

One Wild Ride

By Melissa Good

A soft, cool wind blew over the grass, ruffling it in gentle waves on the slope leading down to the lake. Birds chirped in nearby trees, and a rabbit sat on a rock near the water, scratching its ears with its long hind leg.

Nature, in all its peaceful glory.

The grass waved again, parting slightly near the base of a tall tree, thin stalks of green and gold easing aside to reveal a pair of sparkling blue human eyes, framed in a tanned, angular face with high cheekbones and a cap of midnight dark hair.

Well shaped lips tensed into a grin, as a target was spotted and marked. "Psst."

After a moment, a tuft of grass next to it quivered, revealing a much smaller, much rounder face covered with smudges of dirt.

"Boo?"

"Look." Xena indicated a dark brown spot in the grass. "Over there."

"Whatssat?" Dori craned her neck to see. "Birdie?"

"Duck."

"C'n we play wif it?"

"No."

"H'come? S'pretty!"

Xena pushed several stalks of tall grass aside and pointed. "See? It's a Mama duck, and she's got little babies." She explained in a whisper. "And when that happens... hey! Dor!"

"Buppits!" Dori started to scramble forward. "Good good good.. no! Boo, leggo!"

"Shh. C'mere." Xena tucked Dori under one arm. "Listen. That mama doesn't want you messing with her kids, okay?"

"Buppits!!" Dori protested. "Let's play with them, Boo! C'mon!"

"Shh." Xena dropped back down into the grass. "We're trying to sneak up on em, Dor. Remember?" She patted the grass next to her. "Playing the game, right?"

"Otay." Dori hunkered back down in the grass. "Boo, dis itches." She plucked a grass stalk and poked Xena's arm with it. "Boing boing."

Xena took the stalk and put it in her mouth, chewing it seriously. "You're making too much noise." She warned her child. "The duck's gonna run away."

Dori scowled.

"Okay, now watch. Do like I'm doing." Xena started to crawl forward, flowing through the grass like a large, leather clad snake. "C'mon."

Dori hunkered down and crawled after her adored buddy. "Boo boo boo."

"Shh."

"Pshhhh."

Xena stopped and laid down on her stomach, waiting for Dori to catch up. "Now, see?" She moved some grass aside, to reveal the ducks at a much closer range. "There they are."

Dori studied the brown animal, with her cluster of yellow chicks. "Yeeee!!!" She warbled, scrambling to her feet and bolting for the ducks. "Ayiii!!!"

"Damn it." Xena levitated from the grass and swooped after her, as the duck reacted in alarm, spreading its wings and honking loudly.

"Buppits!" Dori lunged for the ducklings, who scattered in every direction. "Go go go go!!!"

"Dori!" Xena spotted the mud slope too late, and she cursed as Dori's tiny boots slipped out from under her and she landed on her butt and headed lakeward. "Oh Hades." The warrior exploded from the grass and got her feet under her, then started down the slope with swift, powerful strides. "Dori!"

"Wheee!!" Dori waved her arms and forgot the ducks in the joy of her new slide. "Go go go!!!" She chanted, as she barreled towards the high bank of the river. "C'mon Boo!!!"

Xena raced towards her, then shifted her steps as she realized she wasn't going to reach the child in time to stop her from catapulting off the bank into the water. With a sigh, she increased her speed instead and leaped off the edge, tumbling with expert precision in the air and grabbing Dori as she flew off the edge right into Xena's arms.

"Whheee!!! Good!" Dori squealed in delight. "Go fishes!"

Oh yeah. Xena tucked and rolled in mid air, getting her knees under her as they both plunged into the river. We're going to the fishes, all right.

The cold water closed over her, and she slowed her descent, kicking strongly for the surface as Dori wriggled in her grasp. They broke into the air together spluttering, shaking their heads in an almost identical motion to clear the hair from their eyes.

"Boo! Dat was fun!" Dori splashed the water with both hands. "We go again?"

"Glad you think so." Xena said. "You scared the ducks away, Dor."

"Dups?" Dori looked around, and spotted another bird. "Dere!" She pointed. "Boo, c'n we go get that one?" She pleaded. "Pretty!"

"That's a swan." Xena started swimming for the bank, kicking against the powerful current. "Yeah, it is pretty, isn't it?" She got to a half fallen log and held onto it with one hand, the other curling around Dori's body. "Aren't those pretty feathers? Mama has some like that, doesn't she?"

Dori pulled herself up on the log and studied the swan. "Yes." She decided. "Pretty. Mama likes those."

"Well, let's see if we can find her one and bring it back." Xena pulled them along the log to the shore and boosted first Dori, and then herself up onto the rock ledge. She reviewed her now drenched leathers with a rueful look and decided not to take her boots off to spare her feet the pebbles.

Dori rambled off immediately, searching among the grass for feathers as Xena squeezed some of the cold river water out of her armor and watched. "Find a nice one. Maybe mama will make you a thing for your hair."

Dori looked up at her with a puzzled expression. "Mama make pictures." She moved her hand in the air in an imitation more or less of writing. "Make good stories. Boo ride the cow ober the moon!"

Xena sighed. "Yeah, I heard that one the other day."

"Mmoooo!!!"

Xena chuckled, shaking her head. "Your mama comes up with some crazy stories, Doriana."

"Good stories." Dori sat down and ripped up a handful of river grass. "No fezzers, Boo."

"No, huh?" Xena got up and stamped her boots to knock some of the mud off them before she walked over to where Dori was sitting. "Well, that's okay. Why don't we go home and see if there are any around our house."

"Otay." Dori got up and reached for Xena's hand, catching it and holding it as they walked along the grass. "Gramma says we got lots of peoples coming." She confided.

"That's right." Xena agreed. "It's a festival. You know what that is?"

Dori pondered. "No." She smiled at her buddy. "Cookies?"

"There'll be cookies there, sure." Xena agreed. "And lots of our friends are coming, too. Do you like that?"

"No." The toddler frowned. "Too many. Too loud."

Xena gave her hand a squeeze. "It's just for a little while, I promise. Do you like the new place we're staying? You like it up here?"

"Yes."

They walked through a ring of trees and up a small slope, spotting a half built rooftop as they crested the rise. "Here we go." Xena released Dori's hand. "Go find mama, okay? Surprise her."

With a giggle, Dori rambled off, heading for the building as her taller shadow followed behind, pausing a moment to view the new homestead.

It was definitely nicer up here. Xena nodded to herself. Here on the ridge above Amphipolis, she could hear the sounds of nature around them, and breathe air that was relatively clean. Very different than down in the town, which had grown to twice it's size during their absence.

Still a small town, sure, but so full of people that both she and Gabrielle had decided after a single day that they couldn't live there anymore. It was too loud, even in the middle of the night there was so much noise it kept both Xena and Dori up, and small as Amphipolis still was, the crowd of people now living there was just..

It was too much.

So they'd given up their cabin near the inn, and they were about halfway through building themselves a new one up here where it was quieter, and still a little wild. Xena took a deep breath, and headed for the door.

The town was close enough for them to visit every day, and Dori still went down to play with her cousins and friends now that they were back. But there was a separation, definitely, and not everyone was happy about it. "Hey." She greeted her family.

"Hey." Gabrielle looked up from where she was lying flat on her back on the floor, with Dori sitting gleefully on top of her. "Good grief, Xena. What the Hades did you do?" She asked. "You're both soaked!"

"Went swimming." Xena started to strip off her armor, watching the two of them from the corner of her eye. Gabrielle was dressed in rough work clothes, which were mostly covered in bark stains and mud from her building work and her thick, blond hair was being held back off her face by a colorful strip of cloth. "What have you been up since we've been gone?"

"Putting that wall up." Gabrielle waggled a booted foot to her left. "Did I do a good job?"

Xena glanced that way. Strips of bark had been carefully tacked flat against the inside of the log walls, forming a sturdy surface. "Very." She complimented her soulmate. "You go down the hill?"

"Yes."

"Mom still ticked off?"

"Yes."

Xena rolled her eyes. "You'd think I'd sold the old place to the Furies the way she's acting." She muttered. "Stubborn old woman." She toweled her bare body off, taking a seat on the bed to remove her boots.

Gabrielle amiably played a game of patty cake with Dori as she perched there on top of her. "I think it was the inference that the town's too dirty and smelly to live in that pissed her off, Xe." She remarked. "She'll get over it, eventually. Everyone will."

"Bah."

Gabrielle gave her partner a wry look. "Boo's grumpy, Dori. Go make her a pretty picture to cheer her up, okay?"

"Otay." Dori got up and headed for her toybox, one of the few things they'd moved up from the old cabin along with a chest of clothes and the bed. Gabrielle rolled onto her side, then got up and crossed over to where Xena was sitting. She picked up a bit of linen and started drying the warrior's head with it, ruffling her dark hair with deep and simple affection. "We knew it would be different when we came back, this time."

"Hmph."

Gabrielle dried her partner's well shaped ears. "And, I think they had every reason to suspect we might be different when we came back. We've been through a lot ourselves the last few months." She reminded Xena. "In fact, I heard from a few people who didn't think we were going to come back at all."

"Maybe we shouldn't have." Xena said, laying down flat on her back on the bed.

"Hon, this is our home." Gabrielle gently reminded her.

The warrior sighed. "I know." She took hold of one of the bard's hands and examined it. "I just don't know that we fit here anymore." She said. "I don't know if I want to live in a city as big as this is getting."

"Mama." Dori held up something. "Look!"

"It's a leaf, honey." Gabrielle replied. "It came in from the roof. See up there?" She pointed. "We've got sky in our roof right now."

"Pretty!" Dori agreed. "Gots birds."

"Give it a little while." Gabrielle returned her attention to her partner. "I like this spot up here. It's quiet."

"Mm."

"We can be by ourselves if we want. I can do my own cooking up here, and you can hunt." The bard went on. "Give yourself some time to get used to it.. much as I loved being out in the wild, it wasn't really good for Dori."

Xena studied the toddler. "She liked it."

"She needs friends." The bard reminded her partner. "I mean, people her own age for her to play with. I know we're her friends otherwise."

"Mm." Xena's nose wrinkled a little. "Yeah, I know. You need someone else to talk to too."

"No I don't."

"Yes, you do."

"Xena, stop it. That's not true and you know it." Gabrielle frowned.

"Yeah, I know. It's not so bad up here." The warrior relented. "At least I can hear myself think, and we've got clean water, anyway." She pulled Gabrielle's hand closer and kissed the back of it. "And I don't have to worry about people asking me what all that yelling's about at night."

"Ahem." Gabrielle's face colored. "I know you're not talking about me."

Xena grinned.

The bard stuck her tongue out. "Pah." She patted her naked partner on the belly. "C'mon. We're expecting Amazon guests tonight and we can't get out of going down there for dinner."

"Eh." The warrior grunted. "Bring em up here. Eph and Pony aren't into big crowds any more than we are."

"Tomorrow." Gabrielle leaned over and gave her a quick kiss on the lips. "Let's go be social for one night, and get it over with." She paused, gazing down into Xena's eyes. "Besides, they'll probably go to the village after that."

Xena considered the request for a few minutes, then nodded. "All right." She said. "You go on ahead. I've got to put something dry on, and dig out my other boots."

Gabrielle gave her another kiss, then she got up and went to the linen press, pulling out a set of fresh clothing for herself and unlacing the sleeves on the work shirt she was wearing. "I'm glad Eph and Pony are here." She commented. "Now the village'll start really being a home to them."

Xena remained on her back, despite her plans to get dressed. "I guess they figured they'd never get you to be their queen if they stayed up in the mountains, so..." She teased her partner. "They came to you instead."

"Hm." Gabrielle muffled a grin, the thought having occurred to her more than once. She slipped on a dark blue Amazon style top and a matching skirt and buckled the tooled leather belt with a feeling of mild satisfaction. "Kind of how I got them to accept you, huh?"

Xena snorted softly in amusement.

"Hey, it worked."

"Mm." The warrior studied their half thatched roof, which covered the bed and dressing area. The rest of the structure was just bare supports waiting for her to finish construction on it in the morning. "I know what I'll tell my mother.. I'll tell her she's lucky I didn't just swap the town for living with the Amazons. Now that'd been an insult."

"Hey!" Gabrielle put her hands on her hips. "Watch it, consort."

"Oo.." Xena finally smiled, her humor returning. "I'm in big trouble now. I sense a spanking from the Queen in the offing."

"You'd enjoy it." The bard accused, with a returning smile.

"I would." Blue eyes twinkled now. "Sure you want to go down there for dinner?" Xena waggled her brows suggestively as she laced her fingers behind her head.

Urmph. Gabrielle wandered back over to the bed and sat down next to her tormenter, feeling the draw of those eyes as they fastened on her face. "That's not fair, Xe." She eased down onto her side and felt Xena's arm circle her. "You know the answer to that. There's no place on earth I'd rather be than here with you."

"Aww."

"Yeesh, that was sappy, wasn't it?" Gabrielle covered her eyes with one hand. "But anyway, it's not nice for us to ignore our friends." She paused. "All the time, I mean." A sigh. "Gods, you're being contrary tonight."

Xena knew that. She tweaked Gabrielle's hair gently and gave her a nudge. "All right. G'wan." She sighed, waiting for the bard to get up off the bed and then following her. She pulled a spare set of her leathers from the chest, and tossed over a jumpsuit for Dori. "I'll meet you two over there."

"Okay. C'mere, honey." Gabrielle managed to get the wet shirt off her child and get her into dry clothing in a reasonable time. "Did you go swimming with Boo?" She slipped a light cloak over her shoulders, and tightened the laces on Dori's jumpsuit.

"Yes." Dori agreed. "Hungry! We go see grandma now?"

"Absolutely." Gabrielle ruffled her hair. "Let's go."

"Boo!"

"I'll be right there, little terror." Xena buckled her shoulder strap. "You go on with mama." She watched her partner and their daughter leave, pushing the newly hung door closed and stepping carefully down the half built porch.

Silence fell, as their footsteps faded into the twilight, and the warrior paused to absorb a little of it before she turned back to her dressing. All her teasing of Gabrielle notwithstanding, she really was looking forward to seeing their Amazon friends and she was glad they'd finished up the task of closing down their former home finally.

"Hm." Xena tapped her fingers against the chest. "Armor, no armor?" She decided the crowded inn wouldn't be improved by her wearing metal into it, and therefore she abandoned the armor and dragged her spare pair of boots over to the bed to put them on.

After a moment's lacing, she stood up and ran her hands through her damp hair, freeing it from the leather straps and riffling it out to dry as she looked around their new home.

It was bigger than the other one, certainly. With unlimited space up here on the hill, Xena had taken advantage of that and the cabin now had three separate rooms instead of the one and a half of the old one. The bathing chamber was completely separate, and over on the other side of the half finished fireplace was a good size room for Dori and all her toys and pets.

Right now it was empty, but Xena had a bed and some chests planned for it, after she finished the worktable for Gabrielle near the big new windows. Sunlight poured in that corner all day long, and she'd already caught her partner sitting on a pile of bags scribbling over there so she knew she'd picked the right spot.

On the other side of the cabin, on the far side of the bed, was another space she'd staked out for herself. She intended on putting all her weapons making tools there, and all the little things she liked to work on all in one spot.

There was space against one wall for the cabinet that stored all of Gabrielle's scrolls, and there was plenty of room for them to spend time together in the middle.

Much better than the old place. Xena gave the interior an approving nod, and then she went to the door and slipped outside, carrying her cloak draped over her shoulder.

It was quiet and getting dark around the cabin, and she could hear night creatures starting to stir as she stepped down onto the path and started towards town. A light wind stirred the branches as she walked through the trees, the cool earth releasing tiny puffs of scent to her nose as her boots scuffed it.

A quarter candlemark's walking, and she was at the gorge, running one hand over the sturdy ropes that outlined the footbridge over it. Once, the only way across had been a hanging vine, but Gabrielle had convinced her that teaching Dori to swing over at such an early age was just asking for trouble.

The bridge's wooden planks thumped softly under Xena's boots, and she whistled under her breath as she continued down the path between the tall trees. Another few minutes walk took her past the huge birch that marked the entrance to Amazon territory, and she raised a casual hand at the Amazon lookout posted in the branches, who hooted back at her with warbling respect.

Further down, and she reached the stone marker that was the outer boundary of Amphipolis itself. Now, the forest sounds receded and were replaced with the clamor of humanity, as the townsfolk were all going home for the night, putting away tools and animals and readying themselves for the evening.

"Evening, Xena." One of the carters greeted her. "Beautiful night, eh?"

"Not bad." Xena agreed.

"How's the new place coming?" The man asked. "Saw them pulling thatch up for ya."

"Getting there." The warrior ducked under a set of water poles with easy grace and lost her questioner in the crowd which pressed around her until they realized who it was – then space materialized like magic and bodies backed off a distinct step.

Yes it was her home, and yes, they were her family, but she was, still, Xena and they all knew it. Times like this, she definitely appreciated that, especially as she approached the main crossroads of the town.

Houses had sprung up all around the central square, and now traffic was a real issue. Xena dodged several carts as she made her way up to the inn, whose windows were already bright with candlelight and spilling over with voices inside.

There was a new inn, now, down in the lower city beyond the river but everyone still preferred to come up here. Her mother's cooking, probably, or for some just a tradition. Xena pushed the door open and entered, slowing up as she looked around for her family.

"Boo!"

Ah. The warrior carefully picked her way through the tables, some of which had been built with her own hands, and returned a tide of greetings as she headed for the table in the back of the room.

Ephiny stood as she approached, and stepped forward for a hug. "Xena. Glad you two are back." She embraced the warrior with an easy grin. "Thought you'd never get here." She was still in her traveling leathers, which were stained by leaf and mud, but her curls had been pulled back into respectability in deference to the town's sensibilities.

Xena released the Amazon regent, and exchanged stolid, warrior-like arm clasps with Eponin. "We took the long road back." She took a seat next to Gabrielle. "As I'm sure you'll hear."

"Boo.. boo boo boo." Dori climbed up onto her lap and sat there, swinging her legs. "We gots fun now."

Ephiny chuckled. "Glad you think so, cutie." She said. "Looks like you got here just in time, though. Our weather people are predicting a very wet spring. Hope we're ready for it."

"If that's the worst that happens to us, I'd welcome it." Gabrielle handed a piece of bread to her partner. "It was a damn cold winter, and I'm looking forward to some sun for a change." She said. "I got very tired of breaking ice for morning tea on the way down here."

"Brr." Ephiny wryly agreed. "It was a bad winter up in the mountains too. That's what took us so long to get relocated. We were snowed in for two full moons."

"Dori liked it." Xena gave her daughter an indulgent look.

"Oh yeah, especially when she found out what sounds she could get out of you with snowballs in the middle of the night." Gabrielle teased her. "So a little rain'll be welcome for a change."

Xena shared her bread with Dori, and found herself in perfect agreement with her partner. Weather, as usual, was the very least of their worries.

Gabrielle nudged her leg. "Here comes mom."

Xena sighed. Like she'd said. The least of her worries.

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It was late by the time the inn had emptied, the fire burning low in the big hearth as the crowd dwindled down until it was just Xena's family and friends still seated around their table. Dori had been put to bed with her cousins at Toris' place, and the adults were leaned back in their chairs digesting Cyrene's good ale

"So, anyway." Ephiny had slung one leg over her chair arm and rested her mug on her knee. "It was strange to see the place nothing but a bunch of old sticks and a firepit. Hard to say goodbye, funny enough."

"Lot of memories there." Eponin agreed quietly.

"Mm." Gabrielle watched them over the rim of her mug. "Good and bad." She remarked evenly. "Like anything else, I guess."

"True." Ephiny gave her friend a quiet smile. "But I have to admit, the new place beats the old one raw in terms of resources and comfort. Cait found an entire wild grove of herbs apparently, and the cooks are going wild with them."

Xena's eyebrow lifted in wry cynicism, and at the same moment, Gabrielle's hand settled on her knee with a playful squeeze without either of them even making eye contact. Xena's opinion of the Amazon's skill of cooking was well known to her partner, and she'd hinted on more than one occasion that the bard might want to give lessons in that instead of staff sometime.

"Nice to have a new place." Pony said. "Hear you guys do, too."

"Halfway up the mountain." Cyrene remarked dourly. "Idiotic choice, if you ask me."

Gabrielle felt the heavy muscles under her fingers tense, and she cleared her throat. "I love the new place." She said firmly. "It's quiet enough for me to think, and it's not far from Xena's tree."

"Ah. The tree." Ephiny nodded solemnly. "That's a pretty area up there, if I remember right."

"It is. It's beautiful. Dori loves it too." The bard said.

"She loves being here with the other little ones." Cyrene countered her, a stubborn look on her face. "And coming down through those woods is dangerous."

"Mom." Gabrielle felt her patience slipping a little. "It's not nearly as dangerous as traveling here from Athens was."

"Good idea to move out from around here." Pony spoke up. "Otherwise that kid'd be stopping traffic every minute and you'd have wagons rolling down into the river every day." She glanced around. "This place is a circus now."

"It isn't." Cyrene gave her an exasperated look.

"Hate to say it, but she's right." Ephiny said. "I couldn't believe how many people there were when we came up here.. thought I was on my way to Athens again."

The innkeeper got up and collected the pitcher on the table. "Well, it may seem that way to you." She shook her head and started for the kitchen. "To me it's just good business for a change."

A tiny silence fell, which Xena broke by clearing her throat. "Thanks for covering our back." She gave the two Amazons a brief grin. "It's not a popular decision."

Ephiny shrugged a little. "Don't think I want to say this too loud, but you two are grown women who can live anywhere you damn well please, if you catch my drift." She said. "Not to knock your hometown, Xena, but they need you more than you need it."

The warrior wagged a hand in agreement, then she pushed herself to her feet. "Time to call it a night."

"Good idea. You guys must be ready to sack out." Gabrielle got up as well. "We can do more catching up tomorrow." She waited for the two Amazons to stand and join them, and they headed for the door. "Wait till I tell you all the stuff that's supposed to happen for the festival.. you won't believe it."

"I'm going to get Dori." Xena touched her partner on the back. "Meet you on the trail." She took the other fork as they left the inn and started down it, pulling up short as she almost ran into her mother. For a moment, she looked at her, then sidestepped and continued down the path without speaking.

"Xena." Cyrene called after her. "Just hold on a minute."

It's late. The warrior recited internally. And I'm not in the mood. She kept going, brushing past an overhanging branch as she headed for her brother's house. After all the months alone on the road

with Gabrielle and their daughter, she was finding it harder than she'd anticipated readjusting to being home and she knew if she stopped and talked, there'd be a fight.

Not a good way to end the evening. Xena mounted the steps to Toris' cabin and knocked gently, waiting in silence until the door was opened inward. "Hey."

"Hey." Her brother stepped back to let her in. "You could have left her here, sis."

"And had you cursing me at dawn tomorrow when she turned your place upside down? Thanks, no thanks." But Xena smiled, to take the sting from the words. She walked silently across the inside of the cabin and knelt next to the small pallet where Dori was sleeping.

"Mom still ragging you?" Toris knelt next to her. "I heard her going on to one of the staff during dinner."

Xena lifted Dori up and cradled her against one shoulder, murmuring to the child as she half woke up. "So'kay Dor. I'm taking you home."

"Bbbbbbboo." Dori happily snuggled up against her and resumed her interrupted sleep.

Toris chuckled. "Definitely takes after Gabrielle."

Xena stood and gave him a wry look. "Mom needs to get over it." She told him quietly. "Before I'm over it."

"C'mon, sis." Toris nudged her. "She just thinks she knows best for everyone."

Xena leaned closer. "We're not five years old anymore." She said.

"You didn't listen to her when you were.. not sure why she thinks you will now." Her brother replied reasonably. "Give it time."

"Yeah, yeah." Xena turned to leave. "Night."

"Night."

The night reclaimed her, settling its silky folds over her shoulders as she walked along through the now quieter town and out the back gate.

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Gabrielle banked the fire carefully, mindful of the gaps in the cabin that let in fitful cool breezes. She lifted a candle stub and turned, to find Xena sprawled on the bed watching her. The pale blue eyes were almost ochre in the dim light, but the seduction in them was unmistakable.

It made Gabrielle shiver, in an entirely pleasant kind of way. "You know what I like the best about being home?"

"What?" The warrior purred, crooking a finger at her playfully.

"Being able to do something about you looking at me like that without worrying about landing on a rock." Gabrielle blew the candle out and slid into bed, finding Xena's embrace waiting for her. "Or bugs." She sighed happily, as their bodies connected and she was enveloped in warmth. "Or drips of snow."

Xena laughed softly, rolling over with Gabrielle in her arms. "Or owls hooting."

"Mmmhm." Gabrielle nibbled on her partner's earlobe. "I used to think they were just laughing at me." She whispered to her. "Cause let me tell you, they had the absolute worst timing."

"Mm.. nothing like a hooting owl to ruin a mood." Xena agreed.

"Now they can hoot all they want." The bard said, as her hands moved up along Xena's sides, following the contours of her body. "I don't hear a thing."

"Ahh." Xena wriggled her shoulders and exhaled. "Yeah, gotta admit I missed this damn bed." She let her hands wander over the bard's body, stroking sensitive points that tensed under her touch. "And you in it." She added frankly.

"Mm." Gabrielle exhaled contentedly at both the sentiment and her current position. "Thanks." She slowly placed a series of kisses down Xena's breastbone. "I feel the same way."

"Do you?" Xena ran her fingers through the bard's hair. "Does it bother you we're up here alone?"

Gabrielle laughed softly, as she tilted her head up and nuzzled Xena's breast. "Not a serious question, is it?" She laid her cheek down on the warm, firm surface and watched the moonlight peeking through the windows chase across Xena's planed features.

A shift of shadow and then a flash of white revealed the expected smile.

"I am glad we're home." Gabrielle continued. "But I really like being up here instead of down there. It's better for us." She added. "I feel better.. like I have.. like we have more control over our lives."

Xena nodded silently.

"We're not.. entirely civilized." The bard smiled, turning her head and planting another kiss just above Xena's navel. "And I like that."

Intrigued, Xena took hold of her partner around the waist and lifted her a little, rolling over and reversing their position so she was leaning over her and staring right down into her eyes. "Oh, really?" She murmured, pressing her body lightly down over Gabrielle's.

The bard's nostrils flared a little. "Really." She absorbed the hunger in the pale blue eyes above her, and welcomed it, acknowledging the subtle changing in the multifaceted shades of their relationship.

Xena grinned lazily. "You like playing with fire, Gabrielle?"

"Only yours." Gabrielle replied, with a cheeky grin in return, drawing an irregular breath as Xena's hand dropped casually between her legs. There was a knowing intimacy in the touch that sent a jolt through her guts that went past any defenses and made her body arch up against her partner's, wanting that heat.

Craving it. Her hands slid over Xena's body, fingertips tracing over the powerful ribs as they expanded towards her before moving upward to gently encircle the warrior's breasts. She felt a soft laugh against her lips before Xena claimed them and she surrendered to the needs of her body and her partner's knowing touch.

The time they'd spent coming back from Athens had been the longest period they'd been out on the road together since they'd re-knit their relationship and somewhere between the forests and the sea, they'd found themselves discovering a new passion that subtly altered how they related to each other.

Gabrielle wasn't sure what the difference was, whether it was a maturing of their partnership, or her own maturing, or Xena's changing view of who she was, but she knew whatever it was, she loved it. It was almost as though she'd passed some initiation and now in Xena's eyes their relationship had come to some new level.

Was it equality? The bard wasn't sure. She found herself becoming very short of breath as Xena's touch became very intimate, and then she was past wondering about anything other than how to stay on the bed and keep from making Xena's ears ring.

Take that, you darn owl.

**

It was chilly the next morning. Gabrielle donned her heavy cloak and tugged the neck laces closed before she slipped out of the cabin and started down the path. Fog was still clinging to the ground, and her boots kicked it aside as she walked, the air full of the rich scent of wood and moss.

Xena had already gone down the hill, taking Dori to the children's room to play with her friends and sit for a few lessons with the two village teachers, who had been surprised to find their truant pupil already several levels more advanced than her cousins and older friends.

Gabrielle had been indignant at that, until they'd hastily explained it was only because they thought the hardships of the road might have prevented regular classes, not that Gabrielle wasn't more than qualified to teach her.

Like Hades. The bard straightened her shoulders. Sometimes they didn't realize how much time you had, when you didn't have to worry about having to socialize in a village, and deal with all the day to day trivia of living with others. She'd had plenty of time while they were traveling to teach Dori, and in fact, so had Xena.

The path dropped under her feet, and she sped up a bit, dropping down the slope with an easy stride as her body responded with a surge of energy and sense of well being. They'd altered their schedule since they'd been home – it was mid-morning before they made their way down the slope most days as they spent the early morning hours together instead.

Gabrielle whistled softly under her breath, as she almost danced down the path.

She'd shared breakfast with her family earlier, some duck eggs Xena had collected and a handful of newly emerged berries after they'd come back from their morning run.

They.

Mutual. That was another big change. Out of the blue one morning, when she'd been about to leave from their campsite with Dori, Xena had turned to Gabrielle and simply extended her hand in invitation, eyebrows lifting and a grin playing around her lips.

"Me?" Gabrielle set the pot down and looked at her partner. "What?"

"C'mon, mama." Xena waggled her fingers.

"Mama!" Dori agreed, waving her arms. "Come fly!"

Gabrielle stood up, feeling a little unsure. "What's the occasion?" She asked. "Do I look like I need more exercise or something?" The question was rhetorical, they were both in such rawboned condition from the road that even Xena's need for the morning exercise was seriously in doubt.

Xena shook her head. "Just want you to." She said. "C'mon."

The bard put the pot aside and left her tasks behind, walking forward to take Xena's hand and follow her as they disappeared into the trees, the branches closing behind them. "Xe.."

"Just wanted you to share our time in the morning." Xena gently cut her off. "Dori's doing a lot of stuff I thought you'd want to be there for."

The ground had turned to clouds, and she felt feather light walking on it. "Thanks."

"Thank me later." Xena broke into a lope, Dori bouncing happily on her back. "After she nails you with turtle poop."

Gabrielle started laughing, and ran after them, abandoning herself to the chase, and the damp chill of this morning of change that was bringing her path, and Xena's path ever more closely into alignment.

She'd never really gotten what Xena had.. well, gotten, out of her morning rambles, but after a few months of it herself Gabrielle had realized she was gaining strength and flexibility she'd never had before. It was very different from her staff workouts, because it was more of a whole body thing.

Her whole body had grown to appreciate it, and now she felt that new sense of power and balance as she made her way downward at a fast clip, her cloak bouncing along around her with a soft rustle as she ran. She reached the footbridge and trotted over it, then continued on until she reached the fork in the path that led to the new Amazon village.

"Your Majesty!" The Amazon lookout greeted her respectfully. "Good morning."

"Morning." Gabrielle pulled up near the tree. "Mind if I go on down?"

The lookout blinked, and hurriedly snaked down out of the tree. "My queen?"

The bard pointed towards the path to the village. "I'm headed that way."

Bewildered eyes focused on her. "Do you wish an.. escort, my queen?" The lookout hazarded. "I can signal ahead."

You're the queen, sheephead. Remember? "No, thanks. I'm fine." Gabrielle gave her a pat on the arm. "Thanks for asking." She circled the woman and started towards the village. "If you want, you can warn them I'm coming." She called back over her shoulder.

"My queen?"

Gabrielle just waved her hand and kept going, making a mental note to ask Ephiny who had selected the guards recently. She knew they knew they were in friendly territory, but goodness. The bard shook her head and sped up from a walk to a jog, this time going uphill towards the pass that led into the Amazons new valley home.

There were guards at the pass, and as she reached it they came out into view, saluting as they recognized her and ducking quickly back out of the way so she could continue on unhindered. "Morning." She waved at them.

"Your majesty." They called back, returning the wave.

There was a thick band of trees now, once she'd dropped over the ridge and started down again. The trees surrounded a small plateau, which then dropped off to a steep, carved river cleft providing a natural barrier that left the path she was on as one of the few ways into the new homestead.

It was wild, and quiet here. The ridge blocked any sounds of civilization from Amphipolis, and there were ample fresh springs and hunting to sustain the small tribe that were Gabrielle's adopted people. To one side as she ran she spotted the faint path that led up to a cave in the rocks which held a hot spring, one that Xena had found years before and shown her. She suspected the Amazons would put it to good use, and she really hoped the tribe would learn to love the new place as much as they had the old.

Eventually. There were always the nay sayers to deal with, of course. But she was used to that by now, and she was confident that the move from the mountain location to here would be nothing but good for her friends and their families.

"Gabrielle!" Eponin appeared from a side path, and trotted after her. "Hey!"

"Hey." The bard slowed to a halt and waited for her. "Did you get some rest last night? That was pretty late.. we should have let you guys go earlier."

The weapons master came to her side. "Nah, we're fine." She assured her. "How about you guys? It was pretty late for you too."

Gabrielle grinned at her.

Pony colored slightly, and cleared her throat. "Eph's been dealing with a bunch of.. uh.. minor stuff since breakfast. Glad you're here."

Uh oh. "Hm. Where is she?" Gabrielle asked. "Let me go see if I can resolve some of the .. little stuff.. for her."

Pony gave her a mildly grateful look. "Right this way." She indicated a lower path. "I'll take you down there." She turned to lead the way. "I'm sure it's just getting things settled."

"Uh huh." Gabrielle studied her back. "So, how are things?"

Pony glanced back at her. "Oh.. uh..fine." She smiled. "Just great."

"Uh huh."

"No, really."

"Uh huh."

**

A large wagon stood in front of the barn, the two huge draft horses attached to it snuffling the ground for a few blades of grass as they patiently waited. The driver stood with his arms resting on the crosspiece, trading casual waves with one of the town militia who wandered by. "Morning."

"Morning." The militiaman agreed. "Roof?"

"Yeap."

The soldier examined the material with a knowledgeable eye. "Nice."

"Thanks." The driver said. "Waiting on a customer to pick it up. Hope they do fore it rains."

They both looked up at the clouds on the horizon, a slowly building darkness that was creeping across the otherwise blue sky, contemplating it thoughtfully.

"Ahem." A low pitched, but indefinably female voice interrupted them. They both turned around in surprise, to find a tall, dark haired woman in plain brown leather standing there.

The soldier jumped. "Morning, Genr'l." He said.

Xena walked forward and inspected the thatch. "Not bad." She pronounced. "I need you to take it to the other side of the town, near the back gates."

"You Xena?" The driver guessed.

Xena just looked at him.

"Guess so." The man muttered. "Ain't gonna be easy getting through there." He pointed out, indicating the busy main square of the town. "Had trouble enough getting over to this spot."

"I know. Just work at it." The warrior advised him. "It's not that bad once you're past the inn."

"Genr'l, you want me to clear the space?" The soldier asked. "I'll get a few guys, and we'll just close down the road for ya."

It was tempting. Xena knew just how many people she'd piss off if she did it, and what kind of message she'd be sending if she had her troops close down the town on her behalf. Her eyes tipped up, reviewing the sky, and she juggled the knowledge with the real need to get the rest of her cabin roof finished.

The stream of traffic jostled and bumped through the crossroads, it's confines packed with horses, wagons, and people all intent on getting where they needed to go. Unfortunately, Amphipolis hadn't been built to be a major thoroughfare, and with the heavy pole fencing pinching in the traffic, it made for a constant, slow moving throng going from the upper town to the lower and back.

Hades with it. "All right." She told the man. "Bens, grab some of the men and clear me a path. It'll be faster to get this thing through the crossroads that way anyway."

"Sure thing." Bens trotted off, heading for the stable. "Be just a minute, Gen'rl."

The driver grinned. "Now that's a leader." He complimented Xena. "Got your new place back there?"

"No." Xena unhitched the horses and started leading them forward. "C'mon, boys." She uttered under her breath. "My place is a couple leagues up the mountain from here."

The driver walked alongside her. "Horses ain't going up there."

"I know that." Xena could see a small commotion starting ahead of her. She kept the horses moving, and straightened to her full height, spotting a few heads congregating near the crossroads that looked familiar. "I'll take care of it once we get through this mess."

"Surely." The man took hold of the other horses' bridle and pressed against the animal as they approached the milling streams of traffic.

As they reached the beginning of the crossroad, the traffic began to slow, amid yells and shouts of outrage. Six militiamen pushed the crowd back, putting their bodies in the way of the carts and people until they were forced to stop. "Clear back, you!" Bens lifted a quarterstaff. "Hold up there! Hold up, I said!"

"What the Hades is going on?" One of the merchants yelled back. "I've got a delivery to make!"

"You'll make it when we're done." Bens told him. "Now move back!"

"Why you.."

Bens lifted his staff and paused, a set look on his face. "Back off, or else!" He warned. Another militiaman came to his side, holding a short sword drawn against his body.

The merchant slowly backed away, giving the sword a nervous look.

Two more soldiers gently shoved the line of milling people aside to clear the way for Xena, who calmly walked the horses into the now open space.

Everyone fell silent, recognizing the warrior immediately. Xena was aware of the eyes on her, and she caught a brief glimpse of her mother on the porch of the inn just to one side. She kept her head up and walked steadily across the opening.

The militia braced, and thumped their chests with their fists. Xena lifted her free hand casually in acknowledgement of the salute, and repressed a smile as the crowd on the far end of the crossroads edged out of the way without any further prompting. "Thanks, boys." She called out, as the wagon rolled through the intersection and up the far lane.

"Genr'l." Bens ducked his head in respect. "Anything we can do for yah."

Xena smiled and winked at him, as she walked past, and he blushed. She kept the wagon rolling, though, clearing the intersection and moving on up towards the back gate.

"Must be nice." The driver commented.

Xena looked over at him. "What?"

"Being respected like that." He said.

Xena patted the near horse's flat cheek. "I earned it." She glanced at their old cabin as they went past, its windows darkened and an air of desolation that she was half convinced was her own imagination around it. On the ground near the back wall was a broken toy, one of Dori's, and she stepped aside to pick it up.

It was a half of a boat, the mast broken off and hanging sadly. Xena examined it as she walked, her mind turning from the wagon to fixing the toy. "Kids." She sighed. "Tough on these damn things."

The wagon driver looked at her over the backs of the horses, but kept his thoughts to himself.

**

Gabrielle took in the half finished village as she followed Pony towards the council room. That, at least, had been completed first, a shelter and gathering place for the entire tribe. In a rough ring around it, tucked in the trees were the individual quarters of the partnered Amazons, and the senior warriors.

Most had a sapling structure already, and some had the skeletons of roofs. Only one was pretty much complete and she guessed it was probably Eph's since she was the Regent, and she did rate it.

The cook area was just an open hearth at the moment, though she could see stacks of logs laid nearby and the beginnings of a ground clearing for them, but for now the only shelter the cooks had was a rough lean to that covered their supplies and tools.

Something was cooking in a big pot, and the bard sniffed delicately at the air, wrinkling her nose slightly as she detected the scent of something soup that didn't have nearly enough spices in it for her tastes.

Xena had rubbed off on her that way, along with many others. She'd developed a taste for the exotic, coaxed beyond her basic cooking roots by the warrior's cravings, built up on Xena's own travels around the world. Wherever they went, Gabrielle made sure she sniffed out spices, dried them if she had to, and packed them away for use in their often makeshift meals on the road.

Nothing fixed up dried rabbit stew like a little sage and saffron, after all, and she'd discovered a mixture of dried, ground peppers that made a cut of venison wonderful enough to get a song out of her partner in return for it.

"So, what's the Big X up to?" Pony asked. "Working with her soldier guys?"

"Putting up the roof." Gabrielle muffed a grin. "You'd think she could get oh, two dozen hunky guys to do it for her, just by asking, but no, not my Xena."

Pony chuckled.

"Nobody else can do it just right." Gabrielle paused in front of the council hall and cocked her head to listen. "Hm."

"Uh."

The voices inside sounded angry and frustrated. "Do you think it's even slightly possible for me to ever show up here and there not be an argument going on?" The bard asked, plaintively.

"Um.. well, this is the first time you've been here." Pony objected. "So does it count?"

Gabrielle gave her a wry look, then shook her head and entered the door way. She swept aside the hanging beaded curtain and walked into the hall, heading directly across the room to the front table. "Hi."

Ephiny was sitting there, with three other Amazons standing around her. They were all elders, and none of them looked happy. "Hi." The Regent replied, propping her head up on her fist. "Glad you're here."

"Bet you are." Gabrielle's eyes twinkled gently. "What seems to be the problem?"

"Your majesty, the problem is this place isn't suitable for anyone to live in." The nearest elder, a woman named Sheetha turned to look at her. "That is what the problem is."

"Hm." Gabrielle perched on the table, crossing her arms over her chest. "I live here." She reminded them. "Xena lives here. Lots of people live here."

"Not Amazons." Sheetha said, stiffly. "This is too close to civilization."

Ephiny sighed. "You know, I've come to appreciate civilization." She said. "It grows on you, not always having to shoot your dinner."

"And how." Gabrielle agreed.

"That's because you've gotten too soft." Sheetha accused. "We're going to become just like them."

"Like whom?" The bard asked. "Them?" She indicated the general direction of Amphipolis. "Them is us, too." She patted her own chest. "Remember? Xena and I are part of that town."

"Exactly."

"Uh oh." Eponin began to inch backwards, clearing a space as Gabrielle stood up.

"So, are you saying Xena and I are soft?" The bard asked, a hint of amusement coming into her tone. "You're not really going to make me pull a Warrior Princess and start kicking people around to prove otherwise, are you?"

"That's not the point." Sheetha came around the table and faced her. "Gabrielle, I respect you as a leader, please believe that. My worry isn't about you.. it's about how our younger people might view that town.. might view the lifestyle there."

Gabrielle considered that seriously. "You mean, they might decide to move there."

"Yes." The elder nodded. "We work hard to give our people traditions. Some of those traditions mean that we have to give up certain things.. certain comforts. It's our way."

"Hm."

"But Sheetha, we can't keep ourselves isolated forever." Ephiny said. " You know even in the old place, towns were popping up all over around us."

The elder sighed. "There were other places we could have gone."

"There were." Gabrielle agreed quietly. "There are many places in this wide world where you'd be totally isolated, and alone. I've been to some of them."

The women all looked at her.

"I've been to places that I was the first human to ever set eyes on." The bard went on, pacing a little. "So yes, I know there are places like that. But the problem with places like that is that if something bad happens to you, there's no one around to help."

"We don't need help."

"Sheetha, please." Ephiny covered her eyes. "This woman's pulled our asses out of the fire what, three.. four times now? Give me a break."

"You just don't understand." Sheetha shook her head. "Come on, the rest of you. Let's stop wasting our time talking." She led her two cohorts from the room, giving the impression of slamming the beads behind her.

Gabrielle went around the table and sat down next to Ephiny, shoulder to shoulder. They looked at each other, and then Ephiny shook her head. "Don't say it." She warned the bard. "Because you are one." She poked Gabrielle in the shoulder with her index finger.

The bard chuckled softly.

Pony came over and sat next to Ephiny. "I'm going to go take the juniors out and scout around." She said. "Be back after lunchtime."

"Okay." Ephiny leaned over and gave her a light kiss on the lips. "Be careful."

Eponin scowled, blushing a dark crimson as she avoided Gabrielle's twinkling green eyes. "Yeah. Thanks." She got up and trotted out, leaving the regent and her queen alone in the council chamber, where a gentle silence briefly fell.

Ephiny studied her friend, noting the subtle changes in the planes of her face, and the new shadows in her eyes. Despite that, there was a sense of stolid peace about her that the regent had long missed. "Glad to be home?"

"I am, yeah." The bard replied.

"So, how'd it go out there? Must have a lot of stories." Ephiny fished delicately.

A quirk of a grin. "Oh, I do." Gabrielle leaned her head on her fist. "But how about you go first?" She pinned Ephiny with a direct gaze. "So I can do my thing, and you can relax."

Ephiny sighed, but her lips curled into a returning grin. "Let's go over to our place." She pushed herself to her feet.

"Quieter there?"

"I have rum punch there."

"Oh boy." Gabrielle got up to follow her. "Glad I had breakfast."

**

Xena moved the ladder over another space, and tucked a load of thatch onto her shoulder before she started back up it. The roof was almost finished, and she boosted the thatch onto the newly layered part to free her hands once she reached the top.

Between the roof supports, she'd spread a layer of waxed skins, which she'd hammered into place with neatly spaced nails, and now she put down the rows of thatch and fastened them over the skins with a precise and intricate pattern.

Xena hated leaks. She hated leaks almost as much as she hated slugs, and since one tended to attract the other, she was very particular about the surface she put over her head.

Nearby, a bird started singing, and the warrior paused to listen. Then she smiled and continued working, putting down another line of roofing and tacking it into place, putting the nails into position and tapping them lightly in with a sure touch and little fear of smacking her fingers.

She enjoyed her hard won skills, in this arena so different from her fighting one. It felt good to be able to provide this kind of shelter and she was proud of what she'd accomplished in so relatively short a time. After all, the Amazons had been building their village since they'd left and most of their huts weren't as finished as her cabin was, and she'd only been home a little over a half moon.

The bird decided it didn't like being ignored, and it fluttered down from the tree and landed near the top of the roofline. It hopped down a few steps and regarded Xena, cocking its brilliant red head intelligently at her. "Cheep."

"Hi there." Xena continued her task. "What brings a nice bird like you to a place like this?"

"Cheep."

"Everyone's a critic." The warrior finished her roof section, and started down the ladder, tucking her hammer into the belt she had circling her waist. She flexed her hands as she got to the bottom, detouring over to the bedside where a waterskin rested.

It was cool out, but her mouth was dry and she picked up the skin and opened it, putting the spout to her mouth and sucking down some of the spring water Gabrielle had left in it for her. "Mm." She swallowed, her nose picking up just a trace of her partner's scent on the skin.

Beside the skin lay an apple, its red and green surface picking up the sunlight from outside and winking merrily at her. Xena reached down and picked the fruit up, her lips twitching as she acknowledged the silent message left along with it.

Nice. Xena set the skin down and went back to her task, hoisting another bundle of thatch onto her shoulders. She'd gotten to the fourth step on the ladder, when she heard the door to the cabin open behind her and she stopped to look down.

Her mother entered, closing the door behind her with a click of finality. "Xena?"

Xena sighed silently. "Up here." She replied, continuing on her way. She got to the top of the ladder and braced her body against a support, putting the thatch down and starting to position it.

"Can you come down here? We need to talk."

"No." Xena put a handful of tacks between her lips. "Mumphsy."

"Xena."

The warrior tapped in a nail.

"Don't make me come up there."

Xena kept working. She removed a tack from her mouth and positioned it, hoping her mother wasn't going to be literal about her last statement. The ladder, though sturdy, wasn't designed to hold more

than one person of her size. She tapped in another tack, and slid over a new line of thatch. "This needs to get done before it rains, mother."

"Xena." Cyrene took hold of the ladder and shook it. "Get down here."

"If you knock me off this thing, I'll make sure I fall on top of you." Xena warned. "Siddown and wait till I'm done if you want, but leave the ladder alone."

Cyrene made a disgusted noise, but the shaking stopped and Xena was left in peace to finish her thatching. In a way, she hoped her mother had taken the hint and left, but given the fact that she had some insight into the woman's stubbornness, she was ready to bet a dinar she hadn't.

Oh well. Xena worked her way backwards, closing herself in with the steadily reducing space she had left to cover.

"Roo!"

Xena nearly dropped the hammer, juggling it wildly as she glanced over the edge of the roof at the edge of the forest. "Ares!"

"Roo!" The wolf wagged his bushy tail and hopped up and down a few times.

"Don't do that." Xena scolded him. "You want me to fall off this damn thing?" She shook her head as several puppies stumbled out of the trees behind Ares and started exploring. The animals were about half grown, with big paws that got in their way, and indeterminate fuzzy gray/brown fur that belied their half dog heritage. "Ah. So you brought the family, huh?" She sighed.

Endearingly cute, and all of the damn things had taken a liking to her in specific, following her around whenever they found her in the village.

Xena's posse, Toris had named them, delighted with the chance to tease her, both of them keeping in the back of their minds an earlier, simpler time when he'd done the same with Ares, when Xena had first come home.

Memories. Xena backed down a step, and wrapped the last bit of oilskin into place, tacking it down as some thatch fibers drifted loose and lodged in her hair. She'd have to put the final layer into place from the outside, but right now, at least from the inside, the roof was complete.

Which meant she had to get down. The warrior tucked her hammer back in it's belt and climbed to the ground, taking the opportunity to steal another mouthful of water to keep her back turned to her mother for as long as possible.

"Are you finished?" Cyrene asked.

"No." Xena turned, capping the waterskin. She set it down, dusting herself off and taking a seat on the clothing press. "But it'll hold for now."

Cyrene was seated on the bed, as most of their furniture was still down in the old cabin. Her expression was a mixture of annoyance and exasperation, and she studied Xena a moment before she started speaking. "You know I have a..."

"Mother." Xena held a hand up. "I don't want to hear it."

Cyrene blinked in surprise. "I don't think you understand the image you're giving of here."

"I don't think you understand that I don't give a damn what image I'm giving off." Xena retorted. "Bottom line, mother, is that I'm gonna do what I think's best."

"So throwing an attitude with a bunch of soldiers is what you think's best?"

The warrior shrugged. "I had to cross that road." She said. "Should I have started picking up people and tossing them into your herb garden instead?"

"Xena."

"What?"

"What in the Hades is wrong with you?"

Xena picked up the apple and bit into it. "Not a gods be damned thing."

Cyrene got up and shook her head, making her way to the door. "I don't know what you think you're doing."

"What I want to do." Xena answered quietly. "What Gabrielle wants. What Dori wants." She paused. "Not what you and the rest of Amphipolis wants." She looked evenly at her mother. "What I don't understand is why you can't understand that."

Cyrene paused at the door. "It's like since you came back, we're just not good enough for you." She turned and left, closing the door behind her.

Xena chewed a bit of apple and swallowed it.

**

Gabrielle untied her cloak and draped it over the short pole near the door designed for that purpose. The inside of Ephiny and Eponin's quarters was spare, as all Amazon homes were, but with certain blots of color and decoration that caught the eye.

A woven blanket, that covered the big double cot, for instance. Gabrielle had given it to them before they'd left for Athens, and she was charmed to see it put to use. It was the blues, greens, and browns of the forest, something she'd found in the weaver's stall at the last Amphipolis market.

"I was joking about the rum punch." Ephiny poured out two mugs. "But I do have some sun tea. Here." She brought a mug over to Gabrielle as the bard sat down in one of the sturdy, deep chairs near the firepit. "So."

"So." Gabrielle took a sip, studying Ephiny over the rim of the mug.

Ephiny sat down next to her. "For a change, my problem isn't the Amazons." She said. "Or.. well, to be more specific, it's one Amazon as opposed to all of them." She watched the bard lean back in her chair, extending legs covered in buckskin leggings out a little. "If you catch my drift."

"Pony?" Gabrielle guessed.

Ephiny nodded. "Her promise to you is driving her insane."

"To me?" The bard's brows creased. "Oh.. oh, you mean..."

"About the baby." The regent said.

Gabrielle was quiet for a moment, a reflective expression on her face. "She doesn't want one, now?" She asked. "I'm sorry.. I know that's a very personal question."

Ephiny gazed wryly at her. "Gabrielle, you're our sister."

The bard produced a mild grin. "I know. But you know.. having children is not something I'd discuss with my sister."

"Not the way you did it, no." The regent shot back, shaking her finger at her queen.

"Not any way." Gabrielle muttered, blushing a little.

The blush did something to relax Ephiny, making the tanned, mature figure across from her more familiar. "Some things about you never change." She chuckled softly. "I love that."

"Hm." The bard propped her head up on one fist, resting her elbow on the chair arm.

"Anyway.. no, it's not that." Ephiny sighed. "She wants a kid. I want one. The problem is, well.. " She hesitated. "Pon got into some trouble when she was younger. She went with a group of some of the juniors and ended up in some small town down slope from the village."

"Mm." Gabrielle watched her friend's face intently.

"Some jerks got ahold of them. Wasn't pretty." Ephiny said. "At any rate, she's not sure she can go through with the whole thing. She wanted me to talk to you, see if I could get you to release her from that promise."

Gabrielle set her mug down and leaned forward, reaching out to clasp Ephiny's hand. "Why in Hades didn't you tell me that before?" She asked. "For the love of Aphrodite, Eph.. didn't you think I'd understand? Me? Of all people?"

Caught by surprise by the bard's intensity, and the anger in her voice, Ephiny's jaw dropped a little. "Ah.." She resisted the urge to yank her hand free, her warrior's instincts sensing danger in the queen's tense muscles. "Gab, don't hit me."

Green eyes popped wide open. "Hit you?" Gabrielle's voice rose almost into a squeak. "Are you nuts? Of course I'm not going to hit you."

Ah. Mixed signals. Ephiny relaxed herself a little. "Just take it easy." The regent said. "Of course we knew you'd understand... it wasn't that." She explained. "It's.. Hades, you know what it is. You live with the best example of it. We thought we could handle it."

"Urmph."

"Pon thought she could."

Gabrielle sighed. "I felt that way once." She released Ephiny's hand and leaned back again, her eyes darkening with memory. "Xena got me past it."

"I know." Ephiny hesitated, just a bit. "Xena told Pony about it."

The bard looked honestly surprised. "Did she?"

"When it happened to me. She, um.." Ephiny waved a hand. "How to deal with it, ah.."

"Ah. Okay Yeah." Gabrielle made the same gesture, and they both put the subject under the bridge by unspoken, yet common consent. "Yeah, okay. I understand. Listen, you guys have to do whatever makes you happy. Whatever that is, I'm for it."

Ephiny took a long sip from her mug. "You know what the problem is?" She gazed frankly at her queen. "We know what you've been through, and we both feel like weenie chickenshits not to just get through it the same way."

Gabrielle gazed at her boots, an oddly patchworked pair made from leather scraps and stout gut lacing. "Ah."

"Those are cute." Ephiny changed the subject as radically as she was capable of. "Like your pants, too. They new?"

"Xena made them." Gabrielle pulled one boot up to rest on her knee and ran her thumb over the soft leather. "We traded. I made her some gloves." She related, accepting the change. "Lined with squirrel fur to keep her hands warm."

Ephiny could well imagine Xena wearing them, clenching her hands lightly inside with pleasure. "So, was it tough out there?"

"Sometimes." Gabrielle found a smile somewhere and produced it. "The weather sucked, and we had fights, and stuff happen on the road, and Dori acting up.. you know, the usual." She said. "We solved some problems, helped some people, Xena almost died again, I almost died again..same old, same old."

"Gods."

The bard shrugged, a little. "We made it back." She said. "We found something out there... I don't know. It just all worked out."

Ephiny got up and walked over, kneeling down beside the chair Gabrielle was sitting in and clasping her arm with one hand. Then she impulsively put her arm around the bard's shoulders and pulled her closer. "Gabrielle."

Gabrielle responded, returning the hug. "So, this'll work out too." She told her friend. "We'll get through it." She leaned her head even closer. "And you're not a chickenshit." She whispered. "I've chased Dori through enough henhouses to know what that looks like intimately."

Ephiny had to laugh, and so she did, and Gabrielle joined her.

It was all they could do.

**

"What's that, Dori?" Gabrielle pointed, ignoring the fitful gusts of wind at her back that heralded the oncoming storm. "Is that a spider?"

"Gots." Dori reached a hand out for it. "Pretty, mama!"

"No, no.. do you remember how a spider made you owie, before?" Gabrielle steered away from it, her boots digging at the path as she carried Dori up towards the cabin. "Do you remember that?"

"No." Dori clutched at a handful of leaves instead, using her mother's forward motion to assist her in denuding the branch. "Look.. gots leaves. You make story?" She showed her mother the tattered green bits. "We going to where Boo is?"

"We sure are, honey." Gabrielle assured her, climbing the last steep bit of the path before she reached the small plateau their cabin rested on. "Look, there's our house, right?"

"Yes!" Dori wriggled. "Lemme go, mama. I go find Boo."

"Go find Boo." The bard let her daughter down and straightened gratefully as Dori scampered off towards the cabin. "Damn, she's getting heavy." She remarked, with a wry grin. "I don't think a pony can make it up here.. we might have to get her a mountain goat."

A soft rumble of thunder prodded her, and she started forward, strolling over the thick grasses that covered the ground on the gentle slope leading to their porch. "Ah." Her eyes studied the building, and she grinned again. "Boo, you rock. We've got a roof!"

"Mama! Mama! Buppits!" Dori was sitting on the porch in utter ecstasy, surrounded by Ares' puppies who were licking her all over.

"Heh." The bard came up to the porch and propped one booted foot on it, leaning against the sturdy support pole as she watched. "They're almost as cute as you are, Dor." She looked up as a raindrop hit her on the head. "Uh oh.. c'mon, guys. Everyone inside."

"Buppits too?" Dori got to her feet. "C'n we keep them here, mama? I can play with them."

Oh, yeesh. "Well, they like being outside, honey." Gabrielle said. "How about you play with them outside, okay?"

Dori pouted.

"I know, I know.. I'm no fun." Gabrielle took Dori's hand and walked with her inside. Ares scooted after them, sneaking in the door before she could close it, and the next thing she knew the puppies had piled in as well. "Hey!"

Dori giggled. "Good buppits!"

"Bad buppits." Gabrielle scolded them, but shut the door anyway as the rain started coming down. "Oh my gosh, Dori.. what's Boo going to say?" She asked, looking around for the soulmate she felt the presence of quite strongly.

"Better dry than wet?" Xena spoke up, from where she was sprawled in the corner of the cabin, working on something. "What took you two so long? I was going to send an Amazon after you."

The puppies spotted their favorite target and gallumped over, crawling over Xena with excitedly wagging tails. The warrior sat up a little and fended them good naturedly off, her expression and attitude one of rare tolerance. "Little rats.. cut that out."

"Eeeee.. " Dori ran over and joined them, jumping on Xena and throwing her arms around the warrior's neck. "Go Boo!"

Gabrielle went towards the hearth, craning her neck to see what was sitting on it. A pot was swinging slightly from the divots, steam emerging from the top. "What's that?"

"Soup." Xena curled an arm around Dori and gently shoved the puppies aside.

Gabrielle removed her cloak and draped it over one of the poles set in the wall for it. "Where did that come from." She asked, warming her hands over the fire.

"Hope you don't think I made it." Xena snickered. "Last time I tried that we were both sick for a week."

Whatever it was, smelled good. Gabrielle felt a distinct rumbling in her belly, and mourned the sacrifice of lunchtime with the Amazons. "What took us so long was a big argument." She went over to where Xena was seated and found a place among the puppies, letting her head rest against one of her partner's shoulders.

"Someone was arguing with you?" Xena asked. "Who? I'll go kick their ass."

The bard chuckled tiredly. "No, not with me. One of the merchants decided he was being ripped off by that guy who came in yesterday... the one with a wagon full of skins?"

"Uhm."

"Anyway, they got into a huge fight, which kind of escalated. Me and the Amazons stopped it."

"Ah." Xena tickled Dori's stomach. "Hey, little one. You hungry? Your mama is. I can hear her." She turned her head and lightly kissed the bard's head. "Anyone get hurt?"

"Nah." Gabrielle listened to the rain outside. "How'd your day go? I see you finished our roof, thank the gods."

"Eh."

Gabrielle glanced up. "Problems?"

"Mother."

"Ah." The bard patted her partner's muscular leg. "Yeah, I bumped into her after I got Dori and got an earful." She pushed herself to her feet. "She got me at the wrong time."

"Uh oh."

"Yeah." Gabrielle sighed, going to a storage box and taking out a set of wooden bowls. "Sometimes I think she forgets how she met me." She set the bowls on the small table near the fire, then went over to the pot. "So I hope you didn't get this from her.. I don't think she'd poison it, but I wouldn't put it past her to put pickle juice in it."

"I got it from the militia kitchen." Xena got up, brushing the dog hair off her legs as she lifted Dori up and cradled her in her arms. "Actually, they delivered it up here to me."

"Really?" Gabrielle sniffed the soup, and ladled a bit of it up to her lips cautiously. "Those guys are so cute around you."

Xena set Dori down on her heightened chair and took the seat next to her. "Armies aren't cute, Gabrielle."

The bard filled three bowls to the brim with the soup, which had big chunks of lamb in it, among other things. She set the bowls down and provide her family with spoons, then sat down across from

Xena and gratefully dug in. "No they aren't." She swallowed a mouthful. "But those men would collect the dust from the ground you walked on and put it in a bottle for posterity, and you know it."

Xena ripped a roll in half and tossed a portion to her soulmate, then glanced down as all the puppies, plus Ares gathered at her feet and looked up at her hopefully. "I don't think so."

Dori plunked a bit of bread into her soup, looked gravely at it, then pulled it out and threw it on the ground next to the puppies. "Buppets like, Boo." She watched them scrambled to gobble it up. "Make it good."

"Eat yours first." Xena ordered, pointing her spoon at her daughter. "Then if we've got some left, we'll give it to them. Okay?"

"No." Dori scowled at her.

"Dori."

"No."

"Doriana."

"Boo, buppits are hungry!" Dori protested. "Not nice!"

Gabrielle hid her eyes, her shoulders shaking as she scarfed down her soup.

"You're not helping, mama." Xena growled.

"Leave me out of this." The bard held her hand up. "Those are your buppits, Boo."

"You let them in here!" Xena snorted.

"Not on purpose." Gabrielle patted Dori's hand. "Dori, you need to have your dinner first, then we'll take care of the puppies. Come on now, you know that's how it is with Ares, right?" She said. "Boo always gives him his goodies last."

Dori pouted, but then she reached for her spoon and started eating her soup.

"There." Gabrielle smirked at her partner.

Xena wagged her spoon at the bard, then went back to eating herself.

"Thank you for getting this, by the way." Gabrielle went on. "I had some odds and ends, but it's raining buckets out there and it would have been a pretty cold dinner otherwise."

Xena glanced out the window. Due to the way the porch was constructed, it protected the two big openings in the front of the cabin and kept rain from coming in. Eventually, the warrior intended on putting leaded glass in place to close the windows in, but right now they were just square gaps.

"Nasty." She commented, hearing a loud roll of thunder.

"Boom." Dori slurped up her soup. "Gaboom.. gaboom... make loud, Boo."

Gaboom. Xena leaned an elbow on the table and worked a bit of lamb onto her spoon, chewing it thoughtfully. Maybe it would rain all night, she pondered. Maybe it would still be raining tomorrow morning, giving them an excuse to stay together in the cabin and relax.

"Know what?" Gabrielle said. "I almost hope the weather's nasty tomorrow. We've been working like crazy since we've been home.. time for a day off."

Could Gabrielle read her mind? Xena wondered. It seemed like it sometimes, at least recently. "Yeah." She agreed. "I could use a break." She fished out another bit of lamb. "And maybe it'll give my mother a day to chill out. I don't know what the Hades has her up in arms like that."

Gabrielle wondered that herself. She realized the way Xena had informed everyone they were moving was blunt, but that was Xena, after all, and everyone down there should really have been used to that. Her partner was never one to dance about the facts.

Was it just an insult? The bard had gone back and explained the noise, and how it kept them up, and how Dori was unhappy, but for some reason everyone seemed to still think they'd dissed Amphipolis. Even the council, who informed her they no longer wanted her to be a part of them.

Which was fine, really. As the Queen of the Amazons, she now had a bigger responsibility in arbitrating between her tribe and the city, so that would have been a conflict of interest anyway.

But still. Gabrielle felt a little sad, because she loved her partner's hometown, and she'd taken it for her own- especially after the destruction of Potadeia. They'd fought for this land, after all. Nearly died for it.

Nearly died. Battled all of Athens, just to protect the town from them. Xena had gotten hurt doing it, she'd gotten hurt, they'd all gotten trapped in a burning jail...

So, who were these people to criticize them if they chose to live apart?

Gabrielle looked up, to find Xena looking back at her. They both spoke at the same time. "To Hades with them."

"Mama?"

Xena smiled, and Gabrielle smiled back, reaching across the table to take Xena's extended hand and clasp it.

"Gush." Dori rolled her eyes, grabbing Xena's bread and giving it to the waiting puppies. "Gush, gush gush."

**

One Wild Ride

Part 2

Gabrielle woke to the sound of rain thrumming on the ground outside, and on the roof overhead. She could feel a gust of cold, wet wind on her face, and it made her incalculably glad the rest of her was tucked warmly under the covers with Xena pressed up next to her.

There had been many times, in the recent months, when she'd been woken far less comfortably, by streams of icy water washing over them, or once, even, a patter of hailstones that almost defeated even Xena's ethereal reflexes.

The un-romantic side of traveling on the road. Gabrielle took a breath of air soaked with moisture, and the scent of bruised pine leaves, and wriggled a little closer to her partner. It was still dark out, and by the dim light of the banked fire she could see Dori in her little bed, still curled up asleep.

The somewhat scary side of traveling on the road, as well.

It was true that Dori had enjoyed adventuring with them, there was no way for Gabrielle to doubt that. But seeing her child in the pouring rain, and with dangerous animals around, even with parents as capable as Dori's were, it had worried her.

No one could be one hundred percent alert one hundred percent of the time. Xena herself had admitted that. There had been some close calls out there, since Dori was so active, and the world was so unpredictable. Xena had taken pains to try and teach Dori what was dangerous and what wasn't, but her terrible two year old simply didn't acknowledge anything as un-fun as fear.

Xena had found her one memorable morning facing off against a bear. Not a big bear, to be sure, but it had been twice the size of Dori, and spitting mad since the child had been between it, and a beehive it badly wanted to get to.

Dori, of course, had held her ground and been chucking rocks at the animal, getting it even madder when her parents had bolted up over the ridge, drawn by the bear's yowls. Without thinking, Xena had jumped right over Dori's head and flung herself at the bear, who saw a six foot tall armored human yelling bloody murder heading for him and sensibly turned tail immediately and ran.

Bad message. Now Dori thought if she yelled loudly enough at anything, it would run from her. Gabrielle had to smile, though, remembering her toddler's enthusiastic charge after the bear in her buddy's footsteps, yodeling lustily all the while.

It had cracked Xena up, and they'd all ended the moment in a laughing heap, before turning back to capture the beehive with its much loved treat of honey. Gabrielle could taste the sweetness of the moment on the back of her tongue, in fact, and she smiled in remembrance, acknowledging the balance in her emotions about being out there, still.

Scary, and yet, it had turned out wonderful, as so many of their adventures did.

So many wonderful moments. The bard closed her eyes, and exhaled in pleasure. But this was a wonderful moment too, waking to the sound of rain and the knowledge she was safe from it, the knowledge that Dori was snug in her bed, and they were here in their home, together.

She'd had enough of living rough for a little while. Time to enjoy the little pleasures they'd earned right here at home, even if that in and of itself posed some issues.

Crowds, and mad mom's, and Amazons. Oh my.

"Ggggabrielle."

The whisper tickled her ear. "Yees?" She murmured back. "What are you doing up?"

"No fair. That's my line."

Gabrielle turned over, wrapping her arms around Xena's body and reveling in the closeness and comfort. "Ungh. Hear that out there?" She sighed. "I'm just glad you got the roof done."

Xena chuckled, soft and low in her throat. "Getting soft in your old age?"

"If that's what you wanna call it, sure." The bard said. "I like to think of it as getting smarter as I get older."

"Never worked for me."

"Cut the chicken poop, grandma."

The warrior chuckled again, and pulled her closer. "Not too loud. You'll wake the tornado."

"You're already up." Gabrielle teased, sleepily. "Cause we both know where she gets that from, don't we?"

"Pfft."

"Same to you, Boo."

Xena's arms tightened around her again, as a roll of thunder sounded outside. "Know what?" The warrior uttered into her ear. "I'm damn glad I finished that roof, too."

Gabrielle laughed silently. "I bet you are." She answered. "Since I know how much you love lying in puddles of cold water with dew condensing on that beautiful nose of yours." She settled against Xena with a contented sigh.

"Hurm." The warrior ran the fingers of one hand through Gabrielle's blond hair, ending with them cupping the back of her head lightly. "You do know me, don'tcha."

Yes. She did. Gabrielle could finally say that, at least to herself, and not feel any pangs of doubt about it. She knew Xena. She knew every inch of that tall body, every quirk of her eyebrows, every expression on that very expressive face.

She knew Xena's soul, now intertwined so closely with her own, in all its shades of light and shadow. "I do." The bard whispered. "Now go back to sleep, so I can, huh?"

Xena pulled her head a little closer and kissed the top of it, then she tucked the covers more snugly around them and relaxed. "Sure."

The rain outside thrummed down harder, and a rush of wind blew in the scent of the forest clearly. The natural rhythms were soothing, rather than alarming to the two tucked in bed, and they quickly lulled them both back to sleep.

**

Hours later, the rain was still falling outside, but the occupants inside were up and about, busy at various tasks, some more productive than others.

"What'cha do, mama?" Dori peered over the top of the table at her mother curiously.

"Making stories, honey." Gabrielle answered, absently sucking on the top of her quill. "Is that okay?"

"Good stories?"

"Of course." The bard smiled.

"Boo stories?" Dori queried further.

"Of course. What other kind are there?" Her mother replied. "How about I write a story about Boo and the buppits? Would you like that?" She glanced over to where Xena was attaching a shutter, a rapt furry audience dogging her heels. "Hm?"

Xena turned her head and looked over her shoulder, a skeptical expression and raised eyebrow greeting Gabrielle's idea.

"That would be fun, right Dor? Boo and the buppits?" Gabrielle repeated, with a grin. "Wouldn't that be cute?"

"Yes." Dori edged around the table and came closer. "C'n we go see grandma?"

Thunder rolled overhead. "Not right now, honey." Gabrielle cocked her head. "It's still raining. You don't want to get all wet, do you?"

"Yes." The child answered. "Go wet, go now."

Xena chuckled, as she finished one shutter and turned to start on a second. "Silly question, that's little miss fishie, remember?"

"Yeesh." Gabrielle wrote another line. "Well, mama doesn't want to get all wet, Dori, so you'll just have to wait for it to stop raining. Sorry about that."

Dori considered that. "Otay." She turned and went for her toy box. "Play with buppits and Oogy instead. Buppits! C'mere!"

The puppies remained glued to their current target. "G'wan." Xena nudged the nearest of them with her foot. "Hey, maybe she's got cookies. Go get some." She suggested.

"Xena." The bard shook her head. "You're so bad."

"Buppits!" Dori sat down with her toys, and the motion attracted the puppies. They ran over to investigate this new plaything, making Dori squeal with delight. "Good! Good!" She tumbled with them on the floor, a sea of wagging tails and baby toes.

Xena gracefully vaulted out the window and lifted her new shutter, examining the leather straps holding it together with a critical eye. "I'll have to replace these after the rains, but they're quieter than that damn iron." She commented. "No squeaks."

"Leather squeaks." Gabrielle answered. "Yours and the horses does all the time."

"Excuse me?"

"Well, it does." The bard replied. "Creak crick creak crick.. honey, I should know." She mock sighed. "Between you and the crickets, I don't know how I got any sleep up there on Argo sometimes."

"Saucy wench." Xena put one hand on her hip and peered back into the window. "Who's being contrary today?"

The bard stuck her tongue out.

The warrior shook her head and went back to her task. The shutters were hastily made things, woven branches in a tight square pattern inside four pieces of old barn wood, attached with the leather straps off an old set of her leathers. But they did the job, which was to keep the cold blasts of spring air from coming in and she was satisfied with them for the moment.

Another roll of thunder made her turn around and look at the landscape, now thoroughly drenched with the heavy rain. The cabin stood on a flat promontory, she wasn't worried about the ground water rising up over the two steps of the porch, but mudslides weren't an impossibility either.

So far, it looked pretty secure. Xena decided to wait until the rain stopped, however, and do a tour of the area just to check it out. "Bet they're grumbling down in town." She commented.

"Bet they are... not to mention at the Amazon's camp." Gabrielle had wandered over, and was now leaning on the windowsill. The rain wasn't reaching where she was, but a fine mist was, and she leaned into it, wrinkling her nose as it coated her face.

"Weren't you the short blond woman complaining about the rain this morning?" Xena tacked one of the shutters in place.

"Your point?" Gabrielle sat on the sill, then hopped over it, wandering around on the porch and reviewing the wet scene. "I don't mind getting a little wet."

Xena put her tack hammer down and reached behind her, snaring Gabrielle around the waist and pulling her over to her. She leaned back and kissed the bard with lazy passion, taking her time about it until Gabrielle turned all the way round and pressed their bodies together. 'Really?' She licked a droplet of rain off the bard's nose. "Only a little?"

"Ooohh." Gabrielle nuzzled her neck. "There are some awesome advantages to being up here, you know that? Not having six men and a donkey passing our porch is only one of them." She wiped a mist of cold rain off the warrior's cheek. "I think that's what I love so much about being out there with you. It's just us."

"And Dori." Xena reminded her, bending her head for another kiss. "Who thinks we're entirely too affectionate with each other."

"Wait. She'll learn." Gabrielle assured her. "When she gets old enough to know what this feels like."

"When I have to chase suitors off our doorstep with my cane?" Xena snickered. "Gwan back inside and let me finish these damn shutters before we both end up soaking wet." She drew in a breath as she felt the sudden warmth of the bard's hands under her shirt.

"And your point is?"

"You should know." Xena leaned against the windowsill and pulled the bard to her. "You've got your fingers all over them."

"Mama!"

Gabrielle pressed her body against her partners and ducked her head to one side to peer past her shoulder. "Yes, honey?"

"Mama, buppits made a big mess!"

"Uh oh." Xena chuckled. "I ain't looking."

The bard peeked over the sill. Standing near the window was one dark haired child, with ink smeared across her face, and four puppies with black whiskers and black spattered paws. The newly planked floor of the cabin now sported human and paw prints liberally sprinkled about. "Oh boy."

"Buppits did it." Dori assured her earnestly. "Make bad!"

Xena covered her eyes, and tried hard not to laugh.

"Sheesh." Gabrielle sighed. "Well, at least it's only ink."

"Could be worse." Xena agreed.

"Could be worse."

**

Shutters or not, it seemed to Xena to be something of a lost day. Not a bad thing, necessarily. She was lying on her back on the bed, gazing lazily up at the roof as she listened to Dori's piping voice and Gabrielle's deeper answers.

"Hey, Xena?"

Echoes of a younger Gabrielle's tone made Xena smile. "Yees?"

"Think it'll stop raining at all today?"

Xena listened to the rain, judged the steady pattern of the drops, recalled the thickness of the clouds over head, and took a wild guess. "Nah."

"Me either." The bard agreed. "That means either one of us gets wet as all heck or we eat odds and ends."

The warrior stretched and put her hands behind her head. "Odds and ends sounds good to me."

"Thought you'd say that."

Xena's eyes twinkled. "So the point of this conversation was...?" She inquired, idly enjoying the banter. Over the months they'd traveled together before coming home, she'd found their interactions moving to a new kind of gentle intimacy that was comfortable, and surely familiar.

There was a solidness there, that they hadn't had up until now. It was as though they'd moved past the uncertainty of their early romantic relationship, and past the grief of their growing apart, past the timid joy of their reconciliation to this new level that was a cross between affection and sweet teasing, with a little touch of an almost sibling closeness that she'd never really known before.

Not even with Lyceus, who had, after all, been her little brother. This was a more equal sharing, as befitted their partnership. Xena enjoyed being top dog, and she'd never deny that, but she also found that she liked having someone in her life she could just be who she was with, and that was okay with both of them.

"We could let Dori cook." Gabrielle suggested innocently. "Dor, would you like to make something good for your Boo?"

"Boo?" Dori looked up with interest. "You gots good?"

"Sure." Xena amiably agreed. "You get to clean up whatever it ends up as."

"Punk."

"Warrior Princess Punk to you, Amazon." Xena wagged a finger in the air in the general direction of her partner. "Count yourself lucky – she's probably a better cook than I am."

Gabrielle started laughing. "C'mon, Dor. Let's go get Boo." She got up and took Dori's hand, and they both headed for the bed. "Wooooooo!" She let out her own version of Xena's trademark yell and pounced on the supine woman.

Xena grabbed them both as they jumped on her and wrapped her arms around them, rolling over into a jumble of limbs. "Who's got who?" She asked, as both mother and daughter started giggling. "Ah, you couple of lightweights."

"Boo Boo Boo!" Dori squealed. "No itch!"

"Heh.. she knows you as well as I do." Gabrielle chuckled.

"Because she's as ticklish as you are." Xena answered, demonstrating by skittering her fingertips over her partner's ribs.

"Augh." The bard snatched her hands. "Xena!" She let out an indignant yell.

"Not in the ear, Gab." Xena winced, unable to cover hers. She ceased her tickling, though, to prevent a repeat performance. "Ow."

"Ah. Sorry." Gabrielle relaxed, free of her torment. She snuggled back down and exhaled, draping her arm over her partner's stomach. "I still really like rainy days, you know that, Xe?" She gave Xena an indulgently loving look. "Even if I get tickled on them."

"Me, too." The warrior admitted. "Especially if I'm inside during them."

"Fee to." Dori sprawled over Xena's legs. "Boo, you got cookies?"

No, Xena didn't have any cookies, but now that Dori mentioned it, she felt like some. "Tell you what." She said. "I'll go down the hill and bring us up some cookies. How would you like that?"

"You don't have to." Gabrielle protested gently. "We've got stuff here."

"I know.. but that rain's been pretty hard all day." Xena said. "I want to make sure everything's all right down there. River was running a little high." She tickled Gabrielle lightly on the back of her neck. "Despite what my mother thinks, I do give a damn, y'know."

"Xena." Gabrielle hesitated. "You almost gave your life for this town twice in my recent memory. If they don't know you give a damn, they can all go to Hades. Even your mother."

Yeah. Xena knew that, in her heart. "I know." She said. "Maybe that's why it hurts when she says that. A couple of years ago.. she'd have been right."

Gabrielle merely shook her head no.

Xena sighed. "Anyway, she damn well knows better now."

"Maybe I should go." The bard mused.

Xena patted her on the back gently. "Don't make me sit here worrying about you slipping and falling all the way down that damn mountain. Stay here. I'll be right back." She started to extricate herself from her family's embrace.

Gabrielle tightened her hold.

"I'll bring back nut bread." The warrior coaxed.

"Do you really think that's all it takes to win me over?" The bard answered. "C'mon, Xena. I'm a little more complicated than that."

"And honeycake?"

"Hm." The bard released her, however, and rolled over, sitting up on the bed as Xena got herself up out of the other side of it. "Poke an eyeball at the Amazons on your way down?"

"Hrm."

"C'mon, or I'll have to go down with you just to salve my conscience, and that means we'll have to take Dori with us, and the puppies, and.."

"Okay. Right." Xena swung her waxed leather cape over her shoulders and put the hood up. "Do me a favor and have some hot tea ready when I get back?"

"You got it."

Xena stepped outside and closed the door behind her, pausing to review the path before she stepped out into the rain. The rain had slacked a little, but it was still coming down pretty hard and she felt

the mist drench all of the exposed parts of her as she dropped down off the porch and started for the path to town.

Thunder rumbled. Xena kept her head down and drew her cloak a little more closely around her as she started down, placing her boots carefully to avoid the tumble she'd been warning her partner against. The ground was slippery, and the rocks even more so, and she wished she'd borrowed the bard's staff after just a few minutes of traveling.

There was just no way she was going to fall on her butt. She'd never hear the end of it from Gabrielle, and with all the mud and gunk she'd collect in doing it there was no way to hide it either. "Whose hair brained idea was this, again??" She complained out loud, as her boots slipped on a root and she almost lost her balance.

Almost.

Everyone thought she had some kind of supernatural control of her body, Xena knew. Everyone except for Gabrielle, now, of course. One time, even the bard had thought that until she'd lived with Xena a little and found out she tripped and fell on her ass as much as any other human being who did the kinds of physical things she did.

In fact, she'd realized just how much she'd come to enjoy their friendship when she discovered she didn't mind looking like an idiot in front of her every once in a while. Gabrielle had, in fact, taught her it was okay to laugh at herself occasionally.

Only very occasionally, and there would be nothing funny at all if she took a header here with no one to appreciate it but the squirrels.

Xena dodged a fallen log, then changed her mind and leaped up onto it, running along the bark that offered a better footing. She wasn't supernatural, but she'd spent a lot of years training her body to do what she wanted it to do, when she wanted it to do it.

Unfortunately, she didn't often have to take into account pieces of what she traveling over breaking off under her feet. "Yow!" As she jumped off the log, her boots hit a piece of shale that cracked off, taking her with it as it separated from the rock underneath and went sliding away.

Oh boy. Xena found herself balancing on the slate, her downward motion too fast for her to step off without potentially disastrous results. A tree headed her in a flicker, and she swiveled her body to avoid it, ducking under a branch that came so close to her head it captured a few stray dark hairs in its bark.

Whoa. Too close.

The rain kept her from seeing too far ahead of her, and she wavered, crouching to lower her center of gravity and extending her arms as the piece of slate slipped down the path like a stone over the water's surface.

Suddenly she was airborne as the slate rocketed off a small slope, flying through the rain until it landed again, spinning her completely around before she started plunging downward. Her cloak swirled, catching on a branch and she grabbed at the throat tie, ripping it off seconds before the tree ripped her off the slate.

Rain hit her full force through the branches, drenching her to the skin. She shook her head rapidly, shaking the hair and rain from her eyes as she focused on staying up right. "This is nuts!"

She looked around, searching for a place she could jump off and do the minimum of damage. The path where she was sliding was surrounded by craggy rock, though, and on one side, a precipice. Neither was really her first choice.

So.

Xena deliberately relaxed her attention, allowing her body to take over her downward motion. Instinct took over from caution, and she felt her muscles loosen as the shaky sliding she'd been doing turned into a graceful glide.

Her boots were still slipping, but her reflexes made up for it, keeping her upright. It was an almost uncontrolled feeling, as though she was flying down the mountain. The leaves were whipping against her, cold slaps that stung where the drenching rain didn't.

After a moment to get used to the feeling, Xena realized she liked it. The speed excited her, and she leaned forward a little, extending her arms slightly to the side, enough to balance but not enough to catch on the rapidly passing trees.

Wooh. She bent her knees a little, weaving around a small rock outcropping. This is fun.

The path curved around and she leaned to one side, taking the curve as the slate rattled across the path. A fork whipped up on her left hand side, and at the last minute she realized it was the path down to the Amazons. Reversing her body, she tilted her impromptu surf board nearly on end, and somehow made the fork, her speed taking her up and over the small rise that lead to the village.

"Yah!" The Amazon guard jumped out of the way, ending up head first into the mud as Xena whipped past.

Xena grinned and leaned forward, as her speed increased. Check on the Amazons, huh? Ahead of her, she could already hear raised voices and chaos, and as the slope deepened, she was pretty sure she was only going to add to it.

**

Gabrielle spent a few moments just listening to the rain, and daydreaming after Xena left. It was nice to just be able to lay there in the daylight, with nothing more pressing to do than write in her diary. On the road, they usually traveled from sunup to sundown, and with Dori with them there had been precious little time to just lay back and let her thoughts wander.

Now she had that little time, and she reveled in it, thinking of their new home, and all the plans they had for it, and her family, and their future.

It was a peaceful feeling, akin to the one she'd felt last when she'd been first pregnant with Dori – a gentle disassociation that made her rest one hand on her stomach, her thumb rubbing the soft fabric over it in mild speculation. "Hey Dor?"

"Mama." Dori crawled over and tugged on her hair. "Go do stories?" She pleaded. "Want some."

Ah, flattery. The bard rolled over and propped her head up on one hand. "You like my stories, Dor?" She asked. "You like hearing them, and thinking about what they say?"

Dori blinked at her. "Good stories." She concluded. "Boo save the cow. Like that."

The bard chuckled softly. "No, you don't really understand what they mean yet, do you. You just like hearing about Xena."

"Boo?"

"That's okay. Lots of people are like that, sweetie. They just listen to the stories, and they don't realize your mama works very hard to make them mean something special." Gabrielle told her. "Hey listen.. do you think you'd like having a little brother or sister?"

Dori frowned at her after considering the request. "Cow?"

"Hrm.. no.. ah.. like a buppit. A people buppit." The bard explained. "Someone who you can have be with you and play with you all the time."

"Pipple buppit?" Dori seemed dubious.

Gabrielle sighed. "I wish I could remember how I felt about it when my sister was born." She said. "I was about your age, but I don't have any memories at all about that. Maybe that's a good thing." Her brow creased. "Maybe it means, no matter if it takes a little while to get used to it, you don't remember and it's all okay."

"Otay." Dori at last recognized a word she knew. "Cookies?"

"I never really resented my sister." Gabrielle mused. "At least, I don't think I did."

"Mama, go do stories." Dori was apparently bored by her mother's speculation. She crawled closer and butted the bard in the stomach with her head. "You go Boo?"

"Oof." Gabrielle steadied herself as she was knocked slightly backwards. "Do I go Boo? You mean, did I want to go with Xena?"

"Yes."

"Of course I did." The bard answered, in a gentle tone.

"So we go." Dori apparently thought this decided the matter, and she headed for the edge of the bed closest to the door. "Boo Boo Boo.."

"Whoa.." Gabrielle grabbed her by the foot and hauled her down. "Hold on there, bandit." She got an arm around Dori's body and pulled her back, knowing from long experience a single foot hold was a precarious thing. "We're not running out there in the rain, okay?"

"But mama.. you go Boo?" Dori protested. "How come?"

Her mother hugged her. "Honey, Boo said she wanted us to stay here." She explained. "And sometimes we just have to do what Boo asks us to do, right?"

"No."

Gabrielle had to snicker, if only quietly. "Well, this time we do." She said. "So you just stay right here, no running out the door. Promise?"

Dori sucked on her thumb, batting her dark lashes at her mother.

"Dori."

The snub nose wrinkled into a familiar grin.

"Doriana." Gabrielle bit the inside of her lip to keep from laughing. "You don't want to make Boo mad, do you?"

Dori pouted.

"Oh, rats, you 're so cute." The bard squeezed her. "Sweetie, just wait here. Xena will be back soon, and she'll bring you cookies, okay?" She rocked back and forth on the bed, feeling the child start to giggle. "You'll have lots of cookies, and I'll have nutbread, and we'll have Boo here. How's that?"

"Otay." Dori agreed. "Mama, love you."

Gabrielle kissed her on the top of her head. "I love you too, Dori." She responded. "You know how much?"

"Dis much." Dori flung her hands out with a giggle, knowing the answer.

"Right." The bard swung around and put her legs over the side of the bed. "So how about you and I keep busy finishing my story while we wait for Boo, okay? Then you can help me make some tea."

"Fee."

Gabrielle got up and hefted Dori in her arms, carrying her over to the pile of furs she'd been sitting on to write. "You sit here, and help me." She eased to the ground, looking up as a crack of thunder and a flash of lightning lit up the cabin.

"Too loud." Dori complained.

"Yeah." Her mother agreed softly. "You sit here, Dori. You sit here, and stay with me until I throw capes over both of us and go running out the door."

"Mama?"

Gabrielle sighed. "Nothing. C'mon." She dumped a pile of quills on the furs. "Help me sort these out." She watched the child paw among the feathers. "Put the black ones here and the white ones over here, right?"

Dori picked up one of each color and waved them around. "Doo doo doo.." She directed an invisible chorus, making her mother's face crinkle into a grin of memory briefly. "Mama, h'com grandma's mad?" She asked suddenly. "No good."

Gabrielle paused, surprised at the child's perception. "What makes you think grandma's mad, honey?" She asked. "She's not mad at you."

"Boo."

The bard considered. "Did you hear grandma yelling at Boo?"

"Yes."

"That's bad, right?"

"Yes." Dori tossed a feather at her. "H'come?"

How to explain such a complicated thing to a child Dori's age? Gabrielle chewed on the top of the feather she'd just caught from mid air and pondered the question. "Grandma is mad that we moved up here, to this new house."

"H'com?" Dori picked up a quill that had a little ink on it, and started drawing on a scrap of parchment. "Good."

"Because grandma loves us, honey." Gabrielle told her gently. "She wants us to be right around her all the time, so she can be with us. You know all about that, don't you? Just like you want to be with me and Boo, right?"

"Yes."

"Okay, so that's why grandma is mad. Because she wants to be with us."

Dori looked up at her. The green eyes opened wider, and a look of understanding appeared. "Oh."

"At least, that's why I hope she's mad." The bard admitted wryly. "But I think it is." She grabbed her parchments and held them up as the puppies woke up and came over to investigate. "Whoa.. hold on you guys.. cut that out."

"Buppits!" Dori greeted them. "Mama, you tell story Boo with buppits?"

"Um.. I was just kidding about that, Dor."

"Mama?"

Gabrielle sighed. "Me and my big mouth. Okay... let's see. Once upon a time, Boo was out in the forest h..uh, looking for flowers."

Dori giggled.

"Yeah, okay. Boo was in the forest running around and having fun."

"Go Boo!"

"And all of a sudden, Boo heard something squeaking. It was a sound she'd never heard before, so of course, she went off to find out what it was."

"Woof." One of the puppies sneezed, as a feather tickled its nose.

"Squeak squeak.. Dori, do you know what a buppit sounds like when it's a baby? It makes a sound like that." Gabrielle explained. "So that's what Boo heard, and she went off to find out where it was. She hunted high and low, she climbed up trees, and she climbed down a hill, but she couldn't find out where the noise was."

"Boo Boo Boo." Dori wriggled. "Boo can find it!"

"You think so?"

"Boo does ever'ting."

Gabrielle leaned back against the wall, a smile appearing on her face. "You know, I think she can too. So Boo went over the hill, and through the forest and she found a little cave, and in the cave, you know what she found?"

"Buppits!"

"Woof!"

"That's right." The bard agreed. "She found four little buppits, with fur, and tails and ears, and one little buppit that looked just a little like you."

"Doh!"

**

The Amazon village was a sodden mass of scrambling bodies, mud, and virulent cursing. Since the village was on a lower plateau, the deluge of rain had washed through it, drenching the inhabitants of the half finished huts and swamping the supplies left on the ground.

"Get those bags over here!" Ephiny yelled, shading the rain off her face with one hand. "C'mon, move it!" She urged the two Amazons headed her way. "Whose bloody idea was it to put this damn hut here, anyway?"

"That would be you." Pony reminded her, dragging a heavy sack filled with sand into place, and patting it.

"Oh. Right." The regent sighed, and swiped her wet curls off her forehead. "What was I thinking?"

"You were thinking dry season." Pony stolidly went back for another bag. "Same thing we all were thinking."

"Help!"

Ephiny whirled, her eyes widening as she saw a hut collapsing, the heavy spars leaning crazily over as it toppled down on three Amazons inside. "Son of a b.." She broke into a run towards them, yanking her boots out of the mud with oddly staccato sucking sounds. "Grab it! Hurry! Get that off them!"

The hut teetered on the edge of collapse, the three women inside it grabbing for the cross- spars frantically as the rain redoubled.

Pony cursed, and dropped the bag she was carrying, racing after Ephiny. She was halfway caught up with her when something caught her eye, and she looked to her left, where the slope came down to meet the plateau.

Something was moving towards them. Instinctively, Pony reached for her sword and turned, arcing towards the motion and putting herself between whatever it was and her partner. She could see it was something big, and dark, and it was moving very fast, with a very strange, gliding action. "Eph!"

Ephiny heard the warning note. She pulled up in her tracks and whipped her head around, searching for whatever threat Pony had discovered. Her eyes widened as she saw the onrushing figure, and she blinked, then scrubbed the rain from her eyes. "What the..."

Soaked with rain, her dark hair flying out in damp tendrils, Xena appeared to be flying down the ridge, her body balanced over a flat piece of material and her body swaying with that incomparable balance and grace that only she possessed.

Even from where she was, Ephiny could see the wicked grin, and with that, she could imagine the glint in those blue eyes as the warrior sped towards them, drawing a straight line towards her right through the center of the town.

Wild. Untamable, always. Ephiny half shook her head. "Look out!!!" She let out a bellow of warning. "Incoming!!!!"

"Yahhh!!" Two Amazons dove out of the way as the fast moving body whipped past them heading for the falling hut.

Ephiny blinked again. "Pony! Move!"

Eponin got a good look at the attacker, and for once did what she was told, turning and running for her life.

"Yeeeeeahhh!" Xena aimed for the toppling structure, skimming across the water logged grass on a bare sheet of water as Amazons jumped out of her way in all directions. "Whoohoo!"

"Xena!" Ephiny yelled. "What in the Hades are you doing!"

The warrior jumped off the slate as she reached the hut, lazily flipping into a somersault before she landed with both boots in the water, sending a resounding splash everywhere before she hopped forward and grabbed the hut's roof spar just as it toppled, the weight of the structure coming down onto her shoulders as she threw her body into supporting it. "Saving your asses."

The slate thumped to halt near Ephiny's boots, rocking a little before it settled into the grass. "Ah."

Xena straightened her slightly bent knees, leaning forward as the hut swayed crazily. "Get out." She ordered the Amazons. "I can't do this forever."

The three women scuttled out hastily, dragging their belongings into the mud after them.

"Grab that! C'mon." Pony hauled one of them back, throwing them toward where Xena was stolidly standing. "Hang in there, champ." She got into place next to the warrior, only to realize she was too short to help much. "Gods be damned, Xena."

"Just get that brace up." The warrior grunted, her jaw clenching at the effort of holding up the roof. "Prop it near my elbow."

"Give me a.. oh, thanks." Pony wrestled the heavy pole into place with a hand from Ephiny. "Hey, get over here you lazy wenches!"

"Pon."

"Move it!" Eponin roared, glaring over her shoulder at the hesitant women. "Chickenshits!"

Thus spurred, two more Amazons rushed into the hut, grabbing the support and helping them to wrestle it into place.

"Damn sorry you're holding this thing up, Xena." Pony grunted. "You could just give this thing a kick, y'know?"

The pressure of the wood was grinding into her shoulders, and the weight of the roof was pushing her boots down into the mud. Neither was a pleasant sensation, and Xena just wanted it to be over with. She glanced to her right, then carefully shifted her weight onto her left leg and lashed out with her other, slamming into the support and knocking it into place. "Like that?"

"Oof." Pony went sprawling as the surface she'd been pushing against suddenly wasn't there. She ended up on her knees, her shoulders slamming into Ephiny who reeled backwards. "Somethin like.. that.. oops.. Hades... sorry Eph."

"No problem." Ephiny looked up from her seat in the mud, spatters of it liberally coating her face.

Xena cautiously eased out from under the spars, holding on until she was sure it wasn't going to collapse on her. It was still unstable, but she got another support into place with a wrench of her arm, and finally the roof stopped wavering.

"Everyone all right?" The warrior turned around and looked at her audience. She extended a hand down to Ephiny, who grabbed it and allowed herself to be hauled to her feet. "Ephiny?"

"Fine, fine." The regent didn't bother to wipe herself off. "Glad you showed up when you did.. thanks."

"Thanks." One of the Amazons who lived in the hut added, diffidently. "That was really great of you." She looked around at the interior of the hut, sadly scattered with mud and bits of grass. "Though I'm not sure it was worth saving it."

The other Amazon nodded agreement.

Ephiny sighed.

Xena shrugged. "I've had some get blown out from under me." She said, casually. "Gotta build somewhere." She turned to the regent. "Might want to think about building up.. just to keep everyone's.. um.. "

"Ass." Ephiny flicked a bit of mud off hers. "Out of the muck."

"Yeah." The warrior agreed. "And we have ground slugs here. Hate em."

The other Amazons came closer, gathering in the downpour to listen. For once, there was no animosity in their gazes, and no dour glares in Xena's direction. It was new, and different, and Xena felt herself responding to that, straightening up and tossing her wet hair back with a jerk of her head.

The regent looked around, at the sad state of the village. Then she looked back at Xena. "Can I buy you a drink?" She asked, frankly. "I need some advice."

It was a watershed moment, and Xena recognized that, despite the fact that they were standing in the rain, up to their ankles in mud. "Sure." She agreed. "Gabrielle asked me to stop by here, see if you needed anything."

Two messages. One, that their queen was thinking about them. Two, that Xena was willing to do what Gabrielle asked, for whatever her personal reasons were. It always paid to remind them that the oath she'd sworn when she'd been inducted into the tribe was one of loyalty to her partner, not to the Amazons in general.

Just so no one got any funny ideas and started clipping feathers to her or anything. She freed her boots from the muck and followed Ephiny towards her quarters, which were, unlike most of the rest of the village, intact and somewhat snug looking.

Pony stayed behind. "I'm gonna see if I can get this place cleaned up a little." She yelled after Ephiny, who raised a hand and waggled it in response. "Yeah, you're welcome." She turned to the group. "All right, lets get moving with those damn bags,"

"Damned rain." Ephiny swept aside the beads that were the doorway to her home, and entered. She waited for Xena to follow her, then she turned around. "Want a towel?"

Xena picked a hide covered stool and sat down on it. "Nah." She shook her head. "I've just gotta go out there and get wet again. No point."

Ephiny poured something from a skin into two cups, and came over, taking the other stool and handing Xena one of the wooden goblets. "I was up to see your new place this morning."

The warrior's eyebrows hiked. "You were?"

The regent nodded. "Yeah, I'm a sucker for punishment, what can I tell you. It was pretty early though.. I didn't want to bother you guys."

Xena took a sip from the cup, finding a sweet, white wine in it. "You could have."

"I know."

"So?"

"You build that thing." Ephiny said. "You did, yourself, didn't you?"

Xena leaned back and extended her legs, crossing her booted ankles. "I had help."

"But you put it together, you decided how it would be, right?"

"Sure." The warrior frowned, unsure of what Ephiny was getting at. "Well, we did." She clarified. "My partner has some definite opinions of her own."

Ephiny smiled. "I'm sure she does, but what type of wood to use on the walls are probably not among them. Look." She leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees. "This place is all new to us. That's what's taking so long, we don't know the ground, we don't know the trees around here.. I need a native guide."

"Ah."

"Everyone would feel better if you took charge here, and scoped out the area. Tell us the best way to set this place up."

Xena looked around carefully, glanced in her cup, looked at Ephiny, then shook her head a trifle.

"Who are you, and what have you done with the damn Amazons?"

Ephiny gave her a wry grin, tipping her cup in Xena's direction. "A lot changed while you were gone." She offered, quietly. "I'm not sure why or how it all happened, but one night a bunch of the old girls, not the elders, but the.."

"Gonna be elders soon." Xena supplied. "The ones who hated my guts and didn't accept Gabrielle."

"Mm." The regent half nodded. "They showed up in my hut one night and just told me they were over it. They finally agreed that the tribe was better off for having you both a part of us. Frankly.." She took a sip. "I thought they were drunk off their asses."

Xena chuckled.

"But they weren't. So I don't know." Ephiny shrugged. "But all the trash talk stopped, and everyone's been looking forward to you both coming back here. They want..." She seemed a touch embarrassed. "Maybe they're just tired of my lame leadership and they see something better."

The warrior felt suddenly a little out of her depth. This seemed to be teetering dangerously on the edge of a sensitive chat, and she wished Gabrielle were here to keep her right out of it. "Nah.' She disagreed.

"Yeah." Ephiny looked honestly at her. "They want you."

"Gabrielle, you mean."

"Both of you."

Xena set her cup down and studied their friend. Ephiny seemed a little tired, and she could see some signs of a quiet resignation in her face. "They only think they do." She finally concluded. "They always want what they don't have."

Ephiny wagged her hand, acknowledging the comment.

The warrior took a long sip of her wine, giving herself a chance to think. "Sure I'll help." She said.

"Wont' take much... you've got some good people here. They'll catch on fast."

Ephiny nodded. "I'd like Gabrielle to come in and boot butt for a while. I need a break."

Warning bells the size of muskmelons rang in Xena's head. "I'll let her know that." She offered. "You know she'll be there for you."

A smile. "Oh, I do know that." The regent said, sincerely. She paused a moment, then changed the subject. "So, what the Hades were you doing when you came down here? That a new Boo routine?"

It was an accident. Xena's mind supplied. I took a bad step, broke off a piece of rock and managed to stay on it so I didn't end up in mud and animal crap up to my eyeballs. "Yeah." She replied. "New balancing thing I'm trying out. Gotta keep fresh."

"Eh." Ephiny toasted her. "Teach it to Pony."

"I'll tell her you said that."

Finally, the regent smile, a warm, genuine expression that lit up her face. "I am glad you're back." She admitted, raising her cup towards the warrior.

"Me too." Xena touched it with her own. "Just hope it stays that way."

**

The rain had let up some by the time Xena bid Ephiny goodbye, and continued on her way down to Amphipolis. She had a lot to think about as she walked, so she kept her pace slow as she traveled between two craggy ridges and approached the bridge across the gorge.

Halfway over, a sound made her stop and turn to the side, gazing down into the abyss with her head cocked to one side. For all the years of her memory, the gorge had been a dry chasm, an old creek bed that had lost its liquid lifeblood save the barest of trickles, and then only in the deep of the wet season.

Now, for the first time, she could hear the soft hiss and rush of water at the bottom of it. She put her hands on the rope of the bridge and leaned over, her eyes searching the overgrown foliage intently. It was too thick for her to see anything, but the sound persisted and she wondered if it was simply runoff, or something more substantial.

With a faint frown, she released the ropes and continued on, making a mental note to check the slopes below the village. They'd had a wet winter, she knew, and that might count for some of it, but she knew the destructive power of too much water better than most.

Had used it to win a few battles, in fact. Xena reached a lesser slope, and eased into a jog as her boots found surer footing and her body loosened up again after her rest in Ephiny's quarters. Soon enough, she passed through the back gates to the town, the usual traffic dampened to almost nothing from the weather.

It made Amphipolis a little more familiar to her, being able to walk through the narrow lanes without being crowded, or bumping into people. It felt good, and she relaxed a little.

The inn loomed up before her and she started to walk up the steps, when she heard her mother's voice inside, a sharply critical note evident and her name attached to the end of the statement. Xena stopped, one hand on the door, then she turned and left the porch, without looking back.

**

"Cy, will you lay off it?" Johan caught a glimpse of a familiar figure, retreating through the rain away from the inn. "Leave them be."

"Don't you start that." Cyrene told him. "I have to hear it from everyone else."

"Ever think everyone else might be right this time?" Her husband wryly asked. "I don't understand you, you know that? I remember you tearing into Josc, way back when, and telling him to leave the kids do what they wanted, and here you are!"

"Damn it, it's dangerous up there!" Cyrene spluttered in exasperation. "There's no one to even hear them if there's trouble!"

"Cyrene." Johan gripped her shoulders. "Xena and Gabrielle can take care of themselves. Hades, they can take care of themselves, and us, and half Greece, and they don't need no help in doing it. What's the matter with you, woman?"

Cyrene pulled herself free and went to the window, seeing only rain and sodden trees now. "There's nothing wrong with me." She stated flatly. "I just put a lot of my life the last few years in bringing my family back to me, and now this."

"Cy." Johan rubbed his temples. "They didn't move to Persia. Just up the mountain."

"It's the idea of it."

Johan shook his head, and walked back through the inn. "Have it your way, but I'll tell you, Cy... you keep this up, they will move to Persia."

Cyrene glanced over her shoulder and frowned, then returned her attention to the window. A motion caught her eye, and she blinked, leaning forward as she recognized Xena's distinctive form crossing the bridge over to the lower town. "Hmph!"

**

Xena walked quietly into the market, the stalls still open despite the weather. A few people were even shopping, now that the rain had let up and the ground was just a sodden mess instead of a dangerous sheet of water.

They all knew who she was. Xena returned the polite greetings with a casual wave, her eyes picking among the various wares to find something to bring back home for dinner.

She'd promised Gabrielle nutbread, and Dori cookies. Since the inn wasn't in her plans, now she had to find an alternate source for them, as well as an explanation as to why she was tossing perfectly good dinars around just to avoid a fight.

"Two of those." Xena sighed, pointing at a pair of melons she knew her partner would enjoy.

"Sure, genr'l." The vendor agreed amiably. "Like a basket to take with?"

"How much?" A dark brow cocked.

"Just bring her back when you're back this way." The man held his hand up. "We know where you live."

Xena looked at him.

"Ah.. didn't mean it like that." The vendor hastily amended.

"Thanks." The warrior accepted the basket, tossed the man a coin, and continued her browsing. Generally, she wasn't into the whole shopping experience, but since this was mostly for her family, she really didn't mind it too much.

She spotted a leather crafter, and wandered over, admiring the well cured hides tucked carefully under the thatched roof. Their journeys had been tough on her leathers, and she hadn't had time yet to sit down and patch them up the way she liked them. "How much?" She indicated a soft, supple dark brown hide.

The tanner walked over, furtively glancing at her completely drenched leathers and well made, if equally well worn boots. "Won't stand hard usage like that, Xena."

The warrior glanced down. "Probably not." She agreed. "But it's not for me."

"Ah." The tanner nodded, a little more at ease. "Got something a little brighter, if you'd like." He flipped over a few skins and exposed one dyed in a deep, rich purple, a color Xena definitely hadn't seen before. "Got some pigment up near the border."

"Hm." Xena touched the surface, letting her fingers evaluate the skin beneath its pretty coating. It had a fine texture, and who ever had tanned it, had done a damn fine job. Her lips tensed into a faint smile. "How much?"

"Ten dinars."

"Only if you give me the steer it was wrapping in the bargain." The warrior replied.

"Pretty piece of hide." The tanner countered. "That color cost me."

"Six." Xena said.

The vendor shook his head. "I can't let it go for that. Too much put into it."

Xena's eyes twinkled a little. "I could send Gabrielle down here to bargain for it herself."

"Seven." The man responded instantly.

"Done." Xena handed over the coins, aware that she was probably spending more than was strictly necessary but satisfied nonetheless. She slung the hide over her shoulder, neatly folded, and continued on. The rain had petered out, save a few brief spatters, and she even caught the hint of wan sunlight near the west as the clouds reluctantly gave way.

She picked up a packet of walnuts, and a few other edibles, then wandered over to the bakers stall where the woman inside was starting to pack up her wares. "Got any sweet breads left?"

The baker turned, surprised. "Wh..ah." She put down her basket. "Hello, Xena. I didn't expect any more customers today.. it's getting late." She hesitated. "And you don't frequent the market... not with your mother being such the cook she is."

Xena pulled a wicker rack closer. "Had to come down here for something." She lied. "Figured I'd give the inn's kitchen a break. Gimme two of those."

The woman wrapped the two honeycakes, one brimming with fruit, without comment. She then waited, as Xena prowled the rest of the offerings. "Have some flatbreads left." She added hopefully.

Flatbreads. Xena liked them, but it was a staple of theirs on the road, and she'd steered clear of the things since they'd been back. She poked a few of the breads, then sniffed as her nose caught a different scent. "What is that?" She pointed.

"Oh." The woman sighed. "It's just a bad experiment of mine, really. Thought folks would like it, but no one's even so much as nibbled all day." She pulled a pan of dark, thick looking pastry over. "It's got nuts in it.. and some new thing, a bean oil extract my husband brought back from the coast."

Xena broke off a corner and tasted it. It was sweet and rich, and it reminded her of something, some far off place she'd once been to, but she couldn't remember clearly enough to think where. The one thing she did know was that she really liked it.

And, that Gabrielle would, too.

"Not bad." She casually commented. "Different."

"Too much so." The woman shook her head. "Pity."

Xena licked her fingers. "Ah, I'll take it off your hands for you." She offered. "It's not that bad, and the kid'll probably like it."

The baker beamed at her. "You will? Oh.. how about.. ah.. listen, a dinar, okay? For the whole pan. Your little girl is just so cute."

Wasn't the kid Xena had been referring to, but she figured Dori wouldn't mind the treat either. "Sure." She handed over a coin and took possession of the pastry, which the woman wrapped into a nice smelling bundle for her.

She had honeycake, and she had some nuts. She had an acceptable replacement for nutbread, all she was lacking was something dinnerlike for dinner. Nothing in the market really appealed to her, and she kept walking.

Maybe Gabrielle's idea of odds and ends had been right after all. The warrior strolled past the lower town inn, hearing a raucous round of voices coming from the window. She could smell the scent of stale ale already in the wood of the building, and she felt no urge to sample the interior after her first visit when they'd arrived home.

Where she'd once faced an army, now rows and rows of houses had sprung up, lining mud covered lanes that spread out from the bridge like the spokes of a wheel. The market and inn, and some of the merchants were near the waterfront, near where the barges docked and offloaded their cargos.

Further down the huts got a little bigger, a little nicer, as people who had come to Amphipolis after the war became prosperous and put their money into building homes for their families. There was nothing, really, wrong with that and in fact the town had grown along the plans Xena herself had roughed out before they'd left.

They'd dug the refuse pits where she'd told them, and put enough distance between the buildings for carts to pass, collecting the garbage.

But it still stank. That many people with that much waste in that small an area just couldn't avoid that, and Xena found her nose wrinkling in reaction as she circled the central square area, and headed back towards the river.

Maybe she'd just go catch a fish in the brook near the cabin. Bread and fruit was one thing, but the thought of bringing up anything raw from the town just made her stomach turn. Xena decided to quit while she was ahead, and she lengthened her strides, as the clouds closed in again and the wind picked up.

She paused before the bridge, and went to the river's edge, looking carefully at the level. It was high, the water was creeping up the bank on both sides, nibbling away at the rock and mud the lined it. Xena tipped her head back and looked at the thickening clouds, and felt a prickle of apprehension, instincts flaring she didn't often ignore.

"Xena."

Xena looked up, to see Johan on the bridge, heading towards her. She turned her back on the river and walked up to meet him, the planks sounding odd and hollow under their boots. "Rains coming back." She said, briefly he stopped in front of her.

"I know." Johan said. "Listen, I wanted to talk to you about your mother."

Xena sighed. "Do you have to?"

Johan's lips twitched slightly. "Xena, I'm sorry." He said, sincerely. "I know you've caught the back end of this."

The warrior shrugged. "I just did what I had to do. I've done that all my life. Not sure why it's different this time."

He looked uncomfortable. "Justs wants you all close. She's getting on, y'know."

Xena looked at him. "Don't give me that." She said. "I don't buy it."

Johan turned, and gestured back towards the upper town. "No, or me either." He said. "Pride thing, somewhat I'm thinking."

"Hm." A wry expression crossed Xena's face. "We've both got that."

They walked together across the bridge, as the wind tugged at them. "Didn't want to come to the inn?" Johan indicated her burdens. "Had some roast birds on, kind you like."

"Heard my mother bitching about me. Decided to keep going." Xena replied.

"Ah." Johan rubbed his chin. "Sorry about that."

"Not your fault."

They walked a little further, off the bridge and up the slope that lead to the old town gates. Xena paused in front of them, her hand resting on the twisted iron as she remembered the day they'd won the war. She turned and looked down at the sprawling growth below her, and shook her head. "I wonder who really won?"

"What's that?" Johan asked.

Xena just shook her head again.

"You don't like what's happening here, do you?" Her step father asked. "All this change and new town and all?"

"No." The warrior answered honestly, as she pushed off the gate and started through it.

Johan put a hand on her arm. "Why?" He asked. "Ye saw this place through the worst of times. Why not enjoy the good?"

Xena studied his face, feeling a little sad. "Because it's not my home anymore."

Johan stopped in his tracks and let her walk on alone, a few stray drops making their way into the breeze along with the strong scent of lightning.

**

Gabrielle put her hands on her hips and shook her head as she watched Xena enter the cabin. "Didn't you leave here with a cape?"

The drenched warrior, packages tucked under one arm and fish dangling from her other hand paused in consternation. "I did." She set the packages down and knelt to greet Dori, who was unfazed by her dampness. "Hey, shortie."

"And..?"

"I think I left it somewhere." Xena admitted. "I'll go out later and find it."

"Uh huh." The bard walked over and took the fish. "Um.. this what they're serving down at mom's?"

"No."

"Uh huh." Gabrielle decided to take care of the immediate concerns first. She took the fish over to the small worktable against the wall and retrieved her knife set while she listened to Xena play with Dori. "Hon, you might want to get those leathers off."

"I might." Xena agreed.

"Sokay if I just grill this? Dor's kinda hungry."

"Sure. You're not?"

"Ahem." Gabrielle smiled, as she heard Xena stand up and walk across the floor, the newly laid floorboards squeaking lightly under her weight. "How are the Amazons?"

"Hrm."

"Next time we definitely go wf.." Gabrielle paused, and chewed, a delightful taste filling her mouth. She hastily swallowed and turned towards her partner. "What was that?" She managed to get out.

"Like it?" Round, blue eyes looked innocently at her.

"OH yes." Gabrielle licked her lips. "There's more, right?"

"Mama?" Dori tugged her shirt. "Hungry."

"There's more." Xena leaned forward and gave Gabrielle a kiss. "The Amazons are a little waterlogged, but all right. Eph's another story."

"Ah." Gabrielle was torn between questioning Xena, preparing the fish, or tracking down more of the sweet cake she'd just eaten. "Hold that thought." She came down on the side of responsibility and tossed the fish onto her biggest pan, held off the fire by a wire grate Xena had installed.

Xena took the opportunity to strip out of her wet leathers, going to the door to the bathing room and tossing them onto a rack inside. She pulled a shift over her head before she came back into the main room, sitting down on the bed to unlace her equally drenched boots.

Dori wavered, then came over to her. "C'n help, Boo?"

"Sure, shortie." Xena held out a lace. "Pull."

Dori complied, tugging the lace free with such sudden effort, she ended up sitting down hard on her bottom. "Whoof!"

"Easy there." Xena handed her another lace. "What have you been doing, helping mama?"

"Mama make good story, Boo." Dori told her.

"She did, huh?" The warrior tousled her daughter's hair. "What silly thing did she have me doing this time, hm?" She glanced at her partner's back as she heard a soft chuckle. "Uh oh."

Gabrielle rinsed her hands off and wiped them, then she went to the packet Xena had put down. On top there was a mostly wrapped package, which smelled wonderful. Beneath it was a folded hide, and next to them both was a basket. "Did you go into the new town?"

"Yep."

"This is beautiful." Gabrielle spread her hand over the hide. "What a pretty color."

"Glad you like it."

Gabrielle did. "Hm... does that mean your next set of armor's this color? Cool."

Xena cleared her throat.

The bard smiled, gently nudging aside the leather to get to the wrapped package. She peeled the top layer off the wrapping and broke off a piece of the contents, examining it with curious eyes. It was a cakelike substance, but moist and dark with a larger grain than the usual cakes they found in Cyrene's kitchen.

It also smelled wonderful, and she spotted nuts buried inside the pastry. She put it in her mouth and chewed it, amazed at the taste. "This is incredible."

Now it was Xena's turn to chuckle.

The bard turned, taking the packet and setting it up on the mantel to keep it from curious fingers and noses. "You have to take me tomorrow and show me where you got it."

"Sure."

"Mom chase you away again?"

Xena tossed her boots into the bathing room. Then she stood up and faced Gabrielle. "C'mere." She opened her arms and closed them over the bard as she walked right up into her, fitting her body to Xena's without saying a word.

Dori patted the floor. "Gush!"

"You got it, shortie." After many hours of being chilled and wet, the warmth of Gabrielle pressing against her was unspeakably blissful and worth the childish criticism. "Yeah, I wasn't in the mood for arguments." She said. "Johan found me though."

“Ah.”

Xena shrugged, giving the bard a hug before she released her, and started moving the rest of her booty off the bed. “They just don’t get it.”

Instead of moving away, Gabrielle moved closer again instead, taking the stuff from her partner and bumping her with one hip. “Relax while I get that fish ready. Dori, come play with Boo.” She set the bundles down on the worktable and dug out the nuts and melons, looking from one to the other in some mild puzzlement.

“Boo Boo Boo.” Dori grabbed Xena’s knee as she sat down on the bed. “Dup!”

Obligingly, the warrior picked her up and put her on the soft surface. She reclined on her side, and held up one hand for Dori to pattycake with. “You need to talk to Eph.”

“Do I?” Gabrielle set aside the melons for a moment and carefully turned the fish in it’s pan, dusting it with a bit of herbs from the jar on the mantel.

Xena watched Dori grab her fingers and examine them, pulling on her hand with a serious expression. “She thinks the Amazons want us to take over from her.”

Unseen, Gabrielle’s eyes popped wide open. “She does?”

“Yeah.”

“What would make her think that? Xena, you know as well as I do that she’s a very good regent.” Gabrielle tossed a handful of the nuts into the pan with the fish, stirring them around to toast.

“She thinks they’re tired of her leadership, and they want a change. You, specifically.” Xena made a circle of her thumb and forefinger, and put it over Dori’s eye. “See ya.”

“Dee ya!” Dori clutched her hand, giggling. “Goh Boo!” She crawled over and jumped on Xena, who rolled over onto her back and bounced up and down a little. “Go fly!”

“No flying today.” The warrior said. “I’m tired.”

“Boo!”

“Did Ephiny really say that?” Gabrielle asked, as she separated the fish into portion and slid it onto their wooden plates.

“Yup.” Xena put her hands around Dori’s hips and lifted her up. “Here, you fly for a change.”

“Eee!” Dori held her arms out as the warrior moved her through the air. “Go go go!”

Gabrielle had to admit the news troubled her. “Come over here, the two of you.” She cut one of the melons into slices, and set it in a bowl in the center, then snagged a skin full of cider and set it down as well. “Tell you what, I should send you there more often. I spent half the day with them yesterday and didn’t get one word out of her about that.”

Xena carried Dori over to the table, and sat her down on her sturdy high stool. She took the chair next to her, and patted the one Gabrielle usually used. “Siddown.”

“Num.” Dori hadn’t waited on ceremony, and was busy moving her fish from the plate to her mouth in the quickest way possible. “Mama, dis is good!”

“Thanks, honey. Thank Boo for catching it for us.” Gabrielle answered absently, resting her head against one fist as she used a utensil and a more decorous method of eating. “That was very nice of her, wasn’t it?”

“Pure self interest.” Xena forked herself up a bit of fish. “Anyway, you scare the Amazons speechless, what can I tell you.”

“Me?” Gabrielle pointed at herself. “Xena, I don’t scare anyone.”

“Sure you do.”

"I do not!"

"Scared the tanner into cutting his price for me just by mentioning your name." Xena teased.

The bard rolled her eyes. "Give me a break."

The warrior chuckled and shook her head, taking up another piece of fish and adding a few of the roasted nuts to it. "Anyway, talk to Eph. Maybe she's just cycling or something." She said. "Or she needs a few days off from that bunch.. gods know I would."

"Hm." Gabrielle took a piece of melon and ate it. "Yeah, we could do that.. hey, Xe? How about we send her and Pon off on a honeymoon?"

"We?" Xena's brows quirked.

"You're my consort, in case you forgot." The bard said. "I figure, if we do that, by the time they come back they'll be all chilled out, and the Amazons'll be ready to get rid of us."

Xena pondered the idea as she finished her dinner. Several things about it were mildly appealing, most notably the fact that it would give her an excuse to stay away from the town for a while. Maybe that would give her mother a chance to chill out as well. "Huh."

Gabrielle took that as the affirmation it was, and went back to eating.

"Mama, look." Dori held up a nut, then ate it. "Good!"

"Sweetie, you think everything is good." The bard replied good-humoredly. "Everything that's not green or good for you, I mean. Just like your Boo."

Now Xena had her head propped on her fist as she watched her family finish up. "She eats peas." She objected. "And carrots."

"Those are orange."

"And small insects."

"Just like you." Gabrielle gazed across the table, meeting Xena's eyes and holding them. "Know what she did today while you were gone?"

Loaded question. "Um.. no. What?" Dori was capable of pretty much anything, and she'd recently discovered a new love of climbing things, the higher the better. It was a skill they both knew the child hadn't gotten from Gabrielle.

"A somersault."

"Boo Boo Boo.." Dori patted the table contentedly. "Gaboo and the buppits... bck bck."

Xena blinked, shifting her gaze to her daughter and then back to Gabrielle. "Ah..you mean.." She twirled her finger in the air hesitantly.

"Serve you right if I said yes." Gabrielle poked the tip of her tongue out. "No, on the floor. But it was really cute, and she's definitely got your moves."

"How do we know that? I've never seen you do one." Xena said.

"You've never seen YOU do one. I have. Lots. Trust me." Gabrielle got up and went to the mantel. "Hey Dori, you want some cookies?"

"Yes!"

"Boo got us something yummy." The bard separated three squares of the pastry and brought it back to the table. "Here. See what you think of this." She handed Dori the treat, then gave Xena hers, circling the table then letting out a squawk as the warrior snagged her around the waist and pulled her down into her lap. "Whoa!"

"Yum." Xena wrapped her arms securely around her partner, feeling the shift as Gabrielle took a breath, then a returning warmth as the bard draped herself over the warrior's shoulders. "That's my kind of dessert."

Indulgently, Gabrielle broke one of their pastries in half, and offered it to her. "So what do you think, Dor? Good?"

"Mm." Dori was absorbed in her treat, a cavalcade of crumbs scattering across the table.

The bard returned her attention to her quiet partner, who was ignoring the pastry, her head leaning against Gabrielle's shoulder. "Xe?" She set the pastry down, brushing the backs of her knuckles against the warrior's planed cheekbone instead. "Hey."

"Hey." Xena responded. "Gwan and eat it. I'm stuffed." It felt nice to just sit there with Gabrielle, absorbing the gentle affection in the green eyes now studying her intently and letting the troubling questions of the day fade off somewhere. "Eph asked me to help them build that place."

"Ahh." The bard's face split into a pleased smile. "Now that's more like it." She bit into her half of the cake. "You know, it'll be good to spend some time with them. I think I'm liking the idea."

Xena exhaled contentedly. "We'll make it work."

"Of course." Gabrielle tilted her head back, as thunder returned and they heard the rattle of rain again. "Don't we always?" She popped the rest of the pastry into her mouth and licked her fingers. "Mm."

"Mm."

**

Late that night, with rain still pouring down outside and the cool wind rattling the new shutters, Gabrielle lay curled up in bed, her head pillowed on Xena's shoulder and her arm wrapped around her snugly. Under her ear, she could hear the steady beat of the warrior's heart, but her breathing was a little to light, a little too shallow for her to be sleeping.

Well, Gabrielle wasn't sleeping either. "Xena?"

"Mm?" The warrior answered at once.

"Something bothering you?"

A soft chuckle. "No, I was just thinking about things."

"Like what things?" Gabrielle asked, rubbing her thumb lightly over Xena's ribcage.

"Amazons. Mom. Somersaults."

"Ah." Gabrielle let her eyes drift closed, inhaling a breath filled with the scent of clean linen and her soulmate. It was nice to be surrounded by their woven quilt, she mused, instead of the often musky smell of their traveling furs.

"How you're gonna look in that purple leather."

The bard's eyes opened again, and she tilted her head to peer up at Xena's shadowy profile. "You're so funny." She tickled her partner's ribs. "Listen, I'm really sorry mom's being so unreasonable. I'll go down there tomorrow and see if I can see what the problem really is."

"We moved."

"Xena, that's not the real issue and we both know that." Gabrielle said.

"I told her the town stank."

"It does, and she knows that too."

Xena shrugged.

Gabrielle was quiet for a few moments. "Are you mad at her for something?" She felt the warrior shift a little, an almost unconscious tension that spoke more clearly than words. "Still pissed about them coming to Athens?"

She felt the sigh rather than heard it. When they'd returned, they'd both had a big argument with the town elders, one which Gabrielle suspected had led to them asking her not to try and fill Josclyn's place as reeve. Xena had been her typically blunt self, she'd insulted the elders without apology and Gabrielle had, as usual, backed her up one hundred percent.

Johan had told her later that he'd agreed with them, but they'd been gone so long, memories had faded and self righteousness had taken its place as the elders had convinced themselves that they'd gone along to Athens for the best of reasons and ended up getting pushed aside.

Xena had been maddest at Cyrene, because she could have stopped them, and she hadn't. Maybe that was what had triggered the whole thing when they'd decided to move.. maybe that had something to do with it all. Gabrielle wondered if Cyrene didn't feel just a little bit guilty herself about it.

About Josc dying.

For one time, she and Xena had no guilt about anything that happened there. They'd gone and they'd done what they'd done for some darn altruistic reasons, and they'd really gotten nothing out of it but some aches and pains.

Well, aside from her winning that bard contest.

And Xena winning all the games.

And them getting the taxes relieved. But they'd done it all for Amphipolis, so maybe that was why they both felt like they didn't really owe anyone here anything including explanations of why they moved up the side of a mountain.

Maybe they were just growing past their pasts. The bard thought about that, and it put a tiny, wry smile on her face. It was a strange feeling to think that, having been under those clouds for so long.

"Hey."

"Hm?" Gabrielle pressed a little closer, and gave Xena's collarbone a little kiss.

"What are you thinking about?"

"You."

"Ah. Trivial stuff."

"How much I love you."

"Hm."

"How amazing my life is getting to share it with you."

"Gabrielle."

The bard chuckled silently, feeling the heat of a definite blush coloring Xena's skin. "C'mon, Xe.. don't you like when I tell you that? You're the love of my life. Who else can I say that to?"

Xena cleared her throat slightly, her body shifting again, this time in a different way that ended with her curled around Gabrielle a bit more. "I do like it." She whispered into the bard's ear. "Just wish I could come up with the words myself sometimes."

Gabrielle felt the gentle touch brushing against her cheek, tracing her ears, warming her lips. "You don't need to." She whispered back. "You talk louder when you don't say anything at all."

Ah. Nothing like being married to someone with the soul of a poet. Xena had to smile, hearing a note in Gabrielle's voice she'd once thought gone forever.

She remembered the first time she'd heard it, all those years ago now, before she'd gone and died when she hadn't realized all the reasons she'd had to stay alive.

Two days out from any town, in badlands so barren even Xena hadn't had any luck in hunting. The weather had rolled in and they'd found a small niche in the rock with barely enough room for them and the saddlebags and nothing but a bit of smoked venison and an apple between them.

"Ugh." Gabrielle squirmed into a more comfortable position, "Wow. It's sure raining outside, isn't it, Xena?" She looked at the warrior, and then looked away, a funny half grin on her face.

"Sure is." Xena agreed. "Good thing we found shelter."

They were pressed together by necessity, shoulder to shoulder in the small space that was thankfully filling with their combined body heat to combat the chill. Gabrielle's green cloth top was soaked and so was her skirt, and both their boots were caked with mud.

It was an odd, and awkward intimacy.

"Yeah, that's for sure." Gabrielle agreed. "Kinda cramped, though."

"Hm." Xena reviewed her long legs, folded into the space by some miracle of her own flexibility.

"Yeah." She lifted one hand and scratched her nose, aware suddenly of every square inch of Gabrielle's skin touching hers and just how small the shelter really was. "Just big enough for the two of us."

"Yeah." Gabrielle removed the small utility knife she kept tucked in her boot, and split the apple in half, carefully cutting the center with its pits out before she handed one half to Xena. "Might as well start with the good stuff."

Xena accepted the apple, and bit into it. "What would I do without your cooking?"

Shy green eyes suddenly fastened on her face. "I don't know. What would you do?"

It was the tone that filled Xena's ears. A soft throatiness backed with emotion she'd never heard from Gabrielle before, at least, not directed at her. She was almost afraid to look over at the bard, but she could feel the warmth of the smaller woman's breath on her shoulder, they were that close. "Starve?" She hazarded a guess. "C'mon, Gabrielle. You know I can't live without ya."

Their eyes met.

"Likewise." Gabrielle said, into the charged stillness. They both fell silent, then the bard smiled, breaking the awkwardness. "Hey, can you get the venison from that bag? I don't think I can reach it unless I climb over you."

Mechanically, Xena reached for the bag, her eyes still watching her companion's face. "Climb over me?" She asked, both her eyebrows lifting.

"Or.. um.. get wet." Gabrielle pointed to the opening.

"Or get wet." Xena handed over the bag. "Right."

"You.. don't want me to get wet, do you?" Gabrielle questioned, a definite twinkle in her eyes now.

Xena was tongue tied for the briefest of moments. Then she bit into her apple. "Get the venison. No one's getting wet." She ordered.

"Okay."

"Today." Xena added, edging over just a little bit to unkink her leg. She glanced to her right, and found Gabrielle looking right at her. They both grinned, and looked away, and Xena had to wonder if she was imagining things or..

Not.

Of course, the answer to that had been emphatically not. Xena could finally look back on those times now and not feel the pang in her chest anymore. Yes, they'd been through Hades together, but that was now in their past, and she'd realized lately that it really was in their past.

Maybe that was part of her impatience with the townsfolk, and with her mother.

"Hey." Gabrielle uttered softly. "You still thinking?"

"Mhm."

Gabrielle pushed herself up onto her elbow and leaned over, giving her partner a kiss on the lips. "Stop thinking."

Definitely not imagining things. Xena dismissed her thoughts for the morning, and responded, rolling over and pouncing on top of the bard, growling softly right into her ear. "Careful what you ask for, shepherd."

"Oooo." Gabrielle grabbed hold of the muscular body now poised over hers. "I'm in deep trouble."

"Yes, you are."

Outside, the thunder rolled on impotently, sending a petulant spatter of rain that did no more than bounce off the roof.

**

One Wild Ride

Part 2

Gabrielle whistled softly under her breath as she made her way carefully down the mountain path. She used her staff to good effect, feeling out a way among the slippery rocks and placing her boots in spots only after she tested them with a cautious toe.

It was still raining. The clouds were stubbornly thick overhead, and the weather hadn't let up all morning. Eventually, the bard had decided it wasn't going to, and so wrapped in her heavy cloak, she'd started down towards the town.

Xena had seemed content to stay behind in the cabin, wrapped in a thick flannel shift, with Dori in delighted attendance. She'd warned Gabrielle about the path, and asked if she wanted company, but accepted her partner's demurrals and let her go on alone.

A little unusual. Gabrielle had to admit, but since she'd agreed to the same thing the previous day she couldn't really say much about it. Besides, after spending all day in the rain, maybe Xena wanted to relax by the fire. Stranger things had happened.

She walked past the fork that led to the Amazons, resolving to stop there on her way back, and giving the lookout a wave as she went past. She heard a whistle in response, and moved on, crossing the bridge over the gorge and approaching the town in relatively short order.

Her cape was made of leather, with a waxed surface that rejected the rain, and it was cut so it only came to her lower calves to keep it out of most puddles. It was warm, and she peered out from under the hood, glad she had its comforting folds around her.

The thought made her make a mental note to search for Xena's matching one on her way back. How the warrior had lost it, and the fact that she'd returned seemingly oblivious, really surprised Gabrielle. Very strange.

Very absentminded of her. Gabrielle paused, with her hand on the gates to Amphipolis, her brow creased and a speculative look on her face. Then she continued on, a grin on her face. "Four more days." She commented, sidestepping a cart being pulled down the back lane and ducking past two men carrying a basket.

"Pardon?" One of the men asked, glancing around at her. "You talking to me?"

"Nope." Gabrielle assured him. "To myself. Sorry.."

"Too bad." The man chuckled and kept walking, saying something to his companion that made both of them laugh.

"Yeah, yeah." The bard kept going, yanking her boots out of the sucking mud that now filled the roadway. She headed directly for the inn, pausing only to knock what mud she could off before she opened the door and walked inside.

It was quiet, only a few people were inside waiting for lunchtime to begin, or perhaps lingering after breakfast. They looked up as Gabrielle entered and swept her hood back, and most murmured friendly greetings. She was well known in the village, of course, and she smiled and gave the room an equally friendly wave as she walked towards the kitchen.

"Hey, Gabrielle?"

The bard stopped and turned, spotting one of the town weavers, an old resident she'd known since they'd moved back to Amphipolis. "Hi, Saras. What's up?"

"Got some new fabrics in." The woman said. "I know you wear your togs hard."

Gabrielle walked over and sat down across from her. "I do." She admitted. "I used to kid Xena for always wearing leather, but you know what?"

"Lasts a sight longer."

"Sure does." The bard agreed. "So yeah, how about I stop by after the rain ends? I can think of a couple things I do need." Her grin widened a little. "And some things I might need."

"And the little one."

"Always."

"Good then. Didn't mean to hold you." Saras patted her hand. "Glad you're back, I am. Missed hearing your stories."

Gabrielle had come to the point where she recognized she had an ego, and her ego liked hearing things like that. "Thanks, I appreciate that, Saras." She said. "I was going to kind of debut a new story, maybe tomorrow night or the next... here, I mean."

"Oh!" Saras smiled. "Wonderful! You have to let us know when."

"I will." The bard got up. "Talk to you later." She continued on to the kitchen and passed through the entry, taking the slight right turn that would bring her into the cooking area she expected to find Cyrene in.

Despite having help now, her mother in law still commandeered the kitchen, understanding rightly that her inn's reputation mostly rested on it's food and no matter how good her cooks were, she still had to answer for it.

Sure enough, Cyrene was near the back hearth, inspecting the contents of a large pot issuing fragrant steam into the room. She turned, hearing someone enter, and looked faintly surprised when she recognized Gabrielle.

For a moment, Gabrielle thought Cyrene was going to turn her back on her. There was that kind of look in her eye, but after a second it faded and she put her spoon down and walked over instead.

Maybe if it had been Xena, she'd have turned her back. Gabrielle relaxed her posture, and cocked her head a little, aware that she presented a more sympathetic and less aggressive picture than her partner did and people often responded to her far differently. "Hi."

"Well." Cyrene sighed. "Good morning, Gabrielle. What brings you out in weather like this?"

She could see Cyrene wanted to be mad, but as her daughter often found, Gabrielle was a hard person to be mad at if she put her mind to it. "I came to talk to you. Can you take a break and come sit for a minute?" She riffled her damp hair, and held Cyrene's gaze, waiting for the innkeeper to answer.

After a half shake of her head, Cyrene gave in. "Sure." She indicated the table in the back of the kitchen, which had a couple of stools around it. "You had breakfast yet?"

Gabrielle wagged her hand.

"Nuts and berries, I'm sure." Cyrene retrieved a platter and put a bowl on it, adding a few more things before she sat down across from Gabrielle and nudged the plate towards her. "Go on."

She was hungry, and breakfast had actually been some nuts and fruits, and a shared bowl of porridge they'd eaten just to get Dori to eat some too. The bread and cheese looked wonderful, and she helped herself to some as she carefully considered how to start this prickly conversation.

"What's on your mind, Gabrielle?" Cyrene forestalled her, picking up a bit of bread and playing with it.

"What's on my mind." The bard nibbled her cheese thoughtfully. "Well, the usual stuff. Xena. Dori. The weather. Wondering how things are going on Potadeia, you know."

"Hm." Cyrene nodded. "I had a letter from your mother a quarter moon past. Seems things are fine there." She said. "She asked what was going with you."

Gabrielle gazed past her mother in law for a brief moment. "She misses my father."

Cyrene looked down at the table, tracing a bit of the grain of the wood. "I think she does, yes." She agreed, slowly. "Sometimes I think it would have been better if she'd stayed here."

A faint smile crossed the bard's lips. "You have to go where your heart leads you." She took a bite of the bread and cheese and chewed it. "I learned that lesson the hard way."

"Is that what you did now? Followed your heart and let Xena talk you into.." Cyrene stopped, as Gabrielle put the bread down and reached over to cover her hand with her own. "Gabrielle."

"Mom." The bard leaned forward. "Why?"

"What?"

"Why? Why are you so mad about this?" Gabrielle asked softly. "Xe didn't talk me into anything.. we both want to be here, be a part of this place, a place we've both come to consider our only home."

"And so you should."

"But we also need to be who we are."

Now, Cyrene leaned forward. "Who are you, that you need to live alone up on a mountain?" She asked. "Gabrielle, it's dangerous up there. You're all by yourselves. If something happens.."

The bard cocked her head to one side with a puzzled expression. "Mom.."

"Yes, I know." Cyrene held up her hand. "I know how self sufficient and capable you both are. Don't lecture me about that. My daughter's been taking care of herself since she was fifteen years old." She looked directly at Gabrielle. "But Dori isn't fifteen."

Gabrielle folded her hands. "No, she isn't." She agreed. "That was one of the biggest reasons I was glad we were coming home.. because I know she needs the rest of her family, much as she loves just being with us."

"Then she should be here and not up there." Cyrene slapped the table. "And so should the two of you."

Gabrielle had lived long enough with her beloved partner to understand in a visceral level what it felt like to hit your head against a proverbial wall. With Xena, she knew at some point, she just had to walk away from an argument because that stubborn will wouldn't let the warrior back down on some things.

However, this was not Xena. "Mom, we can't." She replied simply.

"If Xena wanted to.."

The bard held a hand up. "It's not just Xena." She cut her mother in law off. "We make decisions together these days. In order for me to do what I do, I can't live in the middle of all this." Her hand opened, palm up, and moved around to indicate their surroundings. "I need to be able to hear myself think."

Cyrene got up and went to the iron grate over the stove. She poured water from the pot heating over it into a cup, and swirled its contents. "Do you?" She turned and regarded the bard seriously. "You never did before. I've been listening you tell stories for years now."

Gabrielle dropped her gaze to her hands, interlacing her fingers. "I did. I just never admitted it to anyone." That was something she wasn't very proud of, though she knew it had a lot to do with that period they'd gone through after their separation. She wanted to do what she thought Xena did, and Xena wanted to do what she thought Gabrielle wanted to do.

Two direly wounded hearts just looking for a little peace. Gabrielle looked up, with a brief smile. Well, they'd healed, and now life was moving forward again, wasn't it? "What I don't get is.. before we left for Athens, you were up in arms with the council over not respecting our need to be alone. What changed?"

Cyrene was caught by surprise, the cup halfway to her lips. She put it back down. "This is different."

"It's no different." Gabrielle shot right back. "Even right now, I'm telling you this is something we need, and you're telling me it's not. So what's up?" She heard a firmer edge come into her voice, and winced a little inside, knowing she probably was going down the wrong track with Cyrene.

Definitely would have been the wrong one with Xena, who responded to being challenged like that by either getting mad, or worse, turning her back and leaving. The bard sighed inwardly, suspecting she was losing her touch in this sort of stuff.

She was definitely not as patient as she used to be. "Mom, listen.."

"Gabrielle, I understand you feel you need to defend Xena." Cyrene said. "Gods know, you've been doing it since the moment I met you, but.."

"Yeah." The bard stood. "When this town was about to kill her. I remember." She felt, rather than saw Cyrene flinch. "I give up. Maybe we should just move to Potadeia." She turned and headed for the door, shaking her head.

"Gabrielle, wait." Cyrene followed her. "Please."

Gabrielle paused and turned, waiting until the innkeeper came up to her. She was a bit shorter than her mother in law, but she straightened her spine and met her gaze evenly.

"Something happened." Cyrene said, suddenly. "I have a reason for what I'm asking you to do. Come down from that mountain, Gabrielle. Bring Xena and Dori down here. Please."

The bard frowned. "What happened?"

"I can't tell you."

A yelling off in the distance made them both look through the door, before Cyrene could answer further. "Now what?" The innkeeper sighed. "Don't tell me the damn pigs got loose again." She hesitated, then put a hand on Gabrielle's shoulder. "It's.."

Another yell, this time louder. Now Gabrielle sighed. "Hold that thought, mom." She added a wry grin to ease her previous attitude. "Trouble first." She grabbed her staff and ducked through the door, running for the front of the inn as the people inside were scrambling for the window to see what was going on.

Raiders? Not in this weather. Gabrielle booted the door open and kept going, forgetting to put her hood up as she jumped off the porch into the rain. The cold water hit her in the face, and she shaded her eyes hastily with an upflung arm, her head turning from side to side to find the source of the turmoil.

Suddenly, three men appeared from the river road, running towards the center of town. They were covered in mud, in an obvious panic. "Help! Help!"

"What's wrong!" Gabrielle let out a yell, trying to see past them. "What is it?"

"The river!" The nearest man yelled back. "The river! It's rising!"

"Fast!?"

"Too fast!"

Uh big time oh. Gabrielle broke into a full run, tucking her staff under her arm and ignoring the rain.

**

Dori put a rock down on the soft surface of the furs, and waited. After a short while, another rock joined it, this one bigger, and darker in color. "Big."

"Good girl." Xena was reclining on her side, her head propped up on her hand. "Now, how is this one different?" She put another rock down, about the same size, but a different color.

"Dis rock green." Dori observed. "Like mama's story."

"Mama's story about the green rock? You remember that?" Xena asked. "That was a long time ago."

Dori looked at her like she was a little nutty. "Pipples." She said. "Big round house."

"Yup, that's right. We were with our friends the forest people, in a round house." The warrior agreed. "Did you like Mama's story?"

"Yes." Dori studiously removed the rocks, and put a stick down, then another one across it. "Go find fishes." She put a small rock down in one of the quarters made by the cross. "Go Boo."

Well, sort of. "That's to tell which way we went, right?" Xena said. "If we go through where two roads meet, so mama can find us."

Dori giggled and grabbed the sticks, tossing them into the air. "Mama knows Boo."

Ah, out of the mouths of tiny children. Xena looked at her daughter, and shook her head. Did Dori really understand what she was saying? Was she really saying she knew Gabrielle could find her sticks or no sticks? "So mama doesn't need sticks to find us, right?"

"Yes." Dori seemed utterly positive. "Mama find Boo, all the time." She abandoned her sticks and stone and crawled over to her buddy, climbing over her as though she were merely an inconvenient obstacle and tumbling down onto the furs on the other side of her.

Xena rolled over onto her other side to keep her in view, since that was the side the fire was on. Dori had learned on their travels not to mess with the hot flames but you never could tell what she'd toss into them. The warrior was glad her daughter was out of diapers, for instance, and she wouldn't forget that smell any time soon. "What'cha doing, Dori?"

Dori was standing spraddle legged, an impossibly serious look on her face. She leaned down and put her hands on the furs, then tumbled head over heels, landing right next to Xena. "Go like Boo!" She announced, looking up hopefully.

"Whoa." Xena laughed. "Is that your somersalt?"

"Go like Boo?"

"You betcha." The warrior gathered her up and hugged her. "Good job, Dori."

"Go go go." Dori burred happily. "Go fly?"

"It's a start." Xena said. "You keep working on it.. you'll be flying in no time, shortie." She patted her daughter on the back, still chuckling.

"Boo boo boo."

"That's me." Xena rolled over onto her back and stretched, enjoying the warmth of the fire and a chance to just spend some time with Dori. Usually, they took her down the mountain to play with her cousins and friends, but the warrior welcomed the long morning and the rain that caused it.

She wondered how Gabrielle was getting on, with her mother. Odds were fifty fifty on that, she'd figured, putting Cyrene's stubbornness on one side, and Gabrielle's intensity on the other.

Footsteps outside, heard even over the rain, alerted her. "Someone's coming to visit, Dor." She bounced the child on her stomach. "Who do you think it is?"

"Mama?"

"Nope, it's not mama." Xena shook her head.

"Gramma?"

"Nope, not gramma either." The warrior said. "I think it's your auntie Ephiny."

"Eff!"

A knock at the door came promptly after the sound of boots scuffing on the porch. "C'mon in." Xena called out. She eyed the door, and her lips quirked into a grin as Ephiny's curly blond head came into view. "Hey."

"Hey." Ephiny entered, and closed the door. She was wearing a heavy cloak, but shed it and hung it on one of the hooks inside the door before she came any further. "Hey there, Dori! Didn't expect to find you here."

"Eff!" Dori pointed at her. "Wet!"

"Right first time." The Amazon came over and sat down on the furs cross legged. "Where's your mama, huh?"

Dori looked at Xena.

"Down fighting with my mother." The warrior said, with a wry grin. "What are you up to? Things still falling down in the village?" She tickled Dori's foot and watched the child scowl at her. "Rain's still coming down out there."

"It is, and that's what I'm here about." Ephiny said. "The village is holding together for now.. okay, it's falling down around my ankles, but the real problem is one of my girls came back and she seems to think the river's too high."

Xena cocked her head. "Well, it is a little." She said. "I saw it yesterday."

"Not down there." Ephiny pointed behind her, and up. "Up near the frost line. One of the big open meadows around the water hole we picked out is deeper than I am tall with runoff."

The warrior sat up, catching Dori as she tumbled and setting her upright without a moment's hesitation. "That's bad."

Ephiny nodded. "My words to the letter." She said. "I'm wondering if.. " The Amazon paused when she saw a distant look come into Xena's eyes suddenly. "Xena?"

Shock.

Anxiety.

Fear.

Xena got to her feet rapidly. "Eph, stay here with Dori." She headed for the door.

"Hey.. wh." The regent scrambled around, catching Dori as she started to race after Xena. "Where are you going.. no, scratch that. Where's Gabrielle?"

"Town." Xena yanked the door open and bolted through it, clearing the porch and hitting the mud without looking back.

"Boo!" Dori stared wide eyed at the now vanished warrior and open door. "Eff! Leggo! Go BOO!"

"No, no, honey." Ephiny made a mental note to send Pony with the next warning of impending disaster. "You stay here, Boo's going to get mama."

"Boo get mama?"

"You know Boo always gets mama." Ephiny got the door closed and herded Dori back towards the fire. "Boo's been getting mama for a long time, longer than you've been around, my little chickadee."

Dori glanced at the door. "Boo and mama come back?"

"Sure." Ephiny said. "I bet mama did something, and she'll have a new story to tell when she gets here." She added. "Cause you know, your mama never does things halfway."

"Otay."

"Did mama ever tell you how she and I met?" Ephiny said. "About how she became the Queen of the Amazons?"

"Keen?"

"No, not overly." Ephiny sighed, settling back onto the furs. "I bet mama never told you you're a princess either, did she?"

Big green eyes blinked at her in befuddlement. "Bck." Dori fell back on an old favorite. "What's a prissess?"

No, Gabrielle wouldn't have. Ephiny admitted silently. For the obvious reason, that Dori wouldn't know what the heck she was talking about, and for the less obvious reason that she knew her friend felt a good deal of ambiguity about her own position.

Well, she'd learn to get over it. "How about I tell you how your mama became an Amazon. Would you like that?"

Dori seemed inclined to be agreeable to that. "Otay." She said. "Then we go find Boo and mama."

Of course. "All right, you got a deal." Ephiny reasoned going down the hill with Dori was probably far less dangerous than trying to keep her locked up in the cabin. "Once upon a time there was an Amazon Queen named Melosa."

"Losa." Dori agreed. "Gots buppits?"

"Sorta." Ephiny said. "That's kinda what started everything."

**

Darn, Darn Darn. Gabrielle dug her staff into the softening mud and braced her legs, trying to get enough leverage to reach out and grab one of the lamb's legs as it struggled in the water wildly. "C'mere, you.."

"Baaa!!!" The terrified animal squealed.

"Gabrielle! Be careful!" Johan yelled from the bank. "Got ropes coming!"

Yeah, yeah. Gabrielle continued her task, grabbing a wooly leg and bodily hauling the lamb out of the water and onto the rapidly dissolving bank. The river had risen alarmingly, covering the bridge already and sweeping anything on it's banks downstream.

Mostly provisions, but also some animals that had been standing by waiting to be loaded onto barges to go down to market. Gabrielle had picked a spot in a crook of the river, where she could get in without taking the full force and try to get things out.

The water sucked at her though, and she could feel the force getting stronger behind her, shoving her against her staff and almost knocking her offbalance. She grabbed another lamb by the scruff of the neck and staggered backwards as the water surged, sending the animal almost into her arms.

"Baaa!" The lamb nipped at her in fear.

"Stop that you little gnarly.." Gabrielle avoided the teeth and shoved the animal's head away from her. "Get up there before I make you into a rug!"

"Gabrielle!" Johan was closer, and now reaching out to her. "Get out of there.. the damn critters ain't worth it!" He found himself with a handful of wet lamb. "Ah!"

"Help!"

Gabrielle whirled, spotting two heads in the water. A merchant had been trying to offload his wagon, it's wheels stuck in the mud and now the water had risen to the point it had taken the wagon up and was slamming it against the bridge.

The merchant had tried to hold onto it. "Help!" He called out, his head going under water.

"Gods." Gabrielle started upstream, battling the raging river one short step at a time as she dug her staff into the bottom, making slow progress. "Someone get him a rope!" She yelled out to the banks, now filling with onlookers. "C'mon people! Help him!"

"Look out!" Another yell, this time she recognized as Cyrene. "Good gods! Gabrielle! Gabrielle! The bridge!"

She heard a crack, and looked up to see the bridge breaking free of it's mooring posts. "Oh my gods." The bard barely had time to even think, before the wooden mass was heading towards her at a frightening speed, with the wagon thundering behind it.

Her boots were stuck in the mud, along with her staff. She knew, in a slow motion kind of way, she wasn't going to get out of it's path in time. All she had time to do, in fact, was steady herself and get ready to grab whatever she could, and just hope the mass didn't kill her outright. "Mom!" She yelled desperately. "I can't!"

The bridge broke free completely and was on her before she could think or say another word. It was a roar of splintering wood and roaring water and screaming. She took a deep breath and did her best to jump. Her body lifted out of the water a few inches, then the bridge plowed into her and would have cut her in half had not something grabbed her arms like iron bands and hauled her up on top of it.

She fell down onto the wood, bucking crazily under her, and felt warmth surround her and hold her down, as the world spun into insanity, and the water's roar filled her senses.

"My gods" Cyrene gasped, her eyes fixed on the two figures fading into the distance, as the flood overcame them, cresting the banks and roaring into the lower town to the company of horrific screams. "Get everyone back from the edge." She told Johan. "Hurry!"

The water kept coming, racing up towards the gates as the townsfolk scrambled to elude it, shaken as everything within the river's reach was taken from them and carried far away.

"Be damned." Johan reached Cyrene's side. "Didn't think she'd get there in time."

Cyrene's hands clenched on the railing of the inn's porch as she stared downstream. "My dream was danger on the mountain." She whispered. "But I had it all wrong."

Johan looked at her.

"All wrong."

**

Xena had little time to do anything but hold on, using her body strength to try and keep them upright on the piece of wood they'd landed on. "You all right?"

"As I can be." Gabrielle answered, her fingers clenched into the wood, and her face turned to one side to keep the water from rushing into her mouth. Her body was pressed against the bridge piece, half under water as the surge came over them every other second. "Now what?"

"Hang on."

Gabrielle closed her eyes as a wave washed over her, remembering to keep her mouth closed so it wouldn't fill with water. The cold was shocking, and she knew she'd be shivering already if Xena wasn't laying on top of her.

Once the water receded a little, she shook her head to clear the wet hair from her eyes and blinked, trying to look ahead of them. All she could see were tall banks, and white, frothing river surface. "How long?"

"No idea." Xena responded. "Never seen it like this."

The rain came down harder, but at least it was warmer than the river. "Xena?"

"Yeah?"

"Know any deserts?"

"Hang on." Xena threw her body to one side, causing their makeshift raft to lean to one side and avoid a half sunken rock. They came close to tipping, then settled back down and went forward again.

"Know a few."

"Let's go live in one." Gabrielle felt her heart settle back down from its sudden racing, as she'd seen the rock whirl by her nose.

"You hate sand." The warrior reminded her, gripping the wood more firmly.

"I hate drowning too."

Xena shook the wet hair out of her own eyes, and grimly hung on, watching the banks grow taller and narrower, and knowing the river would only get wilder. "Just hang on."

"You too."

**

After the third time her head went under water, Gabrielle figured she had to do something. "Hon?"

"Yeah?" Xena lifted her head cautiously, relieved at a slightly easier stretch of water that seemed to be in front of them. The walls were so high on either side by now though, that trying to get them out of the river wasn't even an option.

"Mind if I get up a little?" Gabrielle asked. "I'm getting splinters in bad places."

The warrior eased up and lifted her body off her partner's, rolling onto her side slowly. "Easy." She warned. "This thing's not stable."

"So I noticed." Gabrielle gingerly pushed herself up and onto her back, trading the cold river water for the relative warmth of the rain that now pelted the front of her torso. She blinked some droplets from her eyes and looked over at Xena, her face tensing into a surprised grin as she observed her partner's dress, or, rather, lack thereof. "Um."

"Yeah." Xena glanced down at herself. "Barefoot and in my shift. There's a joke in there somewhere." She gripped the side of the wood as it shifted under them, one hand reaching out for Gabrielle from pure instinct. "Hang on."

"I'm hanging." The bard carefully eased closer, until they were both in the center of the small section of bridge they'd landed on. It was barely big enough to fit them side by side, and felt very unsteady under her weight. "So, what's the plan?"

"Plan?"

"Ah. Something else that wasn't covered under the warlord's guide to greater Greece, huh?" Gabrielle exhaled. "I guess we have to get out of here... there's someplace we can do that soon, right?"

Xena reviewed the river, which was becoming gnarled with whitecaps again. She looked up at the banks, now towering over them and realized she was in a cut of the river she'd never seen before.

Gabrielle realized the same thing at the same time. "Where in Hades are we?" She blurted, turning and looking back. "Xena, I've been down the river from Amphipolis.. no way do we send barges this route.. what happened?"

"Good question." The warrior also looked behind her, staring at the overgrown walls. "Damn it. River must have overflowed it's banks at the big curve.. this is a dry bed."

The bard looked down then up at her. "No it's not."

"Usually it is..it's the gorge, Gabrielle." Xena said. "The one we bridged."

"The g.. you mean our gorge? The one near our cabin?" Now, the foliage and the thick, rich earthen banks made sense. "Wow." Gabrielle said, slowly. "So, where does it end up? Maybe we can grab hold of the sides near the bridge and climb up? I know it's pretty deep, but.."

"But I haven't climbed a cliff barefoot since I was ten." Xena stated frankly. "I don't know what I was thinking."

"I've never climbed one, but that's never stopped us before." Gabrielle found it was easier to keep her balance lying on her stomach, and so she reversed herself again, bracing her weight on her elbows and gripping the wood with both hands. "Besides, it's so darn romantic that you ran out in your underwear to save me."

"Oh, you think so, huh?"

Gabrielle kept her eyes fixed forward on the waves, but she smiled. "Yes, I do."

"I hear that in a story, you're toast, bard." Xena put one arm over Gabrielle's shoulders and grabbed onto the edge of the wood, letting her weight rest on her knees and outstretched arms. "Gonna be a long walk home."

"I'll carry you." The bard answered blithely. "No problem."

The makeshift raft tilted, and they both rolled with the motion, one of Xena's long legs sliding off into the water as she fought to keep them upright. The current seemed to be getting faster also, and the warrior stared ahead at the rough water with worried eyes. "This isn't gonna be easy."

Gabrielle gripped the edge of the wood more firmly, hearing the warning tone in her partner's voice. She peered ahead, but all she could see was the walls on either side, and an endless stretch of white ruffled water.

There was no place, really to even grab onto. She could see bushes on either side, half drowned in the river and thick tree boles sticking up dangerously in the current, but no place they could easily land and escape. To make things more ominous, it felt like they were starting to go faster. "Xe?"

"Yeah?"

"Where do you think this ends up?"

Xena had been wondering exactly that. She knew the slice went across the mountain, but she'd never followed it, having no interest in an old dry river bed. "I'm... not exactly sure." She answered slowly. "But it goes towards.."

"The plateau." Gabrielle whispered. "You don't think.."

Over the river's surge, Xena's sharp ears finally focused on a low roar that had been playing at the peripheral of her senses. Now that she'd heard it, she knew without question what it was. "I think."

Gabrielle's mouth went dry, despite being surrounded by and covered in water. "What do we do?"

The warrior started looking around in earnest, now, searching the banks for some place she could steer toward and grab on. The ride had almost seemed fun for a short while – it was anything but now. "Find something to grab."

"Other than you?" Gabrielle muttered, pushing herself up, and just as quickly lowering herself back down as she nearly rolled off the raft. She felt the wood buck under her, shifting sideways and starting to turn. "Uh.."

Xena wrapped her arms around the edge of the wood and the bard, holding on tight as the raft whirled in a tight circle, caught in an eddy that almost threw them off the surface. Once out of it, they tilted downward, the front edge dipping far under water and taking Gabrielle's upper body with it.

The warrior hauled back, throwing her weight against the surge of the water and bringing the spluttering bard to the surface. "Get up on your knees!"

Gabrielle coughed and blinked the water from her eyes, struggling to comply as she felt Xena's arm tighten around her to pull her upright. Her balance was chancy, but she managed to drag her knees up and get on all fours, glad she did when the front edge went under again and she sunk down to her elbows in the icy cold.

For a moment, she thought they were going to plunge headlong, then the raft twirled sideways again and dropped between two rocks, barely a wide enough opening to let them through. She was thrown against Xena, feeling the shifting power of the warrior's body as she fought to control the raft.

Then something else caught her eye. "Xena!" She yelled, seeing the edge of the waterfall past the curve in the crevasse. "Xena look!"

"I see it!" The warrior yelled back. "I'm steering for the bank there!"

Gabrielle looked to the left, where she could see a bit of the wall sticking out. It wasn't much, but there were some visible roots and it offered a handhold she knew Xena could take advantage of. "What can I do?"

"Lean when I lean!"

Easier said than done. Gabrielle pressed her body against her partners, trying to anticipate which way she was going to move. She could see a roil of water near where they were trying to go, and she felt Xena start to pull the right end of the raft up to send them that way. "Whoa boy..."

The water gushed under them, suddenly cooperating and taking them right towards the wall. "Yow!" Gabrielle let out a yell, as the dirt surface came at her far too fast.

"Duck!"

No question about listening. The bard dove for the surface of the raft, clearing the way for Xena to do whatever it was she needed to do to save them. Her face went under the water but she didn't care, holding her breath as she felt the wrenching power of her partner's legs clamp around her as Xena lunged for the shore.

The shock of contact, and then they were whirling in a tight circle as the river tried to rip them past Xena's hold. Gabrielle felt herself lifted clear of the surface, and she opened her eyes, to see a blur of mud, and green, and frothy blue before something else grabbed them and she felt them tip sideways again. "Yahhh!"

"Son of a.." Xena let out a frustrated bellow, as they spun completely around and the root she'd been holding pulled loose from the soil. "Oh.. Gab!"

It was hard to tell what was happening, but she could hear the panic in Xena's voice and that made her blood run colder than anything else in her life ever could have. Instinctively, Gabrielle released her hold on the raft and grabbed the shifting, muscular body next to her, holding on tight as they continued tipping.

Continued tipping.

They were falling.

Gabrielle buried her face into her partner's chest.

**

The last thing she'd expected on swinging around that point was a break in the rocks, and a secondary waterfall that simply ripped the raft out from under them and sent it plummeting down in a wild spray of water.

They were falling themselves down the front of the small fall, the walls on either side giving her no chance of a handhold, being blunt slate. Xena looked down, and saw a pool the water was exploding into, but there was no way for her to tell how deep it was.

No way to tell once they hit it, if they wouldn't be broken to bits on it's rocky bottom.

No time, really to worry about it either. Xena wrapped her arms around Gabrielle a little tighter, and just prepared her body, bending her knees and hoping for the best. She felt the bard exhale against her skin and relax, a mix of resignation and acceptance in the motion that made her nape hairs prickle.

The water of the fall wrapped around them suddenly, buffeting them and throwing them to the back of the deluge with a force that nearly knocked the breath out of her. She felt her shoulders impact the wall, and then they were sliding down it, a faint slope that slowed their descent just a trifle.

Luck? Xena gingerly leaned back and felt the sting as the irregularities of the rock thudded against her skin, and then the ground was coming up impossibly fast and she just closed her eyes and held her breath.

The shock of the water hitting her was painful, rivaling what it had felt like to slam against a mountainside. She was unable to slow her descent and before it really registered, her feet were hitting the bottom of the pond and driving into it, sending her to her knees with irresistible force.

The shock went through her almost knocking her unconscious. Xena managed to let go of Gabrielle and pushed her surfaceward out of simple instinct, as she struggled to regain control of her body.

Her legs were stuck in the mud, she realized after trying to lunge after her partner. She blinked her eyes open and saw nothing but a swirl of water. Her arms flailed, searching for something to pull herself up with, but nothing was within her grasp.

Damn it. The warrior cursed and yanked at her trapped feet again, the mud sucking at her legs with tenacious strength.

Then a hand reached down and clutched after her, searching frantically and she felt a jolt deep in her guts that could only come from one source. Xena yanked at one leg and got it free, then she reached up and grabbed Gabrielle's hand, kicking against a firmer part of the bottom and pulling her other foot free in a sudden motion that propelled both of them back up to the surface.

The waterfall thundered over their heads, almost driving them back down, but Xena spotted a break in it and she pointed. "There!"

They swam out from under the falls into a pouring rain that was almost as bad. The shore of the lake, which was spilling over to become a river at it's end wasn't that far off though, and with a few powerful strokes Xena had her hand on a rock outcropping that was firmly embedded.

Her other hand was clamped just as firmly around Gabrielle's arm as the bard fought the current attempting to separate them. She could see Gabrielle's head popping clear of the water, and the look of almost panic on her face that dissolved as she looked around and caught her partner's eyes on her.

The rushing water tried to grab them again, but they both weren't having any of that. Xena crawled up onto the gravel bank pulling Gabrielle with her until they were clear of the water, well clear of it, their hands and knees pinched by the sharp gravel.

"Xena, there?" Gabrielle pointed to a fallen tree half against a pile of rocks that promised some meager shelter.

"Better than nothing." The warrior agreed, and they managed to get over to it just as the rain redoubled its efforts to wash them back into the lake. A wash of water splashed down the slope over them, covering them with mud and slush and they both blinked stinging eyes from it.

Xena rolled under the tree and pulled Gabrielle with her, their arms and legs tangling together as they squeezed as much shelter from the fallen trunk as they could.

The rain still bounced around them, but at least, at last, they were both still.

Not to mention together. Gabrielle felt her heartbeat begin to slow finally, the beats so rapid she could hardly breathe from the force of them. So many things had happened in the last little while, she couldn't process them, or flush the fear from her guts quite so quickly.

Xena's heart was racing also, and she could feel the heave of the warrior's breathing under her hands. "You okay?" Gabrielle rasped, clearing her throat from all the water.

"Yeah." Xena replied briefly. "Just catching my breath." She studied the bark over her head, her lashes fluttering as droplets of rain hit her face. "Damn, that was a ride."

"Pah." The bard spit a bit of plant out of her mouth. "Hated it."

Xena lifted a no longer shaking hand and rubbed Gabrielle's back with it. "You okay?"

Gabrielle had her eyes firmly closed. "Not really, no." She admitted. "I really want to throw up."

The warrior eyed her warily. "Mind moving your head a little? I don't want to have to go out in that damn rain again so fast."

The unexpected humor helped. Gabrielle managed a chuckle out of it. "Oh, Xe, that sucked." She winced, removing a splinter from her hand with her teeth. "Let's not do that again, okay?"

"Damn. I was going to ask you if you wanted a repeat for our anniversary." Xena sighed. "Guess I'll have to find something else for us to do."

Slowly, her world was settling. Gabrielle knew the meaningless chatter was helping them both to come down from the terror, and she started reassessing herself with careful motions. Aside from the splinters, her body seemed to have tolerated the insanity surprisingly well, and she flexed her arms and legs with a sense of relief.

Xena was doing much the same thing, relieved they both seemed to be in relatively one piece for a change. "Well, coulda been worse." She turned her head and peered out from under the tree, seeing not much else but rain and wet foliage.

"Much." Gabrielle looked out from the other side, watching the water crash down into the lake and rush off down the little slope they were on. "So.. where are we, exactly?"

The warrior turned her head and peeked past her partner's shoulders. "Valley."

"Ah."

"Pretty narrow one." Xena edged her head out enough to peer upward. The walls rose on either side to dizzying heights, the only lower spot the crack they'd come gushing out of. She could see the lower end of the valley in the distance, it's far wall equally craggy and remote. "Closed."

"Hm." Gabrielle put her head back down on Xena's shoulder. "Well, after the rain stops we can explore it and find a way out. Right now, I'm staying here."

Xena patted the tree with wry affection. "Got my vote." She wriggled her shoulders a little and glanced down at herself. The shift she'd run out in was in very sad repair, the ride down the river having ripped it in several places. She wasn't really chilled yet, but she suspected the weather wasn't going to get any more comfortable any time soon.

Right now, they were keeping each other warm, and that was fine by her. After all, the rain had to stop sometime, didn't it? They could just stay right here, nice and cozy....

"Xe?"

"Hm?"

"Slug."

Xena's head whipped around swiftly, as she looked around for the animal. Spotting it near Gabrielle's head, she quickly grabbed it, grimacing at the slimy texture and whipped it out into the rain with little regret for its insect sensibilities. "Gr."

"Hope that was the only one."

Xena's fingertips drummed on the no longer friendly bark as the rain continued to fall.

**

"Okay, short stuff." Ephiny had run out of stories, run out of games, and run out of patience. "Let's go see where your mama and Boo are, okay?"

"O-tay." Dori was more than ready. She got up and rambled over to the door, reaching up for the latch that was just a little bit too high for her to reach. "C'mere." She hopped, grabbing at it.

"Whooa, whoa.. " Ephiny scrambled after her. "Wait for your old auntie Ephiny, okay? Gimme a minut ehere, let me get your coat on." She managed to get Dori's tiny cloak onto her before the child could escape, and then get the door open. "Now, you hold onto me, little miss Amazon princess, so we don't both fall down the mountain. Okay?"

For once, Dori listened and took Ephiny's hand as they started down the path. Her little boots pattered over the wet leaves, her balance sure footed and unconcerned despite the rain. As she walked, Ephiny noticed she looked around at everything, her eyes taking in all the colors and intricacies of the forest and her ears twitching a little just like Xena's did as she listened.

Amazing. "What do you hear, Dori?" Ephiny asked her. "You hear birds?"

"Aminal." Dori pointed confidently to her right, into the bushes. "Bitty aminal, mama no like."

Small animal Gabrielle didn't like. "Is it a rat?" Ephiny guessed, fascinated. "You can tell there's a rat in there?"

"Yes." Dori hopped down several step like plateaus. "Go fast." She urged. "Go get mama and Boo."

Ephiny hurried to keep up with her. "We're going, you don't want to fall down and get hurt, do you?" She scouted the path before them, her mind doubting a little now the place her friends had chosen to call him. It was a steep drop down the side of the damn hill here, and one wrong step could possibly not be funny at all.

Maybe Cyrene did have a little point, after all. The regent pondered, as she tried to find the safest way down she could. For Xena, sure, it was fine, and for Gabrielle now too, probably. But for the kid?

"Go go go." Dori bounced down the hill like a rabbit. "Go Eff!"

Okay. Maybe for old, cranky Amazons, then. Ephiny picked up her pace and shook her head. "All right, all right.. c'mon, kiddo. Let's go find mama."

"Mama go trouble." Dori said. "Get Boo."

Now what do you suppose that meant? Ephiny felt a pang of anxiety. Xena had tore out of the cabin like a house on fire, that was for sure, and in her wraps, on top of it. "I'm sure mama's okay."

"Otay." Dori agreed. "Tell story?"

"You want me to tell you a story? I told you all my stories." Ephiny said. " You tell me a story."

"Yes." Dori said. "Tell you Boo and the buppits. Good!"

Thunder rolled over head, and Ephiny glanced up at the sky, which was thick with gray clouds. "Good. Yeah. I could use a good story."

"Good!"

The regent only hoped all the stories today turned out to be good ones.

**

Xena gave a last tug on a bit of vine she'd used to tie them down a canopy, and stood back to review her work. It hadn't been easy to chop the thick ropy substance, she'd had nothing but a bit of rock to do it with, but after a couple of smashed thumbs and a lot of green bruising she had enough material.

Overlapping branches over a pair of small bushes formed a reasonable shelter, and was enough to keep the ground dry underneath them. Gabrielle was already seated in the space she'd created, picking the leaves off some berries she'd found nearby.

If nothing else, their travels had taught them to be self sufficient, Xena decided, even though usually she had a lot more tools at hand to be self sufficient with. "All right." She joined Gabrielle in their little hut, sitting down cross legged next to her and giving her head a shake to clear the wet hair from her eyes. "That'll have to do."

"Here." Gabrielle offered her a berry.. "No slugs in sight. Much better." She selected a berry for herself and bit into it cautiously. It was small, and round, and somewhat tart, but her partner had proclaimed them edible, so.. "Interesting taste."

"Hm." Xena munched on hers. "Different."

Gabrielle eyed her. "You've never had them before?" She asked.

The warrior shook her head no. "But the birds were eating them." She said. "So I figured they were all right."

"Ah." The bard gazed speculatively at her handful of tentative edibles. "So, if we both start chucking up, who gets to say I told you so first?"

Xena chuckled. "Relax."

"Uh huh." The bard ate a few more anyway. "No chance of a fire, huh?"

Xena just looked at her.

"Hey, I can ask. You've pulled more surprises out of thin air than that on me." Gabrielle sorted the berries and handed Xena half. "So what's a little rain?"

"Wet wood, and no flint." Xena said. "Not things I can fix in a heartbeat." She rubbed her arms, as the wind picked up a little and rattled through the bushes on either side. "Wish I could." She added in a heartfelt murmur.

"Want my shirt?" Gabrielle asked, in a quietly serious tone.

"I want you in your shirt." The warrior replied. "No sense in both of us being miserable."

Gabrielle studied her partner. She knew Xena was immune to the weather far more than most, but she also knew her partner was used to being covered by more than tattered rags. The shift was giving her little protection, and she could see the goosebumps rising on the warrior's tanned skin.

She realized, suddenly, just how empty handed they really were. No tools, no weapons.. no armor no nothing. She'd lost her staff on the river, and without even their basic camping kit, they really had.. well.. nothing.

Just themselves. Gabrielle looked at Xena. "We're in a mess here, aren't we?"

Solemnly, the warrior nodded. She picked up a bit of stone and examined it, turning it over in her hands. "Well, I'm sure there's fish in that river, and I've still got these." She opened one hand and displayed it. "Gods know we've eaten raw before."

Gabrielle closed her hand around Xena's, tensing her fingers and chafing the warrior's knuckles with her thumb. "We'll be fine." She said. "We've got each other."

Xena smiled, and juggled the rock in her other hand. "We'll be fine." She echoed. "It's just one more little challenge."

One more. The bard rested her head against Xena's shoulder. Just one little one more.

**

"They what?" Ephiny asked for the third time, staring down the river in complete incomprehension. The town was a wreck, overturned wagons and shattered crates were flung everywhere, but that was nothing to the destruction she could see across the flood downslope. None of which mattered to her at the moment. "They went down that?" She pointed.

"Mama go?" Dori was also looking at the river in real surprise. "She go wif Boo?"

"It happened too fast." Granella said, wiping a bit of mud off her face. "Eph, I saw it. I was coming up from the lower town and I'd just crossed the bridge when the flood came down."

"Gods." Ephiny felt deflated. "We'll have to go after them."

"Speed they were going, it'll take us days to catch up on foot." Granella said. "Gabrielle was hauling stock out of the river and the bridge let loose. I swear, I thought she was.."

"Mama?" Dori looked up at the two Amazons. "Mama good."

"I'm sure your mama's good, Dori." Ephiny answered, shading her eyes to view the flood's destruction. "I'm sure Xena's taking very good care of her.."

Granella laid a hand on the regent's shoulder. "I'm sure, too." She said. "Because let me tell you, Eph.. that woman was moving so fast when she grabbed Gabrielle from in front of that bridge, eagles couldn't have caught her."

Ephiny nodded silently. Then she let her hand drop, to rest on Dori's tousled hair. "Don't you worry, Dori. We'll go find your mama's."

Dori blinked thoughtfully, regarding the river. "Bad." She concluded.

"She doesn't seem that upset." Granella observed. "Does that mean they're okay?"

Ephiny knelt and looked at Dori. "You want to go find your mama, sweetie?" She asked. "Want to go find them?"

Dori blinked again. "Yes. Go find mama." She nodded. "Go find mama, go find Boo. Have fun." She turned and started trotting towards the inn. "Gramma!"

"Bu.. bu." Ephiny scrambled to her feet and bolted after her. "Hold on there, kiddo.. hey!"

"Gramma!" Dori yelled again.

"Dori!"

Granella shook her head and followed the two. "Why do I get the feeling Xena and Gabrielle are safer than we are?"

**

The rain finally tapered off near sunset. Gabrielle peered out from under their makeshift shelter and blinked at the sky, glad to see the clouds at least grudgingly parting. "Bout time."

Xena edged up next to her and looked out. The area around them was dour and sodden, and the wind had come up again, chilling them with its briskness. "Well." She rested a hand on her bare knee. "First thing we gotta do is block that damn wind."

Gabrielle leaned against her. "Yeah."

"You want to find a better spot?"

Gabrielle peeked to the left, and then to the right. "You think there is a better spot?"

Xena considered, resting her elbows on her knees. "They way our luck's running today? No." She replied honestly. "I think we should just get as much cover here as we can. I think we'll be getting more rain later."

"Right." Gabrielle ducked out from under their shelter and stood up to her full height, stretching her back out as she regarded their surroundings. Aside from the flooding water nearby, the area was mostly covered in low scrub, with a few stands of tall trees scattered here and there.

As she looked through the brush, she could see boulders around, too, and tipping her head back, she guessed they'd fallen down from the heights above them. "Hm."

Xena emerged after her, putting her hands on her hips. Her eyes flicked over the trees nearby, noting the tall, bare of branch boles. With a shake of her head, she circled the bushes and started hunting on the ground nearby, looking for anything that might be useful.

"Should I go see if I can find more berries?" Gabrielle asked. "I'm not really in the mood yet for raw fish. I know you just scarf it, but I've got to work myself up to that, Xe."

"Sure." The warrior glanced over her shoulder and gave her partner a rakish grin. "At least we'll start with fish."

"Aanaanana." Gabrielle made an atonal sound. "I'm not hearing anything you're saying that might have anything to do with eating insects, Xena." She started moving in a rough circle, searching out anything they could nibble on that was familiar to her.

Mushrooms. Given the dampness, that wasn't unexpected. Gabrielle knelt beside the thick trunk they were growing on and examined them carefully, plucking them only when she was sure they were edible.

At least, for her. She juggled a few in her hand, then she looked around for something to carry them in. Finding nothing but pine needles, she sighed and kept on searching, finally stripping some thin branches off a barely reachable limb and sitting down on a nearby rock to weave them into a basket.

Not having their stuff was sure a pain. Gabrielle carefully threaded the flexible twigs into an interlocking pattern, gently pushing them close together with her fingertips.

The sounds of the forest were slowly coming alive around her, now that the storm had held off for a while and the creatures who lived there were creeping out again. She could hear the soft chirping of a bird off to her right, and the rattle of a cricket to her left.

The sounds reassured her with their essential normality. She'd learned from Xena that danger came in many guises, but what was dangerous for her, was probably also dangerous to the animals around her and they had far sharper senses than she did.

Listen to the world, was what the warrior said.

Gabrielle finished the bottom of her basket, and curved the sides up, lacing them into place with two longer, flexible twigs into a holder large enough to carry both her mushrooms and the berries she

hoped to find. "There we go." She murmured, dumping in the fungi and standing up. "Let's see what else I can find."

A wan bit of fading sunlight splashed over her as she went deeper into the trees, welcome though fleeting. A soft fragrance caught her attention and she stopped, tipping her head back and searching among the branches of some shorter, scrubbier trees. "Ah!"

Pears. Things were looking up, now.

**

Xena stepped carefully through the rocks, wincing a bit as they dug into her bare soles. They were all on the sharp side, but they were small and she was looking for..

Ah. Near the water, several shattered bits of slate were laying. Xena went over and knelt down, examining them with a knowledgeable eye, and selecting one that was a long and narrow, with a thin edge on one side. She lifted it and peered at the edge, rubbing her thumb against it thoughtfully.

It was fragile, but it might be useful. The warrior stood up and moved on, pausing to pick up a thicker piece of stone with a cut edge on one side. She went to one of the trees and felt the bark, then with a sigh, she took a step back and slammed the edge of the rock into the tree, making a gash perhaps the span of her four fingers long in it.

Xena examined the result, and for the nth time that day wished she had any one of her dozens of steel blades with her. "Damn it." She swung again, and again, each time taking a small chunk out of the bark and releasing a rich scent of bruised wood to her nose.

She hoped Gabrielle was having better luck than she was. Usually, she hunted and the bard put her gathering skills to work, and there had been times the gathering was far more successful than the hunting.

Xena finished one long line vertically, and then she started in around the tree at her own shoulder height. Of course, there had been times when the hunting had been more successful than the gathering, too – it really was sometimes just a matter of luck.

She worked her way around the tree, the twilight beginning to turn the surface from varied brown to shades of black and gray, eerily looking as though the area she was working on was dying. Casting a glance over her shoulder, Xena let out a clear whistle, pausing and cocking her ears until she heard an answer from far to her left.

Reassured, she started on the bottom cut, thumping her rock into the tree over and over again, taking a step forward each time. The branches rustled over her head, and she looked up, spotting a squirrel in the branches watching her. "Hey."

The squirrel chattered, so far above her it considered itself safe.

Xena lightly juggled the sharp bit of stone in her other hand, her pale eyes glinting in fading sun. Then she exhaled, and shook her head. "Gabrielle'd never, ever forgive me." She solidered on, making the last cut just as the light began to fade out among the branches.

She dropped the big rock and put her fingertips into the first long cut, prying the bark away from the inside of the tree. It came loose with a soft, ripping sensation, vibrating lightly through her hands as she carefully pulled it loose.

When she finished, she had a circle of bark almost as tall as she was. With a satisfied grunt, she circled her arms around it and started back towards the shelter.

**

Gabrielle knelt by the pool, listening to the thunder of the waterfall nearby. She had her little basket resting to one side, and both her hands were on her upraised knee. Solemnly, she regarded the large turtle sitting on a rock to her left, looking back at her with equal seriousness.

Turtle shells were incredibly useful. Gabrielle had come across one at market, and purchased it, and she'd used it for everything from holding soup to protecting her head on their travels. However, that shell hadn't had a turtle in it, and the problem was..

She really, really liked turtles. They held a special place in her heart and the thought of killing this turtle to take it's shell from it to use was bothering her a lot. With a troubled sigh, she got up and walked over to the animal, her boots splashing into the shallow lip of the pool that separated her from the rock the turtle was sitting on.

It merely watched her, it's jaws moving as it chewed a bit of algae, unintimidated by her presence.

She leaned over and gave it's head a scratch. "Hi there." Gabrielle said, softly. "Someday, you might know how lucky you were today that it was me catching you sitting here."

The turtle kept chewing.

With a smile, Gabrielle moved on, exiting the other side of the shallows and heading back towards where she'd left her partner. As she passed a thick bunch of bushes, a soft rustle made her pause and listen. The rustle came again, and she went still, just like Xena had taught her to.

The wind was blowing towards her, and she knew whatever it was couldn't get her scent, so she waited with gentle patience, breathing evenly until the bush parted and a squat, strange looking bird waddled out, pecking the ground with rapid, erratic head bobs.

Gabrielle had never seen a bird like it before, and she briefly wished she had her staff to knock it over the head with. Birds didn't have her sympathies like turtles did, and a bird that big would make a great pot of soup.

If they had a pot.

Or something to make a fire with.

Or something to butcher the bird with.

With another sigh, Gabrielle started to walk off, jumping a little when the bird reacted to her presence and let out a squawk, racing towards her with a odd gobbling noise.

"Hey!" The bard scrambled away from it, clutching her basket to her chest. "Get out of here, you creepy thing!"

The bird pecked at her, spreading it's stubby wings and flapping them angrily.

"Hey!" Gabrielle yelled louder. "Cut it out!" She booted the bird gently, shoving it back away from her, but that only made it more angry and it redoubled it's efforts. "Xena!" The bard yelled in frustration, falling back on her oldest standby. "Xena!"

"Yeah?" The warrior bolted from between two trees and skidded to a halt. "What the Hades is that?" She stared at the bird.

"If you don't know, d'you really think I will?? Augh!" Gabrielle hopped backwards, kicking out to keep the bird at bay. "Just get it off me!"

Obligingly, Xena swooped down and caught the bird by the neck, yanking it up and away from her beleaguered soulmate. She lifted it up, it's wings flapping furiously and it's legs raking the air searching for a target. "Damn." She held it carefully away from her body. "Could be dinner."

Gabrielle edged closer. "Not unless you've got a fire started."

Xena glanced around. "I don't, but if I let this thing go bet it'll come after us again." She exchanged looks with the bard. "And I don't have boots on."

It was ridiculous, really. The two of them, probably the best fighters for miles, being held hostage by a bird. "Tell you what.. how about you toss it in the bushes, and we run?" Gabrielle suggested. "By the time it gets it's wits together, we'll be outta here."

Xena started laughing, apparently appreciating the humor of it all. "Okay." She said. "Ready? One.. two.."

Gabrielle turned and bolted, clutching her basket of goodies. She heard a crash behind her, and then the soft sounds of footfalls catching up to her and she turned her head as Xena caught up to her and gave her a slap on the butt. "Punk."

"Chicken."

They raced back to the shelter, and Gabrielle pulled up in surprise. "Wow."

Xena turned, shading her eyes to make sure they weren't being pursued. "Found a few things to make it a bit more comfortable."

That she had. Gabrielle crawled inside the shelter and sat down on the bark floor, which was dry and relatively soft. She set her basket down and admired the additional woven branches that now gave the bushes a sturdier set of walls. The wind rustled the outer leaves, but inside it was warm, and after Xena crawled inside with her it got even warmer. "Nice."

"Eh." Xena pulled her legs up under her and flicked a bit of mud off her ankle. "It's dry. Not sure it'll stay that way, but it's better than it was. Whatcha got?"

Gabrielle pulled her basket over. "Blackberries, walnuts, pears, and mushrooms." She announced.

"Pears?"

"Must have budded early." The bard handed her one. "I saw a turtle."

"Urm." Xena had bitten into the pear and was chewing it.

"You're not going to ask me why I didn't catch it?"

"No." The warrior swallowed. "You didn't catch it because you love turtles, Gabrielle."

"Are you calling me predictable?"

Xena blew in her ear, and watched her partner's face crease into a grin. "Know what?"

Gabrielle fingered a blackberry for a moment, then she turned and looked at Xena. "What?"

The warrior leaned over and kissed her lightly on the lips. "I love you." She said, pulling back a little to look Gabrielle in the eye. "And that was the damned wildest way of getting you alone I've ever come up with."

Gabrielle felt a pleasant surge of excitement and confusion. "You can say that again." She answered, hesitantly. "Did you want to?"

"Get you alone?" Xena took a berry from the basket and bit into it. "Yeah."

The bard felt a blush warm her skin. "Good grief, Xe. You'd think we were newlyweds." She ran her fingers through her hair self consciously. "Instead of two muddy refugees under a bush."

Xena leaned back against the rock she'd dragged over and shoved under the bush edge. She extended her long legs, her toes almost emerging into the gathering night. "C'mere." She draped an arm over Gabrielle as the bard scooted over next to her, setting the basket on her thigh. "Look, we're stuck here tonight, right?"

"Right."

"Might as well make the best of it, right?"

Gabrielle let her head lean against Xena's collarbone, as the light slowly faded, leaving them in dusk. "Xe?" She smiled gently. "You are the best of it."

"Ahh."

"So tomorrow we'll hike on out of here, but I'm going to appreciate this night here, just to two of us, just because."

"Attagirl." Xena gave her a kiss on the top of her head.

"Even with the ugly attack chickens out there."

Xena chuckled. "I'll protect you." She assured the bard.

"I know." Gabrielle offered her a berry. "Xe?"

The warrior gently took hold of her chin and tipped it up, giving her another kiss on the lips this time. She ran the edge of her thumb over Gabrielle's cheek, smoothing the soft down that covered it as a glint of silvery light reflected off her eyes. "Mm?"

And, suddenly, Gabrielle did appreciate the night, feeling the sensual wash of emotion trickle over her as she watched Xena's eyes go half lidded, and her lips ease into faint smile. She hadn't asked to be washed down the river, but here they were.

She wanted to live every second of this. "I love you too." She set the basket down for later and half turned, reaching up to caress Xena's face, feeling the skin tense as the smile under her fingertips grew wider. "C'mere."

Willingly, the warrior shifted, one hand dropping lightly to Gabrielle's hip, her fingers curling around the top of her belt and sliding towards the clasp of it.

The bard chuckled softly, as she brushed aside the tattered shift. "Too easy."

They kissed.

Thunder rumbled softly in the distance.

**

It rained most of the night. Gabrielle woke the next morning to the sound of more thunder outside, and the gentle counterpoint of Xena's heartbeat to match it. She lay where she was for a few minutes, remembering the day before and wondering what was going on back in Amphipolis.

Dori, of course, would be upset that they'd disappeared. Gabrielle knew that, but she knew too that Xena had left the toddler with Ephiny, and she knew the regent would take good care of her. The only thing was, she realized they had to get home before their friends started out looking for them, because if that happened, chances were havoc would happen.

It never failed. Their friends and family always meant nothing but the best, but every time they tried to help, it just all went crazy and ended up such a mess. So she hoped they'd just chill out and stay where they were.

On the other hand, though... it had been nice to spend the night alone together, even if it had been under a bush in the rain. Sometimes getting the time to immerse themselves in each other without any distractions was tough and you had to take any opportunity you could, right?

Gabrielle shifted a little, nuzzling her partner's neck and giving her ribs a little tickle to wake her up. "Xeeeeena."

Half opened blue eyes peeked down at her. "Yeeeesss?"

"We need to get hiking." The bard said.

"Uh huh." Xena tilted her head to look outside. "Not like we've gotta break camp."

No, that was true enough. Gabrielle agreed silently. No fire to bank, no packing of their gear... all they had to do was get up and start walking. "Okay, how about we go get washed up in that wonderful pond we fell into, grab some more pears, and go the heck home."

For an answer, Xena stretched, arching her back and gently pushing Gabrielle upright. She bumped the bard out from under the shelter, then followed her as they emerged into the gray morning light. It was not long past dawn, but the sky was so clogged with clouds it was hard to tell that.

Xena took a moment to shake herself into wakefulness, breathing in a deep lungful of the damp, cool air. Despite the cramped shelter, she'd had a good night sleep. "Ahh." Crouching slightly, she leaped up and caught a branch, allowing her back to stretch out and pop into place.

Gabrielle looked over her shoulder, pausing to watch her with an indulgent smile. "What are we going to do for boots for you?"

Xena released the branch and landed, flexing her bare toes. "Good question." She strolled towards Gabrielle and they walked through the trees heading for the pond. Once they got there, they realized at once that the pool had gotten deeper and larger, the overflow from the falls now pushing through the valley.

For now, it was being channeled in what appeared to be an old stream bed, and Xena wondered if the intermittent fall hadn't occurred sometime in the past.

She knelt at the edge of it and plunged her hands into it, bringing them up to her lips as she tasted the liquid with her customary caution. It had an earthy flavor, but given the stirred up ground it had traveled over that wasn't unexpected. "Not bad."

Gabrielle dropped to her knees and leaned over, drinking from Xena's hands as she went cheek to cheek with her partner. "Mm." She licked her lips. "It always tastes better when you hold it. Why is that?"

Xena patted her cheek with a wet hand. "It's your imagination." She scooped up another double handful and scrubbed her face with it, the chill water tingling on her skin. She watched through dripping bangs as Gabrielle did the same, making bubbling noises under her breath.

"Buuuh." The bard ran her wet hands through her hair, arranging the thick, pale locks somewhat. They were longer and shaggier than they had been in a while and that lent a touch of wildness to her appearance.

Xena liked it. "Hey." She bumped shoulders with her. "Let's follow the water and see where it goes. Maybe we'll find an easy way out of here."

Gabrielle looked at the pond. "You think it goes somewhere?"

The warrior stood up and walked along the edge of the burbling runoff. "See?" She pointed at the rocks. "It's come this way before."

The bard got up and followed her, looking curiously around her shoulder. "Oh. Really?"

"Really." Xena continued on, picking her path cautiously to spare her feet. The ground was very damp, and somewhat muddy, so the going wasn't that uncomfortable but she knew if they hit a rocky spot she wasn't going to be enjoying it much.

Gabrielle tapped her arm, and Xena looked around, finding a handful of walnuts being offered to her. She took them with a grateful smile. "Thanks." She turned back around, then stopped. "Hey, look!"

"What?" Gabrielle peered past her. "Oh, that's my turtle!"

Xena cracked a nut in one hand, and popped a nutmeat into her mouth. "Lucky the turtle." She eased past a boulder and let her eyes sweep the ground as the trees slowly gathered from clumps into a forest. The branches and leaves closed in above them, blotting out the clouds and bringing their own feeling of peace.

The warrior's ears were cocked, listening to everything around her. She could hear the soft scuff of Gabrielle's boots as the bard followed, and the sound of her chewing walnuts as well as the rattle and clink of the shells she had in her hand.

In the beginning, she'd been so frustrated with how noisy she thought Gabrielle was. When the girl first joined up with her, Xena had felt like she was surrounded by an infernal racket night and day and no matter what she said to Gabrielle, it just never penetrated.

Then she got to a place in her life that those sounds became something she not only accepted, but she needed. Campfires without it became the loneliest place she'd ever been in.

"Hey, Xena?"

Xena smiled, her eyes catching the tail end of a snake slithering off. "Yees?"

"How come we never knew this valley was here?"

An elderberry bush presented itself, and the warrior paused to raid it, sharing her booty with an instantly attentive bard. "Damn good question." She answered, as they started off again. "I guess.. at least for me, I never really got.." She stopped speaking, gazing ahead of her thoughtfully.

Gabrielle put a hand on her back.

"I stopped exploring around here when other things interfered." Xena finally completed her thought. "I knew that ravine was there, but never thought there was much to see down at the bottom."

"Yeah, good point." Gabrielle agreed. "Hey, we can't know everything, right?"

A soft patter of hooves caught Xena's ear. She crouched and peered through the trees, spotting a small deer darting away. "Lot of animals down here." She murmured.

Gabrielle watched a squirrel run up a tree nearby. "Sure are."

They walked on a bit further. The wind, which had been at their backs, now swung around and gusted into their faces, as a rumble of thunder again was heard.

Xena's nose twitched, as the moist air brought scents both familiar and not to her. "Huh."

"What?"

"Blood."

The bard took a deep breath, but could only smell the rain coming. "You're amazing."

Xena shrugged modestly. "Something must have made a kill." She said, sniffing again. Along with the copper tang of blood, she also caught a soft hint of musk, a strange animal scent she wasn't familiar with. Cat maybe?

It wasn't wolves. She was intimately familiar with that smell by now. They didn't have any really large predators near Amphipolis.. no bears or wild dogs, but she knew there were hunting cats up in the hills – there was a panther skin up at the inn that attested to that.

But this didn't smell like a panther. Xena cracked open another nut and nibbled the contents, her senses now fully alert.

"Hang on, hon." Gabrielle veered off and sloshed into the water, her powerful legs driving against the current easily. "Spotted something I think I can use." She pulled a clump of leaves aside, and tugged on something, yanking backwards until the long stick she'd caught sight of came loose. "Ah." She held up the stick, and sloshed back over to where Xena was standing.

"Hm." Xena examined the find. It was soaking wet, but it was a decent height, and as she flexed it between her hands, a decent hardness. "Good job." She tossed it back to her partner, who caught it easily. "Find me a sword next."

Gabrielle chuckled. "You want to keep this?" She asked.

"Nah." The warrior turned and started walking again. "You're the expert with it."

Gabrielle found a good handhold on her new staff, and followed, accepting that for the honest truth it was now. When they sparred together, on any given day she could win the bouts, and what made her proudest of all about that was how matter of factly Xena accepted it.

"Wonder what Dori's up to?" She said, as they came to a slightly more open area, where the ground sloped up from the water a little.

"Driving Ephiny crazy, I'm sure." Xena replied absently, still trying to sort out the strange scent that the wind was bringing to her. A gust brought her another, stronger smell and she reacted quickly, grabbing Gabrielle and pulling her behind the nearest tree.

"Hey.. wh.."

A deer thundered past them, eyes wild, hooves scattering leaves and pinecones right and left as it skirted the water and then plunged into it, snorting with fear.

Xena curled her hand around the piece of rock she'd picked up the night before and waited, straining her ears. "Something was chasing it."

Gabrielle nodded.

They stayed still, but after a few minutes the deer's footsteps faded off into the forest on the far side of the water, and peace descended on them again. Xena listened hard, and cocked her head, closing her eyes to allow her other senses to sharpen.

Birds started singing again, and the warrior straightened up, giving a half shake of her head. "Nothing's around close."

Gabrielle peered around the tree. "Maybe something just spooked it?" She suggested. "The smell of blood?"

"Could be." Xena lead her around the tree and they started off again. "But one thing I've noticed is that the animals around here are scared of us."

"Of us?" Gabrielle paced alongside her. "You and me? Why? We haven't done anything to any of them yet."

"Exactly." Xena mused. "That means something like us is hunting them." She nibbled some elderberries off the branch she'd stripped from the bush. "Must be people here."

Reasonable, Gabrielle nodded in agreement. "Good. Let's find them. Maybe they know a shortcut out." She caught up and bit an elderberry off the warrior's bunch, enjoying the sweet tart taste. "I wonder how long they've been down here.. maybe they've got some interesting stories about it. You know I hear the coolest things from the places that tend to be remote, right?"

"Yeah." Xena's nose wrinkled. The strange scent was getting a little stronger. "Maybe they haven't learned to tan skins or something."

"What?"

Xena started looking another jagged rock, a worried crease dimpling her forehead.

**

One Wild Ride

Part 4

"Get me more bags." Ephiny wiped some of the mud off her face. "C'mon, you all. Pitch in here." She stepped back and watched as a troop of Amazons dragged sacks full of sand and dropped them just short of the gates of the town, where the overflowing river was lapping.

If she looked below, not much was left of the lower town that was visible. The river spread out across the floodplain, and neither the rain or the rising waters seemed ready to diminish.

"Good gods." Cyrene had her hand on one post. "Will it ever stop?"

Ephiny leaned back against the gates. "Has to. Sometime." She looked down the river, then she turned to look at Cyrene. "I'm worried about them."

"As am I." The innkeeper said, quietly.

The regent stared at the river in frustration. The flood kept any thought of following Xena and Gabrielle at bay, even though she'd tried to scout a route that bypassed the overflowing banks.

Pony had tried as well, climbing up the slopes past Xena's cabin, but finding no way down off the bluff that held her infamous tree. She reported the river was overflowing across the lower plain as well, but there was no sight of their friends.

Frustrating. They could be hurt. They could be lost.

Then she sighed. "Maybe it's for the best. Every time we try to give them a hand we end up screwing up everything." Ephiny admitted. "And they have to save our butts."

Cyrene looked at her. "That's not true."

"C'mon, Cyrene." The regent wiped some of the mud off her hands. "You know it is. You know as well as I do us showing up in Athens just made everything worse."

The innkeeper looked away.

"And you should hear the stories I heard about when we went to 'help' them rescue Toris and Jessan." Ephiny snorted softly. "Maybe they're better off getting back on their own." She helped two villagers unload more sacks, tossing them down with a shake of her head. "Wish it would stop damn raining."

Cyrene edged to one side and stared down at the lower town. The destruction made her blink, and she exhaled softly as she shook her head a few times. "No warning."

"Was warning." Ephiny grunted. "We just didn't read it. Xena was saying something about high water last night and she was going to check something out today but.."

"But." The innkeeper frowned. "Maybe if she'd been down here.."

Ephiny turned and looked at her. "Them maybe dying saving those bloody sheep not enough for you?"

Cyrene turned, giving her an outraged look.

"If they'd have stayed up there together, they'd be here." Ephiny said, bluntly. "But no, Gab had to come down to make peace, like she always does, and almost ended up in pieces for her trouble. Leave it, Cyrene."

"You don't understand." The innkeeper said quietly.

"I understand it was pissing them off." Ephiny got out of the way as a wagon creaked up, with more sandbags in it. "I understand those jackasses down there dissing my Queen." She pointed at the wrecked town. "So if you're looking for sympathy from me, forget it." She turned and walked away, shaking the mud off her hands. "Pony!"

Johan got down from the wagon and watched the Amazon leave. He looked at Cyrene in question, easing past the men now busy unloading the bags. "Heard they didn't find a way down the river."

Cyrene looked very troubled. "No. It's too high." She leaned on the gate. "Not getting any lower either... but she seems to think it's not worth going after them."

Johan stared at her. "Huh?"

"She thinks they'd be better off getting themselves back." The innkeeper snorted angrily.

"Hm." Johan leaned next to her. "May have a point there."

"You too?"

Her husband exhaled. "Cy, I been there couple times now.. we never did do nothing but give those girls heartache."

"You really believe that?" Cyrene said, glancing over her shoulder at the working villagers.

"It's true." Johan said. "Those kids can get out of whatever they're into, Cy. Have been for years without no help from us."

Cyrene turned and stared out across the flood again. "I had a dream."

Johan glanced at her. "Eh?"

"I had a dream. Before they came back." The innkeeper said quietly. "They were alone somewhere.. all alone, with nothing."

"Just a dream, Cy." Johan patted her back. "Kid's'll be fine, you'll see. Probably be showing back up here anytime, telling all kinds of a tall tale.. and y'know.." He looked down at the flooded space before them. "Figure Xena'll like the smell some better here now."

Cyrene didn't answer. She remained staring out over the water, her hands tight around the gate support.

"Cy?"

Cyrene pulled her hood down a little tighter and turned, starting back for the inn in silence.

**

Xena walked differently barefoot. Gabrielle stepped along a bodylength behind her, admiring the sinuous grace in her partner's motion. There was just the slightest hesitation as she put her feet down, and it added a little more gentle swagger to her walk.

Sexy. Gabrielle put the edge of her new staff down and hopped over a log. The animals had quieted down, and Xena seemed a little perplexed over the fading clues her nose was now barely detecting. The rain had slowed to a merely annoying drizzle, also, and the thick forest canopy over their heads blocked a good deal of that for them.

"Hmph." Xena cocked her head. "Damn it, I thought for sure we were going in the right direction."

"Aren't we?" Gabrielle stepped up next to her. "There's the water. We're following it, right?"

Xena ducked under a branch. "Yeah." She grunted. "I thought it was heading towards the signs I caught of those people.. but they're gone." She paused, walking over to kneel down at the side of the water and dip a hand in, scooping some up to her lips and drinking it.

Gabrielle went to one knee next to her, putting a hand on her partner's shoulder to steady her balance. She could feel the warmth of Xena's skin through the fabric of her shirt, and before she drank some herself, she ducked her head and gave the warrior's arm a kiss.

Xena turned her head, droplets of water trailing from her lips. A half smile later, she traded the river's coolness for heat as she returned the kiss. "Not that I'm complaining they're gone." She admitted. "C'mon. I want to get to the end of this thing today.. see what we have to go to get out of here."

"Oh, I dunno." Gabrielle took a drink, then gently shook the water off her hands. She got up and followed Xena as the water started sloping a little more downhill, flooding a lot of the forest as it overran the old bed they were following. "Wandering around the unknown with you isn't so bad."

Xena glanced over her shoulder, and smirked a bit. "Haven't gotten bored of that yet?"

"As if." Gabrielle caught up and they sloshed through the overflow. She let her hand rest on Xena's back, her fingertips lightly scratching the strong muscles there. "What do you think happened back home? If the river's still overflowing here.."

"Probably still overflowing there." Xena acknowledged. "Wouldn't be surprised if it took out some of the lower town."

Gabrielle walked along for a few moments in silence. "You don't sound upset about that."

Xena shrugged.

"They're people too, Xena. They have homes and businesses there." The bard said. "It's not their fault the way the town's growing."

"It's not my fault either." The warrior said. "You want me to lie and say I'd be devastated?"

Gabrielle exhaled, her hand still keeping up its light massage. "No... oh, Xe.. is that a piece of flint?"

Xena had already spotted it, and she plunged into the deeper water, the surge tugging at her shift. "Yep." She captured the piece of rock lodged on a fallen tree and examined it. "Good catch, mama." She climbed back out of the creek and rejoined her partner. "That might come in handy."

"Uh huh." Gabrielle agreed, her eyes searching the ground out of habit for anything else useful. She spotted some thin vines and captured them, separating the strands and braiding them as she walked. They'd been traveling for a few candlemarks already, and she reasoned the sun was probably past overhead by now.

She was hungry. A handful of nuts and berries wasn't really going to hit the spot, either. Gabrielle wasn't sure she was ready to go for raw fish, but she was beginning to feel a little shaky. "Hey, Xe?"

"Hm?" The warrior turned her head. "Whatcha got there?"

The bard finished her braiding. She reached out and circled Xena's waist with the vines, tying them in front of her and pulling the ratty shift close around her body. "A belt for you."

"Ahhh." Xena regarded the gift somberly. "I like it." Though the shift was wet, the wind had been blowing it away from her body and exposing her skin to the chill and rain. The belt held it close, and already she felt more comfortable. "How about braiding me some sandals?"

Gabrielle bumped her lightly with one shoulder. "How about catching me a fish?" She sighed. "Maybe I can work out something while we have lunch."

Xena's eyes flicked over her, studying her face before she merely nodded and headed back into the water, raising a hand to put her dark hair behind one finely shaped ear.

Gabrielle scouted the area for a place they could sit down in, finding a downed tree not far away. She patted it, then went into the surrounding brush to see what she could find.

There were no berries, the bushes were mostly barren. She found a few flowers, which she picked and put in her basket, then she spotted a thick stalk emerging from the ground and she pounced on it gleefully. "Ah hah!"

**

Xena stopped when she was up to her mid thighs in water. She leaned forward and rested her hands on her knees, her head tilted to listen. Gabrielle very rarely asked her to do this in such a point blank way, and she knew the bard must be feeling a little off.

When they traveled, they often didn't eat for long stretches, and though she knew they hadn't had much dinner, or much breakfast, Gabrielle usually could soldier on a lot longer before she started asking to stop.

So.

Xena wiggled her fingers, feeling a ripple near her left leg. She went still for a long instant, then in a flickering motion, plunged her hand into the water and grabbed for whatever it was that was tickling her. She felt a hard, scaled body under her touch and she clamped down with her fingers, pulling her arm out of the water with a feeling of definite triumph.

In her grasp was a large fish, of a type she'd never seen before. It had a big jaw, with spikes on the top of its curved head, and two fins poking out on either side of its body.

Xena lifted it up with a puzzled look, blinking as she spotted a completely unexpected set of tiny legs on the bottom of the creature. "What in Hades?"

The fish honked like a duck, almost making Xena drop it. She finally shook her head and sloshed out of the water, gauging the fish was big enough to feed them both, and hoping she could get Gabrielle to eat the animal uncooked, as nothing she could see anywhere was going to burn right now.

The bard hated raw fish. Xena wasn't too fond of it either, but she'd learned over the years to consume just about anything to keep herself going and fortunately or unfortunately, Gabrielle hadn't really ever had to do that. No matter how bad the foraging had been, she'd somehow managed to keep them from anything worse than a few grubs and an experiment with a snake once.

However.

Her ears located Gabrielle and she walked through the trees to a small clearing, where she found the bard sitting on a log, having gathered some herbs as well as what looked like a sweet tuber. "Hey."

"Got one, huh?" Gabrielle peered at the fish. "What is it?"

"Dunno." Xena smacked the fish's head against the fallen tree, killing it. "You got that.. ah. Yeah." Xena took the jagged stone she'd found the night before and started using it to cut the fish up.

It was not a fast or easy process, and she felt like she was trying to butcher a pig with a wooden spatula. "Damn I'd give anything for a knife."

Gabrielle leaned on the log at her side and regarded the messy process. "Uck."

Xena managed to get the fish open, discarding the entrails of it and separating out the bones. "Those might be useful.." She touched one, bending it a little and finding it much firmer to the touch than she was used to. "Yeah."

"Hm." Gabrielle indicated her little basket. "Found some roots. They're gonna need cooking, though."

The warrior separated a sliver of the raw fish from the side she'd opened and offered it to the bard. "You did say you were hungry."

"Wobbly." Gabrielle sighed, taking the almost translucent piece of fish and putting it into her mouth, swallowing it down quickly without really chewing it.

"Really?" Xena handed her another piece, looking at her with a bit more concern.

The bard settled herself onto the log, straddling it. "You know me." She gave her partner a wry look. "I don't know if I ever told you this but I used to daydream about honeycakes all day when we were on the road."

Xena leaned against the tree, slicing the fish up as best she could and sharing it. "You never told me that."

"When I wasn't daydreaming about you, that is." Gabrielle's mist green eyes twinkled. "You know, this isn't so bad." She swallowed another piece, the grumbling in her guts finally quieting down a little. The misty rain was washing the fish off for Xena, and she set the skeleton aside to rinse.

"I used to daydream about you." The warrior said, unexpectedly.

"Did you?"

Xena nodded, lifting a bit of the fish to her lips and swallowing it. "I used to wonder what you would do if I just walked across the campfire one night and kissed you."

Gabrielle consumed a few more pieces of fish while she considered that. "When was this?"

The warrior shrugged.

"I think I probably... would have passed out." The bard decided.

"Think so?"

"If you had to cross over the campfire to get to me, if it was that long ago.. yeah." Gabrielle said. "I was still in the phase where your armor creaking gave me goosebumps."

Xena gave her a droll look.

"Honey, you asked." Gabrielle offered her partner some of the remaining berries in her basket. "So, what's the plan? Are we still going to follow the water?"

Xena tipped her head back and regarded the sky. "Might as well. We're not moving very fast."

"Sorry." Gabrielle glanced apologetically at the fish.

"Nah, it's me." Xena pointed at her bootless feet. "Let's get as far as we can, and see what we find. Maybe the water'll lead out of here.. we can get some branches and make a raft."

"Ugh. I didn't much like the last raft trip we took." Gabrielle gathered her things up. "Let's go wash off first."

"Right behind you." Xena took the skeleton, carefully breaking off the rib bones and stacking them in a bundle as she walked. "Wanna play what is it?"

Gabrielle smiled. "Sure." Despite the discomfort, and the struggle they were having without their gear, she found herself enjoying the time they were getting to spend alone together. Usually, they were having to entertain or distract Dori, which was a joy – but there was something just so much more intimate when all they had to interact with was each other. "You first."

"Ahhh." Xena shook her wet hair out of her eyes, and grinned. "You asked for it." She cast a look around them out of habit, listening to the forest as she thought about the game. The acrid stink had vanished, and her senses weren't detecting anything to be alarmed over.

Maybe it had just been a dead animal. Xena reasoned. Could have drowned, being swept over the falls like they were, right?

Sure.

**

"C'mere, Dori." Ephiny picked up the child and hefted her. "Let's you and me have a talk." She walked over to one of the benches they'd shoved against the back wall of the inn and sat down with Dori on her lap.

"Go get mama now?" Dori asked.

"No, honey, not yet." Ephiny said. "We can't go yet. There's too much water."

Dori blinked at her. "Too much wasser? Boo go fishes." She said. "Go gets."

Obviously, Dori felt that if Xena and Gabrielle could go down the river, everyone else could too. "We will." Ephiny promised her. "What we're gonna do is, we're gonna wait for the river to stop overflowing, and then, if mama and Boo aren't back, we'll go get them."

The child studied her seriously. "Mama come back?"

"Sure." The regent said. "You know they'll come back as soon as they can, and you know they're so fast, they probably will come back before we can go get them, right?" She bounced Dori on her knee a little. "We don't have to go get them, they'll come get us."

Dori appeared to be considering the request. She stuck a finger into her mouth and sucked it, drumming her heels against Ephiny's leg.

"If we go try to find them, we might get lost." Ephiny added.

"Bck."

"Hm. You haven't made that noise in a while." The regent smiled at her charge. "Honey, I promise. Your mama and your Boo are going to be just fine."

"Otay." Dori finally said. "Wait for Boo."

Miracle of miracles. Ephiny exhaled in relief, as she gazed down into the alert green eyes watching her. Their color matched Gabrielle's exactly, but the unwavering sharpness she projected was all Xena, and the regent found herself wondering what kind of woman this kid was going to grow up into.

Xena and Gabrielle were two of the most willful, stubborn people she knew. They only people either of them listened to was the other, and so, Ephiny had not really been overly shocked when Dori had turned out to be a right little hellion on wagon wheels.

Would Dori turn out to be arrogant? The regent studied that open little face. "Hey, Dori?"

"Yes?" Dori looked up at her, the tiny snub nose crinkling into her mother's trademark grin. "Eff good. We go find fishes now? Get rocks to give mama." She said. "Make pitty picture for Boo."

Ephiny smiled back at her. The one thing she felt would counter the fierce independence the young child showed was her open and giving nature. She was forever finding and presenting everyone with 'presents.' Sometimes they were delightfully welcome, pretty pebbles for instance, and sometimes they were ghastly but intrinsically well meaning.

Dried sheep poop, for example. Pony had accepted hers, noting that they were damn good for starting fires when you needed one.

Ephiny had noticed that most of the time, Boo and mama got the good stuff, though. If Dori found an interesting leaf, or a bright piece of stone or a colorful feather she'd invariably trot off to find one of her parents and give it to them.

Ah. And to see Xena melt at those little hands.

Ephiny ruffled Dori's hair affectionately. "You'll be okay, bitty boo." She told her. "You've got the two biggest hearts in the world raising you. Can't go wrong there." She set Dori on the ground. "Would you like to come up and visit with your Aunt Poopoo, Dori? I think your mama would like it if we took you up to where we live, and played with you until she gets back. Whadda you think?"

Dori poked her lower lip out.

"Okay." Ephiny recognized the expression. "How about me and your aunt Poo poo coming to stay in your house? Would you like that?"

"Good." Dori nodded amiably. "You come play, we can go find fishes."

What the Hades was it with the damn fishes? "Sure." Ephiny looked up as Toris entered, drenched and covered in muck. "Hi."

"Hi." Toris sloshed over and sat down on the bench. "Hi, Dori."

Dori pointed at him. "Buckhead."

Ephiny glanced at Xena's brother. "Uh..."

"Sookay." Toris sighed, laying his hands on his knees. "I feel like a buckhead. Whatever that is." His shoulders slumped. "Gods, what a mess."

"Yeah." Ephiny agreed quietly. "I was just convincing Dori here we need to wait for the water to go down before we start hunting for her parents."

Toris glanced at the child. "Did she agree?" He asked seriously.

"So far."

The tall, dark haired man regarded his niece. "She's being good." He observed, as Dori pattered over to a chest in the inn, and came back with a handful of nuts. She sat down on the bench and started arranging them in a pattern.

"Yes, she is." Ephiny agreed. "She's been a lot better since they came home, I noticed. She's still really energetic, but she listens a lot more."

Dori looked up at her. "You want?" She offered up a nut. "Is good!"

"Thanks, cute stuff." Ephiny accepted the nut. "You got one for your uncle?"

"None for me." Toris stood, with a sigh. "There's so much to do yet." He looked around the inn. All the furniture had been pushed back against the walls, and the floor was covered in muck, with bales and boxes, half sodden, lay stacked where people frantically threw them to save them from the water. "Better get to it."

Ephiny chewed her nutmeat slowly. "You worried about Xena and Gab?"

Toris turned his head towards her. "Honestly? No." He said. "Sometimes I look at you guys when you all fret about them and I wonder if you forget who they are." With a shake of his head, he walked off towards the kitchen, dusting off his hands as he went.

"Do we?" Ephiny exhaled. "Yeah, maybe we do." She held her hands out to Dori. "Or maybe some of us know they're not invincible."

Dori hopped off the bench and came over. "You come play wit me and Guff now?"

The regent glanced at the window, where the light was dimming to an even more dismal shade of gray. "Yeah. Let me grab us some dinner first. You won't like my cooking." She stood and headed for the kitchen, holding Dori's hand as the little girl trotted at her side. "Maybe we can even find some buppits. Whaddaya say?"

"Buppits!" Dori hopped up and down. "Go Go GO!"

**

"It's getting chilly." Gabrielle paused to lean on her staff. "You doing okay?"

Xena, caught in the act of rubbing her upper arms, could only issue a wry grin. "It's getting chilly." She acknowledged. "Think we better find a place to stop for the night." She looked around, seeing not much else but forest and more forest.

The water they'd been following had settled down from a flooded wash to a fast running creek, barely contained within rocky banks that only seldomly dipped to a crossing they could wade into. The trees around them towered high over their heads, with branches out of reach and nothing really suitable for making a shelter with.

Not good. Xena sighed. They had to have shelter, since the wet wind was still blowing, and it was getting colder every minute. She was already shivering a little, and it was only going to get worse. "Let's cross here, and see what we can find on the other side." She pointed across the creek. "There's a ford there."

Gabrielle joined her at the edge of the water, poking ahead with her staff cautiously. "How deep is it?"

"One way to find out." Xena sloshed in on the upstream side of her partner, quickly sinking down until the water was up to her mid thigh. "Careful."

"Eh." Gabrielle followed her, wincing as the cold water soaked into her clothing. "You know, if we manage not to catch the cold from Hades, it'll be a miracle." She reached out and latched on to Xena's arm as the water flow threatened to push her over. "Yow."

Xena put a hand on her back as she moved slowly across. The water got deeper, and at one point she realized she'd have to swim for it. "Um.. Gab?"

"Yeah. I know." Gabrielle sighed. "What I wouldn't give for a little freaking sunlight."

The warrior started swimming, the chills paradoxically subsiding as her muscles surged into action and she pulled powerfully across the creek with Gabrielle stroking gamely at her side as she still tried to hang on to her staff.

The current carried them downstream. Xena watched for a decent landing place as she kept moving on a diagonal, finally spotting a tiny beach just to the lee side of a fallen tree. "There... make for that bank, Gab."

"Easy for you to say." Gabrielle grunted, doing her best to keep up. "Remember what I said about a desert?"

"Yeah." Xena grabbed hold of her with one arm, and snagged a fallen limb on the tree with other, swinging them both into the landing neatly and with surprisingly little effort. "Up you go."

The bard threw her staff up onto the shore and climbed out of the water, her drenched clothing outlining her lithe body. "Pah." She shook herself, turning to offer Xena a hand up. "Gods, I'm over being wet."

Xena got to her feet, starting to move away from the bank until something caught her eye. She paused and glance down at a depression in the sand, an almost footprint that faded into the wash of the river even as she watched.

Hm.

"Something wrong?" Gabrielle peered at her.

Xena dismissed the depression with a shrug. "Nah." She headed off away from the water, towards an upslope she was hoping would lead towards some place they could find shelter. "Keep your eyes open for anything."

"You know.." The bard wiped the wet hair from her eyes. "I know you don't like caves, Xe, but.."

"Right now, I love caves." The warrior replied. "Caves can forget anything bad I ever said about them if they'd just appear. Right now."

"Mm." Gabrielle sighed. "Nice cave, nice dry floor, maybe a lovely little hot spring in the back.. with lots of dry firewood someone considerately left there..."

"You don't want much, do ya."

"You've found them before." Gabrielle leaned forward as the slope got a little steeper, rocky upthrusts beginning to poke their heads from the ground. "I used to think you just had been over every square inch of land we'd ever traveled over, so you of course remembered all the good spots and took us there."

Xena snorted. "Yeah, so when we ended up sleeping in that swamp that was because...?"

"Hey, no one's perfect." Gabrielle chuckled. "Besides, that swamp had it's good points."

"Good points?" Xena was glad of the distraction from the chill. "Gabrielle, we only had one bodylength of dry ground between us."

"Heh. Exactly." Green eyes twinkled gently. "Oh, gee, Xena.. I guess we'll have to only use the one fur, huh?" Her voice rose a notch in mimicry of her younger self. "Shucks."

Muffling a grin, Xena hopped nimbly onto one of the boulders, and shaded her eyes with one hand, peering through the mist. Through the trees, she spotted a darkness that was more than clouds, and her shoulders relaxed. "Think we've got a rock wall over there."

Gabrielle watched as her partner rejoined her, noting the goosebumps covering her skin. They had no provisions left, but even though she was hungry and she was sure Xena was too, getting warm was really the top priority for right now. "Okay, let's get over there."

A soft sound to their left alerted Xena, and she paused, drawing back behind a boulder as she reached out to grab Gabrielle's arm. "Something's coming."

"What?"

Xena started to look around the rock, when the sounds rapidly escalated, and out of the mist and gloom a huge, brown blur burst from the forest and came straight for them.

She got a glimpse of staring eyes, and white teeth, as she instinctively grabbed Gabrielle's staff, and leaped to meet it.

Whatever it was.

**

Gabrielle got a brief look at the beast before it was on them, and smelled an overpowering stink of musk and manure as she dodged out of the way.

"Yeahhh!" Xena let out a wild yell, making the animal start violently, rearing up and striking out at her with hooves the size of wagon wheels. The warrior swung the staff and whacked it in the head, feeling the sting against her palms as the wood rebounded out of them and clattered to the ground. "Damn it!"

"Ooonnngg!" The animal hooted, swinging its massively horned head around and charging her again. "Ooonnngg!"

"Artemis' left tit." Gabrielle took the smart route and dove for the ground, rolling behind a boulder and out of the way. She peered out from behind it, watching as her partner fended off the animal. "Xena! Watch out!" She yelled, seeing the horns sweeping towards the warrior's head. "Xena!"

"I see it!" The warrior jumped up onto the boulder she was behind and leaped onto the animal's back, grabbing hold of its horns and sliding across its body to roll off onto the other side. Her weight pulled the head around, and the animal honked in fear and protest before it was hauled down off its feet and landed with a crack on the ground, twitching violently a few times before it went very still.

Slowly, Xena stood up, wiping her hands on her shift, her body shivering in pure reaction. She glanced over as Gabrielle got to her feet and walked towards her, the bard's eyes on the huge creature. "You all right?"

"Me?" The bard came to her side. "I'm not the one jousting with a .. a.. Xena, what the Hades is that?"

The warrior circled the dead animal, its eyes bugging out and glassy, and its tongue hanging out of a half open jaw. She'd broken its neck and the fall had done the rest. Now quiet was returning to the misty forest around them. "It's a... um.." She put her hands on her hips.

"Deer?" Gabrielle suggested hesitantly. "Crossed with a minotaur?"

It was vaguely deer shaped, and a rusty brown color. But it had a huge crown of interlaced horns on its head, and its back had topped Xena's height by nearly an armspan. Its hooves were split into three, and it had thin white strips across its belly. "Huh."

"Xena, that's the third time you've had to say 'huh' when it comes to animals around here. I've never heard you say it once before. What's up with that?" The bard circled the beast, her hands on her hips. "We're not that far from home." Her eyes lifted to Xena's. "Are we?"

Xena scratched her ear, then half shrugged. "Question is, what do we do with it?" She sat down on the boulder and pulled out her bit of rock and looked at it. "Oh, that's not gonna be a treat using this."

Gabrielle touched one of the horns. "Well, there's a lot of useful material here." She replied, in a practical tone. Her brow creased, and she sat down on another boulder, beginning to tug at the laces on her boot. "Musta gotten a stick in here or something.. hang on."

The warrior looked around. "Well.. maybe we should find shelter first... even if I can hack this thing up somehow we've really got.."

"Uh. Xe?"

Xena looked at the bard, who had an indescribable expression on her face. "What?" She waited, but Gabrielle merely looked at her. "What??"

The bard's nose wrinkled into a wry expression. "You're either going to kiss me or spank me."

Xena cocked her dark head to one side. "Huh?"

Very slowly, the bard raised her hand from her half unlaced boot. In her fingers was a carved bone handle, with a softly glinting blade inserted in it. "Forgot I had it?" Gabrielle offered, hopefully. "Sorry."

The warrior got up and walked to her. "Gaaaaabbbrieellle." She crouched down with her forearms on her knees and eyed her partner. "What were my choices again?" She asked, taking the small utility knife from the bard.

Green eyes blinked penitently at her. "I honestly forgot I stuck it in there.. I don't usually carry it when we're home, but we were out so long that I guess I just got.."

Xena leaned over and kissed her on the lips.

"In the habit of it." The bard concluded, with a sheepish smile as they parted. "Gods, I feel like a dork."

"You won't, once we get a decent meal out of this." Xena said. "See if you can scout around over there and find us someplace to rest up for the night." She examined the knife with a sense of pleasure, realizing she now also had a striker to start a fire with. "Keep an eye out for tinder."

"You're not mad at me?" Gabrielle asked.

"Nu uh." Xena got up and walked over to the beast, already trying to figure out where to start with it. The rain had started to come down again, and she was losing light fast.

"Really?"

Xena turned and looked at her partner, who was still sitting on the rock. "Gabrielle, get over it. You probably just saved our butts. G'wan." She indicated the slope. "Nest."

Gabrielle finished lacing her boot back up, then she stood up. "Consider me nesting." She agreed, giving Xena a pat on the side before she walked on past her and started up the slope. Feeling the handle of the knife near her ankle had unexpectedly thrown her back to an earlier time, when she'd agonized over the least little mistake and cringed before Xena's all knowing eyes.

"You're not that little dork anymore, Gabrielle." She told herself, as she walked through a thick stand of trees, peering under branches and looking around boles. "You actually have some skills now, and she trusts you."

A noise caught her attention and she looked quickly past a thick pine tree, her eyes searching for the source of it. After a moment, she spotted a squirrel dashing up a nearby trunk and relaxed, watching the animal scamper out across a branch over her head. "Well, at least you look normal." She told the squirrel. "Unless you start talking or something."

The squirrel remained prudently mute, and Gabrielle moved on. She spotted another fallen tree and trotted over to it, but the overhang it provided wasn't nearly enough even for her, and forget about her tall soulmate. The bard patted the trunk and climbed over it, continuing further up the slope.

Ahead, she could see through the trees a blank, slate grayness blocking out the light, and she hoped it was the crevice wall. As she edged out from the last row of trunks, though, she realized it wasn't – but it still had some promise.

The wall was actually an upthrust, a jag of rock rising up from the floor of the valley that towered over her. She walked towards it and as she came up next to the stone, it blocked the wind.

That felt wonderful. Gabrielle explored the cracks in it carefully, circling the edge of the upthrust and stopping in her tracks as she spotted an overhang with a concave space beneath it, away from the

wind and big enough for both of them. "Ah hah!" She turned and faced the forest, which spread out beneath her in a thick grey green wave.

Placing two fingers between her teeth, she let out a whistle, then two shorter ones, and paused, cocking her head. After a brief moment's silence, a long whistle answered her back, and she grunted in satisfaction. "This is great." She ducked under the overhang and explored the shelter, stopping in her tracks as she found her eyes drawn to some color on the back wall.

Curious, she went to the very back of the cleft and dropped to her knees, peering at the splotches. She lifted her hand and put it next to one, which matched it in relief, as though someone had painted over their fingers and left the outline on the rock.

It was ochre red, and reminded her of fresh blood. "Wow." She looked at the stick figure of an animal next to it. "What is this all about?"

The rock wasn't forthcoming, so she turned and looked around carefully, searching for signs of habitation. Aside from the paint, however, there wasn't any. She saw no indication of a firepit, or old bones, or tools, which she'd expected to see if anyone used this as a shelter. The floor of the overhang was nothing but dusty rock, and she saw no chisel marks of anyone trying to make it any more comfortable. "Hm."

It was a little strange. Gabrielle circled the space again, but nothing jumped out at her and she finally shrugged and went back outside, heading back to where she'd seen the downed tree to see if some of the brush under it was dry enough to burn.

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"Gabrielle, Gabrielle, Gabrielle." Xena knelt beside the downed whatever it was and continued her butchering. She was elbow deep in gore, and for once was glad of the misty rain that was keeping her relatively clean as she worked. "How do I love you? Let me count the damn ways."

The animal was going to provide her with a lot of stuff they needed. Xena carefully skinned the carcass, peeling back the side and exposing it to the rain. Food, of course, but also the hide, and the bone from the horns.

A rustle in the underbrush brought her from her knees to her feet in an instant, but the sound stilled, and wasn't repeated. Xena felt her senses coming alive as she listened intently, understanding the lure of the dead beast to anything in the surrounding area that was hungry.

She had no intention of facing off against a big cat, or whatever was out there with a hand long utility knife, either. Resuming her kneel, she worked faster, removing meat from the bone and tossing it onto the flayed hide, then neatly detaching the huge, heavy head with its crown of horn and adding that as well.

The light was almost gone now, and Xena could almost sense the eyes in the forest behind her. She cut several lengths of internal sinew and stood, reluctantly leaving the carcass. She knew there was a lot more to salvage, but in the dark – with a bit of a knife and her guts only – she was at a dangerous disadvantage.

She walked over to the hide and tied it around the meat and head, making a messy bundle that she heaved up onto her shoulders. Blood dripped down immediately and ran down her body, soaking into her tattered shift and bringing a wry grimace to her face. "Hope Gabrielle found some place that's got some water."

An owl hooted reassuringly. Xena started up the slope towards where her partner's whistle had come from, leaning forward a little to balance her heavy load.

She was halfway up the slope before she heard the growls behind her. Turning, she peered down, but the shadows already obscured the carcass and all she could see were small moving bodies around it. "Hm." She continued upward, reassured by the fact that the scavengers had waited for her to leave.

The rain started to slow down again, and by the time she reached the rock escarpment, it had finally, finally stopped. Xena could feel the strain in her back and shoulders as she fought for footing on the stone, pebbles and chips biting into her bare feet with spiteful insistence. "Gabrielle!"

"Here." The bard's voice came suddenly out of the gloom. "What do.. oh. Ah."

Xena could only imagine what she looked like to get that kind of reaction. "Yeah. Where are we going? I'm about to drop this thing."

"This way." Gabrielle closed in and got her shoulder under part of the bundle, guiding Xena with a hand on her arm. "Careful."

"Ow." Xena almost fell, as the rock poked her foot. "Remind me I'm barefoot the next time I tell you to find a cave, yeah?"

"Sorry, hon." Gabrielle glanced behind her, hearing a soft clatter. She saw a bunch of rocks skittering down slope, apparently dislodged by her partner. "Just a little more.. it's around that jag, there." She pointed, trying to ignore the stench of blood that now surrounded the both of them.

Xena spotted the overhang and grunted in approval, moving over and kneeling to dump the meat and skin off her back. It hit the ground with a sodden crunch, and she stood back up, working the painful kinks out of her back with a grimace. "That was fun."

"Yeah." Gabrielle observed, looking at her with a wry expression. "I think there's a little stream over there." She indicated a dip in the rock. "You look like.. um.. " It wasn't as though she'd never seen Xena drenched in blood before. After all, they both had that experience more frequently than either of them wanted.

The bard had grown to hate that copper smell, as a matter of fact.

But this was different.

Xena plucked at her partner's shirt. "Look who's talking."

Gabrielle looked at her blood drenched shoulder. "Yeah." She said. "You want to see what I managed to scrape up in there.. and wait till you see the pictures on the wall. Weird."

"Pictures?" Xena rubbed some dried blood off her skin.

"Yeah, animals and hands and stars and stuff." Gabrielle said. "I think I even got some dried, dead pine needles that might, if we're really lucky, burn."

"Great." Xena walked over the crack in the rock, which did indeed hold a small puddle of water. She put her hand in and felt around the bottom, feeling a slight flow against her fingers. The crack carried the water away down the side of the escarpment, where it disappeared into the foliage at the bottom. It wasn't much, but it was wet, and enough for them to drink, and right now, she couldn't be happier about it.

"Ugh." Gabrielle was working on the hide. "What a mess."

"We can smoke the extra." Xena stripped off the shift and wadded it up, sticking it into the water and squeezing it with both hands. She could feel the wind getting colder, but at least it wasn't raining and so she hoped the shivers now racking her body would be temporary. "Cause I don't want to have to do that again before we get outta here."

"I'm right there with ya." Gabrielle looked around, a twinkle entering her eyes as she studied her partner's naked form. "You think we'll find a way out tomorrow?"

"Eh." Xena had taken her shift out and wrung it. "Yeah." She looked past the escarpment. "Far wall's in the distance.. I can just see it. We can follow that." She undid her underwraps and rinsed those off next, leaving her completely unclothed.

"Instead of the water?" Gabrielle picked up the animal's head and lugged it over to flat rock nearby. She set the skull on it, then went back to the pile of meat.

"Yeah." Xena scrubbed her skin with the cold water. "Thanks for finding us some shelter." With a sigh, she shook out the wet shift and turned, laying it over her shoulder. The cold was starting to make her muscles cramp, and she wanted nothing more than to crawl inside the shelter and get out of the wind.

However. She wasn't about to leave Gabrielle doing all the work. "Okay, why don't we.."

"Why don't you take your cute little bare butt into that cave and get it warm before I spank it?" Gabrielle cut her off neatly. "And while you're at it, see if you can start a fire?"

Xena paused in mid step, one hand extended, her eyes blinking.

"Shoo." Gabrielle motioned her away. "G'wan."

Wrapping her wet shift along with her dignity around her, Xena retreated to the space under the overhang, finding an adequate area already filled with as much dead plant matter as Gabrielle could find. The piece of flint was already sitting next to the pile of tinder, and Xena sat down next to it after she spread her wet shift out across the rocks to dry.

Gabrielle took a piece of bark she'd found near the fallen tree and went to the tiny spring, scrubbing it with a couple of handfuls of water. Then she went back over to the pile of meat and selected the steaks Xena had cut out, laying them onto the bark neatly.

The clouds had parted, and the moon was reluctantly peeking out, giving her a little light to work by and she hummed softly under her breath as she arranged the raw meat, one ear cocked for the sound of the fire starting.

She could hear the distinctive snicks as Xena struck sparks, in a particular rhythm the bard recognized immediately. Two strikes, a pause, two strikes. Longer pause, three strikes. Then the strikes faded and she heard Xena rustling around, and the sound of her blowing softly against the tinder.

How many times had she listened to that? How many times had she counted those strikes, knowing she had just until the fire caught before she had to get up from resting after their long day and hold up her end of their partnership?

Just like she was now. Gabrielle got the last of the meat onto the bark and stood, grunting a little under the weight of it as she carried it into the shelter and set it down on a bit of shelf rock to one side. "Hey."

"Hey." Xena was intent on the fire her hands were creating. A crackling was coming from the tinder, and a wisp of smoke, bringing the scent of smokey pine to the space. "Think this is working." She'd unraveled her underwraps and laid them out as a seat instead, leaving her body bare.

"Thank the gods." The bard exhaled. "Y'know, I thought I was used to camping, but boy, it's tough doing it from scratch."

"Uh huh." Xena fed the baby fire some more tinder, pleased when it responded with a small flame. The gentle illumination was enough for her to see Gabrielle by, and she gave the bard a smile. "Guess we can cut that up into chunks and put it on sticks."

"Is that wood going to be dry enough to really catch?" The bard asked. "I tried to find the driest I could, but everything was just so soaked."

Xena examined the branches set to one side. "We'll see." She started building a stack of larger pieces around the tinder, laying them in a pattern with practiced hands. The warmth was beginning to creep outward, warming her legs.

It felt amazing. She'd forgotten what it felt like to be denied fire's comfort, since they always made one when they camped or traveled. Even in the heat of summer, a mug of tea or soup was welcome at the end of a dusty day and there was something about the flames that was soothing aside from the practical.

Gabrielle moved over and sat down next to her, their bare knees touching. She picked up the knife and began stripping the bark off a stick she'd taken from the tinder pile. "So."

"So."

"You never did answer me about these strange animals." Gabrielle sprinkled the bark strippings into the growing fire.

"I don't have an answer." Xena said.

"That one scared the Hades out of me. Who ever heard of a deer.. or whatever it was, attacking people?"

Xena thoughtfully placed more sticks as the fire started to spread warmth inside the enclosure. "I don't think it was attacking us." She said. "I think it was running from something."

"Again? Like that other thing?"

The warrior nodded.

"That's creepy. Why didn't it come after us, too?"

Xena had been wondering the same thing. The chill was starting to work its way out of her body, and the warmth was making her feel just a little sleepy. She'd been shivering most of the day, and the relief from it was more profound than she'd realized. "I don't know."

Gabrielle got up and went to the bark, crouching next to it so she could cut the first of the steaks up into the chunks Xena had suggested. Her skirt and top were now merely just damp instead of dripping, but she almost envied her partner in her nakedness.

Damp cloth just wasn't fun. Neither were wet boots. Neither was being hungry, but at least she was doing something to correct that last problem. She brought the sticks back over and gave them to her partner. "I'm going to get that skin laid out for you."

Xena held the impromptu kabobs over the fire. "Put it hair down, and throw a few rocks on the corners. With any luck it'll rain all over it tonight."

Gabrielle ducked outside, her figure barely visible in the moonlight. "Yeah, clouds are coming in again." She called out.

The warrior nodded, turning the sticks a little as they dripped and hissed above the fire. The scent of the roasting meat was making her mouth water, and she swallowed a few times as she watched the chunks cook.

The bard reentered their little nook, sitting down again and unlacing her wet boots. "I put that head thing over in the corner out there. I was afraid I'd catch a look at it in the middle of the night and it would scare the lambswool off me."

Xena chuckled. "I'll keep a couple hunks of it and make you a new knife when we get home." She promised. "As a keepsake."

"Mm." Gabrielle pulled off her boot, and the sock under it. "My feet feel like dried grapes."

"Raisins." Xena blithely supplied.

"Punk." The bard wiggled her toes in the fire's warmth. "Boy that feels good." She leaned back on her hands and looked at her partner. "I ever tell you how gorgeous you are?"

One dark eyebrow arched up sharply.

"Well, you are." Gabrielle said, her eyes taking in the warm glow of the fire on the warrior's naked skin.

Xena held out a kabob. "Here." She gave the bard a wry look. "You gonna take that wet stuff off?"

Gabrielle looked down at herself, then up at her partner. "Hang on to that for a minute." She unlaced her top and pulled it off over her head, laying the half shirt onto a nearby jut of rock. Then she undid the ties on her belt and removed it, unwrapping her skirt and putting it neatly next to the top. "There." She scooted a little closer to Xena, and took her kabob. "Better?"

"Almost." The warrior poked her wraps.

Gabrielle handed the kabob back, unfastening her top wrap and removing it as her eyes dropped a little. She folded the undergarment and got up on her knees, setting it down as Xena had hers before she removed her lower one.

The warmth felt wonderful on her skin, and she was glad to get rid of the clammy fabric. "That feels a lot better." She reseated herself.

"Uh huh." Xena handed her the stick back, then reached up and traced the line of blushing skin across her neck. "Something wrong?"

"Um.. no." Gabrielle cleared her throat, unsure really of why she was blushing – being naked in front of her soulmate was hardly an uncommon thing for her to be. "It's just the fire."

"Uh huh."

"No, really." Gabrielle moved closer, so their shoulders were touching. "It feels so good to be dry. And warm." She bit into her dinner, chewing the gamey meat and wishing for some of her own spices. "Tastes like deer."

"It does." Xena agreed. "Big, male deer."

"Like mutton, instead of lamb."

"Exactly."

Gabrielle took another bite and chewed. "I don't care. I'm starving." She admitted. "I'm just glad it's cooked. I don't think I could have taken this raw."

Xena licked her lips. "Eh." She grunted. "Make a decent stew."

"If we had a pot."

"Eh." The warrior grunted again.

Gabrielle ate in silence for a while, finishing up her kabob. She licked her lips. "Want more?" She asked.

"Still hungry?" Blue eyes winked at her in the firelight.

A rakish grin appeared on Gabrielle's face. "Yeah."

Xena grinned back. "Then bring it on, shepherd. Bring it on."

**

"So what do you think?" Gabrielle asked. She was seated cross-legged in front of the pictures, with a curious Xena crouching behind her. "Ever see anything like that?"

The warrior extended a long-fingered hand and traced the outline of one of the animals. "Horse?" She wondered. "Or is this one of those deer things I killed?"

"Look at the hand." Gabrielle held hers up to it, fitting her fingers to the outline.

"Mm." Xena touched the drawing, where the thumb came up shorter on the hand than the bard's. "Interesting."

Gabrielle took her hand back down. "You think it was.. hunter signs or something? Maybe a mark to show what animals were around?"

"Maybe."

"Or maybe it tells a story." The bard mused. "But who put them here?"

Xena put a hand on her shoulder, and stood, stretching her body out and walking to the edge of the overhang. Though it had rained through the night, the clouds had now grudgingly cleared and a bit of sunlight was peeking through the trees, edging over the cliffs to splash over the escarpment.

She was a bit stiff from sleeping on the hard rock floor, and so she lifted both arms over her head and twisted her body in one direction, then the other to loosen up a mildly protesting back. "Ah." She felt her spine pop into place. "Let's see how the skin's doing."

The animal skin, scraped patiently by her the night before and rubbed with ashes, seemed to be doing reasonably well. Xena examined the tough hide which had stiffened up some, but not enough to prevent her working it. She flipped over an edge and ran her finger along the inside of the skin, nodding a little as she did.

Gabrielle came out and joined her. "What's the plan?" She asked.

"Plan is, I use some of this to make some half-assed boots." Xena replied. "I've got a bruise the size of a hen's egg on my instep."

"Ow. Can you do that?" The bard asked, curiously. "I mean, do you have all the stuff you need?"

Xena set a handful of white objects on the rock. "Needles." She said, indicating the fish bones. "Gut." She twisted a bit of the sinew, dried and gnarly looking as it lay on the stone. "And hide." She pointed at the skin.

"Hm." Gabrielle appeared impressed. "Well, we can make a bag to carry some stuff with us, too." She said. "Especially that meat smoking in there." She watched her partner nod. "I'm going to see if I can find some herbs, and some more berries, if you're going to work on that, okay?"

"Good." Xena nodded. "Be careful."

"Yes, grandma." Gabrielle gave her a quick hug before she started down towards the forest, her staff in one hand. She was dressed in her now dry clothing, and she was glad the fire had even dried out her leather boots and her pair of very soggy socks.

Things were definitely looking up. If Xena finished her boots, they could get on their way by mid-day at the latest. They had provisions, they'd had a decent night's sleep, and it had stopped raining. Gabrielle took a deep breath of pine scented air, and exhaled in satisfaction.

Her mind returned to the pictures on the rock as she entered the forest rim, her eyes searching the underbrush with automatic expertise. It had taken her a long time to be comfortable in the wild – her first few months alone with Xena had been a non-stop horror show of scary plant after scary animal after scary natural danger like quicksand.

Now she walked through the trees with confidence, shying aside from poison oak and ducking past spiderwebs with impunity. "Ah." She spotted some mint, and pounced on it, carefully selecting the tenderest leaves and putting them in her little basket. As she knelt next to the herbs, she heard a soft crackling behind her, and she turned, putting the basket down and picking up her staff in one smooth action.

There was nothing there, but she could hear a soft breathing in the bushes just beyond the tree next to her. Fixing her eyes on the bushes, she brought her staff up to a defensive position, curling the fingers of her right hand around the upper part of it, and shifting her thumb on the lower, ready to pop the bottom of the weapon out if something rushed her. "Someone there?" She asked, her voice loud in the suddenly quiet forest. "I won't hurt you."

The soft breathing continued.

"If you don't hurt me, that is." Gabrielle amended. She took a step towards the bushes, straining her senses to detect any sign of attack. She saw the bushes move, and her grip tightened as she squinted through the dappled light. "Hello?"

There was motion, sudden and quicksilver. Gabrielle got the impression of something dark and wiry, as the leaves rattled violently and then went still as whatever it was retreated. "Hey.. wait... wh.." She went over to where the creature had been hiding, alarmed by it's speed.

Beneath the bushes, the ground was stirred, but she couldn't make out any real track. She shaded her eyes and looked in the direction it had gone, but everything was still, and the rich, green underbrush seemed unbroken. "Huh."

Peace returned to the forest. Gabrielle retreated back to her basket, picking it up as she continued to look around her carefully. "Well." She exhaled. "That was weirder than naked sheep in winter."

She decided to move away from where the creature had come from, but she picked up a bit of rock and scraped a mark in the tree to mark the spot for later. Xena would, she was sure, want to see the spot the animal had been in, because what seemed to Gabrielle a muddled stir of leaves probably would give her partner far more clues.

It hadn't seemed dangerous, for which she was grateful. So far the things they'd run into hadn't been – strange and weird, yes, but unthreatening.

Most of the time, the wild was like that. She'd been in places where they'd faced big predators – cats and bears and the occasional wolf – but those times were few and far between and certainly she and Xena had been in danger far more often from their own kind than from any other.

And, too, there was just something about Xena that most potentially dangerous creatures seemed to recognize and avoid. Was it the weapons? Gabrielle found a blackberry bush and raided it with a piratical chuckle. Was it the leather?

She wasn't sure. But she remembered very clearly the time they'd walked into a clearing with two big bears in it, huge animals that towered over both of them, and all Xena had to do was let out a yell, and they both ran like deer from her.

Weird. Useful, but weird. Gabrielle found some lemon grass, and collected it with a sense of pleasure, adding several sprays of sage she found hiding nearby. "Boy, if I only had a darn pot." Her lips edged into a wry expression. "Bet Xena doesn't rag me about taking half our cabin with us the next time we travel."

The thought made her chuckle, and she ducked under some hanging vines, pausing as she looked up them to see if she could spot some gourds. The trees went straight up here, angling just a bit towards the slope and another rocky escarpment rising almost up over her.

Her eyes met another pair looking down at her from the rocks, framed in a round face, with a big nose and flat ears. Gabrielle drew in a breath to call out, then she blinked, as the face disappeared over the edge of the escarpment.

Pebbles rattled down, to tumble at her feet.

"XEna!" Gabrielle found herself yelling in utter reflex. "Xena!!!"

**

There was something about the whole idea of being so self sufficient that was pleasing to her. Xena stitched together two layers of hide with her fishbone needle and gut as she enjoyed the sunshine outside the shelter.

Was it easier to have everything they needed? Sure. But having to scrape up everything was a challenge, and it was engaging her often restless mind in quite a satisfying way. She put the needle down and picked up the utility knife, punching a few more holes around the edge of her boots to be.

It would probably take them a few days to get out of the ravine, she figured. Now that it had stopped raining, the possibilities of spending a few days alone with Gabrielle, free of any responsibilities save each other were beginning to occur to her – and while she wasn't glad of the flood and knew there would be a huge mess for them to clean up back home, she wasn't about to look a gift horse in the ass either.

There. She finished the second sole, and set it down on the ground so she could fit her foot onto it. A square of hide extended on all four sides, and she gathered it up around her calf, studying the effect and function.

She could just tie it all up with strips of gut, of course, but..

"Xena!"

Gabrielle's holler made her jerk in response, her head whipping around to locate the sound.

"Xena!!"

Her partner's voice sounded alarmed, but not scared, and Xena quickly decided it was worth a moment to tie the hide around her leg and spare herself more bruises. "Gabrielle!" She yelled back, projecting her voice as her hands worked quickly.

"Over here!!"

Yeah, I hear ya. Xena stood up and tested her new footwear, not really pleased with the fit, but resolving to fix it later. She turned and ran towards the sound of her partner's voice, racing up the edge of the escarpment to pause the edge and stare past it.

She could see another, smaller escarpment very close by, and her ears told her Gabrielle was past it. "Gabrielle!"

"Here!"

Yep. Xena headed downward, rambling across the rocks until she was near the bottom, and then leaping off the escarpment to fly through the air, somersaulting lazily before she landed at the base of two tall trees. She headed around the side of the smaller escarpment, spotting Gabrielle immediately as a flash of color between the trees.

As she ran, she craned her head and looked around, trying to spot whatever had alarmed her partner. "What's up?" She asked, as she came even with the bard, who was standing at the base of the smaller rock formation and staring up. "Gab?"

"Up there." The bard pointed. "Something was up there, watching me."

Xena stared upward. "What was it?" She put a hand on the bard's back.

"I don't know." Gabrielle admitted, glancing down. "Oh, those are cute." She observed. "It was some kind of.. I think it was a person."

"A person." The warrior repeated. "Okay... so why did you yell out like that?"

Gabrielle exhaled. "It was strange." She said. "It had a ... it had a face, with eyes, and a nose and all that, but it was.. Xena, it was just weird."

The warrior pursed her lips. "All right." She said. "Let's go see if whatever it was left any tracks." She started up the escarpment, with Gabrielle at her heels. "Careful, that's loose."

Gabrielle minded her steps, using her staff to keep her balance and carrying her basket in her other hand. "Sorry I yelled like a banshee." She apologized. "I was just so startled."

Xena smiled, unseen. "S'allright." She said. "You've always done that."

"I have?"

"Yeah." The warrior climbed up over a half fallen tree, it's roots tenaciously clinging to the rock. "Two things I always loved about you were the way your reaction to damn near anything was to shout out my name and the fact you never screamed."

Gabrielle pondered that revelation. "I never screamed?" She asked. "Xena, that's not true."

"You yell."

"What?"

"You yell." The warrior extended a hand back. "Grab on.. steep up here." She waited for Gabrielle to juggle her things and latch on, and she pulled her up next to her before stepping over a craggy outcropping. "You never scream."

Gabrielle resumed her staff and they got to the top of the escarpment, where she'd seen the figure. "I yell." She mused, looking around the ground for some sign of disturbance. "That's where he was, Xena." She tapped the edge of the rock with her staff.

"He?"

"Whatever." But she'd gotten the distinct feeling it was male. "I really never scream?"

Xena knelt on the ground and touched the rock, opening her nostrils to suck in any hint of a clue as to what her partner had seen. "Nope." She got up and went to the opposite slope, where she could now see a rough path leading downward. "Ah."

"What?" Gabrielle joined her.

Xena indicated the path, which had been worn by many feet. She also touched the rock, which was smooth from contact, and smudged with dirt. She bent close, and sniffed it, detecting mud, and the coppery scent of blood along with an acrid, musky scent that rang a familiar bell.

"Should we follow it?" Gabrielle peered downward. "Doesn't look like anything or anyone is here now."

Xena drummed her fingers on the rock. "Let's get our gear." She said. "Before someone or something else does." She started back the way they'd come. "And keep your eyes peeled for round, river rocks."

"River rocks?" Gabrielle scrambled after her partner. "For what?"

"We might need them to throw." Xena said, picking up her pace.

Gabrielle merely grunted in response, her eyes on the forest closing over them.

**

One Wild Ride

Part 5

Eponin closed the cabin door behind her and stood against it, only her eyes moving as she scanned the interior. "Hi."

Ephiny was seated near the fire, watching Dori play. "Hi." She responded. "C'mon in."

Cautiously, the weapon's master crossed the floor and settled on the chair at her side. "You were joking, right?"

"Me?" Ephiny glanced past her. "About what, coming in the place?"

"Staying here."

The regent surveyed the interior of the cabin. "I'm serious. Something wrong with it?" She queried. "Damn sure it's more comfortable than our place is right now."

Pony moved her head, her eyes rolling around the interior. "Eph, this is like.. their space." She said. "I feel like I'm in a temple or something."

"Oh, please." Ephiny chuckled. "Build a bridge and get over it, will ya? They're friends of ours."

Pony examined her boots, then glanced up from under ginger colored brows. "You telling me we're gonna sleep in their bed?" She asked. "That bed?" She pointed.

Ephiny looked at it. The bed was large, and appeared extremely comfortable, instead of the spike ridden rack her partner's tone suggested. "Yes." She answered, slowly. "Is there something wrong with that?"

Pony looked at the bed, then at her, then at the bed. She propped her elbow on her knee and rested her chin on her hand. "We could get pregnant."

"What?"

"You know, I was thinking.. they could have just said it happened in a tree. Maybe it didn't." Pony studied Dori. "Maybe she didn't, I mean. What if it just happened here?"

Ephiny felt like she'd unexpectedly stepped into a mushroom induced hallucination. "Are you sick?"

"Me?"

"Dori, is she sick?" Ephiny asked the toddler, who looked up from her dolls in question. "Is your auntie Poo Poo goofy?"

"Hey!"

Dori thumped her dragon on the floor. "Poo poo funny." She agreed. "You make story?"

Pony edged back in the chair. "Oh no.. no no." She held up a hand. "That's your mama's gig. I don't do stories."

"Mama." Dori kicked out one little bootied foot. "Mama go play with Boo." She explained seriously. "Mama make fun, make Boo fun. Like that."

Ephiny worked that one out in her head. "So.. you're saying it's okay for them to go off and be together?"

Dori looked at her with a puzzled expression. "Go Boo."

"I'm not getting it." The regent said.

"Me, either." Pony stood up and wandered around the cabin, stopping to peer curiously at this thing and that. The personality of the owners was very much imprinted, she realized, as she found the corner where Xena obviously did her own little stuff in.

There were a few small projects lying out, but everything was aligned neatly, and the set of worn armorer's tools were lined up in a precise row with everything in it's place. A bit of the warrior's armor was sitting ready, apparently her next task.

Pony picked up the bit, rubbing her thumb over the brass and leather, the inside shaped and bent to exactly fit. She'd always admired Xena's gear, and even more so when she'd learned the warrior made most of it herself.

Herself. Not that Amazons didn't make their own leathers sometimes, because they did. But that was one thing, and crafting metal armor was something else. But she supposed if you trusted your life to something, you probably slept better at night knowing it was done the right way.

"Pon?"

Eponin turned around. "Yeah?"

"What are you doing?"

"Checking out the master's technique." Pony put the armor bit down and resumed her wandering, ending up back at the fireplace. She put her hand on the mantel, and let herself absorb the sense of presence she was convinced was real even though the cabin's owners were presently not. "I just feel weird in here."

Ephiny relaxed on the bear rug, extending her legs and crossing them at the ankles. "I don't." She admitted frankly. "I like this place." She patted the soft surface. "So sit down and get used to it."

Reluctantly, Pony did so. "What's in there?" She pointed at the pot hanging in the hearth.

"Dinner." Ephiny benignly watched Dori set up some wooden horses, and then knock them all down with a swing of her small fist.

"Uh.."

"Relax. It's from the inn." The regent gave her a wry look.

"Ah." Pony reclined onto her back, putting her hands behind her head. "It sure is a lot quieter around here." She admitted, eyeing Dori apprehensively. "Even with the munchkin around."

"Mm." Ephiny nodded. "Actually, it's damn nice to be away from the village for a few days."

Pony looked at her.

Ephiny shrugged.

Pony looked back at the roof and pondered the situation, considering the possibilities with growing enthusiasm until she was whapped on the head with a purple dragon.

"Poo poo!"

"Village. Dori. Village Dori. Village.." Pony rubbed her nose. "Hhum....."

"Buppits!" Dori cocked her head and got up, racing for the door. "Buppits come!"

"Eph?"

"Chill out." Ephiny was chasing across the cabin after their charge. "It'll be good practice."

"What?"

**

Xena led the way through the trees, her senses fully alert. Her hand clenched lightly and she rubbed her fingers, glancing around to where Gabrielle was quietly following her. "Know what I wish?"

"Wish you had your sword." Gabrielle supplied amiably. "And your chakram, and your armor. Did I leave anything out?"

"Hmph."

"Sometimes having your weapon come from the nearest tree is pretty handy." Gabrielle hefted her staff. "You hear anything following us?"

"No."

They walked up a small ridge and paused the top, surveying their path. To the right, a little in the distance, was the crevice wall. To the left, they could just barely see the glint of light on the water, which was narrowing down from a creek to a brook as the water thinned out in the sun.

Ahead of them, Gabrielle could see a series of ridges, with scrubby trees and bushes crawling over them. It was quiet and wild, and she hadn't seen many animals at all during their walk.

No sign of the strange creatures either. She ran a hand through her hair, and exhaled.

"Want to stop for a drink?" Xena was watching her from the corner of her eye. "I could use one."

"Sure." Gabrielle readily followed her partner over towards the brook, stepping over a couple of rocks and a fallen log half disintegrated into the earth before they reached it. She selected another rock on the edge of the water and sat down, resting her elbows on her knees. "Sheesh."

Xena drank a handful of water, then scooped up a double and offered it to her. "Here."

"Thanks." Gabrielle leaned forward and sipped the cold liquid gratefully. "I don't think I really slept well last night. I'm a little ragged today." She wiped her lips with the back of her hand. "I kept thinking I was hearing things."

"You were." Xena casually circled her with one arm. "There was something hunting outside where we were.. a little down slope."

Gabrielle looked at her. "Did it catch anything?"

"Yes."

"Ah." The bard leaned against her partner's tall body, resting her head against Xena's shoulder. "So I wasn't dreaming I heard something screaming, was I?"

"No."

Gabrielle nodded a few times. "Good." She said. "I hate nightmares."

One of Xena's brows lifted. "So you'd rather them be real?"

A far off look entered the bard's eyes as she studied the thick brush. "Yes, I would." She finally answered. "My dreams were always more horrible than my waking life was."

Xena wasn't quite sure what to say to that, because she wasn't really sure where it was coming from. "Uh." She cleared her throat. "Maybe because you keep your scared parts inside and the only time they can come out is when you're sleeping."

Gabrielle extended her legs, crossing her boots as she watched a bird flit from branch to branch across from them. "That's amazingly profound of you, sweetie."

"Eh."

"I never wanted to be afraid in front of you, because I knew you never were."

"Bull." Xena snorted. "You know better."

"Now, sure." The bard agreed, with a gentle smile. "But you know, you've really got a point there. I never thought about it like that."

Xena gave her a squeeze. "C'mon. Let's get moving." She said. "I want to get past that open stretch over there." She got up and extended her hand, which Gabrielle took as she pulled her partner upright. She handed Gabrielle back her staff and they moved on, skirting the edge of the water as they headed for the low hills.

Gabrielle stifled a yawn, and dug in her roughly made fur pouch for a nut to chew on. She followed Xena an automatic pace behind and to the left, guiltily enjoying the fact that she could let her attention wander and trust in the warrior's reflexes to keep them both out of trouble.

Matter of fact, it was walking on the road when most of her stories had gotten thought of, those long sometimes dusty hours where they'd traveled side by side in companionable silence. "Xena?"

"Hm?"

"Was that thing we saw.. was it a person?"

Xena leaned forward a little, as they started up the slope of the first hill. "Not like any I've seen."

"Me either." Gabrielle said. "Maybe if we find the people who made those paintings, they can tell us."

"Maybe." Xena reached the top of the hill and the breeze caught her hair, pushing it back from her face and streaming it out behind her. She lifted her head, catching a scent on the wind and stopped, her body stiffening.

"What?" Gabrielle took hold of her staff with both hands, watching her like a hawk.

She could smell them, but not see them. "Keep alert." Xena warned her partner. "Stay close."

"Absolutely." Gabrielle assured her, as they started down the hill. "Since I'm the one with the big stick. Someone has to protect your butt."

Xena chuckled softly, shaking her head. The slope on this side was quite steep, and she started sliding a little, her rough foot covering not really hard enough to give her full purchase. Small rocks, dislodged from the half crumbling soil skittered down the hill before them, and as they reached the bottom and entered a thick stand of trees, every hair on her body stood up. "Gabrielle!"

The bard saw them, and her staff swept up as she stepped past Xena in a guard position. Her eyes flicked from side to side as shadowy figures circled out to meet them. "Hey!"

Xena stepped to one side, clearing the edge of the staff, and put her back against a nearby tree. The figures facing them were short, about Gabrielle's height, but stocky, and there were at least six of them. They were the round faced, wild creatures from the trees, but...

"Xena?" Gabrielle's eyes were wide. "They've got clothes on."

"I see that." The warrior watched the hairy figures get closer. They were dodging and grunting, the biggest one pointing at them as they got more and more excited. She could see them better now, they appeared grotesque even to her eyes long used to the vagaries of humanity. "Gabrielle, stay back."

"Okay, well, then they're people." Gabrielle decided. "Hey, um..." She addressed the one closest to her. "What's your name?" She released one hand off her staff and extended it.

"Gabrielle." Xena warned.

The grunts increased in volume. The closest one jumped forward, then leaped back, then jumped forward again, shaking a thick stick in one hand.

"Gabrielle."

"Shh." The bard took another step forward, fearlessly. "C'mon, Xena.. they've got clothes on, and they're standing up and everything." She said. "Hi there.. can you talk?"

She never does learn, does she. Xena tensed, watching the hooting and coughing increase in agitation. "Gab.."

The creature jumped forward and reached out to Gabrielle at that very moment, it's stubby fingers grasping at her arm.

"See?" Gabrielle grinned, taking another step.

The creature grabbed her outstretched hand and yanked hard, pulling the bard forward and almost into his arm. It screamed in triumph as the bard let out a yell.

Son of a bacchae. Xena leaped as the rest of the creatures all jumped on the two of them, yelling and hooting and screaming until her ears nearly stood on end. "Gabrielle!"

"Yahhh!" Gabrielle felt hands all over her, grasping and hard, and an overpowering stench nearly made her gag. She twisted and rolled, trying to get away as wiry bodies landed on top of her. Oh poop. She jabbed an elbow into a nearby set of ribs. Xena's gonna kill me.

"Aurouhgh!" A roar went off nearly in her ear, and Gabrielle felt a smothering hold grab her and a body thrust against hers in a frantic rhythm that knocked the breath out of her as her brain suddenly realized what the creature was trying to do.

Fear, anger and a creeping horror all took hold of her at once, and she convulsed on the ground, twisting and writhing with all her strength. "Xena!" She let out a desperate yell.

The sound of a splitting melon alerted her, and she turned her face and as much of her body as she could to avoid the sudden drenching of hot copper as the growling and screeching was overwhelmed by Xena's strident battle call.

Xena whipped the staff back and let it fly again, shoving one of the creatures back with her foot. "Get off there you.." She stopped speaking, feeling a jolt of open terror from Gabrielle that made her drop the staff and just leap at the pile with her bare hands extended, grabbing hold of the first hairy body she reached and yanking it back away from the bard. "Get off of her!"

The creature yowled at her, making barking and grunting noises that were almost language. Xena shoved him away and grabbed for the next one, who was humping up and down on her partner with great sexual energy. "Son of a bacc.. get off!" She grabbed it by its hair and pulled its head around, as one of the others jumped on her back and tried the same thing.

Its strength was amazing. It had a lock around her neck and only the fact that her total focus was on Gabrielle let her stay upright.

Xena lashed out with her elbow and broke something, hearing the crunch as she connected. She didn't even hesitate, continuing the motion around and grabbing her attacker, throwing him over her shoulder and onto the rocks.

Gabrielle had gotten enough leverage to upend her last adversary, and she was wrestling with him on the ground, his greater strength and size evenly matched against the bard's fury. Her entire body was tensing with the effort, the muscles in her shoulders and back standing out in rigid relief under her skin.

"Gabrielle!" Xena grabbed hold one of the creatures about to jump on both of them and whirled around, slamming the hairy body against a tree and releasing him just as the bard threw off her attacker. She bounded forward and kicked the creature in the head as it tried to come back for more, sending it sprawling some yards away. "Here!" She reached down for Gabrielle, who grabbed her as she stood and wrapped her arms around the warrior. "Bastards!"

Gabrielle was breathing so hard it hurt to hear it. "Oh my gods, Xena he was trying to.." She stopped speaking. "Let's get out of here."

"You got that right." Xena booted up the staff to her hand and smacked one of the reviving creatures with it, feeling a sting in her hands as it bounced off the thick skull. She decided not to stop and repeat the action, and with a hand on Gabrielle's back, she broke into a run guiding the bard in front of her. "Go!"

"I am!" Gabrielle didn't need any encouragement. Her heart was hammering in her chest so hard it was making her shake, and she felt like she couldn't run fast enough to outreach the stench that clung to her from the creatures.

She wanted to throw up. Resolutely, she merely swallowed hard and put her energy into running instead, as they climbed up the next slope at top speed. The months running with Xena now came home to her, and she tucked her hands into fists as her body responded to the need with a sudden surge.

They reached the small ridge and slowed as they reached the bole of a large tree, swinging around it to look back the way they'd come.

Gabrielle laid her hand on the bark, her breathing ragged as her eyes strained to catch any hint of movement. "See em?"

"No." Xena exhaled, and sucked in another lungful of air, expelling it in an epithet that almost caused the tree's leaves to drop around her. "But I don't want to take chances. Let's move." She started off at a slower pace down the other side of the ridge, keeping her hand lightly laying on Gabrielle's back. "You okay?"

Gabrielle shuddered. "Yeah." She muttered. "Except for my stupidity flashback."

Xena glanced at the bard's profile, which was strained, her jaw muscles clenching and releasing visibly under the skin. "Let's find a place to hole up for a candlemark. See if they're following us."

Gabrielle nodded mutely.

They entered the trees at the bottom of the ridge with due caution, for once welcoming the newly gathering clouds and the threat of more rain.

**

They found shelter just as the rain started, two trees that had grown together in such a way as to make a triangular pocket a little ways off the ground. Xena was relieved to be off the ground, even though they didn't have much space and the bark was more than a little pokey against her bare skin.

She had her back against the bole, and her arms wrapped around Gabrielle, as they both watched the rain and the single approach through the trees to their hiding place.

The bard was being very quiet as she sat curled up between Xena's legs with her head resting against the warrior's collarbone. She hadn't said much since they'd found shelter, and Xena was starting to worry about her a little.

The reassuring thing was that she wanted to cuddle. Xena had learned during their estrangement that Gabrielle would instinctively put distance between them when she was upset or angry with her, and on the other side of the coin, would seek her out and initiate physical contact when she was upset about anything else.

Becoming a safe place again had been an unspeakably, silently wonderful moment for her.

"Damn it, I'm not going to put up with this!" Gabrielle rounded on Ephiny, sparks flying from unexpectedly angry green eyes. "If they have a problem with her.." She pointed at Xena. "You tell them to come talk to me!" She pointed at herself. "Or shut the Hades up!"

"Look, Gabrielle.." Ephiny held a hand up. "I know you're pissed off, but you really need to understand where this is coming from. Those people care about you!"

"Then tell them to back off!" The bard yelled.

Xena just stood off to one side, completely at a loss as to what to do. She understood the problem the Amazons had with her, and she felt, actually, sympathy for Ephiny who was trying to be a referee in a game she had decided bias in. "Maybe I should just leave." She finally suggested.

Gabrielle looked at her. "I'm not going to back off." She said. "Ephiny, get all of those jerks into the common hall in a half candlemark and I'll talk to them."

"Gabrielle..."

"Am I your queen, or am I not?" Gabrielle cut her off. "Make up your mind."

Ephiny lifted a hand, then let it fall against her thigh. "As you wish." She turned and left the queen's quarters, the beads at the door rattling reproachfully after her.

Gabrielle turned and put her back to the room, resting her hands on her desk. "Gods be damned." She whispered. "I don't need this."

Xena stayed where she was, feeling sick to her stomach as the bard's anger rolled against her. What could she say? If she hadn't been there, there'd be no problem.

With a sigh, Gabrielle straightened up and turned, letting her hands drop to her sides as frustration showed in every line of her body. She looked across at Xena, and they both seemed to become aware of the gulf of space between them.

The gulf Xena wondered that would ever disappear completely. Or at all.

Gabrielle's brow tensed a little, and she hesitated, her hands clenching slightly. Then she twitched into motion, walking over to Xena and pausing again before she came into her personal space and brushed against her, circling the warrior with her arms and putting her head down on her shoulder. "Make me feel better."

Something she hadn't done in a very long time.

Without thinking, Xena returned the hug, pulling her close and cradling the back of her head in one hand, almost numb with the pure joy of the moment. "Gabrielle." She said, simply. "I love you."

She felt the shudder go through the bard's body and the hold on her tightened into a fierce squeeze. "That'll do it every time." Gabrielle choked out. "Thanks."

Which one of them felt the better for it, was a mystery she had no interest in solving.

A soft snuffle drew her attention, and Xena glanced down at the figure huddled against her. "Hey."

"Hey." Gabrielle answered softly.

"You all right?"

The bard sighed. "My stomach hurts a little." She admitted. "I just can't get those.. get that.. ugh." Her fingers tightened on Xena's arm. "That was really rotten."

"I know." Xena tightened her hold a trifle.

"And I feel like an idiot."

The warrior gave her partner a kiss on the head. "Nah."

"Don't 'nah' me, Xena." Gabrielle said. "Where the Hades did my brain go there? What was I thinking? I know better than that." She cleared her throat and swallowed, grimacing. "Ugh."

"Shh." The warrior stroked her arm soothingly. "Let it go."

The bard sighed again.

Xena reached down and clasped Gabrielle's wrist, probing the inside of it with a delicate touch. "Can't offer you herbs, but let's see if this helps." She pressed the point just where the two bones in her partner's wrist came together, feeling a certain tension relax as the bard put her head back down.

That old magic. Sweeter than honey on her tongue and just as welcome. Xena rested her cheek against the softness of the bard's hair and rocked them both a little.

Gabrielle looked out at the rain, the gray light reflecting her own thoughts precisely. The one thing anchoring her was Xena's very solid presence and the unstated support she could sense in her partner's every move. "I didn't expect them to try and rape me." She finally said in an almost whisper. "That... I think that's haunting me a little."

Xena didn't answer, but she released Gabrielle's wrist and wrapped her arms around her firmly, understanding the unspoken emotion more clearly than the spoken one.

There were a thousand words in the silence between them and a thousand points of pain in two hearts that had gone through Hades together wrapped in a love that made it all bearable.

A magic of its own kind.

They listened to the rain for a while, each lost in different reflections. Finally, Gabrielle pressed her cheek against Xena's chest, and let her thumb rub idly over the skin on her arm. "Have I really learned so little in all these years, Xe?"

Xena didn't answer for a while, her eyes searching the wet trees and roaming across the grass before she let them drop back down to Gabrielle's face. "You're just you." She finally said, and then fell silent again.

Gabrielle thought about what that meant to her, and to Xena. Was it true? Was she just destined to go through life having things happen to her just because she was who she was?

Did that suck? The bard thought about that darkest time in her life, echoes of which had pounded against her under the grasping hands of the creatures. She could remember that hopeless, horrible sensation of being unable to stop what was happening, and of screaming Xena's name and for the first time knowing the warrior couldn't help her.

The memory made her eyes sting, and she blinked as a few tears trickled out. But this time, she acknowledged, had been different. So maybe it wasn't so bad that she'd been able to come back around to where she thought the best of people instead of the worst.

After all, Xena went through life having things happen to her pretty much just because she was who she was, didn't she?

"Gabrielle?" Xena's voice broke into her reverie.

"Yeah, Boo?" Gabrielle injected a note of wry humor from somewhere into her tone. "I'm sorry I'm being whiney. I think it was just the shock of seeing those... um.. what were they, anyway?"

Xena gently removed the traces of tears from the bard's face. "I'm getting real tired of saying it, but I don't know what they are." She said. "But I tell you what.. if one of them comes near you again I'm gonna skin him and leave his man's parts hanging on the nearest tree."

"It was..." Gabrielle felt the tight sensation leaving her throat, and her stomach started to settle a little. "It was so strange, because they were wearing those furs and all, but they were so much like animals."

Xena ran her fingers through Gabrielle's hair, ruffling it affectionately. "You okay?" She asked. "Tell me the truth."

"Or?" Gabrielle managed a wry grin.

"Or I'll kiss you senseless."

"Ooo... I'm lying. I'm lying.." The bard felt a chuckle bubble up, and she let it, then ended it with a long exhale. "Yeah, I'm okay." She said. "I was just freaked out a little."

"How's your stomach?"

Gabrielle considered that seriously. "Empty." She said. "Want to reach me some of that smoked stuff?" She watched the rain come down harder. "Because I don't think we're going anywhere for a while."

Reassured by the return of her partner's appetite, Xena opened the furry flap on her makeshift bag, removing some of the meat she'd smoked the previous day. It had dried decently, but she definitely missed the bard's spices on the somewhat bland hunks. "Here." She selected a piece and handed it over. "When this stops, I think we better get something more dangerous than your filleting knife ready."

"Hm?" Gabrielle chewed on the jerky. "You don't think they'll leave us alone?"

"No."

"Really?"

"No." Xena watched the rain fall past Gabrielle's shoulders. "They were tracking us since we got here. We've got something they want."

Gabrielle looked at herself, and then at her partner, and then at the rain. "What?"

Xena pursed her lips in annoyance. "I don't know." She snipped the words off precisely.

"I think I've heard you say that more times in the last couple of days than I have the entire time I've known you." The bard observed.

"Grr."

Gabrielle had to smile at the frustration in her partner's voice. Xena was such a walking encyclopedia of everything that having so many things be outside her experience must be driving the poor thing nuts. "Hang in there, honey." She returned the comforting. "I'm sure you'll have it figured out soon enough."

Xena frowned a little. "I'm not sure I want to figure it out." She admitted frankly. "I want to get the Hades out of here in one piece. If there's a lot of those guys, we could be in trouble, Gabrielle."

A prickle of surprise went down the bard's back. "Because of.. okay, they seemed pretty strong, but.."

"We have no weapons."

"I have." Gabrielle said. "And if you cut yourself one, they're in deep trouble because between the two of us there isn't much about quarterstaff we've got left to learn."

Xena inclined her head in acknowledgement. "True, but if they jump us in big numbers, I'm not sure it's gonna help." She said. "So we've got to get creative."

"Creative." Gabrielle mused. "What do you have in mind?"

Xena gazed out at the rain, and grinned briefly. "Let's wait and see."

**

Ephiny sat down in the carved wooden chair, resting her arm on the desk next to it. Dori was crawling around all over the floor playing with her twin cousins, and their mother had gone off with Pony to check out the village.

She'd been left to babysit. But that was okay. "You kids be careful." Ephiny warned them benignly. "Don't get any splinters." She leaned back in the chair and relaxed, her fingertips straying over the fine surface.

A few inches away, Gabrielle's diary rested, its thick hide cover creased and marred with all the scars of her many travels. Ephiny studied it, reaching over to touch the warm leather and feeling the gouges under her fingertips.

There were stories enough for three lifetimes of a normal person in there. Ephiny shook her head. She'd seen her Queen sit quietly at night, even when she visited them, writing a page, maybe two, into this diary almost as though it was critical to her to mark each and every day.

Ephiny had considered starting a diary of her own, since the thing seemed to bring a lot of comfort to her friend. But when she'd tried it, she found that the words really didn't come to her like they did to Gabrielle – her entries tended to be somewhat short, and pretty damn boring. She'd given it up after a few days.

But Gabrielle never had. Ephiny restrained her curiosity and restricted her snooping to simply lifting the cover, and glancing at the inside. On the first page, tattered and worn, was simply Gabrielle's name – so carefully written she knew it must have been done when the bard was much younger.

On the inside of the leather cover, though, there was something written in a very different hand. Ephiny pulled the book a little closer to examine it, her eyes tracing the powerful, slanted letters. It was Xena's handwriting, she recognized it from the notes the warrior had sent her partner way back when.

It was in a language she didn't understand, though. Figures. Trust Xena to put something into her lover's diary no one understood. Except Gabrielle, probably. Ephiny smiled, and closed the book up. She wondered where the two of them were now.

Had they gotten free of the river? Probably. The regent put her hands behind her head and leaned back. It had taken them months to come back from Athens –she wouldn't put it past them to dawdle a few days coming back this time.

She didn't grudge it to them, despite the fact that there was a boatload of clean up that had to be done around the town, and in the Amazon village. She'd seen both of them do enough for everyone over the last few years that skipping mucking out the stables seemed a cheap trade off.

They deserved a few days out alone together, Ephiny decided. They were both good moms, though her lips quirked just thinking it, and good friends. She knew Gabrielle would come back and have that half embarrassed grin on her face, and probably be in a much better frame of mind to take over the Amazons for a while.

"Eff!" Dori came over and tugged on her legging.

"What is it, bitty boo?" Ephiny picked the child up and set her on her lap. "Hm? You want some lunch? You hungry, or you want to play some more?"

Dori looked at her with an inquisitive expression. "You go wif me to get wrocks?"

Rocks. Ah yes. Dori's favorite plaything. Ephiny glanced at the mantel, which held a representative sampling of the toddler's collection. "Sure, honey. What kind of rocks do you want this time, round ones, or flat ones?"

"Big." Dori held her hands up. "Big ones from the fishies."

Ah, round river rocks. Ephiny secretly liked those herself. She'd found two of them broken in half before they'd left the old village and she'd snuck them into her pack to bring along. The inside was full of crystal, and it was just surprisingly pretty to look like. "All right.. how about we take a walk to the spring, and see if we can find some, okay?"

Dori grinned, her green eyes lighting up. "Otay!"

"Good." Ephiny ruffled her dark hair. "You know what, Dori? You're not so bad." She confided. "You used to scare the chickens out of me when you were littler, you know that?" She set the child on the ground and stood up. "C'mon, kiddo. Let's take your cousins and go find us some rocks."

Dori galloped across the cabin floor squealing. Ephiny followed her, herding the twins as she opened the door to a strong, spring breeze and a hint of more rain in the air. "Let's hurry up. You don't need to catch cold, you little rascals."

The fresh air felt good, though, and she enjoyed the feel of it against her bare arms as her little posse rambled through the thick grass, bouncing over everything in its path. Ephiny found herself laughing the antics, especially when Dori took charge as they got to the spring, instructing her cousins with an infantile yet definite air of authority.

"You.. go dere." Dori pointed. "Look! Gets brown rocks."

Ephiny seated herself on a nearby boulder to watch. "You tell em. Dor." She said. "That's a proper little Amazon princess.. kick some ass."

She tried to imagine Dori as an adolescent, and it was surprisingly hard to do. Hard to say, really, which one of her parents the kid would take after as she got older. Maybe a mixture of both? "Hey, Dori?"

Dori turned her head to look. "Yes!" She pointed at Ephiny. "Eff! Go get fishes!"

Hm. She couldn't really recall either Xena or Gabrielle ordering her around quite like that. "Go get fishes, huh? How'd you like to swim with fishes, kiddo?"

Dori grinned. "Go fishes!" She agreed, turning and running for the spring.

"Oh crap." Ephiny got up and bolted after her. "Forgot about that." She caught up to Dori just as she reached the spring's edge, and managed to get hold of the back of her jumper. "Hold on little frog." She hauled her back. "That's too cold for you."

"Eff!" Dori complained, feet scrabbling on the ground. "You said go to fishes!"

"Yeah, yeah, I know.. but I was just joking." Ephiny hoisted her up. "Good grief, you're getting huge." She could feel the solid weight of the child and feel the strength as she put her arms around Ephiny's neck. "You're gonna be a bruiser like Xena, aren't you?"

"Boo!" Dori predictably yodeled.

Yeah. Ephiny carried her back over to her cousins and put her down. She was already a lot taller than the two twins, and in the child's small frame the regent could already see lines that reminded her of Xena. Something about the set of the shoulders, and the way she walked. "Okay, where are those rocks? I thought we're supposed to be collecting them!"

"Get wrocks." Dori rambled off, searching in the grass. "Lolo, c'mere."

Little Solon amiably complied, trotting over and squatting down next to her. "Gots?"

"Dook." Dori held up a mud covered rock.

Solon took it and looked at it. "Guk." He tossed it down, wiping his hands on his tunic.

Dori retrieved the rock and came back to Ephiny, holding it up. "Eff, good wrok!" She held it up. "See? Pretty!"

Ephiny accepted the bit of stone and studied it. "Well, I don't know, Dori.."

The toddler grabbed the rock impatiently. "Dook!" She held it up to the light. "See?"

The pallid sunlight caught a glint in the stone, and Ephiny pulled it closer again, peering at it. She rubbed the mud off one flat side and blinked at the warm, coppery thread running all through it. "Oh." Ephiny murmured. "Yeah, I see."

"Pretty!" Dori said.

"Very pretty, munchkin." Ephiny ran a finger over the metallic surface. "Are there any more over there like this?"

"Dis?"

"More pretty rocks?" Ephiny got up. "C"mon.. let's go find some." She followed Dori over to where she'd dug up the rock, halfway torn between wanting to find more and hoping she didn't. Copper ore was more than valuable – if there was enough here, it would make them all comfortable for the rest of their lives.

Dori hunkered down and pawed at the dirt, yanking up a root, and then another hunk of rock. She examined it, then tossed it aside, and continued digging. "Boo Boo Boo..." The child hummed as she worked. "Go Boo get good rocks."

Ephiny sat down and picked up the rock she'd discarded, turning it over in her fingers. It appeared dull and uninteresting on the outside, but it appeared to be the same kind of rock as the one with the copper in it, so.. The regent half turned and smacked the rock against the boulder she was perched on, cracking it in half.

Dori turned to look at her in surprise. "Eff? What you do?"

Ephiny stared at the two halves of the rock in her hand, the inside surface brilliant with orange. "Look, Dori. I made a pretty rock too." She murmured. "Wait till Boo and mama see it."

Dori came over and looked. "Pretty!" She agreed. "Go show mama?"

The regent looked around, at the quiet, wild place. "We'll show mama as soon as she gets home, munchkin. I promise."

"Mama mad."

Ephiny looked at the child. Dori was standing next to her with one hand on her knee, and a frown on her small face. "What?"

"Mama mad." Dori looked up. "NO good." She pouted. "Go get Boo, make mama good."

Ephiny hesitated, wondering if the child was just rambling. "Your mama's mad, Dori?" She asked. "When?"

"Mama mad." Dori answered sadly.

"Right now?"

"Yes."

Did Dori really know what Gabrielle was feeling, so far away? Ephiny found it hard to believe, even though she'd seen that weird connection thing between her two friends work on more than one occasion. "Well, honey, let's go back home, and maybe when we show her the rocks, she won't be mad anymore."

"Mama." Dori went back to sorting around in the grass. "Mama like." She came back and held up another rock, this one with a visible sparkle. "Give mama, no mad."

Ephiny took it, and stared. The stone was a chunk of raw emerald. "I bet mama wouldn't be mad." She murmured. "Dori, do you find rocks like this all the time here?"

Dori cocked her head. "Wroks?"

"Like this? You have rocks like this at home?"

"Lots." The toddler nodded. "Pretty. Mama like. Boo make pictures." She explained. "All good."

Surely, Xena and Gabrielle knew what this stuff was. Ephiny studied the gem in her hand. Neither of them were stupid, and Gabrielle, at the very least, had a definite eye for adornment.

Was that why they moved up here?

The regent pondered that. If they let Dori keep them to play with, did that mean they just weren't going to tell anyone about it?

Ephiny juggled the rocks. "You guys got enough now? Let's go back home and have some cookies. How about that?"

"Cookies!" Dori was willingly distracted. "Yes!" She started off immediately in the direction of the cabin. "Go, go go."

Ephiny strolled after her, gently herding the two twins along behind.

**

Gabrielle could sense they were being followed. Given that her senses were far less perceptive than Xena's were, that meant at least the followers weren't really that skilled, but it didn't comfort her a lot to know that.

She walked quietly behind Xena, as they climbed up another hilly ridge between thick trees. The rain had stopped again, and other than the soft rustle of their footsteps against the sodden leaves the surrounding woods remained empty and silent.

Xena had taken her advice and cut herself a staff. It was strange for the bard to see her partner walking with one, though a master at its use, she generally never had one of her own. "Xena?"

The warrior paused, and waited for her to catch up. "We've got another couple candlemarks light left. I want to get someplace I can defend if we have to before dark."

Gabrielle nodded. "They're coming after us."

Xena glanced back the way they had come, and sniffed the wind, her nostrils flaring out a little. "Yeah." She replied briefly. "So that's why."

"You don't think we can get out of here before tonight?" The bard asked. "We're coming near that wall."

The warrior shook her head. "We need to find a way out. By the time we reach the wall, it'll be close to dark. Can't chance it."

"Okay." Gabrielle shifted her grip on her staff. "Let's go, then."

Xena turned and started leading the way up again. The creek hadn't disgorged any decent rocks for them, and nothing she'd seen so far really lent itself to weaponry. Her eyes searched the branches. Once they stopped for the night, she could collect some good upper limbs and maybe make a bow and some arrows, but she had a feeling if it came to a conflict, it would be close in and that wouldn't do her much good.

"Know what I was thinking?" Gabrielle's voice drifted up from behind her.

"No, what?" Xena answered, sliding past two closely growing trunks.

“What’s going on back home?”

Xena exhaled, more worried about what was going on right around her. “River’s probably still up. Takes a while to drop.” She said. “People cleaning up, I guess.” She paused to examine a small pile of sharp edged rocks, selecting one and fitting her hand around it.

“Think Dori’s making trouble?”

The warrior pursed her lips. “I left her with Eph.” She continued on, tucking the rock away in the rough sack she’d made from the hide. “Hope she forgives me.”

Gabrielle chuckled softly. “She’s been good lately.” She said. “Do you think Eph’s acting a little strange?”

Xena reached the top of the hill and paused, shading her eyes and gazing out over the terrain. She could see across a small, boulder strewn valley to another ridge, and beyond that, the slope went upwards towards the far wall of the crevasse. “Stranger than what?” She muttered.

“Just, weird.”

“She’s an Amazon. It’s natural.” Xena frowned, searching for a way around the valley, and finding none. Crossing the rocky area would be tough, but they had no options at the moment.

“Hey!”

Xena jumped, as her butt was slapped. “Gabrielle!”

The bard bumped her with her hip. “Am I weird? She asked. “Cause I’m an Amazon, and come to think of it, so are you.” Her finger poked her partner’s semi exposed ribs. “So stop dissing them.”

“Hmph.” The warrior sniffed.

They walked along the ridge for a few minutes, until Xena found a good route down, and then they started carefully along the steep slope. “Careful.”

Gabrielle picked her steps with caution, feeling the loose rocks slide under her boots. Halfway down the slope, something made her turn and look behind her, and she grabbed for Xena’s back as her eyes nearly came out of her head. “Xena!”

The warrior turned, crouching and ready to pounce, as her head whipped around. She spotted what Gabrielle had seen and in a single bound, launched herself past Gabrielle back up the slope. Near the trees they’d just left, a line of dark figures were standing, but as she reacted, they disappeared back beyond the line of the ridge.

Gabrielle dug her boots in and raised her staff. “You know something?”

“What?” Xena scanned the horizon, her body still coiled in waiting.

“You’re right. I do yell your name for damn near everything.” Gabrielle edged up a step or two, anxiously watching the treeline. “Are they coming?”

Xena straightened. “I don’t think so.” She glanced behind them. “Let’s get through this valley fast as we can. I don’t like not having any cover.”

“Right behind you, sweetheart.” Gabrielle felt her heart starting to speed up, and her hands clenched a little, her body reacting to the prospect of fighting she knew was imminent. Her breathing deepened and she arched her back a little, tightening and releasing her trunk muscles to warm them up a little.

Xena broke into a ramble, almost dancing down the side of the valley as she moved from rock to rock. She held the staff out clenched in both hands for balance.

Gabrielle followed, putting her months of morning runs to good use as she chased after the warrior. They both picked up speed as they reached the bottom of the valley, and as they did, she heard a hooting behind them.

"Run." Xena instructed, slowing to let the bard pass her. "I'll be right behind you."

The bard didn't stop to argue. She bounded down into the flat of the valley, working hard to keep her footing on the rocky ground. Behind her, she could hear Xena's footsteps, and the sharp rattle as rocks skittered out from under her partner's feet.

She hoped they both kept from falling on their heads. "Which way!"

"Your right." Xena yelled back.

Gabrielle could see a narrow path leading up the next slope and she headed for it. Her ears picked up the sound of pattering feet following them, and the rattling of rocks turned into a veritable avalanche. "Xe?" She called back. "We in trouble?"

"Gabrielle?"

"Yeah?"

"RUN!"

Oh boy. The bard broke into a flat out run, disregarding the rocks as her heart thundered in her ears. I guess that would be yes.

**

Xena judged the distance between them and their pursuers, who had spread out in a semi circle as they ran to chase them down. She and the bard had a head start, but the creatures seemed to know the land well, and were making better time across the rocks than they were.

She had a few moments to decide, now, if they were going to try and scramble up the path, or turn and make a stand together at the slope. Strategically, it would be better to get up the path to the top, because then the creatures would have to come at them one at a time and really presented very little threat.

Unless they started throwing rocks, of course.

But if they stopped at the bottom, they'd have to face a line of them and though Xena had no doubts whatsoever about either of their skills with a quarterstaff there were a lot of hairy bodies coming after them.

She glanced behind her, relying on her reflexes to keep her from sprawling headlong. The closest creature was only a few body lengths behind her, and he was charging full speed, his eyes intent on them. There was a ferociousness in the expression that made Xena's skin crawl, and she decided taking a stand wasn't a very good idea.

Putting the creatures behind her, she sped up, getting as close to Gabrielle as she could without disturbing her partner's stride. The bard was charging along competently, her short stride sending bits of slate flying off in all directions. "Keep moving." Xena warned. "C'mon, get, get, get."

"I'm getting!" Gabrielle rounded a boulder and almost pulled up, when she spotted a dark figure blocking the path. Then she picked up her momentum again and bolted right for him, bringing her staff up to shoulder level and cocking her arms. "Yeaaaahhhh!!!"

The creature didn't seem to realize what the staff was. He reached out for her, hooting in excitement and didn't try to avoid the rapid strike as Gabrielle whipped her staff around and smacked him in the side of the head.

The staff hit the creature's ear and blood exploded from it as he stumbled to one side and fell against a tree. Howling in pain, he scrambled back to his feet only to meet the bard's staff again as she went past him, this time hitting him between the eyes with its end.

He dropped, senseless.

"Nice!" Xena complimented her, as they reached the slope.

"What?" Gabrielle yelled back, her voice taut with anxiety. "Now.. up?"

"Go!" Xena glanced behind her, then she grabbed her partner around her waist and fairly threw her up the path. She could almost feel the hot breath at her back as she fought her instincts and scrambled after Gabrielle.

Everything in her wanted to turn and fight. She hated running from it.

A hand grabbed her ankle and she kicked backwards without looking, wrenching her leg free and feeling her heel connect with something hard. She kept climbing up ward, the staff clenched in one hand and her other pulling herself up with any hold she could find. "Go!"

Another grab at her, this time a two handed catch around her calf. Xena lunged up ward, uncoiling her other leg and turning as she did, bringing the staff around and smacking her adversary right in the face with it.

She broke something, saw the blood flying, but he didn't let go until she repeated the hit, slamming the butt of the staff right into his eye socket. He reeled back, but his fingers were still locked around her leg and she felt her footing start to slip.

Damn it.

The soft hide just wasn't boots. Xena dug the end of the staff in and pushed off it, swinging her free leg around in a roundhouse kick that finally dislodged her persistent attacker. He slid down, taking out several of the frantically climbing others, and she turned and bolted, knowing she only had a moment's grace to do so.

She came very close to crashing headlong into Gabrielle, who was skidding back down the path towards her. "Hey!"

"Okay, okay.. I'm going." Gabrielle reversed her course hastily. "Sorry!"

Xena reached up and gave her a smack on the butt, returning an earlier favor. "Didn't I tell you to run!?" She asked, as they climbed rapidly.

"Didn't I tell you where you go I go?" Gabrielle retorted. "They're still coming after us, Xe."

"I know." A glance behind her had revealed the creatures determinedly following, now single file as they struggled up the path. Her and Gabrielle's greater agility and lighter weight were now giving them an advantage, and she calculated they'd make it to the top before the others caught up.

But then what? Xena hoped for open ground. If they could outrun them until she found some cover, they'd be all right. The slope beneath them became a little shallower, and she got up next to Gabrielle again, putting a hand on her back. "See that tree up there? Head for that."

Gabrielle nodded, glancing behind her. "They're gaining."

"I know." The warrior said. "But they're coming up one at a time.. even if they catch us, we can handle them." She urged the bard forward. "C'mon."

Gabrielle took a better grip on her staff and leaned forward, feeling the strain against her thighs. She was catching her second wind, though, and she sped up, her eyes fixed on the tree Xena was aiming for.

Several bodylengths from it, she heard the creatures let out a yell behind her, and she slowed, looking around and bringing her staff up again. Xena bolted past her and charged the ridge, letting out a yell of her own as she reached the top and leaped over the edge of the path to confront what they both were sure was another group of the creatures.

Gabrielle hauled herself up and scabbled the last few steps, topping the rise only to find her partner standing there alone, facing a mild slope of soft, yellow grasses.

They looked at each other. "You thought it was an ambush." Gabrielle panted.

"Yeah."

"So what was it?"

Xena looked down at the path. "It was an ambush." She stepped behind the tree, and peered at the valley. "It just wasn't ours."

Gabrielle came up next to her and stared, watching as the creatures ran back away from the path, towards the center of the valley. Two of them were on the ground, being savaged by a huge cat, who lifted its head and snarled as the rest approached, hooting and waving their hands. "Huh."

"Huh." Xena clapped her on the shoulder. "Let's go. No sense in wasting that bit of luck." She pushed away from the tree and started through the grass. "That won't distract em for long."

Gabrielle watched the creatures try to chase the cat off their fallen cohorts, and wondered. They all circled the cat, regardless of the danger, and were trying to scare it. One of the creatures stooped and picked up a rock, throwing it at the cat with impressive strength.

The others picked up on it, and started pelting the animal, who snarled, and lunged at the closest of them.

"Gabrielle." Xena took hold of her arm firmly. "Let's get outta here."

"Okay." The bard allowed herself to be tugged away. "Xena, they're trying to save those guys."

Guys. Xena just kept walking. "Yeah, I saw." She said.

"So.. they're not just like.. animals." Gabrielle hefted her staff and carried it at her side, rather than using it to walk with. "Are they?"

"Unfortunately, no." The warrior broke into a jog. "Smarter they are, worse it'll be for us."

Gabrielle started running to keep up with her. She knew Xena was right about the creatures.. men.. whatever, but she couldn't help but wonder if they were smart enough, couldn't they communicate with them? At least find out what they wanted?

Or, well, she knew what they wanted, but find out why they were so desperate to.. um. Her eyes fell on Xena, as the sun finally found a crack in the clouds and burst through. It lit the warrior up in golden warmth, with her tatty shift belted around her, and her makeshift boots and put a hint of fire along her tanned skin.

Okay. Well, Gabrielle put the thought aside for later, when they were safe. Her heartbeat had settled down again, and she welcomed the heat of the sun after their wet day. They ran through the knee high grass, and every minute or so she'd turn to check behind them.

Quiet so far. She only hoped it stayed that way.

**

They reached the far wall with the sun already beginning to slant down past the crevasse edge. Days were, Gabrielle suddenly realized, much shorter here and nights longer, because the sun only shone down into the valley when it was at its highest. "Wow." She followed Xena through the trees. "I thought I was just.."

"What?" Xena examined the rock wall, frowning at its solid, unhelpful appearance.

"Nothing." Gabrielle walked along next to her. "You know, I think I liked being out in the open better. You can see further." She peeked over her shoulder, at the thick forest around them.

"Mm." The warrior pushed through a bunch of bushes. "Well, you better hope we find someplace to hide in or you'll be sleeping in a tree again."

"You sound like that should scare me." Gabrielle detoured a few steps when she spotted an elderberry bush. The tiny berries weren't her favorite, and truth be told, she enjoyed them as jam more, but she wasn't going to turn down any option at this point.

She expertly picked several branches free, and stuffed them in the rough sack she'd made from a piece of the hide of the big deer thing. Another handful got stuffed into her mouth, and she chewed the berries as she followed Xena along the edge of the trees.

The day had a poignant familiarity to it, of a sudden. Gabrielle felt the years slip away from her as she foraged, remembering moons and moons of being on the road alone with Xena when every day had ended more or less, just like this.

Her finding part of their dinner, Xena looking for a place to camp.

Danger around them. Gabrielle understood that she could keep as relaxed about that as she was because she'd spent so much time with threats of all kinds hanging over her. Ruffians, or thieves, or bounty hunters after Xena, wild animals, sometimes angry gods.. you couldn't be nervous all the time or you'd just fall down, she'd discovered.

So – she saved her nerves for when she needed them, for the moment when the steel was coming at her, or fireballs were singing her hair, when the danger became real and immediate instead of that ever present potential.

You slept better that way, too. “Hey, Xena?” Gabrielle spotted a tiny creek. “Look.” She pointed at the flow of the water. “That’s coming from the wall.. should we follow it?”

The warrior examined the creek. She knelt next to it and scooped up a mouthful, swirling it around before she swallowed it. “Hm.” It had a strong mineral taste, rather than the rich, earthen one from running over ground for a long time. “Yeah.” She stood up and started along it. “Good catch.”

Another flash from the past, and it made Gabrielle smile. “You know what I miss?”

“Dori?”

“Well, yeah, of course. But.. I was thinking about my diary.” Gabrielle said.

“Mm.” Xena spotted a turtle, a nice big one with a shell the size of her head. Incredibly useful. She glanced back at Gabrielle, and then she sighed, and walked past the animal. “Look. A friend of yours.”

“Oo!” The bard trotted over and knelt by the turtle. “Hi there!.. oh, Xena look! He’s got two heads!”

The warrior backtracked and crouched at her side, looking at the animal, who placidly stood there chewing algae with both sets of jaws. “Hmph.” She made a small, surprised sound. “Never saw that before.” She reached out and touched the shell, rubbing her thumb over it’s damp ridges. “There’s so many strange things here, Gabrielle. I don’t really understand it.”

“Like this?”

“Like everything.” Xena exhaled, and indicated their surroundings. “Nothing’s right. Everything’s different than it should be.. the plants, the animals.. it’s like we got on a ship and went to a far away place. Like Chin.”

Gabrielle looked away, past her partner’s shoulder. She was briefly silent, then nodded. “They did have different animals there.” She acknowledged quietly. “But Xena, we’re only a day’s river journey from home. We were both born near here.”

“I know.” Xena seemed honestly perplexed. “But look at this turtle.. even without having two heads, it’s totally different looking than the ones near Amphipolis.” She pointed at the shell. “Round, not oval. Bumps here, and look at the color.”

“Hm.” Gabrielle pushed a bit of hair back behind her ear. “That is different.” She admitted. “And what about that fish, Xena? It had feet.”

“Yes.” The warrior gave the turtle a pat, and then she stood up. “Like it was neither one thing or the other.” She offered Gabrielle a hand up. “Let’s go find our cave, so we can talk about it.” Her eyes flicked behind them, searching the trees intently.

“They here?” Gabrielle caught the stiffening of her partner’s frame.

"Something is." Xena picked up her pace.

They walked quickly along the water, its depth and width getting wider as they neared the wall. Gabrielle could hear a rushing sound she knew was a waterfall.

Then she heard footsteps behind them. "Xena.."

"I hear it." Xena sighed. "Let's go." She broke into a jog.

They traced the water, and as they broke out of the trees into a boulder strewn field, they heard a by now familiar hooting behind them. Xena glanced behind her, then she grabbed Gabrielle's arm and pointed. "Into the water. There."

"The w.." Gabrielle turned around, and saw the line of figures moving toward them. "Okay." She splashed into the fast flowing stream, feeling the icy cold ripples against her knees, then her thighs. "Wouldn't we be able to move faster if we were on land?"

"Yes." Xena watched as the line of figures reached the water.

It stopped, and the creatures started jumping up and down, yelling and waving thin sticks they were now holding in their hands.

"Where are we going?" Gabrielle asked, as she caught the sight of the figures running downstream. "They'll just cross where it's shallow in there and catch us on the other side!"

Xena waded in deeper, now up to her waist as she headed directly upstream. "We're not going across." She reached out to grab hold of Gabrielle's arm again, pulling her against the current. "Over there."

"Under the falls?" Gabrielle asked. "What if.."

"It's just rocks? Then we're getting a free water massage." The warrior told her grimly. "But it's our best shot right now."

"Yippee." Gabrielle used both hands on her staff, shoving it down into the river bottom and pulling herself forward. She could hear the creatures approaching on the other bank, and as she turned her head, she caught sight of one flinging something at them. "X.f" She managed to swallow the instinctive bellow, and yanked her partner's arm instead.

The rock fell short, but others took its place and in a minute they were ducking a veritable hailstorm of them. "Yow!" Gabrielle yelled, as one stung her in the arm. "You darn pig butts!"

Xena hit the center of the channel and surged upstream with powerful strokes. "Hang on to my belt." She told the bard, waiting for Gabrielle to get a hold before she started swimming in earnest, leaving the staff she'd picked up behind to use both arms.

Gabrielle was torn between wanting to aid the effort, and knowing if she let loose she'd never catch up to the warrior. So she kept hold of her staff, and tried to use the end of it to fend off any rocks headed their way.

The creatures raced alongside the banks, the nearest ones daring to go up to their ankles at the edge of the stream, but jumping out again almost immediately. She could see their faces now clearly, round, with pushed forward faces a little like Jessan's people, and broad noses. They had uniformly dark hair curling around their heads, and thick hair on their arms and legs as well.

Some were naked. A few had skins wrapped around them.

They grunted and screamed, showing their teeth, hopping up and down and throwing whatever was within their reach at them.

Gabrielle felt the ripples of water tearing at her, and she marveled again at Xena's strength as the warrior pulled both of them through the powerful current. As they neared the waterfall, the creatures became almost frantic with excitement, hooting so loudly it was giving her a headache.

Missiles started dropping in the water near them and all of a sudden, two of the biggest of the creatures jumped in, and started slapping at the surface, trying to get to them.

Xena stroked past them, throwing herself with every ounce of energy at the water and skimming them past the outstretched hands with hand lengths to spare. The two tried to follow, but water current pushed them back and they made a last lunge just as Xena made a huge effort of her own, pulling them both under the waterfall and out of sight.

Gabrielle felt the water thunder down over her, and she could feel an almost equal power surge coming from under the water as the cleared the sheeting wall. She blinked her eyes and shook her head to clear her hair from them, looking quickly around as Xena caught hold of an outcropping and held them in place.

If she looked behind them, through the falls, she could see quicksilver glimpses of the creatures, but it didn't look like they were coming any closer. Satisfied, she turned around and looked at the space they were in, her jaw dropping slightly and a startled sound coming from her throat. "Brp."

"Mm." Xena was holding them steady against the flow. The cliff behind the falls jutted out to form an overhang, and below that was the gushing heart of the spring that fed the river. It flowed from a cavern mouth she could just see past and into, down a center channel carved out over many years. "Better than I hoped for."

They pulled themselves over to the cavern edge and out of the water, moving along the narrow strip of rock into the interior of the cavern. "Never thought I'd be this glad to be in one these things." Xena commented wryly.

"Me either." Gabrielle exhaled, looking around her. The cavern was small and mostly bare- the center channel delved down into the rocks about mid way across it, leaving an open platform above with a ceiling high enough for Xena to stand upright without ducking her head. There wasn't much there but some sand and pebbles, but it was dry and quiet, and thankfully free of creatures.

Xena walked around the edges, then sighed, and dropped the sodden pack from her back onto the ground. "No other entrances." She remarked. "Looks like we'll have to go out the way we came in."

"Ugh."

The warrior sat down on the ledge over the spring and stared at the back of the waterfall. She was fairly confident the creatures weren't going to follow them in here.. she knew they weren't swimmers and the water before the falls was deep.

The question was – would they stay out there and wait for them to come out? And if they did, how were they going to get past them?

Gabrielle was searching along the edge of the water, ducking out the entrance and then coming back with some soggy driftwood in her arms. "Not much, but it's here."

Xena nodded. "Wont' be much good until it dries."

Gabrielle set the wood down and came over to sit next to her. "That's okay." She leaned against her partner. "I'm just happy to be sitting down."

"Mm."

"We'll work the rest out." The bard said. "Somehow."

Xena kicked her hide covered feet against the rocks and exhaled, wondering just how the somehow would end up to be.

**

One Wild Ride

Part 6

The day outside was beginning to wane. The rain had cleared, and the fading light reflected in a purple wash off the waterfall thundering outside their hiding spot.

Xena stood just inside it, her arms crossed and her eyes searching through the moving water, watching the outside for any sign of their pursuers.

She didn't think they'd approach the cave – the falls obscured them, and the rushing creek would take a damn good swimmer to make headway against. But she could see at the edge of the water, near the last bend, a few hairy figures hunkered down waiting.

Fair enough. Xena conceded. But how long would they stay for?

The warrior sighed. After investigating their little nook fully, she wasn't really that happy about it and she was already pondering if they should sneak out after dark and find a better.

Gabrielle lay flat on her back, her head pillowed on her makeshift sack and the remainder of the hide under her. The light was fading outside, and she was using what was left to study the craggy ceiling as she listened to Xena rattling around near the front of the little cave.

She knew the warrior wasn't happy. Xena never paced and muttered when she was, but there was little the bard could do about it at the moment, so she merely stretched her body out a little, mourning the hard stone under her, and tried to relax as much as she could.

They had the wood drying in one corner, and their clothing drying in another. It was a little chilly in the cave – the cold water emerging from the rocks and the faint mist from the waterfall was putting a few goosebumps on her bare skin but it was bearable, and certainly better than sitting around in wet stuff.

For a long time, she'd never understood Xena's need to be in the moment. The warrior put the past aside, and didn't concern herself with the future, instead, she lived very much in the present and had, since the bard had known her.

Right now, though, she understood it. Yesterday was unrecoverable, tomorrow was uncertain, but right now was right now and it was good to lay quietly and rest, making idle patterns from the crystals winking down from the cavern roof.

Xena came over and sat down on the hide next to her, laying a warm hand on her belly and giving her a friendly scratch. "Miss our cabin?"

"Hah!" Gabrielle chuckled. "You need to ask?" She blinked a little as her body reacted to the gentle touch against her skin. "I'd even settle for your tree at this point."

"Me, too." The warrior laid down so they were side by side. "Know something?"

"What?" The bard turned her head so she could watch her partner's face.

"Being out in the wet, with no clothes and no tools isn't my thing." Xena pronounced. "Don't like it. Not into it. Want out of it."

Gabrielle let her eyes wander down her companion's naked body, then one of her eyebrows quirked upwards a trifle. "Oh, I dunno." She drawled. "It has its moments."

Xena grinned wryly at her. "Let's just say it'd be a lot sexier on the bearskin rug in front of our fire." She folded her hands over her stomach. "I'm not sure how good an idea this was."

Gabrielle mimicked her posture. "Well." She wriggled her nose, then reached up to scratch it. "I didn't think we had many options. They were about to catch us, Xe."

"Yeah, I know. But there isn't much in here, and we can't stick around." The warrior complained. "A couple rocks, yeah, but aside from clean water, we don't have much else."

"Except each other." Gabrielle reached out and tangled her fingers with her partner.

Xena's eyes searched the cavern roof, a faint smile playing at her lips.

"You think they'll stay out there?" Gabrielle went on. "They have to go eat and sleep sometime, right?" She asked, reasonably. "I'm sure we can find something to use to get away with, Xena. We're both pretty bright people."

The warrior chuckled softly. "Yeah, we are."

"So, what's the problem?" The bard asked.

Xena sighed. What was the problem? She wished she knew. She wished she understood more of what was going on around them, where the strange animals came from, and the even stranger creatures. Finally she shrugged. "I'm in a bad mood."

"Ah" Gabrielle reached over and gave her a comforting pat on the arm. "Damn, I left my honeyballs at home."

Xena snorted softly. "You left everything at home."

"Almost everything." The bard agreed. "Brought the only thing I couldn't live without." She watched the warrior's profile from the corner of her eye, seeing the tensing of the skin across her cheek as she smiled. "And I don't know.. there's something to be said for traveling light."

Reluctantly engaged, Xena made a show of eyeing her companion up and down. "Speak for yourself, shorty." She advised, but she reached over to run her fingers through Gabrielle's hair. "I think I'm just being cranky."

"You just hate not having sharp things, don't you?" Gabrielle asked, in a mild voice. "Xena, you can make a weapon out of anything. Not only do I believe that, I've seen it. Pans, pots, trees, water, cups of mead, beads, bangles... pfy."

Xena gently covered the bard's mouth, stifling her. "There's no percentage in tricking and killing animals, Gabrielle."

The bard's brows converged across her forehead.

Purple shadows chased across the warrior's features. "I've been in tough spots before. You know that." Xena said. "I've never shied from going in against the odds."

The brows creased further.

Xena sighed. "I'm not making any sense, am I?"

The bard shook her head.

Xena removed her hand. "Yeah, I think I need a nap." She admitted. "I don't know what the Hades I mean either." One hand lifted and rubbed the bridge of her nose. "We can hole up in here for a little while.. long as that meat lasts. No fish from the spring."

"Mmhmr."

"Sorry." Xena removed her hand.

"So'kay." Gabrielle reached out and stroked Xena's arm. "Long day."

"Mm." Xena's tone was pensive.

"But we're here at the end of it." The bard continued, with a gentle smile. "So how bad could it be?"

How bad could it be? Xena felt her bad mood slipping away, surrendering before Gabrielle's barrage of romantic pronouncements. She knew they'd think of something, figure out some way to get out of the mess they were in – she just wished she could think of it *now* instead of later. That's all.

Patience had never, really, been her forte. Xena turned her head so she could study the naked woman at her side. Gabrielle had her ankles crossed, and the smooth lines of her muscular frame and the fine arch of her ribs became a lot more interesting to contemplate than the creeps outside. "Think that stuff'll dry out enough for me to make a fire?"

"Let's just take it one thing at a time." The bard said. "Let's see what we can put together for fighting those guys, then we can maybe figure out how we can distract them so we can slip out of here."

Hmm. Xena rolled over, and draped herself over Gabrielle's body, making the bard's green eyes almost come out of her head with the sudden, warm assault. "I think I got something that'd distract em." She purred into Gabrielle's ear. "Whadda you think?"

"Erf?" Gabrielle felt a hot tingle ignite inside her, banishing the chills.

"Erf?"

"I'm distracted." The bard ran her hands along her partner's ribs. "And you know what? We don't need any fire." She let the rush of the spring and the thunder of the waterfall rush through her, staying in the moment and forgetting what waited for them outside.

"We don't?" Xena nibbled her way down Gabrielle's neck, her fingertips exploring further.

"Nope." Gabrielle found even the discomfort of the rocks fading. "We do.. ooh." Her words faded into incoherence, ending with a soft, guttural sound.

"Good."

**

Gabrielle was drowsing, her body wrapped up in the skin as night fell outside. She felt relaxed and sated, her head pillowed on her arm as she listened to Xena tending the tiny fire they'd actually managed to get started

The sound of the waterfall obscured almost everything, but she could catch hints from outside, the scream of a cat, a howl.. it made her glad she was inside the cave, plain as it was. "Whatcha doing?" She asked Xena, hearing a soft clonking sound from whatever the warrior was up to.

"Seeing if I can boil water."

Gabrielle's mist green eyes opened immediately and she squirmed around to see her partner. In the very dim firelight, she caught sight of what Xena was doing, and the oddness made her sit up and peer closer. "Wh... oh."

Xena sat back, observing her work with some satisfaction. The one thing they had in plenty in the cave were rocks, and she'd build up a pile of them with room in the bottom for her fire. On the top of the pile, she'd left an opening about the size of her two cupped hands, and in that was sitting a half round object.

"What is that?" Gabrielle pointed at it. "Xena, you didn't go back and get that turtle, did you?"

Xena looked at her. "Listen." She rested an elbow on her knee. "I love you, and I respect you, my bard, but if it comes down to us starving or me killing a turtle, the turtle's a goner, got me?"

"Aww." Gabrielle ran a hand through her hair. "We're not starving!"

"Speak for yourself." The warrior said. "But it's not the damn turtle so don't worry about it."

At that, Gabrielle got up and walked over to the little makeshift oven, peering more closely at the bowl. "Oh." She wrinkled her nose a little. "Deerwhatever skull."

"Mm." Xena tended the fire carefully, feeding it with the few sticks that had managed to dry out. "I needed to let it harden for a while.. I think it'll work." She eyed the unevenly cracked bone. "Did the best I could with it."

Gabrielle walked over and picked up her clothing, feeling it and finding it mostly dry. She pulled her top on and tightened the laces, and then wrapped her skirt around her. "Know what I have?"

"Cute kneecaps." Xena poked her fingertip into the water inside the skull, grunting a little as she detected some warmth near the bottom. "Getting there."

"Mint leaves." Gabrielle carried her makeshift sack over and sat down cross legged next to her partner. "Or were you just planning on drinking hot water from that animal head?" She dumped out the contents of her bag and sorted through them, putting the mint aside along with the elderberry leaves and berries.

Xena picked up a leaf and examined it, biting into the green bit and chewing it experimentally. "Mm." She licked her lips. "It's mint."

Gabrielle gave her a look. "Listen, partner, I've been collecting your tea leaves long enough to know which ones they are, okay?" She put a pile of the mint leaves on her knee. "I wasn't about to repeat the time I mistook mint for oregano."

The warrior chuckled briefly. "I remember that."

"You spit hot tea over Argo's head. I'm sure you do." Gabrielle put her own finger in the water, pleased that it did, in fact, seem to be heating up. "One of my more embarrassing moments in my early life with you, matter of fact. Right up there with not knowing what a codpiece was and tripping and falling to Argo's road droppings."

Xena remembered those too. "You were so cute." She agreed.

"That was not cute."

"Sure it was." The warrior disagreed. "Just the way you'd look up at me with that helpless look.. got me every time." She picked up an elderberry branch and nibbled a berry cautiously. After a moment's silence, she looked up, to find the bard looking at her. "Hey, it did."

Gabrielle looked down at the leaf in her hands. "Do you know how many nights I cried myself to sleep, thinking you thought I was a useless nitwit?"

Xena took the leaf from her. "About as many nights as I sat up wondering when you'd figure out I wasn't worth your time of day and leave."

Gabrielle's lips tensed, then after a moment, twitched into a wry grin that belied the glint of tears in her eyes. "Love sure is an amazing thing, huh?"

The warrior nodded silently.

The bard scooped up a handful of the mint leaves and picked up a bit of stone, pounding them gently to bruise the surface and let the oils out, relaxing in the soundless understanding between them as she went through the familiar motions.

She remembered Xena teaching her this very step, something she'd never seen her mother do or anyone in her village but which the warrior knew because of her being a healer.

She remembered the many, many cups they'd shared together over the years and remembered the time she'd finally realized the wooden cup Xena'd been using for months was the one she'd given her, all others having been discarded.

She remembered the first night after Xena had come back from the dead, and they'd drank from the same cup tea that was half leaf and half her tears.

She remembered the first time she made them both tea again, after the bad times and forgot to think twice about it.

"Gabrielle?"

The bard looked up. "Hm?"

"I think that's enough." Xena indicated the small pile of pulp in front of her. "You can dump it in now."

"Sorry." Gabrielle gathered the leaf fragments up and put them in the half skull, watching them drift into the water. "I was just thinking about us."

"Mmhm." Xena nibbled off some more berries. "Guess we've got that, some meat and these." She indicated the berries. "We've had worse."

"Oh yeah."

Gabrielle fished out the dried meat and started cutting it into manageable pieces, her eyes darting occasionally over to watch Xena as she dragged a small pile of round river rocks in front of her. "Where did those come from?"

"Spring." The warrior picked among them and selected one about the size of her fist. "I'm gonna try something.. saw it done once, a long time ago." She picked up a much larger rock, a piece of granite from the cave, positioning it above the selected stone and slamming it down unexpectedly, with a resounding crack.

"Yow!" Gabrielle shielded the meat with one hand to keep rock fragments from littering it. "What the heck was that for?"

Xena lifted the granite and set it aside, examining the results. The river stone had been cracked in half, but the crack had happened on the diagonal. She lifted one half of the rock, and showed Gabrielle the interior. It was a glassy iridescent surface, with sharp angles. "See?"

Gabrielle peered at it. "Yes, but I have no idea what I'm looking at except a half of a rock."

Xena picked up her hand and brought it close, running her fingertip over the edge.

"Yow." Gabrielle jerked in surprise. "That's sharp!"

"Exactly." Xena turned the rock over in her hands and regarded it. "Now let's see what I can do with it." She set the rock down on it's end, and picked up a second, tapping it experimentally.

Gabrielle watched, trading off taking a piece of meat and feeding Xena one as the warrior worked with both hands on her task. She never would have thought of using rocks to cut with, especially round river rocks, but that was part of Xena's unending series of talents.

"Ow." The warrior hit her finger with the rock she was using as a hammer. "Bacchae."

Well, even unending talent took practice, after all.

**

Eponin climbed the last little bit of the path to the cabin, glad of the peaceful night sounds that had finally descended around her. On her back was a sack that contained some rough rations, scrounged from the back of the inn where everyone and their grandparents were taking shelter.

What a freaking mess. Eponin actually found herself looking forward to being in the solitude of Xena and Gabrielle's place, Dori or no Dori. At least here weren't hissy elders, muddy merchants, or cycling Amazons inside.

She mounted the steps to the porch and paused to shake the biggest raindrops off her cloak, before she pushed the door open and stepped inside. "Hey." She stopped to remove the cloak, and hang it on the wall peg.

Ephiny was lounging on the bearskin, idly watching Dori do something or other. "Hey." She looked up when the weapons master entered, and lifted a hand for a wave. "How's it going down there?"

"First rank crap." Eponin dropped her pack onto the floor and sat down in one of the chairs. "What a bunch of townheads." She wagged her fingers at Dori, who turned around to look at her. "Hi, ya little wild weasel."

"Poopoo." Dori greeted her solemnly. "Wet."

"Uh huh." Eponin agreed. "Everything's wet. Town's wet, our village is wet, the whole damn mountain is wet."

"Mm." Ephiny nodded.

The weapons master looked around the cabin. "Only thing practically for leagues that ain't wet is this place." She looked at Ephiny. "Rocking pick, boss."

Ephiny's hazel eyes twinkled. She lifted a hand and made a somewhat autocratic gesture. "That's why they give me the big feathers." She said. "I wanted some time out.. can't think of a better excuse to get it than babysitting our little princess here."

"Pincess." Dori pounded the wood floor with her stuffed dragon. "No gots pincess, gots Famby." She explained. "Mama take Famby, go to fishes."

Ephiny reached over and picked up the stuffed animal. "Did mama send Flameball to the fishes because he gets dirty? Do the fishes wash him?"

"Go fishes, make good smell." Dori agreed.

"She's really into water, huh?" Pony mused. "You see her swim?"

"Mm." Ephiny pounced the dragon over to where Dori was sitting, legs spraddled. "Like a little fishie, huh Dor?"

"Fishie!" Dori squealed. "Like that!"

Pony chuckled, shaking her head as she started unpacking her bag, laying the provisions she'd scarfed up on the table. A loaf of bread, a hunk of cheese, a sausage she'd stolen right from under Cyrene's nose and a big bunch of grapes. "Ain't much."

"Looks good to me." Ephiny said. "I've got some of that soup from yesterday left... we'll be fine." She tickled Dori's foot, chuckling as the child scowled at her. "How'd the river look?"

"Still rising." Pony said. "They managed to get the plateau drained down at our place, though. Things are working out there."

"Good." Ephiny hoisted herself to her feet and came over to the table. She sat down and laid her hands on the top of it, smoothing the neatly fitted wood. She had a table in her quarters in the village, but it was far more roughly made, and the legs wobbled at bit. This one sat square, and the top had a pretty inlay of darker and lighter woods in a pattern. "This is pretty."

"Yeah." Pony agreed. "Musta cost em." She added. "But they got the dinars for it.. I guess."

"Xena made it." The regent disagreed.

"Yeah?" Pony seemed honestly surprised. "No poop?" She examined the table with more interest. "She really made this, by herself?"

Ephiny nodded. "Yeah.. I asked Gab about it over in the other place.. figured someone in the town had done it up for them. I wanted maybe to get one like it.. she thought it was pretty funny."

"Uh."

"Suggested I commission Xena to do it." The regent grinned wryly. "She made that desk of Gab's, back in the old cabin, too. They're gonna move it up here.. just waited for the roof to be done."

"Wow." Pony murmured. "Anything she can't do?"

"Cook, apparently." Ephiny got up and walked over to the hearth, swinging the pot back into place over the fire. "But I found out something today, and I'm not sure what to do about it." She continued on, picking something up off the mantle. She walked back to the table and put it down in front of Eponin. "This."

Pony picked it up and looked at it. "Nice." She glanced around. "You find it in here? I'm sure all the places they been, they've found gods only knows what."

Ephiny shook her head. "No." She sat down. "I found it in the little creek up above the ridge."

"Huh."

"Dori's got a whole collection of pretty rocks like this." The regent said, meeting Eponin's eyes meaningfully.

Pony turned the rock in her fingers. "Eph, this is worth more than our whole damn village."

"I know." Ephiny rested her chin on her fist. "And, they have to know, Pon. Xena and Gab, I mean. They gotta know what this stuff is."

Dori came over and climbed up onto the smaller chair at the end of the table. "Go play with pitty rocks?" She asked, seeing the piece of stone in Pony's hands. "Boo makes pictures."

The two Amazons looked at each other in silence. Finally, Pony exhaled. "Well." She put the rock down and nudged it back towards Ephiny. "I guess we have to wait for them to come back to ask em." She shrugged. "Probably.. you know, Eph, probably they kept quiet cause they know what that'd do to this place."

Ephiny nodded. "That's what I was thinking too." She agreed. "Cause frankly.. anything else would just suck."

"Mm."

"Really suck."

"Yeah."

**

Gabrielle had tidied up what she could, and packed away what she could, and now found herself with nothing more to do than relax and watch Xena work. The tea had turned out pleasant, though drinking from the edge of the bone cup had not been, and she'd missed their usual dose of honey in it.

She suspected Xena missed it even more than she did though the warrior hadn't commented on it either way.

Xena had knocked off the other side of her rock, but then the entire thing had split on her, and she'd discarded it, moving on to the next rock, a stubborn look on her face. She'd gotten that one, slightly bigger and more round, broken to her satisfaction and now she was working with a smaller piece of granite in shaping a rough sort of blade with it.

Gabrielle really wanted to curl up with her head on Xena's thigh, but her beloved partner was scattering bits of sharp rock everywhere and she really didn't want it hitting her in the face. She contented herself with finding a comfortable a spot on the hard floor as she could instead. A piece of stone ended up near her anyway, and she picked it up. "That's pretty."

Xena glanced over at her. "What is?"

Gabrielle held the shard up. It was a very thin piece of the river stone, and it had facets that caught the firelight. The edges were amazingly sharp when she ran her fingertip over them, but also seemed very fragile.

"Pain in the ass to work with." Her partner grunted, going back to her task.

"Mm." Gabrielle studied the piece further, sitting up a little and experimentally trying the edge of the stone against a scrap of the hide. To her mild surprise, it cut through the skin easily, with as much effort as she'd normally have to use with her oft sharpened hand knife. "Wow."

"Huh?"

Gabrielle displayed the cut. "That works."

"Mm" Xena indicated her discarded sack boots. "Wanna make those fit me better?"

Delighted at both the chance of doing something productive and the added bonus of doing it for Xena, Gabrielle immediately got up and retrieved the boots, which already were showing the hard wear very typical of her partner. "Let's see what I can do."

"Wish I had socks." Xena eyed the makeshift footwear mournfully.

Gabrielle reached over and tweaked one of her toes. "You can have mine." She touched a raw spot on the top of the warrior's foot. "You should have said something."

Xena wiggled her toes, and gave Gabrielle a mildly sheepish look.

Gabrielle scooted forward a little and took the battered appendage into her lap, giving the warrior's powerful ankle a pat before she started to work. Xena had merely wrapped the bottom layer of the makeshift boots in a large fold of the hide, tying it tightly around her leg to try and keep it in place.

It hadn't really worked that well and after a day's travel and all the mud and rain, the booties were looking pretty sad. "Xena, Xena, Xena." Gabrielle untied the knotted gut and spread everything out. "This is so not like you."

"I was preoccupied." Xena went back to delicately tapping her rocks. "You were yelling my name."

"Hm.. so I was." The bard decided to start by attaching the sole of the boot to its upper. She patiently poked holes in the hide with one of the fishbones, threading gut through them in a running knot stitch. "Now that you said that, I started realizing just how much I do that."

"Do what?" "Yell 'Xena!!!" Gabrielle supplied. "I don't even think about it. It's just total reflex."

Xena knocked off another flake, turning the rock in her hands and studying the results. She'd produced a very rough looking point on one end of the stone, a teardrop shape that was heavy enough and sharp enough as she hefted it in her hand to do some damage.

Experimentally, she lifted her arm and swung in an imaginary strike. Though she came within a whisper of Gabrielle's bend head, the bard didn't so much as twitch, her fingers busy on her task. "Hm."

"How's it going?" Gabrielle asked.

Xena sighed. "It works.. but I'm not sure it's worth anything." She moved her arm in a stabling gesture again. "If they're that close, I just as easily could break their necks with a kick. Probably safer to."

Gabrielle glanced down the length of her partner's very long legs, and had to agree that was probably true. One of the big advantages she had with her staff, in fact, was that she could reach far beyond her own body length to get to attackers before they got too close to her.

She looked back at the rock. "Could you tie it onto something? Like a hatchet?" She asked.

"Hm."

Gabrielle went back to the boot, drawing the sides of the hide up around Xena's calf and reviewing the results. After a moment's pondering, she made two careful slits in the hide, and inverted their ends, sewing a seam up from her instep.

Xena watched her, a brow lifting, then a look of thoughtful acceptance crossed her face. She went back to studying her new weapon, looking around the cave for something she could use to put Gabrielle's idea in action.

They had some wood, but most of it was small, and brittle – ideal for use in the fire but not very good for anything else. Her eyes wandered over to their stuff, and then paused, fastening on the antlers she'd lugged on her back the whole way from their hideout the night before.

Well, duh. The warrior sat quietly, her mind trying to shape the hard antler into a form that could hold her stone ax. There were a few forks in it, and... yes. Her head nodded once or twice. A fork, with two or three small prongs she could sharpen into a point as well around it.

If she fit the stone ax inside, she'd have a reasonable weapon, and the antlers were curved – that would amplify her already powerful swing and give some advantage out of it.

Excellent. Xena relaxed, setting the stone down and returning her attention to the fully absorbed in her work bard. Gabrielle had the tip of her tongue sticking out, and she was bent over the hide, painstakingly pushing the tattered bit of gut through to hold it together. "Gabrielle?"

The bard's hands stopped moving, and she looked over. Both eyebrows lifted in question.

"Gotta tell ya. I couldn't think of anyone I'd rather be stuck in a place like this with than you." Xena told her sincerely.

Gabrielle looked around, seemingly either puzzled or confused, then she looked back at her. "Um... thanks." She said. "Did I do something and just missed it or... what?" Her eyes dropped back down to the boot. "Or am I not doing this right?"

Xena merely looked at her in bemusement.

"Or are you just saying that?" Gabrielle grinned hesitantly. "And I'm being insecure and silly?"

Xena rewarded her with a sexy grin.

"Hey, what can I tell you." The bard chuckled with a touch of embarrassment as she went back to her task. "It's a little strange, being in here, isn't it? The falls blocks everything outside. I can't hear anything but water."

"Mm."

"Do you feel safe in here?" Gabrielle finished her stitching, and laid a hand on Xena's leg.

Xena looked around. "I feel like I'm in a dead end here." She replied honestly. "I think if they want to bad enough, they'll figure out a way to get in, so the longer we stay here, the less safe it feels."

"Okay." The bard said. "You think we should get out tonight, then?"

Xena hadn't really thought about it for a while, but hearing the words, she knew the truth of them.

"Yes." She said. "We can wait until the moon sets. Go out in the darkest part of the night."

"Okay." Gabrielle said again. "I better get sewing then. Hold still." She drew the two seams she'd just finished together and mimed a lacing. "I figured if I did this.. and you pulled it tight it would go around your foot there, like.. yeah.

Xena wiggled her foot and grunted approval. "Good." The hide now felt much snuggier around her leg and more comfortable. "Now I know where to go for my next set when we get home." She teased.

Gabrielle stuck her tongue out, then went back to her lacing. "Do you think they have any human qualities at all, Xena? I mean, like us?" She asked quietly. "There's no way for us to reach them.. to communicate with them?"

Xena drew up her non-occupied knee and rested her arm on it. The answer wasn't a simple one, and she knew Gabrielle deserved more than a simple answer, given their history.

Given her history. "We don't have a common language." She said. "I'm not sure they have a language at all."

"Why?"

"Just didn't see it." Xena replied slowly. "Even with hand signals.. grunts, .. you can see when hunters are communicating. They weren't."

Gabrielle remained quiet for a few minutes, working hard. "Oh." She finally said. "And if they don't communicate with each other, there's not much chance they'll communicate with us."

"Yes."

"So, what do they really want from us?" Gabrielle looked up. "Is it just an animal thing? That doesn't make sense, Xena. We run into wild animals all the time, and none of them yet have tried to.. um... "

"Yeah, I know."

"So what does it mean?"

The pale blue eyes, hazel in the fire's golden light, blinked at her. "I don't know what it means, Gabrielle." Xena said. "What I do know is that they meant us harm, when we did nothing to them. I'm not going to sacrifice either of us to find out what their motivation was. Or is."

"But.."

"No buts." Xena laid a hand on her partner's leg. "This isn't the Horde, Gabrielle. I'm not going after them. They're coming after us."

"Mm." The bard half nodded. "I just hate the unreasoning nature of it. I can't escape thinking that if people can talk, they can work things out between them." She covered Xena's hand with her own. "But you're right about one thing.. I'm not sure they're people."

"Hm."

"But while we're getting out of here and getting away from them, if I get a chance, I'm going to find out." The bard's eyes met Xena's directly.

"All right." The warrior's mild look didn't waver. "If you get in trouble while you're trying to find out, I'm going to pick your butt up and haul you with me head down if I have to."

Fair enough. Gabrielle went back to her boot making. The night was promising to be a long, and probably unpalatably interesting one.

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The moon had just set, when Xena led the way out of the cave and into the darkness beyond. With the waterfall thundering around them, this was the most dangerous time as most of her senses were cut off by the noise, the darkness, and the overpowering smell of the water.

"Ready?" The warrior held on to the wall, straining her eyes to see through the curtain of water. "We're gonna have to swim a little."

"Desert. Desert. Desert." Gabrielle chanted almost soundlessly behind her. "Okay, I'm with you."

Xena cinched the pack on her back a little more tightly, and took a grip on her newly finished stone ax. The weight of it was a little off, though she'd balanced it with another stone on the bottom, but it had enough heft to please her warrior's sensibilities, and she was moderately happy with it.

Her boots felt snug, and more comfortable, and they'd shared another head bowl of tea and some meat before they'd packed up, which made them ready as they were going to be to face whatever was going to come next.

Gabrielle reconciled herself to the cold water as she followed Xena into it, sitting down on the edge of the cave lip before she eased into the pool, stifling a grunt as the chill hit her bare midriff. She took a deep breath and started swimming, her staff attached to her wrist with a strip of hide.

The current caught them immediately and carried them through the falls, emerging into a gray and faintly silver landscape capped with a thick blanket of unexpected stars overhead. Gabrielle's eyes were drawn up immediately and she smiled, glad to see her old friends.

The coldness of the water made her shiver, but it took little effort for them to move, the current taking them right away from the cave and towards the far banks. "It's quiet." Gabrielle whispered, once they'd moved far enough to outreach the thunder of the falls.

"Yeah." Xena was stroking through the water next to her, eyes alert and scanning the banks. "Looks okay for now." She said. "Let's make for that far point, see if we can get out there." She pointed to a bit of land jutting out into the water.

"Gotcha." Gabrielle was just glad their time in the water was going to be limited. She'd fallen asleep again after they'd finished their task, and Xena had only recently woken her up. Her body seemed to

think it should still be curled up next to the fire, and wasn't cooperating all that willingly at the moment.

The current tugged at her, and she swam harder, trying to keep up with Xena's powerful strokes. Having her staff bump into her every time she turned around wasn't making it easier. "Xe?"

The warrior turned and spotted her, reaching out with one arm and catching hold of her leather belt, adding a hefty tug that pulled her free of the current and got her going in the right direction again. "Thanks. Sorry."

Xena caught a protruding branch near her selected exit point and she paused, pulling Gabrielle close. "Hang on here a minute. I want to check this place out." She fitted the bard's hand around the branch, and slid over to the bank, reaching up to grab two rocks that overhung it slightly and lifting herself up out of the water.

Gabrielle found her body almost getting used to the chill, and she waited quietly, watching the dim starlight reflect off the drops of water on Xena's skin. After a minute of stillness, the warrior hoisted herself up onto the land, remaining crouched close to it and going still again.

She knew what Xena was doing. She was presenting herself as a target, so that if anything was out there waiting for them, they'd jump at her. The warrior had her new weapon at her side, and there was an air of wild confidence about her visible even in the dim light.

Gabrielle felt completely safe, which was an odd thing to feel given that she was in a mysterious valley surrounded by dangerous creatures, in water up to her neck at the moment. She kept her eyes on Xena's profile, then pushed herself forward when the warrior turned and extended a hand towards her.

"C'mere." Xena's tone was low, but not a whisper. "Give me the stick, then I'll pull you up."

Willingly, Gabrielle handed up her staff, then put her hands on the rocks Xena had used and pulled herself upward.

It wasn't easy, and it certainly wasn't as easy as Xena made it look. The bard kept at it anyway, hauling herself forward with a grunt and scraping her stomach on the rocks before Xena got hold of her and pulled her all the way up. "Thanks."

"I told you I'd get you up here." Xena chided her.

"Wanted to try it myself." Gabrielle bumped her aside. "C'mon, it's breezy out here. I'm freezing." She rubbed her arms and trotted over to retrieve her staff, following Xena as she led the way towards the trees and away from the creek.

The ground they were traveling over was rocky, as the valley had been, but there were tufts and hillocks of grass that came up to their knees to get through as well. Xena shifted her grip on her ax and wished she wasn't dripping, anxious to get away from the waterfall so she could put her ears to better use.

They had a relatively large open space to cross before they were hidden in the trees, and despite the lack of moonlight Xena felt very exposed. She lengthened her stride a little, straining her senses and turning her head from side to side to catch any hint of anyone approaching them.

Or anything.

"Okay, so what's the plan?" Gabrielle murmured, as they crossed the last bit of open space, and entered the forest. The light, what little there was, vanished and left them in a deep gloom that amplified the least sound.

"All right." Xena put a hand on her back and guided her, the warrior's eyes adjusting to the dark quickly. "I've got the feeling these things aren't night creatures." She said. "So I want to get as far away from them as we can while we can."

"Makes sense." Gabrielle probed ahead of her with her staff, seeing mostly musky shadows. "But what if we run into something else?"

Xena sighed. "Then we do. Keep your voice down." She opened her eyes wider, trying to see the forest around her, but the very dense foliage over her head blocked out any possible starlight, and all she could detect were vague shadows.

It was creepy. Xena could hear things moving somewhere around them, little rustles and clicks her mind did not readily identify. That bothered her a lot, and she felt a shiver go down her back. "Stay close."

"Okay." The bard whispered. "It smells funny in here."

The warrior sniffed, catching the odd, almost spicy scent that made her nose wrinkle. "Yeah.. hm." She wished she had a torch suddenly. "Wonder what that is."

"Hope we're not about to step in it." Gabrielle muttered, feeling her heartbeat pick up. "Xena, are you sure this is a good idea?"

"No." Xena admitted. "But I don't think we have any good options, either."

Gabrielle moved closer to her partner. "If I walk into a huge spiderweb, I'm gonna lose it, Xena."

Spiders. Xena's eyes widened and she looked around her. She hated spiders. "What made you mention that?" She asked sharply.

"The smell." Gabrielle supplied readily. "It reminds me of the time you squished that big hairy.."

"I remember." Xena cut her off. "The tarantula." The creature had invaded Gabrielle's sleeping furs, and Xena had responded to the young girl's startled terror with what must have seemed to Gabrielle overly excessive gallantry. She'd flattened the damn thing with such violence she'd sent guts from it almost over Argo's startled head.

She hated spiders.

"That thing, yeah." The bard agreed. "Gods that was ugly.. but it smelled the same and so I..pmf."

"Sh." Her partner whispered in her ear.

Gabrielle nodded, and was released. She waited for Xena to do something, surprised when the warrior merely continued to walk along in the darkness. After a few steps, she just shrugged and followed, shaking her head.

Now that Gabrielle had identified the stink, Xena couldn't get it out of her mind, never even considering her nostrils. Every hair on her body was on end, and she kept imagining the touch of hairy legs on her arm or her head or..

Stop it. The warrior took a deep breath, and released it. Her hand shifted on her new ax, bringing it up as she casually swept it in front of her body to deflect.. well, anything. Moss.

Branches.

Bats.

Spiders.

"Xena?"

The warrior nearly jumped out of her skin at the quiet voice next to her. "Wh.. yea?"

"You okay?"

"Fine." Xena scowled, unseen in the dark. Something brushed against her arm and she stifled a vocal reaction, realizing it was Gabrielle's fingers fastening warm and sure around her wrist.

"You sure?"

She could hear the concern in the bard's voice. "Just trying to concentrate on where we're going." She reassured her partner. "Don't want to walk off a gully edge or something."

"Uh huh." The bard's tone was gently knowing.

Something touched her other arm, and Xena couldn't prevent herself from reacting, swinging her new ax around in a tight, vicious circle. "Son of a.."

"Xe."

The warrior stopped walking and listened, aware of her heightened breathing. "Yes?"

"I have an idea."

"What?"

"How about we go towards that break in the trees over there, and go right at the edge of the forest, so we can see stuff better?" Gabrielle had no idea why her usually stolid partner was freaking out. She laid her hand on Xena's back, feeling the faint quiver of her muscles under the touch. "This is getting a little creepy." She offered hesitantly. "Isn't it?"

Somehow, she knew Xena was looking at her, even though she couldn't see the warrior's face in the darkness. "Listen.. oh!" She felt something crawling on her back and she jerked in reflex. "Yow!"

"Great idea." Xena decided. "Let's go." She grabbed the bard's hand and headed for the break in the trees, slashing her ax in front of her like a demented wheat harvester outside Amphipolis. They plowed through some underbrush with thorns, making them both yelp, then after a last struggle they emerged between the trees, breathing hard and looking around.

"Okay." Xena circled her partner, relieved when she didn't find any crawling invaders on her. "You all right?"

"Yeah." Gabrielle peered at Xena's ax. "Yuck. What is that?"

The warrior looked at the weapon, which was wrapped in sticky gray filaments. "Spiderweb."

"Ew." Gabrielle made a face.

Xena shook herself violently, shrugging the pack off her back and dropping it to the ground. She was fairly sure she didn't have any on her, but with spiders, you couldn't be too careful. Not only did she hate the little suckers just because she did, some of them could kill you with a single bite.

Gabrielle seemed to guess what she was up to, and she circled her, examining her carefully. "No spiders." She gave her a pat. "Gods, I hate those things. They used to give me night mares when I was a kid."

"Hm." Xena shook out her pack, just to be very sure. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. My mother never cleaned the ceiling in the house. They lived up there.. and they'd drop down on us at night. Uggh!" Gabrielle shuddered. "That night.. when you killed that one? I didn't sleep a wink after that."

"Mm." Xena kicked her pack, unsatisfied with her examination.

"Or the next night."

"I remember." Finally, the warrior picked up her burden and reluctantly resumed it. "You didn't until I took you into bed with me, if I remember right." She ran nervous hands through her hair. "I felt bad for ya."

"Hm.. yeah." Gabrielle started forward after her, staying close to the edge of the forest to take advantage of its protection, but enough in the starlight to see her way. "I think I decided spiders had their good points after all." She mused. "I felt very safe from them with you, that's for sure."

Xena snorted softly, swinging her head from side to side as she used the meager starlight to find a good path through the fringe of the trees. She remembered that night, all right. The cool mountain air

had brushed over her as she'd watched the moon rise, with Gabrielle sleeping peacefully cuddled up against her.

So many things had gone through her mind that night.

"Besides, you smelled great." Gabrielle's casual commentary disrupted her memories. "It was the first time I really thought about leather being sexy."

"Thanks." Xena dismissed memories and thoughts of spiders, and concentrated on finding their path instead. The forest curved around ahead of them, and then marched up yet another in an apparent endless series of ridges.

It was almost like a well used road, the warrior mused. When wagon wheels had kicked back hard packed dirt for so long, it created ripples in the roadbed. The valley looked a bit like that, as though some god had put a hand on either end and compressed it into wrinkles.

A low cough, in the distance alerted her. She stopped, and listened, Gabrielle pausing next to her now in silence.

The cough came again. Xena held a hand up, and cursed softly as she felt the wind at her back, knowing the sound was coming ahead of her. "Don't like that."

"What is it?" Gabrielle tensed. "Bear?"

"Cat."

"Great." Gabrielle sighed. "Well, at least this kind of thing we understand." She said, with a comforting pat on Xena's arm. "We've gone up against those before.. and you've done it alone."

"True." Xena lead the way forward. "Let's see if we can get to high ground. Maybe we'll see the damn thing coming." Maybe they would get lucky, and it would be a small cat, which, if she killed it, could provide them with another useful pelt, and some teeth.

Gabrielle flexed her hands around her staff, her body shivering into alertness. All the fatigue she'd felt when they'd started was gone, replaced by nervous energy, and in a way she was glad they were on the move, rather than hanging out in the cave.

She only hoped she felt that way when the sun rose.

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Xena shifted her ax from one hand to the other, and pulled her body up onto a rock escarpment. It had started raining again, and even the starlight was now blocked by clouds, impeding their progress significantly.

She wiped the water out of her eyes and peered across the ridge, blinking out the stinging raindrops. "Damn it." Hopping back down to the ground, she walked over to where Gabrielle was waiting, her body pressed up against a tree in the lee of the wind. "Can't see a damn thing."

"Great." Gabrielle crossed her arms, her wet hair hanging down over her eyes. "Okay, so what next?" She heard the testy note in her voice and grimaced a little, but didn't regret the honesty. "Xena, does this really make any sense?"

The warrior glared at her. "Not a gods be damned thing in two days has made any sense!" She said, in exasperation. "You got a better plan? Let's hear it!"

Gabrielle looked around her. All she could see was the forest, a lot of wet bushes, some rocks, and too many clouds to count. They'd been traveling for two or three candlemarks, and had barely crossed two ridges and now they were faced with a third, steeper, with no easy path up.

So. Either they climbed the rocks, or tried the forest or stayed where they were. No good choices, but then, Xena probably knew that better than she did. "Pig turds."

“Well?”

The bard half turned and looked at her. “No, I don’t.” She stated quietly. “So are we going to figure out what to do, or just stand here yelling at each other?”

“Well, I’m open for any suggestions.” Xena walked over to the nearest tree and smacked it.

“Oh, that’s useful.” The bard sighed. “Xena, come back over here.”

“I like it better over here.” The warrior shot back. “That all right?”

Oh boy. This was going nowhere fast. Gabrielle debated her options, then decided to stay where she was. She knew Xena was frustrated. No sense in pushing the warrior when they were both...

“Stupid son of ...Gabrielle!”

Instinctively the bard grabbed for her staff, sensing motion to her left that hadn’t been there a second ago. She’d gotten halfway in position when something big and heavy hit her from behind, slamming her to the ground with extraordinary violence. “Xena!!!”

“Stay down!” The warrior yelled as she bolted past her. “YYyahhhh!!!!”

Gabrielle heard a growl, and a hideous, tearing sound, and smelled the hot, feral, musky scent of cat. She rolled to one side and tucked her arms and legs in, twisting around quickly as her eyes sought her partner.

What she saw froze her in mid motion. Outlined in the dim light a huge animal, its head towering over her partner’s leaped over her and bore Xena to the ground, a flash of huge, white teeth heading directly for Xena’s throat.

Xena grabbed its neck, and shoved upward, her eyes huge and wide. The beast’s weight was overpowering, though and it drove down towards her, snarling. She felt the hot breath blast her face, and saliva followed from the huge fangs now skimming her throat.

Gabrielle snapped out of it and got to her feet, her staff already swinging around as she charged the animal with utter disregard to her own safety. “Yaaahhh!!!” She slammed the beast in the back with her staff, whipping it up and slamming it down again with frantic energy. “Get off!! Get off her! Damn it! Xena!!!!”

Xena arched her back and got her feet up under the beast’s belly, kicking it with all her strength. She lifted its hindquarter’s off the ground as the huge teeth grazed her chest, and then the animal turned its head aside in anger and confusion as Gabrielle continued to whack the Hades out of its spine.

“Get... Off... Get.. Off!” The bard screamed at the top of her lungs.

Xena felt the animal try to lift off her, to escape the pain in its guts from her kicking, and the pain in its back from Gabrielle’s attack. The respite gave her time to get to Gabrielle’s small knife, and she grabbed it, following the animal up as it turned to attack Gabrielle and jamming it into the beast’s throat.

It roared in fury. Xena leaped on its back, and now it was her turn to knock it to the ground despite its huge size. She got one arm around its neck and kept stabbing as it writhed under her, its huge claws missing her arm by a hair only. “Die, damn you!” Xena yelled, shoving the knife in as far as she could and hoping she hit something lethal. Yanking her arm back, she felt the knife slash through something thick, then hot, reeking blood was erupting all over her as the animal thrashed wildly, screaming now in fear as it struggled to live.

Gabrielle hadn’t let up for a second, and she was still pounding the creature, until she saw it slump to the ground, the gray dimness reflecting only barely off a darker glint coloring its thick, dappled fur. She stopped, breathing hard. “Xe?”

Slowly, the warrior let the animal’s neck loose and straightened, her own breathing strained. “Son of a bacchae.”

Gabrielle circled the dying cat and dropped to her knees beside Xena, leaning on her staff as the rain came down harder. "You okay?"

Xena wiped the small blade on the creature's fur, and stuck it back in her boot with shaking hands. "No." She swallowed, dragging one knee up and resting her forearm on it. "Biggest damn cat I've ever seen." With a light sigh, she let her head rest against her hand.

Gabrielle put an arm around her, feeling the shivering under her touch. She pressed her cheek against Xena's shoulder, then kissed the skin there. "Gods." The bard whispered. "How long was he stalking us?"

Xena shook her head in silence.

The animal gave a tiny, weak cough, and then its chest went still.

The bard slowly pushed herself to her feet and circled the animal, crouching down in front of it to stare. "Xena, look at those teeth."

"Saw them up close, thanks." The warrior said briefly.

Gabrielle felt a once familiar anxiety hit her in the guts. She looked at Xena across the carcass, and the anxiety increased as the warrior refused to meet her eyes. Quickly, she got up and came back over, this time kneeling down in front of the silent woman and letting her staff drop to the ground.

Xena looked up at the clatter. Gabrielle reached her hand out and touched her face, leaning closer to banish the gloom between them. "Xena. It's already terrifying here. Please.. let's not fight. I can't take it."

The warrior's eyes dropped, and her body posture shifted, the muscles on either side of her neck relaxing a trifle.

"Sorry I got snippy before." Gabrielle went on. "I know you're doing your best to get us out of here."

Xena glanced back up, a perceptible softening in her eyes. "Sorry." She uttered briefly, clearing her throat. "I over-reacted a little. Must be tired." She admitted. "Anyway... I guess we should take care of this thing and get moving. All the noise.. something'll come looking."

Gabrielle remained where she was, her fingers still stroking Xena's cheek, until she felt an answering touch at her waist, and only then did she get up. She waited for the warrior to stand as well, and then she moved in to give her a quick hug. "Thanks for saving my butt for the nth time in my life."

"Likewise." Xena responded in a more normal tone as she returned the hug, giving the bard a light scratch on the back with the tips of her fingers. She felt a faint quiver in the arms clasped around her and exhaled, allowing the frustration to simply dissolve.

They had no time for that, really. Gabrielle was right. The last thing either of them needed right now was a petty spat over nothing. She tightened her arms, then gently released the bard. "Give me a hand with this? Might as well not waste that damn pelt."

"Mm." Gabrielle felt her guts unkink and it almost made her weak in the knees, but she left that aside and went to help her partner roll the beast over and make it ready for her to skin. Its fur was extremely thick and soft, and in the light might have even been pretty, with its mottled spots. She ran a hand over the body, and shook her head. "It's so big."

Xena tilted the huge head back and shook her head, her hand clasping around one of its huge front teeth. Her fingers barely fit around it, and it was longer than her hand, half the length of her forearm. "Damn.. look at this!"

"Incredible." Gabrielle leaned closer, touching the other, blood covered tooth. "Xena, that would have gone right through you."

"Yeah." The warrior pushed the head aside and started to work. The beast's frame was large, and very muscular and she knew she'd survived the attack only by the grace of a lot of luck, Gabrielle's staff, and a fortunate kick in the right place. "Know what I'm worried about?"

Gabrielle lifted a heavy leg so she could get to the skin under it. "That there's more than one of these?"

"Yeah."

"Maybe that's why the other creatures are not into being out a night." The bard mused. "Maybe they find a safe spot.. you think this was the kind of cat that attacked them the other day?"

"Maybe." Xena tugged the pelt, giving her head a shake to clear the wet hair from her eyes. "I think we should take the hint."

"Mm." Gabrielle looked around with a touch of trepidation. "So we've got the creatures to deal with in daylight, and these suckers to deal with at night. Xena, we'll never get out of here."

"We will." The warrior replied softly. "Pull that.. yeah."

Gabrielle did so, hoping Xena would hurry up. Just the thought of another cat jumping out at them was making her twitch and now they had the task of once again finding shelter. "Damn rain." She wiped the moisture from her eyes with the back of her hand, then went back to pulling.

Xena listened to the thunder of the rain around her, and mentally repeated the curse in a more virulent form. Was there no end to their lousy luck this trip?

"Xena?"

"Yeah?"

"It's a female." Gabrielle had ducked her head closer to the animal's skin. "Look." She spread the fur across it's belly apart, and revealed nipples. "Uh oh." She grimaced. "Xena.. check this out."

Xena leaned closer to see what alarmed her. "Oh." She exhaled, seeing the evidence of milk, and recent usage. "Great." She exhaled, then paused. "Hm. Wait... that could work for us."

"Huh?"

"Hang in there, Gabrielle. We may have caught a break." Xena grimly continued her work. Maybe they'd get lucky after all. She only hoped the bard wouldn't insist on the obvious inevitability if she was right.

"You don't mean we're going to look for the cubs." Gabrielle looked at her in disbelief.

The warrior shrugged. "They've got shelter somewhere."

Gabrielle stared at the dead animal. "Are we going to keep them?"

Xena didn't answer.

"Then you better hope we don't find them."

**

It was raining so hard when they finally got moving, that they were forced to enter the forest again, this time skirting the ridge that had proven too steep to reasonably climb. Xena moved along in front with her ears cocked, the cat skin added to her pack along with the rest.

She'd decided against looking for the cubs, after all. It had only taken a brief consideration of the possible outcome of finding them, and the knowledge that the fight that would ensue would not be a pointless or mild one to eject the idea from her mind no matter what the possibilities of a nice dry cave were.

Besides. Xena exhaled. With the way things had been going, the damn things were already dead, or their hiding place was a mud hole and they wouldn't even get shelter out of it.

Gabrielle kept close behind her, staff held at the ready. The rain, however, seemed to have driven all the other animals under cover, because they didn't encounter so much as a lizard on their trek through the trees. That was both comforting and intimidating, and she found herself wishing she'd

see just one or two other creatures out in the weather with them, just to prove they weren't totally nutty.

Maybe even a turtle or something. They liked rain, didn't they? She hunched her shoulders and shaded her eyes from the worst of the downpour, glad at least they were somewhat sheltered from the wind. There was a mossy wall of rock to their right, and she reached out to idly touch it, her fingers moving over the fuzzy surface and suddenly finding something strange. "Hey, Xena?"

The warrior stopped plodding in front of her and turned, apparently very willing to be held up from their march. "Yeah?" She walked back the few steps to where the bard was now standing, her entire hand laid flat on the rocks. "Something wrong?"

"Feel this." The bard urge. "It's warm."

Xena obligingly put her hand next to her partners, and found to her surprise that the rock surface was, in fact, warm to the touch. "Huh." She searched the wall. "Interesting.. but not much use right now, I guess."

Gabrielle leaned her entire body against the rock, closing her eyes blissfully. "Speak for yourself." She sighed. "Boy, that feels great."

Xena leaned her shoulder into the rock, feeling the warmth radiate against her skin. "Hm." She mused. "All right, you've got a point there. But we can't hang out holding the wall up, Gabrielle."

"Meanie." The bard reluctantly edged away from the stone. "Hey, if this is warm.. you think you can find a hot spring around here to go with it?" She joined the warrior as they continued their trek. "Wow, could I use one."

The warrior paused again and studied her, noticing the faint bluish tinge to her partner's lips even in the very low light. "You need to stop?" She asked. "You should have said something."

"I thought I did." Green eyes met hers wryly. "I'd forgotten how little subtlety works on you." She rubbed her arm, trying to stifle the shivers, now made much worse by the brief foray into warmth. "I should have stayed away from that rock, is what I should have done."

Xena put an arm around her and started forward again. "Soon as we find a spot, we'll stop." She promised. "Stick by me until then."

Walking together was awkward, since Xena had all their stuff on her back, and Gabrielle was carrying her staff, but they managed somehow, squeezing through the trees as the rain continued to pour down through the branches.

The constant deluge was beginning to get on Xena's nerves. She searched every square inch of their surroundings, hoping for even a little overhang they could squeeze into. The wall was curving away to the right a little, and she decided to stay close to it, even though the ground was sloping downward and a small race of rainwater was covering her feet.

A pair of trees were growing almost up against the wall, and they squirmed through the tiny space available, then Xena had to stop since Gabrielle did so in front of her. "Hey."

"Look." Gabrielle pointed.

Xena peered at the shadowy crack in the rocks. A slab of granite had dropped down off the escarpment, and was leaning against the wall at an angle, providing a small, but very welcome hiding spot. "Uh huh." She followed Gabrielle to it, touching the bard's shoulder in warming. "Poke inside first. No surprises."

Gabrielle nodded, sticking her staff into the opening and prodding gently, both of them tensed and ready to back off if something came out and objected. She could feel nothing but rock surface inside though, not even leaf litter to indicate it was in use by any other creature for a den. "Feels okay."

Gratefully, they crawled inside. Gabrielle felt the inside wall and almost groaned in relief to find it holding some of the warmth she'd felt previously. She settled down with her back to it, glad to be out of the rain and wind and thankful to be sitting down.

She was cold, and tired, and she wanted nothing more than to let her head rest back against the rock and stay still for a while. The cat, the rain, the spat, the creatures... she was on overload and she knew it. She was painfully glad Xena had dropped the idea of looking for the cat's babies.

That would have been way too much. It was bad enough her mind kept imagining the poor little things crying, alone in the storm, for a mother that would never come back to them. She could feel for them, even as she didn't regret one bit of her attack on the cat who was trying to kill her partner.

Life just really sucked sometimes.

Xena had wedged the cat skin across the opening, exposing the inside to the cleansing rain while she also provided a wind block. Now she crawled over to where Gabrielle was sitting, carrying the folded skin. "Wanna get up a second?"

"No." Gabrielle did so anyway, reaching up to grasp an uneven crack on the inside of the leaning slab and pulling herself up off the ground long enough for the warrior to put the hide down.

"Okay." Xena sat down on one side and extended her legs, wryly gazing at her sodden self.

Gabrielle lowered herself back down and let her hands rest on her thighs, smoothing the wet fabric of her skirt out with tired fingers. "Thanks for stopping." She remarked quietly. "I'm toast."

Xena folded her hands together and leaned back, absorbing the warmth of the stone. "Me too." She agreed.

"No, you're not." The bard rolled her head to one side and peered at her. "You could keep going for three days. So don't even start with that. You're just trying to make me feel better about being a wimp."

"You're not a wimp." The warrior avoided the accusation.

"Not usually, no." Gabrielle squirmed closer, to take advantage of Xena's body warmth as well as the rock's. "I think it's all this darn, darn rain. It's making me nuts."

The little nook was losing its chill, and they both relaxed and leaned against each other. Gabrielle rested her head on Xena's shoulder and closed her eyes, content to simply go mindlessly blank for a while. She felt Xena take her hand and hold it between both her own, and that felt warm and good and right, and..

Xena studied her sleeping companion quietly for a few minutes. She kept one hand clasped around the bard's, and laid the other on her ax. She calculated they had a few candlemarks left to go before dawn, and she wasn't taking any chances in sleeping herself. Despite the storm, and their shelter, the thought of another of those cats, or worse, finding them was making her senses twitch and every crack or rumble of dislodging stones in the rain sent tension singing through her.

She hadn't felt this vulnerable since she'd given birth to Solon. It was both aggravating and terrifying, and she was torn between anger at their situation and frustration at herself for not having better answers for it. That wasn't really fair to her and she knew it, but she also knew the simple fact that Gabrielle was depending on her to get them home – yes, she'd help with every ounce of her strength to do whatever Xena needed done, but the plan was whatever Xena said the plan was.

Damn it. Xena gazed through the darkness at the stone. It would be damn nice just once to have someone else have the plan. She wriggled her shoulderblades into a slightly more comfortable position, and tried to relax. Maybe in the morning, she'd ask Gabrielle what *she* thought they should do.

Gods knew her own plans hadn't gotten them anywhere useful so far.

She could hear the rain coming down harder outside, and after a while she allowed the thrum of it to relax her, its thunder providing a shield of sorts she couldn't begin to really resent.

**

Gabrielle was chiefly aware of it being very quiet when she woke up. There was light streaming in from behind the hide in the opening, and the air was comfortably warm and actually somewhat dry. She was curled up on her side, with her head on Xena's leg, and she wondered briefly how exactly she'd gotten into that position.

"Morning."

Gabrielle rolled over and looked up, rubbing her arm that had fallen asleep against the stone. She found Xena looking back at her, the warrior's dark hair in complete disarray and a smudge of dried mud across the bridge of her nose. "Morning." The bard replied, with a smile for the sight.

"Feel better?"

"Anything would feel better than what I felt like before." Gabrielle replied honestly. "Rain stop?"

"Yep."

"Is that actually sunlight out there?"

"Yep."

The bard patted her chest. "Be still my beating heart."

"Not if I have anything to do about it." Xena gave her bare belly a gentle rub. "It's been quiet out there. Think we can go find something for breakfast."

On cue, Gabrielle's stomach rumbled, making them both chuckle. The bard sat up and pulled her legs crossed under her, pushing her own ratty feeling pale locks back off her face. "Wow." She rested her elbows on her knees. "Why exactly did I ever find this whole sleeping on the ground thing romantic?"

"Speak for yourself." Xena remarked dryly, as she crawled to the edge of the alcove and peered cautiously out past the cat hide. The sun had indeed come out, and it was splashing over the rich, green forest with an almost luscious vividness.

She pushed the skin aside and slipped out of the crack in the rock, straightening to her full height with a grimace as her spine cracked into place. "Ugh." A patch of sunlight was nearby and she walked into it, reveling in the warmth as the light touched her face.

She looked up, to see mostly blue sky overhead, and felt a sense of relief despite the cover the storms had given them. They had enough challenges, she figured, without having to deal with half drowning every minute.

"Ahh.. this feels great!"

Xena turned, to find Gabrielle strolling up to join her. The bard had her arms extended, and she was visibly reveling in the sunshine that gathered around her and lit her skin with a golden glow.

For a moment, the warrior stood, entranced. "Glad you think so." She finally said, as the bard arrived at her side.

"You don't?"

"I do." Xena draped her arms on her partner's shoulders. "I'd love to be dry for a while." She looked around at the forest, which was quiet save a gentle wind stirring the branches. It blew against her face and she lifted her nose into it, sniffing deeply.

Gabrielle watched her, caught by the quintessential wildness of the motion and marveling at the proud nobility of her somewhat scruffy looking partner's attitude. It reminded her suddenly of the very first time she'd seen her soulmate to be, all that time ago.

Wild, and untamed, and dressed not unlike she was now with her shredded rags and lack of weapons. "Xena?"

Xena finished her study of the wind, then relaxed, finding nothing out of the ordinary on it. "Yees?" She cocked her head and regarded the bard. "Gaaabrrrielle?"

Gabrielle closed her hands gently into fists and pushed them against her partner's stomach playfully. "You're so cool."

"What?"

"C'mon." Gabrielle bumped her again. "Let's get ourselves together and figure out what we're going to do next." She looked up. "I'm sorry.. I've been letting myself fall into that old trap of expecting you to know everything.. you should have spanked my lazy butt."

Xena only wished all her problems would resolve themselves with such neat rapidity and completeness. "All right." She turned the bard and pointed. "How about you get some water in our skull, and I'll see what I can salvage of that." She indicated the cat skin.

"Good start." Gabrielle agreed. "Then, how about we figure out how to get past this wall?" She indicated the rock escarpment. "Because I don't know about you, but I don't really want to get trapped here."

"Sounds like a plan."

They walked back towards the cleft. "Now.. why did you say I was cool?" Xena asked, patting herself. "I'm not, am I?"

"No, hon." Gabrielle muffled a chuckle. "It was just a joke."

"A joke?" The warrior

"Xena, forget it. It was a compliment."

"A compliment?" The warrior repeated. "I think your head was soaked too long last night." She pulled down the cat skin and turned it over, laying it out on the now dry ground. She picked up some of the pieces of river rock she'd patiently chipped off, and began to scrape the inside.

Gabrielle retrieved the half skull and headed for the sound of water. She prudently picked up her staff as well, and let her eyes shift from side to side as she walked searching for anything useful. There wasn't much around, though, and she arrived at the edge of the small brook she'd heard pretty much empty handed.

The side of the bank was open, a thick, rich grassy area sloping down towards it in a natural ford. Gabrielle knelt beside the water and stuck her hand in, then moved it towards the rocky edge on the side of the ford. "Whoohoo." She chortled, feeling warmth against her fingers.

Given the heat in the rocks above, she wasn't that surprised to find a hot spring, but it was welcome nonetheless. A quick glance in the surface of the water made her wince at her grubby reflection, and she made an instant decision to take advantage of her find.

She sat down and started unlacing her boots, looking behind her through the trees to where she could just see Xena's outline bending over her skin. The nearby presence reassured her, and she quickly stripped off her clothing and slid into the warm water of the spring.

"Oh, boy.. this feels good." Despite the fact that she'd spent the entire previous day drenched, she was glad now to feel this waters touch on her, and she submerged to her neck, feeling her body loosen up as the heat penetrated stiff muscles.

Ah, that felt even better. The bard exhaled, reaching behind her to rub the small of her back, where a knot was in the process of unraveling. She'd come off the road this time in pretty good shape, and the weeks at home sleeping in a decent bed had improved that, but there were still those little things now she found she had to deal with sometimes.

An aching knee in cold weather, for example, a legacy of the three or four times she'd damaged it in this or that fight or the odd jumping over walls. The knot in her back. The occasional twinge in her neck after a long session with her staff. Gabrielle closed her eyes and floated for a few moments. Reminders, really. Physical markers of her sometimes dangerous life along with the scars she'd earned living those stories she told.

She ducked her head back, wetting her hair and watching as the light current took away a swirl of mud from it. Idly wishing for their herbal soap, she was glad enough to use a handful of sand from the banks to scrub her skin, all the time mindful of the time and her surroundings.

Finishing with that, she dragged her clothes into the spring and scrubbed them as well, taking the time to work most of the bloodstains out of the weave of her top. Satisfied at last, she swam over to the rocks and stood up, the warm water sheeting off her body and exposing her to the sun as she draped the cloth over stone to dry.

Then her senses prickled, and she turned her head, searching the area to locate whatever had alerted her. She had to sweep over the far bank twice before she spotted it – a face in the brush peering out at her.

Every muscle tensed as she focused on it, and she glanced quickly over to where her staff was. But the face didn't move, and after a second she realized something else – it was female.

Okay. Gabrielle waded over to the ford and reclaimed her weapon, bracing it in the stream that came up to her knees. Should she call Xena? The person or whatever had shown no inclination to come out of their hiding spot and did not even seem to realize Gabrielle had seen her.

On the one hand, maybe she could open up some communication here. On the other, if there were a ton of bad guys behind that innocent looking face, and she got hurt or worse, Xena would....

Xena would. "Xena!" Gabrielle let out a yell.

The face reacted, disappearing into the bushes. Gabrielle stood her ground, her hands wrapped around her staff until a rhythmic thrumming behind her heralded the arrival of her partner. She turned her head as Xena splashed into the water and approached her, taking in the alert look that briefly went very puzzled as the cold creek she'd expected turned out otherwise. "Someone's over there." She pointed with the end of her staff. "They were watching me."

Xena spared her a wry glance. "They've got good taste." She complimented her. "More of the same?" She put a hand on the bard's bare shoulder. "And are you naked for a reason?"

"Washed my clothes." Gabrielle supplied succinctly. "No, it was a woman, Xena." She indicated the bank. "I was enjoying a nice warm bath here, and I felt someone watching me." Her hands shifted on her staff, and she released the fingers of one hand to run them through her damp hair. "It's a hot spring."

"So I feel." Xena started across the creek, stolidly gripping her makeshift ax. "Stay there. I'm gonna go see if I can find anything."

Gabrielle considered, then stepped back to the rocks and leaned back on their warmth, resting her hands on her staff and crossing her legs at the ankles. The sun poured down over her and she squinted a little, keeping Xena's moving figure in focus.

Xena plowed through the water, her eyes searching the far banks intently. She reached the other shore and climbed out onto it, going directly to the bushes and peering behind them. Light footprints were in the damp sand, and confirmed Gabrielle's identification of the gender of the watcher.

The prints led away from the shore, toe imprints and knee scuffs, along with hand prints indicating the person had crawled off with little attempt to disguise their tracks. Xena could see them leading off, and she paused for a moment to look back at her partner before she followed them.

Gabrielle was standing at the edge of the brook, watching her, the bard's pale hair glistening in the sunlight. Xena lifted a hand and made a sign, waiting a moment as her partner returned the signal. "Yeah, sure she'll stay there." The warrior sighed, shaking her head and turning to follow the tracks.

The ground sloped up from the creek, towards a scattering of heavy boulders and the footprints lead directly to them. The wind was at her back, and Xena wondered if she was walking into a trap – creatures or no, she'd seen wolves lure prey into a band of their brethren and she had no doubt the creatures were capable of doing the same.

Well. Xena hefted the ax and felt the familiar tingle flow through her body. They better be ready for what they're looking for. She spun the ax in her hand, getting used to the oddness of it's balance as she walked forward, her weight coming forward onto the balls of her feet as she got closer to the boulders.

Part of her success as a warrior was her confidence in her own skills. Xena understood that, and she understood that it was this confidence, as well as the skills themselves that often allowed her to come out on top over an opponent, or opponents who were in reality stronger, faster, or more deadly than she was herself.

It came down to being dangerous in your own mind. Xena called up that part of her that was a natural born killer and stepped forward, crouching and leaping up onto the first of the boulders, scaling it to the top and leaping to the next one, which would give her a view over the pile.

There was motion, and her body reacted, blood rushing to her skin as she turned to track it, her arms spreading out as she crouched and got ready to spring.

Staring back at her was a small, hunched over woman wrapped in tattered skins, her eyes wide in terror.

Xena's eyes flicked to either side, but she saw no other movement. She straightened up and stepped off the rock, tucking her body into a lazy flip before she landed near the woman and stood, studying the intruder with expressionless eyes.

Unlike the male creatures she'd seen, this thing before her was far more recognizably human. She had a thin frame, and thick, russet hair that was wild and unkempt, but grew pretty much only on her head instead of all over like the others. She had regular features, obscured by dirt, and pale gray eyes. Cleaned up, Xena realized she'd be unremarkable walking in the market in Amphipolis, and she felt no threat from her. "Who are you?" She asked bluntly.

The woman looked warily at her, edging back against the rocks.

Xena took a step forward. The woman reacted in fear, letting out a wild, screeching howl that fairly pinned the warrior's ears back.

From the other side the rocks, she heard a sudden splashing. Xena jumped towards the woman, grabbing hold of her and clapping a hand over her mouth to stop the sound, then pulling her to her feet and heading back the way she'd come.

Gabrielle could try communicating with her, assuming the screaming didn't bring the rest of the creatures down on them or she didn't scare the thing to death before she could bring her back to the camp.

**

One Wild Ride

Part 7

Gabrielle sat quietly, her arms wrapped around her knees as she studied their unexpected visitor. The sun had dried her clothing, and now they were outside the little cleft they'd taken shelter in regarding each other.

The woman Xena had found and brought across the creek looked mostly terrified. The fact that Xena was seated right next to her, watching her like a hawk probably had something to do with that, but Gabrielle also got the feeling she was just naturally timid.

She and Xena had both tried talking to her, but it had been like talking to a tree. The woman merely hugged herself and rocked back and forth, almost as if they weren't there.

Her arms and legs were covered in scars. Gabrielle remembered her own moment of self indulgent pity earlier and tried to imagine what life would be like if everything hurt. The scars didn't look like smooth cuts, as Xena's did, but instead they were jagged, and some were puckered from punctures.

Gabrielle flexed her hand, her thumb rubbing against the calluses from her staff. She caught the woman watching her, and she turned her hand upmost, closing it into a fist.

The woman's body stiffened, and she stopped rocking. Gabrielle glanced past her, to meet Xena's watchful eyes beyond. The warrior remained still, though, with a blink of her eyes deferring the next step to her partner.

The bard relaxed her hand, opening it all the way and putting it down on the ground. No reaction. After a moment's thought, she lifted her hand up and traced a circle in the dust. That got a guarded look out of the woman, and she furtively watched Gabrielle as she repeated in the dirt one of the figures she'd seen in the cave, that first night.

The result was surprising – the woman uncoiled and lunged across the ground, slapping at Gabrielle's hand with startling violence. The bard resisted the urge to bat the woman back, letting her capture her hand as it lay on the ground.

She was in no danger. Gabrielle made a quick hand signal to the already in motion Xena, who managed somehow to still herself, remaining poised in a half crouch, every muscle tensed.

The woman kept staring at her. Gabrielle tried to look as unthreatening as possible, and put her other hand down on the ground. "We're not going to hurt you."

The eyes shifted slightly to Xena, then back to her, and Gabrielle realized in that moment that the woman had understood what she'd said. "We're not." She looked down at the woman's hand covering hers, and realized there were no differences between them.

The others, the men – they had been different. Gabrielle remembered short, stubby fingers and oddly shaped hands grasping her, full of thick hair on the backs. She studied the woman's features. Aside from the dirt, and the scars, this woman could have been her sister.

The woman looked up and into her eyes. "Who are you?" Gabrielle asked, gently. "You're not one of them." From the corner of her eye, she spotted Xena's intrigued expression, and felt a moment of almost ridiculous pride.

But the woman merely crouched down and scuttled away from her, putting her back against the fallen tree and watching them both warily.

Xena eased back to her seat also. "That was interesting." She remarked. "So now what, your majesty?"

Gabrielle wrinkled her nose at her partner, before she settled cross-legged on the ground and with a cautious look at their visitor, started drawing in the dirt again.

This time, however, the woman merely ignored her, huddling next to the tree and circling her knees with both arms.

"Should I put the pinch on her?" Xena suggested.

"Xena." Gabrielle spared her partner a wry glance. "C'mon."

The warrior shrugged. "You know I'm into instant gratification."

Yes, Gabrielle did know that. Despite her having amazing patience with certain things, such as her projects, and Dori – Xena wanted what she wanted and she wanted it right now. Always had. “Well, you could work on your fur. I’ve got this covered.”

Xena could also take a hint when one was handed to her. “Right.” She got up and went to their shelter, disappearing into it.

Gabrielle continued her doodling, only looking up at the woman after silence had settled between them for a bit. She found their visitor looking back at her directly now, her attitude remarkably different than it had been so shortly before. “So.”

“So.” The woman responded, in a very raspy voice.

It took all of Gabrielle’s bardic skills not to jump in surprise, even though she’d suspected their unwilling visitor was more human than she seemed. “Ah.” She murmured, watching the woman as she got up on her haunches, her arms hanging down in an oddly animalistic pose. “Well..”

“You were wrong.” The woman continued, adding a few guttural sounds, much like she was clucking her tongue against the roof of her mouth. “Wrong.”

“I was?”

“I am one of them.” The woman lifted her head in a jerky gesture. “My people.”

Gabrielle gave up her drawing and sat up, circling her knees with both arms. She studied her for a long moment. “You talk.” She finally said. “What’s your name?”

“I have no name.” The woman replied. “We have no names.”

From the corner of her eye, Gabrielle caught sight of Xena emerging with her fur, and settling down against the rock, far enough to give them the illusion of privacy, but close enough to kick some butt if that was needed.

Not that the woman was much of a threat. In size, she was shorter than Gabrielle by a couple of fingers, and was far lighter, almost skin and bones that stuck out at odd angles caused by the way she held herself. The bard’s compact, muscular form was far more intimidating, and the woman in fact, was watching her with a wary expression.

But still.

At one time, Gabrielle might have found the inference that she couldn’t take care of herself grating, but now it just made her smile. “Well, my name’s Gabrielle.” She remarked. “And we’re not here to hurt anyone.. we just want to find a way home.”

The woman looked at her expressionlessly. “There is no way out of here.” She said. “My mother looked for one all her life, and never found it.”

Gabrielle wasn’t sure what to say to that. “Well, we just started looking.”

The woman edged a little closer to her. “Then you should stop.” She said. “My mother learned too late – and she died trying to get out. You will never find a way.”

Gabrielle felt a chill go down her back, and the rasping of the woman’s voice grated on her nerves. There was something unnatural about it that she couldn’t quite put her finger on. “We..”

“We’ll find one.” Xena spoke up, her powerful voice carrying from the crevice and echoing slightly.

The woman turned and looked back, her eyes falling on the fur Xena was scraping. Her entire body stiffened and she stood up, staring at the skin with widening eyes. “Ahh!!!”

Gabrielle scrambled to her feet and reached out. “Hey!”

With a keening yelp, the woman evaded Gabrielle’s hand and bolted away from them, running down the slope towards the water with impressive, if rambling speed. “Ahhhh!! Ahhhh!!!”

Caught by surprise, even Xena merely stood up, her head cocking to one side as she watched the woman run into the water, dodging and splashing as though the liquid was painful to her screaming her high squeal all the while. "What the Hades?" The warrior muttered.

"That." Gabrielle got up and went over to her. "Was really strange." She looked after the woman, who had slogged out the other side of the creek and bolted into the woods. "Should we go after her?"

"No." Xena shook her head. "She'll be back." She sat back down again with the fur, stolidly starting to scrape it.

"You think so?" Gabrielle sat next to her.

"Yeah."

The bard thought about what had just happened. There was so much strange about it, she had to take a minute to look at each piece of the odd puzzle, and decide where they fit. Or if they fit. "You think she was telling the truth?"

"Hm?" Xena looked up.

"About all that stuff. Was she telling the truth?"

Xena went back to scraping. "I don't think so." She remarked.

"About any of it?"

"No."

Hm. Gabrielle let her head rest against the rock. "I wish we'd kept her here. I had a lot more to ask her." She said. "Whether she's lying or not, she's here, and she can talk to us."

"Mm."

"You said they couldn't communicate."

Xena sniffed reflectively. "I don't think they can."

"So.."

"That's why I think she's lying." The warrior said. "She's not the same as the others."

That was a possibility, of course. Gabrielle rather tended to believe that herself, just from her own observations. However, there was also a chance that she was telling the truth – what if the others were just pretending not to communicate, for instance?

Gabrielle had no idea why they'd do that, but she'd seen a lot of strange things in her lifetime, and this would not be the strangest. "What if she is telling the truth?" She asked her partner. "What if we're wrong? Maybe they can talk. She did.. she had to come from somewhere, Xena, and she said she was one of them so.."

"So?"

"So, what if she's one of them?"

Xena shifted a little. "I don't know." She glanced across the water, studying the trees. "Maybe I shouldn't have let her go." She mused. "Wonder what scared her off, my voice?"

"It's not *that* different from mine." Gabrielle said. "Just sexier." She added. "I don't know what she ran away from.. she seemed okay, until she looked over at you."

"Hm."

They both looked down at the fur draped over Xena's legs. "Well." Gabrielle touched it. "You said you thought this was the animal that was attacking them, right?"

"Yeah." Xena replied, puzzled. "So?"

"It was also kind of the thing I was drawing in the dirt." The bard explained. "Well, I mean, sort of – they had this kind of blocky sticky looking thing with these.." She put her fingers on either side of her jaw, pointing downward. "And then she kind of tried to stop me."

"Ah. That's what that was." Xena studied the treeline again. "This is all not making a lot of sense."

"No, it isn't." Gabrielle agreed.

"But you know what?"

"What?"

"I think we haven't seen the last of our little friend." Xena bent her head and continued her scraping. "We'd better see what we can gather around here."

Gabrielle let her head rest against Xena's shoulder. "What if she was telling the truth about the other thing, Xena? That there isn't a way out of here?"

Xena's hands stilled for a moment, then they continued their slow, deliberate motion. "They looked for one. She says. We didn't."

Which was, of course, true. What was possible for other people was not the same thing as what was possible for her and Xena. Gabrielle nodded quietly to herself, and fell silent, thinking about the other woman.

Why had she come? Had the others sent her?

Could they really communicate? Had she, Gabrielle, been right and Xena wrong? It had happened once before, and she knew Xena remembered that.

Gods knew, she did. She could still, if she tried, remember that moment in the hospice, kneeling at that bedside and understanding that sometimes being right and winning out – well, it didn't really mean much if the person you cared most about in the world was the one who was on the wrong side.

She never expected Xena to admit it.

She knelt beside the pallet, and did the only thing that made sense to her heart, trying to help the poor wounded men who were no longer part of anyone's war. She rinsed the tattered rags they had left out, and wiped off the blood, the stink of battle rising around her and bringing helpless tears to her eyes.

So she'd been right. So what? Would it change people dying? Would it change Xena's unreasoning hatred for their attackers?

No. All it would do was make Xena angry and resentful towards her, and things between them would just get worse.

Distinctive footsteps echoed in her ears, coming closer. Gabrielle kept her back turned and her eyes on her work as her mind imagined all the lectures that would be shortly coming her way. She tried to stir up some inner anger at that, to plan her retorts, get ready to make her moral stand no matter what Xena had to say about it.

But her inner child didn't want to be angry. She didn't want to fight with Xena. She wanted Xena to be proud of her, and pat her on the back, and smile at her again. Not give her lectures on how stupid she was.

That head over heels hopelessly in unrequited love thing really sucked sometimes, and this was one of them. Gabrielle sighed inwardly, and wished it was just all over with already.

The steps stopped. There were no brusque words, though, only a gentle creak of leather as Xena knelt beside her, and rested her hands on the pallet edge.

When she did start to speak, it was the tone Gabrielle heard, not so much the words. The gentleness of it. The sincerity and honesty that touched her heart and eased the stain of disappointment and frustration from her as though she'd stepped into a warm bath.

The words really didn't even matter.

Wait.

Loved what?

Gabrielle suddenly realized something had happened. She looked up at Xena and saw herself reflected back in the sparkle of those blue eyes and knew there was something different.

She had made that difference.

It was an awesome moment, only topped by Xena's hand on hers as they worked together to ease the injured man as her own personal world twirled into a completely different orbit around them.

Awesome.

Gabrielle glanced up at that same, angular profile and reached over to remove a smudge of dirt from it, rubbing Xena's cheekbone with the edge of her thumb. Dear gods, they'd come such a long way, hadn't they? Now she was a bigger critic of herself and her motives than Xena ever had been.

Xena glanced at her, a hint of an affectionate grin pulling her lips upward. "I've got lots of other muck you could hunt down if you're that bored." She teased. "Not to mention rock dust."

Boy, had they ever come a long way. "Sorry.. I'll go find us some lunch." Gabrielle pushed herself to her feet. "I thought I saw some wild grapes near that spring." She picked up her little basket, then turned. "Xe, if you think the others are coming after us, why stay here? Why not forget the skin, and let's just take off?"

"Because." Xena finished one part of the surface, and started working on another. "I think this thing's gonna come in handy."

"Uh huh." Gabrielle regarded the large furry surface. There was no doubt in her mind it would come in handy, but at what risk? "And?"

"And, if they were coming after us that fast, they'd have done it already." The warrior replied. "I want to climb up that rock wall far as I can go, and see if I can scout the land out a little. Following water's getting us nowhere."

Gabrielle tipped her head back and looked at the sheer rock wall. Then she looked at her partner. "Hm." She knew better than to question that plan. "I guess I'd better find something more substantial than grapes, huh?"

Xena chuckled, then fell silent. After a moment, she looked up at Gabrielle. "Hey."

The bard turned back around, hearing the hail. "Yeah?"

"I hope you are right." Xena said. "Figure out a way for us to communicate with them." She held Gabrielle's eyes for a moment, then dropped hers back to her work.

A very long way indeed. Gabrielle smiled, as she turned and headed off.

**

Ephiny kept an eye on Dori as they walked down the slope into the Amazon village. "Not too fast, Dori. Wait for your old auntie Eff."

Dori amiably circled back to her, observing the new village with interested eyes. "Pretty."

Pretty? Ephiny looked around in bemusement. The plateau was large, and ringed with trees, the ground covered in soft grasses and flowers. "You think it's pretty, Dor?"

"Pretty." Dori nodded. "Fowers. Pretty aanimals." She pointed at a red bird flitting in the nearby branches. "Fishes." She concluded, her hand moving to indicate the stream. "Good!"

Ah, a fresh set of eyes. "Well, glad you think so." Ephiny guided her down towards the shelters, which had actually gotten more substantial while she'd been up at the cabin. Most had roofs, if a bit

patchwork, and the village was beginning to take on familiar outlines despite the rain and all the confusion.

Near the center of the open space, she spotted a few of the children at play. They'd had only a small group of births this year, with the war and everything, and so the kid's yells and laughter were doubly precious here in the new village.

"Eff! Go play?" Dori's eyes lit up at seeing new potential playmates. "Go now?"

Hm. The last time Xena and Gabrielle had visited the village, they'd brought their tiny terror with them, but Dori had been suffering from a sore throat and her mother had kept her close by her side. She hadn't had a chance to play with any of the little Amazons, much to her woeful displeasure.

Their kids tended to be raucous, headstrong types, learning early in the competitive world of the Amazons to stake their ground and keep their places. How would Dori fare with them? Ephiny knew that in town, Dori did play with her little cousins and some of the others, but that was different.

"Eff?"

Well, if she was standing by, how much harm could they do to Dori, after all? "Okay, sure." She agreed. "Let's go play, Dor. But you have to be nice to the rest of the kids, okay? No fighting."

Dori turned around and looked at her in utter puzzlement. "Fitting?"

"Yeah, you know..." Ephiny held up her fists and mimed some boxing.

Dori merely kept looking puzzled. "No gots." She eventually shrugged her small shoulders. "You go ask Boo?"

Was it possible? Could it be that a kid who lived with two of the best fighters in her personal memory had no idea what fighting was? "Um.. never mind Dor.. just go play and have a good time." Ephiny told her. "Be good."

"Otay." Dori trotted off, apparently understanding this last instruction. Ephiny strolled casually after her, pausing near the firepit to lean on some stacked wood and watch as her little charge joined the playing Amazon children.

The little girls stopped running around as Dori entered the playground, giving up their game of chase in favor of this new diversion. The tallest of them, Pitra, came right over and checked the new kid out. "Hey."

"Hi." Dori replied readily. "We go play?"

Ephiny edged behind the wood, so the kids wouldn't see her. Dori wasn't the youngest of the girls, but Pitra was probably a year and a half older, the oldest of them, and tended to act out being in charge because of it.

"Maybe. Who are you?" Pitra asked. "Never seen you round here."

Dori cocked her head to one side. "Live dere." She pointed up in the general direction of the cabin. "Make nice go play?" Her head was pretty much even with Pitra's despite their age difference, and she was built heavier than the older girl. "We have fun. C'mon!"

One of the other, younger girls seemed willing. She brought over a stuffed ball they'd been playing with. "Catch?"

Dori grinned, well familiar with the game. She held up her hands invitingly. "Go."

"Wait." Pitra got in the way. "I'm the boss here."

Ephiny leaned forward, fascinated. She wondered what the heck Dori was going to do, knowing certainly the child hadn't ever faced that kind of challenge. Just being with her parents kept most things at bay, and the regent found herself very curious as to how the toddler was going to handle bossy little Pitra.

Dori apparently couldn't fathom what Pitra's problem was. She put her hands on her hips, in a motion uncannily like Gabrielle's and frowned. "What you do? Go play, be nice." She told Pitra. "Have fun."

Pitra scowled at her. "You better do what I say, or else!" She said. "Go over there!" She pointed.

Dori looked over there, then back at Pitra. "H'come?"

"Cause I said so." Pitra said. "Go over there!"

"No." Dori shook her head, dark locks bouncing. "Be nice!"

Pitra had enough. She came over and gave Dori a shove, pointing towards the other side of the playing area. "Go over there!"

Dori's hands came off her hips, her balance undisturbed by Pitra's pushing. "Bad." She pointed at Pitra. "You stop now."

Pitra grabbed hold of Dori and started pulling her where she wanted her to go. She didn't get far, because Dori dug her heels in and let out a yell the likes of which almost scared the feathers off Ephiny's leathers. The volume was quite startling, and so was the depth of the tone from such a small throat.

"Ahh!" Pitra jerked her head back in surprise. "Shut up!"

"NO!" Dori followed the yell up. "You stop!" She pulled her tunic free and shoved Pitra back, sending the older girl flying to fall on her butt on the ground. "Be NICE!!!"

Ah. Ephiny propped her chin on her fist. Gabrielle with a kick ass attitude. This was going to be one interesting Amazon when she came of age. Unwilling to let the carnage go further, and mildly worried about what would happen if the hapless Pitra really got the Terror of Amphipolis mad, she emerged from her hiding place and strolled over to the playground. "Hi kids."

"Eff!" Dori turned to her. "Dis one not nice. Go get Boo and make squash!" She said, indignantly.

The girls all went quiet, spotting Ephiny. Pitra, however, wasn't quite finished. "Where did she come from?" She asked. "She ruined our game!"

Ephiny disliked liars. Even small ones. "This is Doriana." She said, by way of introduction. "She lives up on the mountain, above the town. She's our neighbor."

"She's not an Amazon." Pitra sniffed.

"Honey, you have no idea how much trouble you could get into saying that." Ephiny told her. "Doriana is an Amazon. She's an Amazon princess, as a matter of fact. Her mother's Queen Gabrielle."

"Mama!" Dori regained her good humor. "Mama come back soon, wif Boo, and we c'n go get fishes." She stated positively. "Boo fly." She punctuated that by putting her hands down and performing a baby somersault, ending up with her legs splayed on the ground and a big grin on her face. "See?"

Ephiny grinned back. "Is that how she started? Good going, Dori!" She told the child. "You keep that up, and you'll be jumping over the roof yourself soon."

Pitra looked at Dori, edging away from her a bit. "Oh." All the children knew who Gabrielle was. Matter of fact, she was a favorite of theirs, because of her stories more than any real sense that they knew she was the Queen. "I didn't know that."

"You probably don't want to shove her again." Ephiny said. "For one thing, it's not nice, as Dori knows, and for another, you probably don't want to make her mad."

Pitra had the grace to look embarrassed. "I wasn't going to hurt her."

"No, you probably weren't." Ephiny agreed, for a different reason than the girl thought. "But we don't treat our sisters like that, do we?"

"No, ma'am."

"Good." Ephiny gave Pitra a direct look. "We want to be good to our friends, don't we?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You don't want the Queen's consort knocking you on your ass for messing with her kid, right?"

"No, ma'am."

"Good."

"Play now?" Dori turned back to the girl with the ball sack. "Catch?" She held up her hands again, apparently more than ready to forget the turmoil and have a good time. "Fun!"

The other girl tossed the sack ball, and Dori caught it, then tossed it back. The rest of the girls save Pitra joined in, ready to accept their new playmate. The game of ball started up again, and childish laughter soon filled the air.

Pitra stood there awkwardly for a minute, but when Ephiny showed no further signs of paying attention to her, she eventually turned and went back to the group, joining in. The regent plucked a stalk of grass and chewed it reflectively, turning her head as Pony came up next to her. "Hey Pon."

"Hey." Pony rested her arms on the wood. "That was something."

Ephiny shrugged. "Kids."

"Ungh." Eponin nodded. "But you didn't see it from the angle I did." She indicated another tree, a quarter of the way round the playground. "When Dori got mad and yelled? She gave Pitra 'the look.'"

"No. Yeah?" Ephiny turned her head to face her partner.

"Oh yeah." Pony nodded. "She's gonna be a rocking Amazon."

"Mm." The regent agreed. "That she is. That, she is."

**

They decided to stay in the crevice again for the second night. Gabrielle was headed back to it now, a thick load of springy branches on her shoulders. Xena had finished working on the pelt, and now she was sitting on a rock working on some antler pitons to help her climb up the wall. "Hey, Xe."

"Hey." Xena looked up from her task. "What's that for?"

"Ah.. you just wait and see." The bard walked past her, and knelt in the opening to the shelter, stuffing the branches inside ahead of her. Even though they'd be leaving at dawn the next morning, she wasn't going to spend another night completely uncomfortable if she didn't have to.

So she crawled inside, gently pushing aside their odd collection of supplies and started laying the branches down in a crosshatch near the warm back wall. When she was done, she dragged the deerskin over and laid it on top, folded in half to double it's padding. "There."

She sat back and reviewed her handiwork. Granted, it wasn't anywhere close to their bed at home, but anything was better than bare rock. Pleased, she gave the skin a pat, then turned and crawled outside in time to see Xena start to scale the wall. "Be careful."

"Yeah." Xena studied her choices, then used the horn pitons she'd carved to get another handhold set before she shifted her boots to two different spots. "Been a while since I did this."

"I can tell you exactly how long."

Xena grinned. "Thought you didn't keep track of stuff like that." She moved up a bodylength higher, finding the scaling a bit easier than she'd expected. The rock had enough cracks for her to use the pitons to good effect, and she was making decent progress up the face.

"There's certain stuff like that I keep written over my heart. I never forget it." Gabrielle called up in answer. "You scaling that cliff, for example."

"Uh huh."

"You stopping the arrow, you kissing me.."

"You kissed me first, if I recall." Xena said, as she swung herself across a flat space, and braced her feet into a crack.

"Details, details." Gabrielle felt her hands clenching into fists, as she watched Xena climb. She had every faith in her partner's abilities, but that didn't stop her from worrying. She could see the shift of the muscles in the warrior's legs, standing out under her skin as she levered herself upward. "Damn, I could never do that."

"What?" Xena called down.

"I said, you've got a cute butt, honey!" Gabrielle replied. "Whoops.. careful!"

Xena resettled her grip and hugged the rock, looking down between her chest and her elbow at her partner. "Don't you have something better to do than watch my butt?"

Gabrielle put her hands behind her back and rocked up and down on her heels. "Nope." She said.

"Gabrielle."

The bard chuckled, and relented, turning around and going to the edge of the rocks, to perch on one and keep watch over the creek and its surroundings. They'd seen no sign at all of their strange visitor, or of the other creatures, and the late afternoon sunlight draped peacefully over the wild space and warmed Gabrielle's skin.

She felt a damn sight better than she had the day before, that was for sure. Gabrielle drummed her heels on the rock, humming under her breath. Hopefully Xena would spot a way out from up there, and then tomorrow they could head for it and...

And. Gabrielle found her thoughts going back to the woman. She wanted to know more about her, where she came from, and what her life was like. The bard had sensed a deep sadness behind the few words, and the instinct in her that let her spot a good story when she saw one had been well and truly triggered.

If they left, and didn't see her again, how would Gabrielle know what happened to her? Or what *had* happened to her? She wanted to know. She wanted to understand these strange creatures.

People. Gabrielle corrected herself. People. Her eyes searched the underbrush, willing the woman to reappear, if only at a distance.

The trees remained stolid and featureless, however, and only small birds broke the stillness of the glade.

**

Xena finally reached the top of the escarpment, throwing her leg over a bit of out jut stone and settling herself down on it. She flexed her hands and extended her aching arms, grimacing as her shoulders popped back into place. "Ow."

It had definitely been a while. Xena let her arms drop to rest on her thighs. She remembered that rainy day, all right, that had started in uncertain panic and ended.. ended in Gabrielle's arms. But it wasn't the first kiss she remembered the best, it was the second.

Now what? Xena looked at the far wall of the Amazon Queen's quarters, as Gabrielle patched up the gash on her back. She felt shaky and uncertain, unsure of where they were going to go from where they'd just been, and if either of them were really ready for this.

Yes, she'd said she was going to go for it. Yes, she realized Gabrielle was head over heels in love with her.

Yes, she realized she was head over heels in love with Gabrielle.

Xena exhaled, listening to the echoes of those words in her mind. What was that going to do to them? They'd crossed that line and now what? Could she go back?

She felt Gabrielle's fingers smooth salve over the cut she'd just sewn, and then the gentle pressure as the bard placed a shy kiss on the back of her shoulder. She turned her head and caught Gabrielle looking back at her, the girl's green eyes so brilliant with gentle joy it almost made her stop breathing.

Could she take that away again? Tell Gabrielle they really, really were better off just friends?

How much did that friendship mean to her?

"I can't believe you're really here." Gabrielle said. "I missed you so much."

Xena shifted her eyes left and right, then smiled. "I missed you too." She admitted.

"You did?" Gabrielle's words were a mere whisper. "Really?"

Her doubts were slipping through her fingers like so much fine sand. "Yeah." Xena replied. "You done back there?"

Gabrielle looked at the injury, her fingertips touching the skin on Xena's shoulder. "Yeah."

Her expression slid into a quiet pensiveness, and Xena suddenly resented that. She wanted the wide eyed happy back. "Hey, c'mon. I've had a lot worse." She gave Gabrielle a pat on the leg, her hand somehow forgetting to lift off the warm skin and remaining there.

A little twinkle came back. "I know." Gabrielle came around to face her. "It's just different when you get hurt because of me." With a trembling bit of hesitation, she lifted her hand and touched Xena's cheek, a tremor going through her as they stared into each other's eyes.

Xena studied the serious expression. Gabrielle looked exhausted, and she didn't think it was just from the long day and the excitement. There were dark circles under her eyes and she'd lost weight, the lines of tension visible in the corners of her eyes and across her jawline.

Poor kid. Xena ordered her into bed, and they sat there, side by side, riding the edge of this new, strange, frustrating, interesting change to their relationship.

What was Gabrielle worried about now? That she wouldn't be attracted to someone? That she wouldn't like the closeness? Aphrodite's left tit, was she still that naïve? Then she realized what Gabrielle was really asking.

Was Xena attracted to her?

Could Xena answer that question, and still think she could go back across that line?

No way. So put your dinars where your mouth is, and put your heart on the table, Xena. It's time. "Hm." Xena lifted a hand and brushed it along Gabrielle's cheek, feeling the pressure as she leaned into the touch. "Let's see now."

"Wh.." Gabrielle's question cut off as Xena ran one fingertip down across her chin, and across the underside of her jaw. She swallowed instead, the flutter of her heartbeat very evident against Xena's touch. "Uh.."

Xena explored her collarbone, then rested her hand above Gabrielle's heart. "I think you'll be all right."

An almost painfully questioning expression formed on Gabrielle's face.

"But I'd better make sure." Ah. What a sweet moment, one she'd been waiting on for a very long time. Xena leaned forward and tossed her reservations to the wind, brushing her lips against Gabrielle's and feeling the soft gasp, then moving closer for a more intense contact.

Am I attracted to you? Xena welcomed the tingling that coursed over her skin. She gently cupped Gabrielle's face as the kiss lengthened, feeling the flush under her fingers as Gabrielle slumped against her, a soft sub audible sound emerging from her throat.

Yeah. You could say that. Xena finally leaned back a little, and watched the green eyes reappear, under fluttering lashes. After a moment, a dazzling grin appeared along with them, a moment of sudden, absolute joy that sealed the last of her reservations. "You'll be just fine."

"Uh." Gabrielle appeared dazed, but delighted. "Yeah, I think you're right."

Xena pulled her over into a hug, knowing a moment of plain unvarnished happiness herself, that only deepened as she let slip her defenses and reveled in the simple sensation of being in love.

A bright, unexpected moment in her heretofore very dark life.

"Hey, Xena!"

Oh, great. Here I am daydreaming about kissing up on the top of a rock. Must look like an idiot. Xena leaned over and peered down. "Yeah?"

"Look to your right!" Gabrielle pointed.

Huh? Xena peered to the side, spotting the pictograms a moment later. She stared at the drawings, high up on the side of the cliff, in consternation. How in Hades had they gotten there?

She put that aside for a bit, and shaded the fading sunlight from her eyes, looking around to see what path they could take. The creek traveled from the glade they were in, across a forested area, towards the far wall. Xena could see relatively flat ground between where she was and the wall, and she gauged they could easily make it the following day.

Once at the wall – she could see only the sheer cliff, but surely there were breaks in it, caves, or some place for the water to go. Once they found that, they would find a way out.

Satisfied, Xena turned her attention back to the pictograms, crawling over and hanging half off the rocks to get a better look. Experimentally, she extended one hand, and found her fingertips brushed the paintings. Had the creatures climbed the rock as she'd done?

Xena straightened up, turning and looking back the way they'd come. Her eyes spotted the brown figure in the treetops instantly, and she took a breath in, realizing the creature was watching her. The treetop was easily six or seven bodylengths from the ground, and the creature looked perfectly at home.

Not a good omen. Xena edged back over and started to look for an easier way down, her eyes flicking down to the waiting Gabrielle, who was casually seated, ankles crossed, watching her.

Not a good omen at all.

**

Gabrielle sat with her back against the wall, her hands folded over her stomach and her thoughts fixed on the details of a story she'd been working on before the flood.

It was dark out. They had a small fire going, but Xena was seated near the entrance, nervous as a pig near Solstice even though the area around them appeared clear of any creatures or other intruders.

Gabrielle knew better than to try and get her partner to relax. When Xena was as wound up as she was tonight, any attempts to distract her wouldn't be well received, and actually since she was afraid they were going to be attacked, it wouldn't be smart either.

So, the bard used the time to her advantage, scooting over and taking the back half of the little bed she'd made up. She could sort out the details, and had, but she also found she missed being able to write them down.

She missed being able to write in her diary, an old friend she'd come to depend on at the end of the day to give her some place to shake out the corners of her soul into. In horrible times and wonderful ones, it was good just to check off another day well lived.

She wondered what Xena was thinking. If she turned her head, she could see the warrior's back as Xena sat in the entrance, her hands curled around her stone and bone ax. Her posture was wary and alert, her head turning as she scanned back and forth across the open space between the rocks and the creek.

Occasionally, she'd leaned out and back, watching the escarpment.

Gabrielle wasn't nervous – after all, her partner was the greatest warrior in her personal knowledge and probably most anyone else's too – but she found herself feeling Xena's tension and that made it very hard to concentrate on what she was thinking about.

Fish turds. "Xe? Want to play a game?"

Xena half turned. "What?"

"Do you want to play a game." Gabrielle repeated. "You know, who am I, or stars, or something?"

The pale blue eyes, hazel in the firelight, blinked. "Are you bored or do you think I am?"

"Yes."

Xena returned her gaze to the outside, her eyes tracking as the moon cast shadows across the rocks. "Sure." She agreed. "Gonna be a long night." She added. "You could get some sleep while you can."

"I could." Gabrielle agreed. "But I feel so guilty doing that while you stay up."

"Don't."

"Might as well ask me to stop breathing."

Xena fingered her makeshift ax, as she cocked her ears to listen outside. "I'd never do that." She uttered, after a moment's silence. "I've just got the feeling they're out there, outside where I can see or hear them."

"Okay." Gabrielle changed positions, rolling over to lay down on the deerskin, with her head nearest her partner and the fire. "So, what makes you think they're going to come after us tonight?"

Xena didn't answer for a bit. Her thumb rubbed idly against the horn, wondering herself why she was so antsy. "I don't know."

Gabrielle considered her relatively comfortable spot. After a few heartbeats, she sighed, then got up on her hands and knees and crawled over to where her partner was sitting. She thumped down next to her and curled up in a half ball, her head resting on her arm.

Xena looked at her in bemusement. "What are you doing?" She asked, as the bard wriggled back a little, pressing her shoulderblades against Xena's thigh.

"Nothing."

"Something wrong with that bed over there?"

"You're not in it."

Xena released one hand off the ax and draped her arm over the bard. "You're a little nuts sometimes, Gabrielle."

"Yeah, I know."

"I like that." The warrior concluded. She rested her elbow on Gabrielle's hip and laid her hand along the bard's ribcage, enjoying the simple warmth of the contact. She felt her edginess fade a little and the night outside became just a bit less threatening and a bit more peaceful than it had been.

Her imagination? Sure. But she wasn't going to argue with it. She felt the regular lift of Gabrielle's ribcage and found herself stroking the soft skin. The world was a whole lot less intimidating when you shared it with a friend, wasn't it?

"What are you thinking about?" Gabrielle asked.

"Us."

"Mm." Gabrielle felt the discomfort of laying on stone ease, and she was glad to have traded the heat of the rock wall for the warmth of Xena's body and the gentleness of her touch. "I like thinking about us."

"Me, too."

The bard was quiet for a while, her eyes half closing as she gazed into the tiny fire. She found herself tired, though they really hadn't done much that day and knew despite the rocks under her, she'd be falling asleep soon.

Even the thought made her eyes close all the way, and she exhaled, leaning back a little against Xena's leg. "Xena?" She said, suddenly. "Why would that woman's mother have been trying to get out of the valley all her life?"

"What?"

"Didn't you hear her say that?"

Xena shifted away from the opening and focused on her partner. "I musta missed it." She said. "I was inside here for a bit."

"No, you were out there.. it was just before you said something." Gabrielle objected. "Anyway.. she said.. after I said we were trying to find a way out, that her mother had tried all her life and failed."

Xena looked past her, the warrior's forehead creasing sharply. "Oh.. wait. I did hear that."

Gabrielle's eyes opened, and she rolled her head back to look at her partner. "Are you okay?" She asked. "You've been acting a little weird lately, you know?"

"Me?" Xena's eyebrows lifted. "You're the one sleeping on the rocks, kid."

"Kid?" Gabrielle matched her raised eyebrows. "I don't mean right now. Before we left."

Xena now merely looked puzzled "Huh?" She said. "Because I was fighting with mom?"

"No."

"Did I stain the inside of the cabin a strange color or something?"

"No." Gabrielle reached up to ruffle her fingers through Xena's dark hair. "Little things.. like you running out into the rain and losing your cloak somewhere."

Xena was briefly quiet, then her lips twitched. "Hm."

"Becoming chatty with the Amazons.. having sensitive talks with Ephiny.."

"That wasn't what happened." Xena objected. "She had a sensitive chat with me. Not the other way around. Maybe she's acting weird." She suggested. "Matter of fact, I meant to talk to you about that but.. I um.."

"Forgot."

Xena's brows twitched, and she turned her head to make another sweep of the area. When she looked back, Gabrielle had completely rolled onto her back and was looking up at her, hands folded over her middle. They studied each other in silence for a few minutes. Then Xena took a slow, careful breath.

"Um.. when are you.."

"Tomorrow." Gabrielle answered instantly. "If I counted right." She added, with a touch of sheepishness. "You usually keep track of that better than I do."

Xena actually blushed, reaching up to scrub the hair out of her eyes as she leaned back against the rocks. "Yeah.. well... "

"Yeah."

They were both quiet again, but this time the silence was packed full of thoughtfulness. Xena was threading through her memories of the past month, trying to think of any particular time they'd been together that had seemed out of the ordinary.

Well, the warrior scratched her ear. Not that she ever really considered any time they were together as really ordinary. But the time in the treehouse... that had been a night to remember. While she and Gabrielle certainly had been passionate with each other the past month, no one single time really stood out in her mind like that time before had.

So..?

"I can't figure it out either." Gabrielle was watching her face, and apparently deducing her thoughts at the same time. "But I've been feeling kind of.. mm... different, too. Lately." She laid her hand over Xena's thigh, her thumb tracing a line across the warrior's skin. "Just kind of ... centered."

Xena put her hand on Gabrielle's stomach. "I noticed your stamina seems to be off."

Gabrielle nodded. "I thought it was just all the stuff going on, but I'm getting tired a lot faster than I think I should be." She admitted. "What do you think?"

Slowly, Xena started to smile. "Mm... I was wondering about that when you asked me to stop and fish for you the first day we were in here." She said. "So.. yeah. Could be."

Gabrielle's face creased into a big grin of her own. "That would be so awesome." She said. "Especially.. since the obvious alternative is that both of us are getting goofy in our old age."

Xena chuckled. "Yeah, you're right." She agreed. A sound outside made her turn again to study the surroundings, seeing a night hunting small cat stalking something near the edge of the water. She just stopped herself from waving cheerfully at the animal, as her spirits and heart about floated right up out of her.

Gabrielle laid her cheek against her partner's leg, closing her eyes and feeling the joy silently radiating at her.

She hadn't really intended on talking to Xena about her suspicions for another couple of days, but what the Hades. It sure beat talking about the rock dust and it took both their minds off the dangers outside.

And it made Xena smile. Gabrielle grinned herself, enjoying the moment.

She was suddenly lifted up off the rocks, and hugged, Xena's arms closing around her so tightly she felt her spine pop with the pressure. The warrior didn't make a sound, but Gabrielle swore she could actually feel her partner bouncing up and down, drenching them both with silently explicit happiness.

She wrapped her arms around Xena and hugged her back. "Xe, we gotta get out of here." She murmured into the warrior's ear. "I told Dori she was going to get a little baby buppit to play with."

"We will." Xena said. "I promise." She squeezed Gabrielle again, and they both laughed softly, an odd sound that echoed into the night to a range of listening ears.

**

"There." Gabrielle stepped back and regarded her handiwork critically, giving her partner an approving nod after a minute. "You look cute."

"Not the objective." Xena adjusted her woven belt, now holding the catskin around her body in lieu of her raggedy shift. She'd done what she could to fit the hide around her body, and Gabrielle's belt did help but stylish it wasn't.

It covered her though, and provided far and away more protection than the torn cloth had. She'd opened a hole for her head, and let the skin drape down front and back, providing a more or less sleeveless tunic that fell almost to her knees. "S'allright." The warrior concluded. "Let's get moving."

Gabrielle went over and slipped the pack she'd fashioned to hold their supplies onto her back, tying a piece of tough vine across her hips to keep it in place.

"I could take that.."

"Ah ah ah." Gabrielle interrupted the speech. "Don't you even start, Xena." She finished her knot and turned, putting her hands on her hips as she faced her partner. "It's just a bunch of dried meat, a few nuts, and a skull. I can handle it." She picked up her staff and tossed it, spinning it in mid air before she caught it again. "C'mon, kitty kitty. Let's go."

"Kitty this." Xena suggested, giving the bard a wry look. "All right. We'll cross the creek and travel along the wall. Keep that staff handy." She started down the escarpment, moving off the rock surface into the glade leading to the creek.

Gabrielle was right at her heels, taking a deep breath of cool dawn air as they crossed into the grassy area. She welcomed the change as her boots sunk into the softer surface, and she scrunched her toes up and flexed her feet in pleasure.

It was a great morning. They'd ended up sleeping on her little branch bed anyway. Xena had built up the fire, and they'd retreated behind it to snuggle together all night and she'd slept well, at any rate, waking in a cheerful mood.

What a total turnaround from yesterday. Gabrielle paused as they splashed through the creek, scooping up a handful of the water and drinking it. She could still taste the tartness of the berries she'd had for breakfast, along with a fish Xena had insisted on catching before dawn.

Mm. Roasted fish had it all over raw, that was for sure. She felt pleasantly full for the first time in a few days and she was looking forward to making progress out of the valley. It seemed odd to her, but her curiosity about the other people seemed to have faded as well, and she found her attention focusing more tightly on herself and her partner.

Natural, she supposed. After what they'd talked about last night, it would have seemed strange otherwise. She dug into the bank of the creek edge with her staff as they exited on the other side and picked up her pace, joining Xena and walking side by side with her as they headed towards the wall.

The ground went downhill for a while, the earth going from stony to a deep rich brown that released the pungent scent of growing things as their boots disturbed it. They entered a dense forest, tall trees rising up on either side of them as Xena picked a path between them.

There were no other paths here - not even animal trails and Gabrielle felt a shiver go up her spine as she experienced again the sensation of going someplace unknown, where not even Xena had been before. The forest around them rustled with life - she caught sight of the tail end of a snake slithering off into the leaf litter and off to their left, the reassuringly familiar sound of a woodpecker rattled.

To their right, she could see the wall looming through the trees, and accordingly, Xena turned to walk parallel to it, the trees running right up to the stone and some even edging slightly up into it, roots clinging tenaciously into cracks in the rock. "Look at that one, Xena."

The warrior turned her head. "Yeah." She sidestepped across a thick patch of gnarled roots and put her hand on the small tree, which was almost growing sideways out of the wall. "Limited space. Guess they do whatever they have to do to live."

"Mm." Gabrielle observed the tree, then she walked forward and gave it a little pat. "You go, tree." She said. "There really isn't much space down here, is there?"

‘Nope.’ Xena climbed off the roots and continued on. ‘It’s narrowest by where we came in.’

‘Yeah.’ Gabrielle remembered that. ‘But it spread out a little.’ She hopped up onto a rock and balanced on it, walking alongside Xena. ‘Xena... I know you didn’t know most of the animals we saw.. you think they’re so different because they’re stuck down here? That’s why we never saw them before?’

Xena twirled her ax absently as she walked, her expression thoughtful. ‘Can’t be that different.’ She eventually decided, with a shake of her head. ‘Maybe it’s more of Ares experiments.’

‘Ew.’ Gabrielle didn’t like that thought. She walked a few more steps. ‘Oh, gosh.. but that would make sense, wouldn’t it? Maybe it was like Jessan’s people.’

‘That’s what I was thinking.’ Xena admitted. ‘Only it went wrong. Maybe this is where they put all the ones that went wrong.’

‘Like the fish with the feet!’

‘Mm.’

‘Wow.’ Gabrielle glanced around. ‘That’s creepy.’

Xena nodded in agreement. They came across a tiny brook, running down from the wall into the foliage and she paused, kneeling to take a drink from it. ‘One thing I really do miss.’

‘Our waterskins?’ Gabrielle joined her. ‘Yeah.. you know, you don’t think about how much you depend on that stuff until you don’t have it.’

Xena took another handful of water, gazing into the brook for a long moment. ‘Like everything else.’ She said, flicking a few droplets off her fingers before she turned her head to meet Gabrielle’s eyes. ‘But you find that out the hard way, don’t you?’

Gabrielle rested her elbow on her upraised knee. ‘That’s the truth.’ She glanced into the creek, then jerked a little, startled. ‘Hey, look.’

Xena leaned next to her and peered down into the water. ‘Huh.’ She reached down into the creek and got her fingers around the glistening golden rock Gabrielle had spotted, bringing it back up and into the light for them to examine. ‘This stuff again?’

Gabrielle took it. ‘Is that gold?’

‘Probably.’ The warrior shook her head. ‘Between that, and the damn gems Dori keeps finding, if any of this gets out we might as well move to Athens.’ She wiped her hands off on the grass and stood. ‘Damn it.’

Gabrielle stood. ‘Okay for me to keep this?’ She asked. ‘I’d like to have something pretty made out of it.. that craftsman you know’ll do it for me and not say anything.’

Xena eyed her. ‘How about another baby charm?’ She grinned.

‘Mmm... there’s an idea.’ Gabrielle tucked the nugget away. ‘Are you really worried about people finding out what’s up on the mountain?’

‘Damn straight I am.’ Xena replied, as they moved on. ‘I’ve seen what happens, Gabrielle. We’ll have half of Greece tearing up the hills to get to that stuff.’

‘Mm.’

Xena suddenly slowed, and put a hand out, her eyes darting from tree to tree. ‘Sh.’

Gabrielle dropped back a step and brought her staff up, halting and waiting in silence as she watched Xena extend her senses out. She listened herself, but aside from the soft tinkling of the creek they’d crossed, and the rustling of branches, she couldn’t detect anything out of the ordinary.

And then, it was there. Out of the trees in front of them, one of the valley people dropped, extending his long arms out and barking at them in a commanding way.

Xena shifted her grip and crouched slightly, every muscle tensing as she readied for battle.

The male slapped his chest, and barked again. Gabrielle watched him in fascination, noting the thick, powerful frame, somewhat short legs, and very long, very strong looking arms. He wasn't wearing any skins, and the fact he was a male was very evident.

His face was round, with a thick nose and a huge jaw, and the beard covering his lower face extended down and covered his neck, fading into the hair on his chest.

If this was, as Xena had imagined, a by blow of Ares... what in Hades had he been thinking? Even the forest people, Jessan's people, though very different looking, were beautiful in their own way. Ares, give him all his other faults, had a good eye for that sort of thing.

There was nothing beautiful about this man.

He took a step forward, proudly erect, and thumped his chest again.

"What's he trying to do?" Gabrielle whispered.

"Intimidate us." Xena uttered back.

The male pointed at them. He thumped his chest. He came towards them, barking loudly, his hand clenching into fists.

"What are we going to do?" Gabrielle edged forward a little, moving her staff in a short arc. "Hey!" She called back to him. "Chill out!"

That seemed to enrage him. He pounded his chest and then rushed at them with impressive speed, bounding over the ground with tough, bare feet.

Xena met him halfway, swinging her ax in a vicious arc and catching him in the ribs with the blunt end. She could feel the crunch as the rock hit bone, and the blow produced a wild howl from the creature. She roundhouse kicked him backwards, planting her body squarely between him, and Gabrielle.

Gabrielle leaned back against the nearest tree and put the end of her staff on the ground, realizing that with one opponent, and Xena in a fighting mood, there was no chance she'd get a pop in edgewise. "Okay, so that communication didn't get us anywhere."

The creature got up and coughed, glaring at Xena with vivid and obvious hatred. He barked another few times, then rushed at her again, this time dodging as he reached her and putting a hand out to block the swing of her ax.

"Learns fast." Xena switched the ax to her other hand and smacked him on the side of the head with it. She could have done it point on and probably split his skull, but with him being alone, she realized it might be their only chance to learn something in relative safety.

The creature stumbled to one side, but didn't go down. He turned and picked up a branch, swinging it at Xena's head in return.

The warrior gracefully evaded him, grabbing the end of his branch with one hand and slamming the mid point of it with the fist clenched around the ax, breaking the branch in half. She flung the broken end away and went on the attack herself, chopping the other half out of his hand with the point of the rock. "Yeeehoo!"

With a yelp, he dropped the stick. Xena's yell then seemed to startle the creature. He stopped dead in his tracks, and his eyes opened wide, just before Xena nailed him with a roundhouse kick to the side of the head that sent him flying into the nearest tree.

He picked up a rock and whipped it at the warrior, who ducked. The creature barked angrily, but he circled the tree and crouched behind it, now watching her with wary caution.

"That's better." Xena remarked in approval. "Wanna try that communication thing again now?"

Gabrielle edged up next to her. She debated handing off her staff to her partner, but one look at the creature's wild eyes changed her mind and she kept her grip on it as she cautiously moved towards the tree.

She could hear the tiny, aggravated snorting noise coming from Xena, so she stopped midway, within the warrior's reach, and paused to consider. Speech hadn't done a lot for them, but with the woman, hand signals had.

So.

She released one hand off her staff and extended it, closing her fingers into a fist, and then opening them again.

The creature watched her intently.

"Don't you go any closer." Xena growled softly.

"Yes, grandma." Gabrielle tossed back over her shoulder. "Shh." She returned her attention to the creature, still crouching behind the tree. Once again, she extended her hand, this time, palm down.

Slowly, the creature edged around the tree, his nose twitching. He grunted, a deep guttural sound.

Gabrielle brought her fingers together, tips touching.

The creature motioned her forward towards him, with another guttural bark.

Mindful of her simmering partner, Gabrielle merely stood her ground, making the same gesture again. "Hon, you want to take a step back? I think you intimidated *him*" She sensed the warrior moving back reluctantly, and she waited until Xena stopped moving before she returned her attention to the creature.

He was in a half crouch now, watching her closely. Gabrielle leaned forward a little, and made an encouraging noise, motioning him forward as he'd done to her moments before.

She didn't expect the result. The creature bolted towards her with lightning speed, raising a howl that stood her hair nearly on end. Only her reflexes saved her, as she whipped her staff into both hands and attacked without thinking, smashing him between the legs with all the strength she could muster.

There was no time to do anything else, as Xena flew past her like a rabid wildcat, heading for the downed creature who was already curling into a ball and howling in utter pain.

"Xena!" Gabrielle managed to grab a handful of fur as the warrior went past. "Easy!"

"Easy!" Xena yelled back. "I'll take his damned.."

"XENA!" Gabrielle held on and dug in her heels. "He's on the ground! Relax!" She managed somehow to get the warrior to stop, just before she pounced on the creature. "I got him. I got him.. easy!"

Xena stood over the howling male, her eyes darting back and forth. "I don't think this is gonna work." She said. "Let's get out of here before more of them show up." She backed up a step.

"Xena." Gabrielle eased up next to her, studying her hapless victim. "Just... hang on for a minute. I was getting somewhere with him."

Xena just looked at her.

"Well, I *was*." The bard protested. "I told him to come to me, and he did!" She moved a little closer. "I think he's young."

Xena hefted her ax and dourly stood guard, ready to whack the male if he got up. "What makes you think that?" She asked. "They're all single minded and stupid, far as I can tell."

Gabrielle slowly crouched down, holding on to her staff for balance. The creature stopped howling and stared at her, one hand covering his head to protect it, the other covering his groin. Now his eyes were wide open and round, and she could see fear in them.

There was no doubt in her mind he had some kind of intelligence. She lifted her hand off the staff and closed her fingers into a fist, and he cowered, pressing himself into the ground. "He doesn't have as much hair as the other ones did." She said. "He's a lot smaller...and his face.. I don't know. He just seems younger to me."

"Mm." Xena had been observing the creature. "Maybe." She put a hand on Gabrielle's shoulder. "But I still think we should get out of here."

Gabrielle really had no other hand signs to try, and she was out of ideas on how to communicate with the creature. "Okay." She got up and took a step back, watching the male intently. He stayed right where he was, curled up, pressed against the ground. He was no longer howling, but his body was rocking back and forth a little, in pain.

"Let me try one more thing." The bard said. She crouched down again and cleared away some leaf litter, drawing a circle on the dirt with her finger. Unlike the woman, though, this had no effect on the male, and he simply continued to rock, grunting. "Okay, so much for that."

Xena waited for her to get up and back away before she did as well, keeping the creature in her view until they were well into the forest. Finally, she turned and put hand on Gabrielle's back, guiding her forward. "It's not making any sense." She muttered.

"The guy?" Gabrielle asked. "I don't know, that sort of started to make sense, Xena.. I mean, he confronted us, and we fought back, and he got scared... that is what usually happens."

"Mm."

"Or you mean the people here at all?"

Xena glanced behind her. "I'm not sure what I mean." She exhaled in frustration. "Bet he follows us."

Gabrielle looked behind them as well. "I don't see anything."

They continued through the trees, both of them walking a little faster as if by common consent. The ground, which had been sloping downward, now leveled out and they had easy going. The trees had thinned out a little, and Xena relaxed just a bit, as they walked through bars of rich sunlight together.

The encounter with the creature had puzzled and disturbed her. There was something so different between this one and the female, and things just weren't adding up. Nothing was.

Gabrielle exhaled, running her fingers through her hair and pushing it back off her forehead. Xena eyed her covertly, but the bard seemed to be walking along with good energy, and didn't seem tired despite the recent battle. As she crossed into a patch of sunlight, she raised her face to it, half closing her eyes, and allowing an easy smile to appear.

It made Xena smile in response. She reached out and put her hand on Gabrielle's shoulder. "You up for a little running?"

"Sure." Gabrielle agreed. "You want to put some space between us and him?"

"Yeah."

"Let's go." The bard took a grip on the center of her staff and broke into a jog.

Xena joined her, carrying her ax much the same way. They ran together over the leaf covered earth, their footsteps making very little sound on the rich earth. It was almost as if they were flying over the ground, and she dared any moth eaten old creature to catch up with them.

Eventually, she decided, the answers would come to her. In the meantime, she had other things to think about.

Like buppits.

**

One Wild Ride

Part 8

"Xena, someone's following us." Gabrielle said, in a normal tone of voice.

"I know."

They had been traveling along the wall for four candlemarks. The surrounding terrain had changed from a thick forest to a scrubbier brush, but as a positive side effect, they'd stocked up on several kinds of nuts and berries, and one stalk that had tender, edible ends.

"You think we should worry about that?"

Xena had picked herself up a staff again, and had her ax slipped into the belt around her waist. "Not yet." She replied. "I think it's your boyfriend."

"Don't start with that." Gabrielle bapped her on the edge of her shoulder with the tip of her staff. "What makes you think it's him?"

"I can smell him." Xena answered equably. "Definitely stinks worse than the woman did."

"Isn't that usually the case?" Gabrielle asked, drolly.

Xena pondered that. "Well, there was that Amazon.."

"Ugh. Say no more."

Xena led them across two fallen tree trunks, poking the ground carefully to stir any possible snakes into retreat. They'd had a close call once already. "How are you feeling?"

Caught in the middle of chewing a nut, Gabrielle swallowed hastily. "Fine." She replied. "Why? Did you decide those berries we found were really poisonous?"

"No." Xena stepped off the logs and back onto the ground. "Just wondered." She wandered on, glancing up at the valley wall looming over them. At treetop level, she spotted a large bird's nest, and as she watched, a bird of prey landed in it, something small and limp dangling from its claws.

Was it a hawk? Xena shaded her eyes. "Falcon." She indicated the bird.

Gabrielle trotted over and looked up. "Oh, wow." She could see the pinions as the bird spread its wings, walking awkwardly on the edge of the nest. "You think it has babies?"

"That's usually what a nest is for." The warrior remarked dryly. "Besides, she's feeding something up there."

"Hm." Gabrielle blithely ignored the sarcasm and continued watching the bird. "She's pretty." She concluded, dropping her eyes and turning them forward along their path. "And its far enough up so that we won't get pooped on."

Xena chuckled. "You still resent those seagulls, don't you?"

"Pfftp." The bard made a disparaging noise, as they walked. "They were chasing me. Lucky Dori was around to throw rocks at them, because you certainly weren't any help."

"I was busy."

"Busy laughing your butt off." Gabrielle said. "Hey, is that a passageway up there?" She pointed to a crack in the wall.

They angled for it, crossing another of the many small brooks that seemed to gush from the wall in regular intervals. The crack grew broader as they approached, wide enough for both of them to pass through together, and Gabrielle felt a sense of anticipation as they came up to it and peered inside.

"Oh.." Gabrielle said, after a moment. "Well, it's not a way out."

"No." Xena exhaled. "But it's interesting." She walked forward into the crack, which narrowed quickly at its top to a closed rock finality. The result was a long, triangular cave like space that should have

been dark, but wasn't. The ground sloped downward, and water had collected in a pool inside, and sunlight bouncing off the water reflected off the thickly encrusted crystals that lined the rock above it.

It was beautiful, in a strange, wild way. Gabrielle walked inside, peering around. Past the pool the narrow cave continued, it's flickers of light fading into utter darkness. "What do you think is back there?"

Xena cautiously followed her, reaching up to run her fingers over the crystals curiously. She wrinkled her nose, then stepped closer and licked one of the crystals. "Salt." She pronounced, with some surprise.

"Really?" Gabrielle looked over her shoulder. "Great. Break some off for me?"

"Sure." The warrior was glad enough to pause, reversing her ax and gently knocking some of the irregular crystals free. "Don't go to far back there."

"I won't." Gabrielle had edged over to where the shadows took over, and she could see no further back into the cave. "You think this goes somewhere?" She asked. "Want to get a torch and find out? Maybe there's more caves, or a chimney."

Xena walked over, juggling the crystals in one hand. She stopped at Gabrielle's side and cocked her head, sniffing the air brushing languidly across her face. After a moment she opened her mouth as well, and closed her eyes. The salt put an acrid edge on the air, but under that, and the strong smell of the water, she could detect rock, dust, and a faint hint of sulphur.

A chimney was always possible, and she'd seen these cracks in the rock leading upwards often enough. Hades, she owed her life to one of them. She didn't smell anything that would make her think so this time – at least not close to where they were.

"No, huh?" Gabrielle said.

"Hard to say." Xena admitted. "Nothing near us."

Gabrielle walked a little further into the shadows, bolstered by her partner's presence. As she moved along, she could hear her boots scuffing lightly against the rock, and the shadows seemed to press in on her. She blinked, but the darkness was impenetrable, and she stopped walking. "Hm."

"Gab?"

Gabrielle felt Xena come up behind her, and lay a hand on her shoulder. "I know, I'm coming."

"Look." Xena pointed.

The bard inhaled sharply, when she saw two glowing eyes looking back at her. "What is that?" She whispered. The eyes were round and featureless, floating about her head level from the ground. She could see no body outline around them.

Given what they'd seen in the valley so far, Xena really didn't have any confidence in a guess.

"Dunno." She took a step towards the eyes, then another.

The glowing orbs disappeared.

Xena remained still, but she shifted her grip on her ax, her heartbeat picking up a little. She strained her ears, but aside from the ripple of the water, and Gabrielle's soft breaths behind her, she could hear nothing. So, now what?

"I don't think we should go any further." Gabrielle spoke up quietly. "Not without a torch."

Xena held up her hand, as a faint sound came to her ears. It was a soft clacking, very much like bone hitting bone. It made her nape hairs prickle, and she took a step back, towards the opening, and the light. "Good idea."

They backed out, past the water, towards the opening, not turning until they were in a fairly sizable patch of reflected light.

Then they stopped dead, as they both saw the line of bodies blocking their way out of the crevice and back into the main valley. "Oh.. damn." Gabrielle blurted, bringing her staff up across her body in a defensive position. "Xena.."

"Yeah, I see em." Xena glanced behind her. She thought she saw a brief glimpse of glowing eyes, but she turned her attention forward again, to this more immediate threat.

She could see only about six of the creatures. They were shoulder to shoulder across the opening, watching them both with hungry, yet wary eyes. These were, as Gabrielle had noted, much larger than the lone male they'd last encountered, and they were more muscular, and appeared older if the thick facial hair and general burliness meant anything.

"So, now what?" Gabrielle murmured. "Talk about being stuck between some rocks and an ugly face."

Xena exhaled in disgust, setting her staff aside and hefting her ax. She eased around the edge of the pool and let her body fill the opening, squaring her shoulders as she faced off against the creatures.

The biggest of them grunted at her, a preemptory bark accompanying a sharp gesture, his stubby fingers curling towards him hand held down.

Gabrielle came up behind Xena, peeking past her elbow at the creatures. "Yow."

"Watch our backs, huh?" Xena uttered. "I don't like what I heard back there."

"Is it worse than what we see in front of us?" Gabrielle queried.

"Maybe."

Oh, yippee. Gabrielle resolutely faced away from her partner, putting her back to Xena's back and gripping her staff firmly with both hands. She anxiously searched the shadows, catching a brief glimpse of the glowing orbs before they vanished, as though sensing her watching. "Oh, that's creepy." She murmured. "Sure you don't want to trade?"

Xena regarded the creatures. The largest one had taken a step towards her, making the come hither gesture in company with an unsubtle hip thrust. "Yeah, I'm sure." She told her partner. "Swing for the glowing things if it comes close."

Yippee. Gabrielle swallowed, and focused her attention on the dark recesses of the cave. She could feel Xena shifting behind her, and hear the warrior let out an aggressive growl. "Wish I could do that."

"What?" Xena asked.

"Nothing." Gabrielle spotted the orbs again, but this time she didn't look right at them. She focused her attention ahead of her, and watched the orbs float in her peripheral vision.

Creepy.

Xena made eye contact with the big creature, and traded his imperious gesture with one of her own. She watched him take another step, then she took one herself, raising the ax to waist level and flexing her hands around it.

The creature beat his chest, as the younger one had done. It made a hollow thumping sound, and was something Xena had no interest in duplicating given her natural physical differences. So, instead, she spread her arms out wide, the ax almost grazing the stone roof, and let out a wild yell that echoed off the crystals quite satisfyingly.

The big creature glared at her, then he mimicked her arm sweep, but only managed a rough bark to counter her yell.

"Get the Hades out of here!" Xena switched to actual language. This seemed to enrage the creatures, and they all started jumping up and down, and hooting. "Gabrielle!"

"What?" The bard was busy watching floating orbs, because now there were two sets. "I'm busy!"

"It is *NOT* easier to talk instead of fight." The warrior yelled. "These stupid bastards are getting on my LAST NERVE!"

"Sorry hon." Gabrielle edged towards the first set of eyeballs, making a motion with her staff. "G'wan, get back, you!" She could hear a soft rattling, and was that a hiss, or did she imagine it? "Back!" She yelled louder. "Xena, these things are creeping me out!"

"Things?"

"There's two of them now."

"Great." Xena sighed in utter frustration. "All right.c'mon. We're going to have to fight our way out of this damn place." She started forward. "Let's go, Pounding Pauline."

"Right here." Gabrielle gladly abandoned her little nightmares and came to Xena's side, joining her as they both headed for the creatures. "Just rush them?"

"Yeah."

Good an idea as any. Gabrielle readied herself as they both broke into a jog, passing the sparkling pool and coming into the reflected light from the outside.

Xena let out another yell for good measure and lifted her ax up, threatening the creatures with it. "Ya stinking bastards! Beat it!" She bellowed, hitting a patch of sun that caught her in all her mottled furred glory.

The creatures stared at Xena, stopped hooting, and turned, running away as fast as they could, howling in fear. Warrior and bard stopped at the entrance, watching them shred foliage on their way through the trees, and turned to look at each other.

"What in the Hades was that?" Gabrielle wondered.

Xena stared at them, then down at herself. "They think I'm one of these?" She pondered, touching her catskin dress.

"Honey." Gabrielle put her staff end on the ground and leaned on it. "I don't think even those guys could be that stupid."

"Well, then I don't know w.." Xena happened to turn towards Gabrielle, and from the corner of her eye she caught sight of the forest of glowing eyeballs that were now approaching them. "Bacchae!" She grabbed Gabrielle by the arm and started after the creatures. "Move it!"

"Yahhhh!!" Gabrielle looked, and then regretted it. "What are those!"

Xena didn't know. Uncharacteristically, she really didn't want to find out. "If this is Ares' playground, you wanna get up close and personal with something that lives in a dark cave and sounds like bones rattling?"

Gabrielle didn't even have to think about it. She caught up to Xena and passed her, breaking into a very workman or workwomanline run, passing out of the crevice and turning right, heading away from where the creatures had bolted off to the left.

Xena unabashedly raced after her, glad to abandon the cave and its occupants, and hoping they didn't come out after them. If there was one thing she hated more than spiders, it was weird skeleton creatures with glowing eyes.

She just hated them. Especially since she had no idea what they were. Or where they came from.

Or why their eyes glowed.

The sun was starting to dive behind the cliff wall again. They'd have to find another place to stay the night, away from hairy and scary creatures, and hunting animals... Xena looked up as thunder rumbled overhead. And rain.

Damn it.

Romance of the road my ass.

**

It was dark by the time they found any kind of shelter. It had been raining for a candlemark, and they'd slogged the last few miles in ankle deep mud that sucked at their every step.

"Ugh." Gabrielle thumped back against the prickly bark of a downed tree, raking the wet hair off her forehead as Xena managed to get their deerskin hammered into place to protect them from the rain. The ground was soaked and muddy, and there was no where to sit down, but at least the skin kept the needle-like rain from pelting every square inch of her.

It felt good to stand still. She could feel the roughness of the tree behind her and she leaned back, glad to hang her pack off a broken branch and just listen to the storm instead of be in it. She glanced up as Xena ducked under the skin, her hair plastered down over her shoulders. "Good as it gets?"

"Yeah." Xena joined her leaning against the tree trunk. "Give me a minute, and I'll cut us a seat out of this." She patted the bark they were resting against. "Rain'll keep most things away from us."

"Mm." Gabrielle blinked, propping her boot up on the tree and letting her hands rest on her thigh. She flicked a bit of dried mud off her skin and wiggled her toes, wincing a little at the squishy, muddy sensation. There was no chance of a fire, she realized, and she reconciled herself to a cold, wet night with the only positive the fact she would be sleeping on the soft, muddy ground instead of on rocks.

Relative levels of comfort, after all. She listened to the rain pelting the forest around them, and despite the discomfort, she took heart in it because, as Xena had said, it provided them a measure of safety. She turned and studied their little nook. "Cozy."

Xena snorted softly. She'd tied off the skin from the fallen trunk to one of the roots sticking out from the bottom of the tree, and provided them with a space just about big enough for the two of them and their gear. The ground was sloped away from them, and the hide was pitched to allow the water to drip off.

She addressed her stone ax to the bark, cutting into it, then bending close to sniff the gash. The tree had only recently fallen, and she straightened in relief before she made her second cut. If the bark had been too dead and dried out, all she'd have gotten for her troubles was crumbled rubble and she really, really wanted something other than mud to sit on.

She continued to work, pausing briefly when she felt Gabrielle come up and lean against her, the bard's warm hands gently rubbing her shoulders. "What's up?"

"Nothing." The bard replied. "Just making myself useful."

Xena wasn't sure how useful that really was, but it sure felt wonderful so she wasn't about to complain. "Damn rain."

Gabrielle continued working. They'd traveled over so much ground since the scare at the crevice, it was all starting to blend together in her mind. Trees, more trees, hills, and the everpresent wall on their right, which was now beginning to angle in to join the opposite wall they could just see from the hilltops on the left.

Somewhere ahead of them, they would meet. What would they find there? Would there be some place where they could seek a way out of the valley?

Or was the woman right? Gabrielle faced the thought as she kneaded the tense muscles in her partner's back. Nah. Xena would find a way for them to get home. It would take more than a creepy old valley to hold her.

"So." Xena started to peel back her cut square of bark.

"So?" Gabrielle circled her from behind, and gave her a squeeze.

"How's everything?"

Gabrielle considered. "Well, it's wet, it's muddy, and there are probably slugs around."

Xena was silent, her hands busy with the bark. "Wasn't what I meant." She finally muttered.

"It wasn't?" The bard frowned. "What did you mean?"

Xena wrenched the bark free, then she turned in the circle of Gabrielle's arms to face her. "You say I don't get subtlety?" She asked, with a wry expression. "You bleeding yet?"

Gabrielle blinked, her head jerking back a little in surprise. "Huh?" She blurted, then realized what Xena meant. "Oh.. sheep." She hid her face against her partner's collarbone. "No."

"Ahhh." The warrior kissed her on the top of her head.

"I could just be late." Gabrielle demurred. "I am sometimes."

"True." Xena agreed. "But on the other hand, not cycling right now is a gift from the gods, so don't say that too loud."

"Ain't that the truth." The bard sighed. She hugged Xena, and felt a sense of peace come over her as the warrior hugged her back.

Xena dropped the bark down and nudged it into place with her foot. "C'mon." She dropped to her knees onto the pale, moist surface, half guiding half tugging Gabrielle along with her.

They arranged themselves as best they could, sharing the square to sit on and propping their knees up with boots planted in the damp ground. Shoulder to shoulder, they rested quietly, listening to the rain pelt down in almost absolute darkness.

After a little while, Gabrielle exhaled, and reached up to get her sack, removing it from its makeshift hook and taking it down into her lap. "Want some figs?"

"Sure." Xena anticipated the sweet, chewy treat. "Got any of that deer left?"

"A little." Gabrielle removed it by touch and separated it into two portions. She handed one to Xena along with some figs, and put a piece into her own mouth and started chewing. "Do you have any idea at all what those creepy things were? I've never seen anything like that before, Xena."

The warrior took a bite of fig and pondered the question. "I don't... well, I heard of something like that once." She amended. "Someone.. I think one of the guys I sailed with back when told us a story about a ship that was cursed."

"Like Cecrops?"

"Yeah, something like that." Xena said. "Anyway, the crew died of something, but instead of just dying, they became living skeletons. Just bones, and glowing eyes."

"Ugh."

"Guy said you could see them across the water at night. Scared hell out of the crew." She added. "Told the damn thing every night until they all were seeing ghosts everywhere."

Gabrielle chewed quietly for a minute. "So what did you do?"

"Broke his jaw."

"Mm." Gabrielle reached in and retrieved a handful of nuts, cracking one and sharing it. "You think he was telling the truth?"

"Nah." Xena shook her head. "Just a sea tale."

"But Cecrops' story was true." The bard argued. "And if you think about it, that's just as crazy sounding." She said. "I would have thought it was just a story, if I hadn't actually seen it myself."

"Maybe." The warrior conceded. "Anyway, they were there." She added. "Whatever they were."

"They scared the hooters."

Xena stopped in mid chew. "Scared the what?" She looked at her partner.

"Hooters. That's what I'm calling those guys." Gabrielle informed her. "That weird noise they make. You know."

"Hooters."

"Mm." Xena grunted. "The damn things scared me, so why not them?" She said.

"Scared me too." Gabrielle said. "Don't you think they spook easy, though? They seem to be afraid of a lot of stuff."

Xena nodded, having noticed that as well.

"Wonder what they really are." The bard mused. "I don't think they're anything Ares did, Xe."

"No?"

"No." Gabrielle said. "They're way too ugly." She glanced at her partner. "Much as I don't like him, he's got good taste."

Xena looked back at her, the barest hint of reflection off her eyes in the dim stormlight. "Was that a compliment?"

Gabrielle chuckled softly.

"I don't know, Gabrielle." The warrior sighed. "There's just so much here we just don't know about." She edged over a little, so their bodies were touching. "Every time I turn around, there's just more mysteries and fewer answers."

Gabrielle swallowed her last mouthful and dusted her fingers off. She took the half skull from the bag and leaned forward, extending her hand to catch rain runoff into the makeshift cup, waiting until it filled before she settled back and took a sip.

Xena had patiently rasped down the edges of the bone with a bit of rock, and it was smooth now and comfortable, if still creepy, to drink from. Gabrielle took another sip, then passed it over. "Well, tell you what."

"What?"

"How about I tell us both a story?"

Xena laid a hand on the bard's thigh, giving her a dimly seen fond look. "You don't have to do that. We both need some rest."

"I want to do it." Gabrielle said. "I'm tired, but not sleepy. If I tell a story, maybe I'll get my brain to agree with my body."

"Mm.. okay." Xena stifled a yawn, then stopped, and cocked her head to listen.

Gabrielle sensed it. "What?" She uttered sub vocally.

After a moment, the warrior relaxed. "There's someone out there." She uttered back.

"Hooters?"

"Probably." Xena listened intently. "Only one."

The woman? Or the boy? Gabrielle wondered. "Are they coming after us?"

"No... just out there." Xena could sense the creature not far away, but not close enough to worry her either. It wasn't moving around much, probably taking shelter as best it could just as they were. She felt Gabrielle lean against her, and exhale. "Tell *you* what."

"What?"

"How about I sing you to sleep?" Xena offered. "Haven't done that in a long time."

Gabrielle was positively charmed. "I'd like that." She replied softly. "Thank you."

Xena slid her arm around her partner's waist and waited for Gabrielle to cuddle close, as she selected a song from her admittedly small repertoire and composed herself to sing it. As the rain pattered down, she started, a gentle, sweet tune she knew Gabrielle adored.

It was an expression of love that made the surroundings irrelevant, and the skulking watcher just a point in the wind outside.

And it worked.

**

Ephiny walked into total chaos in the inn. She stopped in surprise just inside the door and just listened, watching with wide eyes as a throng of muddy, angry people all stood around the Amphipolis village elders, yelling at the top of their lungs.

"What the heck?" She turned to ask Granella, who had spotted her and skulked on over. "What's going on here?"

"They're mad." Granella said, succinctly.

Ephiny waited, then, when nothing more was forthcoming, she looked at her friend. "And?"

Granella shrugged. "They seem to think the town up here owes them compensation."

The regent's jaw dropped a little. "For what?"

"Hard to say." Granella leaned against the wall. "Something about them coming here and settling and bringing in money, and now it's all gone to crap, and so they're owed."

Ephiny's eyebrows lifted. "You have got to be kidding me."

"Nope."

The regent folded her arms over her chest. "Did someone ask them to come here?"

Granella sighed. "Well, no.. I mean, some of them just came, you know?"

"Yeah."

"But the council's been trying to get more of them in, and I guess.. yeah, some of them got talked into it." The dark haired woman explained. "But it wasn't like anyone did this on purpose. It's a damn flood." She added. "So I don't know."

"The council paid them to come here?" Ephiny asked.

"I don't think they paid them. More like promised them they'd do well."

"Ah." The regent nodded. "So now, when they've lost everything, they want the council to make good on the promise."

"Right."

Ephiny sniffed reflectively, as she watched the council try to deal with the angry merchants and lower town residents. "Bet they wish Gabrielle were here."

Granella hid a grin with her hand. "Bet they do." She agreed. "Where's Dori?"

"Up at the village." Ephiny said. "Playing with the rest of the rugrats and having a ball." She spotted Cyrene entering. "Hm."

The innkeeper saw her, and diverted her path, heading over to where the two women were standing. "Ephiny?"

"Yees?" Ephiny mimicked Xena's usual answer.

"Where's my granddaughter?"

"We cooked and ate her. Figured you wouldn't mind." Ephiny replied, with a straight face.

Cyrene sighed.

"She's up at the village with the rest of the kids." The regent relented. "We've got about a half dozen youngsters up there, and a bunch of doting aunts to watch em. She's fine." She looked around. "I figured she'd be better off there than down here with all the hubbub."

Cyrene looked around, and seemed to appreciate the sentiment. She watched the argument going on in the corner, and shook her head. "Idiots."

"Which ones?" Ephiny asked. "I'd say your council got what it deserved, myself."

Cyrene turned and looked at her in surprise.

Ephiny shrugged.

"They did what they thought was best for all of us." The innkeeper said. "No one can blame them for stirring up business.. you shouldn't say that. It's those moochers who don't deserve their time of day." She continued. "I wouldn't give them a dinar."

One of the bigger merchants stepped forward, his voice rising and his finger jabbing into the lead councilman's chest. "You listen, you useless bit of hot air! You promised me a fortune! You promised my family a nice house! Now you make good! You make good or I'll have your head!"

Cyrene exhaled. "Fools."

"Pity Gabrielle's not in charge." Ephiny remarked.

"Yeah." Granella said. "For one thing, that guy would not be poking her."

"More than once."

"Hmph." Cyrene cleared her throat. "Really, they just felt that with her traveling so much, it wasn't fair to ask her to be involved."

"Do you really believe that?" Granella asked, unexpectedly. "Even Toris doesn't."

Cyrene eyed her.

"I think they were just torked that a woman was in charge." The dark haired woman stated. "I heard them talking. It had nothing to do with Gab's traveling. They just want it all. They want to run everything, but they want them to be here to fix things when they break." She shook her head. "I felt bad for Gab. Telling her to get lost.. that hurt her."

Cyrene was silent for a bit. "I didn't think she cared." She finally said.

"How could she not care? She loves this place." Ephiny said. "It's the one spot beside tall dark and deadly she thinks of as home. Not even Potadeia is that to her." She paused reflectively. "Or our village."

"All right, all right.." The head councilman finally said, loudly. "Fine, I.. I'll make it up to you. We'll make it good. For all of you."

Cyrene turned. "What?"

"Damn straight you will!" The merchant yelled. "And you'll start it right now by putting us up! Here! My wife's not gonna sleep in the back of no wagon, like you told me!" He looked around at the group. "Right?"

"Yeah. That's not fair!" One of the other merchants agreed. "You gotta do us right!"

"O...of course. Of course." The head man turned to Cyrene. "Of course.. yes?"

"No." Cyrene replied, in a steady tone. "We're full. You know that Alaf."

Alaf made a shushing gesture. "Put someone out." The man ordered. "Can't you see how important this is?" He glared at her. "It's business!"

Everyone swung to look at Cyrene. "I'm an innkeeper." She stated flatly. "My business is to run this inn, not kick out paying customers for your whims, Alaf."

"A whim!" Alaf hissed.

Cyrene shrugged. "I'm not the one who cut the deal with them." She said. "If I recall, you deliberately cut me out of that conversation."

"Cyrene!"

"Now look!" The merchant broke in, striding forward. "You listen to me old woman.."

Granella and Ephiny reacted, cutting him off and sliding in front of Cyrene, Ephiny drawing her sword and extending it with absolutely no hesitation whatsoever. "Hold it." The regent ordered.

"Don't interfere." Alaf ordered. "This is none of your business!"

"Wrong." Ephiny contradicted him. "This inn belongs to my queen's family, and that makes it my business." She motioned the merchant forward with her other hand. "So c'mon. You want a piece of me? Think you can knock me down, big guy?"

"But.." Alaf hesitated.

"Wait your turn." Ephiny cut him off. "I'll kick your ass when I'm done with his." She turned back to the merchant. "Well? See how far your big mouth gets you with me, buster."

The merchant stared at Ephiny. "You know what the problem is in this place?" He said. "Women." He turned to Alaf. "They got you all whipped."

Alaf looked at the regent.

"Bet your ass we do." Ephiny grinned at him. "And you better thank me for keeping you from being mean to Cyrene here, because, little man – there's lots worse than me around here." She spun her sword in her hand, and then sheathed it, letting her hands come to rest on her hips and giving the two of them her very best Amazon glare.

"You can say that again." Cyrene stepped forward and edged past Ephiny. "Now, all of you lot, get out." She pointed at the door. "I don't give a damn what deals you cut with these bastards. It's not my affair, and I won't be throwing anyone out for you!"

Alaf's lips twitched. "All right. You can stay in my house." He told the man. "Come with me. We'll get things settled." He turned to leave, then turned back to Cyrene. "I'll remember this, Cyrene."

They walked out, slamming the door behind them while the rest of the merchants milled around uncertainly, and then followed, leaving the inn covered in muddy footprints, but empty of their agitated whispers.

Cyrene sighed. "This is not good."

Ephiny took a seat at one of the tables and propped a boot up on the trestle. "I thought I was pretty spiffy, actually. Haven't had to pull the cycling Amazon from Hades from my bag of tricks in a while." She rested her arm on the table. "Did it buy me a mug of ale?"

Granella chuckled. "Eph, you're too much." She went over and sat down. "But you know, I think we should go find Xena and Gabrielle."

"Thought you decided they didn't need our help?" Cyrene said, but in a mild tone that took the sting out.

"They don't." Ephiny looked up at her. "But I think we're going to end up needing theirs, here." She gestured at the window. "River's leveled. Maybe I can send a few warriors in a canoe down, see if they spot them."

"Hm." Granella murmured.

Cyrene sat down next to Ephiny. "I think that would be a very good idea." She said. "And no matter what you say, or what you think... they could be in trouble and really need the help this time."

Ephiny thought about that. "Anything's possible." She conceded. "They do get into some scrapes." She studied the edge of the table, drawing her finger along it. "Sometimes I think they manage to get out of whatever they get into by themselves because they just don't have any other option."

"Exactly." Cyrene agreed. "Listen, I know they're resourceful. I know Xena's got more tricks up her sleeve than.. than..."

"Than she has sleeves." Granella supplied, with a rakish grin. "Eph, tell you what. Let me go down the river for them. I'll take Pony." She offered. "When we find them, that way it'll be more like me going to them for help, then us trying to rescue them."

All three women were quiet for a little bit. "All right." Ephiny finally said. "Pony'd like that. She'd rather go chasing down those two than clean up the mud in the village, that's for damn sure."

Granella grinned again. "I'm sure Toris won't mind chasing after the twins instead of doing the same here."

Cyrene snorted and rolled her eyes.

"Cyrene." Ephiny tapped the table. "Are those guys going to give you a problem? I can send some featherheads down here to hang out if they are."

The innkeeper propped her chin up on her fist. "Probably. But I can grab some of Xena's boys if they get too riled up. I think they'll go just so far before they realize they really don't want to get their ass kicked in public."

"By the militia?"

"By me." Cyrene corrected, wryly. "You know, Xena *is* my daughter."

Granella and Ephiny both laughed at that. "Yeah, and if they get too nasty, I'll send Dori down here." Ephiny said. "They'll wish they were facing the Athenian army instead." She slapped Granella's arm. "Okay, deal. I'll let Pon know. C'mon up and you two can make plans."

"Gotcha." Granella nodded. "Let me go tell Toris." She got up and slipped out the kitchen door, leaving Ephiny and Cyrene alone.

"Let me get you that ale." Cyrene got up and headed for the tap. "Thanks for the show, by the way."

"I hate loudmouth jerks." Ephiny said. "Especially loudmouth jerks who do bad things to friends of mine." She accepted the mug, and sipped from it, then set it down. "And I'm really ticked off about that whole council thing with Gabrielle."

Cyrene sat down with her own mug. "Are you?" She mused. "When I heard, I thought it was a good thing.. not having them bother her." She glanced up. "Is that why they moved up the mountain?"

Ephiny stifled her first impulse, and took a steady breath instead. "Might have been one of the small reasons." She said. "But you know, Cyrene.. it really was because they can't stand the uproar. They've lived out in the wild too long."

"Hmph."

"I noticed it when they stayed by us. They just really need space." The regent said. "And... Xena told me she felt like this place wasn't her home anymore."

Cyrene looked sharply at her. "She said that to you too?"

Ephiny nodded.

"Damn it." The innkeeper shook her head. "How can I trade that for the success of all the people here?" She asked plaintively. "These people suffered during that war, and stood by us. Don't they deserve to make good now?"

They did. Ephiny had to agree with that. "Of course they do." She said. "I don't know what the answer is, Cyrene."

A loud yell penetrated the inn wall, and they both turned to look. "Well, it could be a moot point." Cyrene got up and headed for the door. "We may all be going to Hades in a wicker basket now."

Could be. Ephiny hauled herself to her feet and followed. Could very well be.

**

The air was a dark gray, and so was the sky. The only color was from the trees around them, sodden greens and the brown of moss that leant the glade a gloomy air.

Gabrielle sat cross-legged on the bark, her elbows resting on her knees as she gazed out into the pouring rain. Across from her, under a thick bush, was their Hooter friend, the young male. He was hunched under the leaves, drenched, but stubbornly watching them just as she was watching him.

He hadn't tried to come any closer, after he'd found them. He just settled in across the glade, his dark eyes fixed on them with an almost woebegone expression.

Darn it. Gabrielle wiped mist from her face for the nth time. What the heck were they going to do with him?

Xena was taking advantage of the storm to kick back and relax, her body stretched out under the tarp and her eyes closed. "Is he doing tricks yet?"

"Xena." Gabrielle reached behind her and gave the warrior a slap on the calf. "What's he waiting for, I wonder?"

"Rain to stop?"

The bard sighed. "You're such a punk sometimes."

"I'm bored." Xena answered. "C'mon over here. We can give him something more fun to watch." She nudged Gabrielle with her foot.

"I'm trying to figure out how to communicate with this guy." Gabrielle nevertheless turned and laid down on her side, draping one arm over Xena's middle. "You're not helping."

"Gabrielle." Xena opened one blue eye and peered at her. "It's raining like Hades. Besides mind reading, how much communication you think's getting done here?"

"Mm." Gabrielle snuggled closer. "I don't want to try that come here gesture again. This place isn't big enough for us, plus a wet Hooter." She lifted her head and craned her neck, spotting just a quick glimpse of their watcher as he huddled in the rain.

"Uhhuh."

"What does he want, you think?"

"A mate." Xena replied. "Must be frustrating the Hades out of him, seeing two females just ripe for the picking, and having them kick his ass."

The bard snorted softly, and buried her face into Xena's shoulder. "This would be funny if it wasn't so darn...darn.."

"Annoying."

"Frustrating." Gabrielle corrected. "That's what it is.. it's just so frustrating that all this stuff is happening to us and we're just... stuck here."

"Mm."

Gabrielle sighed, her eyes straying out to the rain. "Is this ever going to end, Xe?" She complained, feeling a light touch as the warrior's hand came to rest on her back, and began a slow massage. "I'm tired of this whole rain thing already."

Xena gazed up at the hide protecting them, and found herself fully in agreement with her partner's sentiments. The heavy downpour was getting on her nerves as well, and the misty wet that kept covering their skin was just making it worse.

She wanted to be up and gone, but having them walk in that much rain for so long was just asking for trouble, and she was a little surprised they both weren't coming down with colds already. She had no herbs for that, and if Gabrielle got the coughing sickness here..

Xena felt a chill run down her spine. In reflex, she pulled Gabrielle a little closer, hugging her. A fire was out of the question, and they'd finished off the last of their stores for breakfast. If the rain ever stopped, they'd have to go out and find or catch something, and if the rain didn't stop..

Well, she'd have to go out and find something anyway.

"What are you thinking about?" Gabrielle asked.

"Hunting."

"Ah. Romantic."

"You asked." The warrior sighed. "Damn I wish we were out of here."

"Out of this charming nest you made us? Me too." Gabrielle agreed.

"Out of this damn valley." Xena replied, in a frustrated tone. "I'm tired of not having.. anything.. I need."

"Anything?"

Xena curled her hand around Gabrielle's elbow and rubbed the skin there with her thumb. "Anything aside from you." She amended, wryly. "And all this wet's getting on my last nerve."

"Mine too."

It was enough to drive anyone crazy, the warrior acknowledged. Knowing they had so far to go to get home, and to be just sitting here.

Ah well.

Xena forced herself to just relax. She thought for a minute, then she rolled onto her side, tilting her head and giving Gabrielle a kiss on the lips. There was a hint of figs to be found there and she took her time following up on the hint.

Gabrielle hesitated, then leaned into the kiss, her body responding without any conscious direction to the familiar touch. A brief thought of their silent watcher crossed her mind, but it was just as quickly dismissed when Xena's fingers traveled around from her back across her waistline and eased between them to gently cup her breast.

She felt a jolt hit her guts, and the rain outside faded. Xena's touch always had that affect on her, even after all this time, and she was glad enough to dismiss the discomforts around her and concentrate on more pleasurable tingles instead.

Xena's fur tunic was unbelted, and she nudged a fold of it aside. She ran the tips of her fingers up the warrior's bare side, and felt the muscles just under the skin contract in reflex.

The cat skin had a musky scent of it's own, and it blended with Xena's in a not unpleasant way. Gabrielle ducked her head and kissed the warrior's collarbone, welcoming the warmth as her partner's thigh slipped between hers.

"Grrr." Xena growled softly into her ear.

Gabrielle smiled, moving her kisses slowly downward. With Xena, there was plenty of length to cover and she liked taking her time to do so, as the warrior reciprocated with teasing nips along the back of her neck.

Definitely more interesting than watching the rain. The bard felt a touch glide down her back, coming to rest on her hip for just an instant, before she felt a teasing tug on the laces of her belt.

Hm. "Xe?"

"Mm?" The warrior licked her earlobe lightly, then caught it between her teeth.

"Do I really want to moon the Hooter?"

Without even the slightest hesitation, Xena removed the catskin and draped it over Gabrielle's body. "There. Better?"

Leaving herself, of course, completely exposed. "Exhibitionist." The bard surrendered, going back to her exploration.

"My mother always says, if you got it.."

"Don't leave it out in the rain to get wrinkled." The bard completed the sentence, her gentle touch moving lower and getting a soft gasp from her partner. "So there."

"Whatever." Xena unlaced her belt and slid her skirt away, nudging her over onto her back as their bodies touched and melded.

Gabrielle flipped an edge of the catskin back over Xena's torso, just before she mostly forgot about their surroundings, and the rain, and any watchers. Her body got caught up in Xena's stroking, as desire erupted in her guts and shortened her breathing.

She used to feel shy about how she reacted to Xena, but somewhere between her growing up and them growing together, she'd dropped the blushing and just learned to really enjoy it.

Now a groan eased from her throat as Xena hit a particularly sensitive spot and she ducked her head to tease one of Xena's nipples in return, coaxing a low sound of appreciation from the warrior.

She used to feel a little awkward, and more than a little awed at being able to touch Xena like this, after so much time where they'd traveled together as friends. It had seemed amazing.

"Grr."

It had seemed unbelievable, when it finally happened.

"Ggggaabrielle."

Oh, boy, she loved it when Xena did that. "Uhhgh." And she loved when Xena said her name, too.

Ah well. She could really think of no better way to spend a rainy day than this, after all.

**

By evening, it still hadn't stopped raining. Xena sighed, tying the makeshift laces on her even more makeshift boots, and turned her head to look at Gabrielle. "You over this?"

"Way over it." Gabrielle agreed. "It's flooding under here. We can't stick around, and if I'm gonna get wet anyway, might as well be looking for another place to take shelter." The bard fastened their carriesack to her back and snugged the gut tie around her waist. "Let's go."

Mentally preparing herself for the rain, Xena stepped outside into it, and unfastened the skin they'd been huddled under. It was truly sodden, but she patiently rolled and squeezed it as she folded it into a manageable bundle.

Gabrielle stood behind her, blond hair already plastered to her head as the rain bounced off her skin and darkened her clothing. She tipped her head back, and reckoned they had a few hours of light left

to travel by, and maybe a few more if they got lucky and the rain cleared enough for the moon to come out.

The Hooter had disappeared. They weren't sure exactly when but after they'd spent a pleasant candlemark snuggling they'd gotten up to find he was no longer there watching them.

Gabrielle wasn't really sure if that was any kind of commentary or just coincidence. She glanced around, then turned her back to Xena as the warrior approached. "Put it in the sack." She said. "There's nothing else in there but some pieces of your rocks."

"It's heavy." The warrior warned.

Gabrielle turned back around and gave her partner a glare. "You are **not** going to start this." She said, firmly. "Xena, I swear, I can't handle nine months of you treating me like a piece of darn crystal."

Caught flatfooted, the warrior merely clasped the sodden hide to her chest, and blinked.

"Don't give me that look." The bard repressed a grin with difficulty. "Can you at least wait until we're sure I'm pregnant?"

Xena poked her lower lip out in a pout.

"Xeeena." Gabrielle covered her eyes. "Stooooop."

Xena leaned forward and gave her a kiss on the forehead. "Love you."

"Mmph." The bard peeked up at her, melting effortlessly at the honest sentiment she saw in the warrior's eyes. "That's not fair." She murmured. "You know exactly where to get me."

The warrior gently turned her around, and started stuffing the hide into her carriesack. "After all this time I damn well better." She pushed the lumpy load flat with one hand. "How's that?"

Darn it. It was heavy. Gabrielle felt the strap across her waist dig into her ribs. She shifted it a little, and pulled the sack higher on her shoulders. "It's okay."

"You sure?" Xena uttered, right into her ear.

"Yep." Gabrielle knew at this point, if she admitted otherwise she was going to be ribbed unmercifully, so she hitched herself up and got on with it, heading down out from where they'd taken shelter towards the wall again.

Xena caught up to her and they walked side by side, both of them using their staffs as the rain drove against them. Most of the animals were hiding from the rain, and they walked through a forest that seemed almost eerily quiet.

They had only walked for about half candle mark when they heard a soft rustling off to the right. Xena paused, and put her arm out, but Gabrielle had already stopped, lifting her staff up and sliding her hands across it at shoulder's width.

The leaves went still, then after a moment, a branch slowly moved aside, and the woman Hooter appeared, her expression wary as she studied them.

Gabrielle eased her staff back down onto the ground. "Hi." She greeted the woman. "I'm glad you came back. We didn't mean to scare you off before."

The woman Hooter stayed where she was, her eyes going with deep apprehension to Xena. "What are you?" Her voice, as before, was low and guttural, the tone hoarse.

Gabrielle turned and looked at her partner, then she turned back. "Who, Xena?" She asked. "Xena's a person. Just like I am." She studied the Hooter. "Just like you are."

Xena remained silent, her hands wrapped around her staff as she leaned on it.

"You killed a two fang." The Hooter accused.

"Sure." Gabrielle said, after a moment's hesitation. "It was trying to kill us." She explained. "We didn't have a choice."

Xena stiffened suddenly, straightening. "Watch out." She warned. "There's more around us."

Gabrielle shifted and took a step back, her eyes sweeping around them as she put a tree at her back and cleared Xena's reach. She couldn't see anything in the foliage, but she trusted Xena's senses implicitly and she lifted her staff into a defensive posture.

A hoot from her left confirmed the warrior's hearing. "Tell them not to attack us." Gabrielle suddenly said, turning towards the woman Hooter. "They're going to get hurt."

The woman licked her lips.

"I'm not kidding." The bard warned.

The woman picked up a rock. Xena and Gabrielle both tensed, and Gabrielle felt a shiver come over her skin as her body readied itself for battle. The cold rain eased, as a flush warmed her and she clenched and relaxed her hands on her staff.

The woman lifted her hand, but instead of throwing the rock, she whacked it against the tree she was crouched next to. She was answered by a hoot, and she whacked the tree again.

Gabrielle tapped Xena on the back of the leg lightly.

Another hoot. The woman cautiously edged out into view, raising her hand over her head, and making a sign with her fingers.

Xena snorted, one shoulder lifting into a half shrug. "You win."

A low, powerful hoot came from their left, and Gabrielle swiveled a little, her eyes searching the bushes intently. After a few blinks to clear the rain from her eyes, she spotted a discontinuity in the leaves, and her vision focused on a flicker of light that resolved itself into a pair of brown eyes.

There was danger around them. She could feel that. But there was danger in them also, and she hoped the Hooters realized that as well.

A rock appeared in the air. "Gab." Xena surged into motion, but the rock was closer to Gabrielle than she was, and the bard whipped her staff up and intercepted it, whacking it in the opposite direction with a loud, distinct crack.

"Nice." Xena said. "Tell them not to try that again or the next one's going up someone's ass." She told the woman Hooter directly. "That's gonna hurt."

The woman stared at Xena. Gabrielle cleared her throat gently. "I don't think she really understood that, hon." She muttered. "Tell them to stop." She repeated, in a louder voice. "If Xena could kill a two fang, your people are nothing to her."

Xena gave her a look.

The woman definitely seemed to understand that. She smacked the rock against the tree several times, with an urgency, and signed with her hand in the direction just past Gabrielle's left. The bard sensed motion, and she stepped back gracefully, turning to face the bushes but moving out of Xena's way at the same time.

Xena slid past her at the same time, tucking her staff under her arm and wrapping her fingers around it while she removed her hand ax from her belt and hefted it, her eyes fixed on where the male Hooter was hiding.

"Careful, Xe." Gabrielle took up her rear guard position, watching the rest of the undergrowth carefully. It was so thick here, it was hard to see anything past the deep green leaves, and with the rain, hard to hear anything in them as well.

The woman Hooter banged her rock again, and signed, and hearing an answering hoot, finally got so frustrated she stood up out of the bushes and let out a scream so loud it made Xena grimace.

The male hooted angrily. The woman threw the rock at him, the stone tearing through the leaves and disappearing. She screamed again, and signed with both hands.

Xena paused, waiting to see what was going to happen. "Keep your eyes open." She warned Gabrielle.

"Don't worry. I've got you covered." The bard answered.

After a brief silence, the male Hooter stood up, his head rising out of the brush as he faced off against Xena. He was the largest of them, almost as tall as the warrior, with thick, very broad shoulders and a powerful chest.

He smacked his chest with one hand, and hooted at Xena, tossing his head with an almost arrogant air – only to dissolve into startled fear when the warrior leaped at him, letting out a yell of her own and swinging her ax at his head.

He scurried off quickly, hiding behind a tree and staring at her.

Xena twirled her ax and snorted. "Typical."

The woman Hooter dashed out from behind her tree and raced over to where the male was, signing furiously at him. Her attitude, though, was one of fear, and as she reached him, she crouched down and held her hands over her head.

Gabrielle watched them in fascination, trying to figure out what they were saying to each other with mostly body language and a few signs.

Only a few. But they were communicating, and she felt proud of herself for understanding the possibility of that despite what her partner had thought. It was a rare thing to have Xena be wrong and at least now, after all this time, she freely admitted it when it did happen.

But only to Gabrielle. "We really don't want to hurt you." She called out to the woman. "We're just trying to get out of here."

The male glared at them, then he surprisingly hunkered down next to the female, hooting softly at her. The female signed something at him, with a small grunting noise of her own. He jerked his head up twice, then backed up, going behind a tree again and watching Xena.

"Now what?" Gabrielle muttered.

"Guess we'll find out." Xena took a few steps back, closer to Gabrielle. "At least they're not just attacking us."

"Mm."

The woman got up and ambled over towards them. When she got close, she sat down on the ground, and did the same thing she'd done with the males, held her hands over her head.

Xena turned and looked at Gabrielle. "Any ideas?"

Gabrielle studied the woman. "I think that means... she wants to talk to you." She said. "Go over and kneel down next to her."

The warrior looked dubious, but she complied, easing down on one knee cautiously. "If she bites me, you're gonna never hear the end of this, Gabrielle."

"If she tries, I'll knock her block off." Gabrielle replied shortly. She edged up behind her partner and waited, her hands clasped around her staff.

The woman stayed in her hunched position. Xena turned her head and looked questioningly at the bard, her eye brows hiking up.

"Touch her hand." Gabrielle said.

Obediently, Xena did so, drawing her own back quickly when the woman straightened and peered at her, though the rain that now came down in sheets over both of them. "Well?" She asked. "I know you can talk. So talk."

The woman Hooter gazed steadily at her. "Come with us." She said. "See what we are."

Oo. Gabrielle felt the dual strong tugs of caution and curiosity. "Where?" She asked, but the woman didn't even look at her.

"Where?" Xena repeated.

The woman pointed in the general direction of the wall. "Our place."

Xena stood and backed up. "I don't like it."

"Me either." Gabrielle put a hand on her arm. "But chances are, it's out of the rain." She said. "And maybe, if we can figure out who these people are... they'll just leave us alone, and we can get on our way. It's hard with them chasing us."

"Mm." Xena grunted. "It's dangerous, Gabrielle. They're wild.. almost wild animals."

Gabrielle studied the creatures. Xena was right about that, she realized, but there was some level of understanding there. "We can handle it." She finally said. "I think we should take the risk."

Xena considered that for a moment. She tipped her head back and looked at the clouds, which were only getting darker, and heavier. "All right." She finally said. "I still don't like it, but.. " She looked at the woman. "Okay." She said. "We'll go."

An expression of relief came over the woman's face, and she got up, motioning them to follow. Xena stepped in front of her and held a hand up. "Hold it." She watched the woman cringe and back up. "If anyone tries to hurt us." She said, slowly. "I will kill them. You understand me?"

Slowly, the woman nodded.

"All right. Let's go." Xena motioned for Gabrielle to go in front of her. "I'll watch your back."

Gabrielle nodded and followed the woman, aware of the silent figures gliding through the trees on either side of them. Thunder rolled over head, and she wondered, briefly, if they weren't making a very big mistake.

Hoots went up around them. Gabrielle sighed and clutched her staff. Guess she'd have to wait and find out.

**

It was nearly nightfall by the time they reached the Hooter shelter. It wasn't quite a cave, much to Xena's relief, it was more of a long, extended overhang back into the cliff face, that showed some signs of having been chipped out by unskilled hands.

There was a long, rocky slope filled with loose gravel in front of it, and the brush had been cleared back to allow a view of anything approaching. Xena caught all these details, and she nodded slightly, her estimation of the Hooter's intelligence creeping up a notch.

As they walked into the cleared space, the male Hooters appeared from the forest around them, slouching by and into the shelter with dark looks and wary distance. The biggest one alone took his time, stalking up the slope and pausing at the entrance to look at them, before he went inside as well.

"We okay?" Gabrielle uttered softly. "Looks pretty open."

"Mm." Xena grunted a response, putting a hand on her shoulder. "I think we're all right. Just be very, very careful." The male Hooters still made her wary, but they'd kept their distance the entire walk, and showed every sign of continuing to do so.

Xena wasn't sure if going inside their lair would change anything, but at least they had a clear escape path, and by her count, only about a dozen of the Hooters were inside, a number she felt they were capable of dealing with.

"Wonder where the rest of them are?" Gabrielle asked, as they approached the cliff overhang.

"Reading my mind?"

The bard chuckled softly, easing inside and blinking at little while her eyes adjusted to the additional gloom, that yet wasn't as dark as she'd expected. "Oh. Xena, look."

The warrior ducked her head to one side and peered at the roof of the overhang, which was dotted with tiny, glowing specks. They didn't shed a lot of light, just a soft eerie glow but it was something other than darkness. "Huh."

"It's pretty." Gabrielle edged further inside as her vision adjusted. The overhang was sheltering a range of different levels of stone, and it went back for maybe ten of Xena's outstretched arm lengths. There were piles of leaves in various places, matted down and roundish and near each one were small collections of stones and other items.

Nests? She watched the Hooters separate and go to the leaf piles, confirming her guess. There was little else in the shelter save some stacks of twigs and a few animal bones and she supposed they lived day to day on what they found much like she and Xena had often done when traveling.

Or now.

The male Hooter went to the top level nearest the cavern roof, in the back and sat down in his pile of leaves, folding his arms over his knees and glaring morosely at them.

"Come." The woman told them, gesturing towards a shelf off to one side.

Xena cast a dark look around the cavern, but followed her, with Gabrielle at her heels. The shelter smelled about like she'd expected, dusty and rank, the scent of long decayed kills mixed with refuse and worse that thankfully wasn't too overpowering due to the open nature of the overhang.

She could smell water somewhere, a richly mineral scent that tickled her nose, and as they stepped further inside the overhang, the rain finally stopped drenching them much to her relief.

One of the males hooted loudly. The others responded, and two stood up, gesturing angrily at each other. The big male in the back let out a bellow, and after a few breaths, the sound subsided.

"Nice." Xena sighed.

"Stay here." The woman rasped. She crawled up onto one of the ledge and gathered something to her, then she ambled back into the open space, heading for the big male's nest.

Gabrielle watched her, easing down onto one knee as water dropped off her clothing onto the stone. This was like nothing she'd ever seen, not even the cave of the throwback forest people had been like that. The difference, she realized, was that the forest dwellers were acting in a certain way because they wanted to where these creatures were what they were just because they were.

It felt very wild, and very dangerous to be here. She felt tense, and she knew Xena was even more so. The warrior was standing between her and the rest of the room, her weight resting on her staff and her eyes moving constantly.

And yet, here was something completely new to both of them. Gabrielle had to admit that situation didn't happen nearly as often as it used to, and it touched the spirit of adventure inside her. One of the most exciting things she'd felt about traveling with Xena when they'd first met was that every sunset of her life then had ended someplace new.

There was something very appealing about that, especially to a newly minted bard.

She sat down on the stone, letting the pack on her back rest and taking the weight off her shoulders. Now that she'd gotten used to the soft glow, she could see details around her, smudges on the rock wall in the back that looked like the images she'd seen before, and the few animal skins stretched on frames made of branches stacked off to one side.

A low hoot made her look back at the woman. She had stopped next to the big male, and crouched down, with the now familiar posture of hands over head. The sight made Gabrielle's face twitch into an almost grimace, and she half stood back up as the big male slapped at her hand.

Xena reached back and put a hand on her shoulder without even looking. Gabrielle moved forward and came up next to her, feeling the hand shift across her back as Xena's arm draped over her shoulders instead. They stood watching as the female crawled forward and put down a bundle in front of the male.

The male pushed the bundle aside, and grabbed the female, twisting her around and mounting her sexually. He let out a hoot and bared his teeth, thrusting energetically.

Both Xena and Gabrielle surged forward as if they were one person. Gabrielle yelled a warning as they ran across the rocks towards the two of them.

One of the smaller males got up and jumped at Xena as she came close, only to be whacked across the head by the warrior's staff with a crack that resounded across the cavern.

"No!" The woman gasped. "No.. no stop!" She held a shaking hand up in the oncoming warriors direction. "No!" She looked behind her at the male, who had frozen in place, his eyes huge.

Realizing they were being addressed, Xena slowed, holding out one arm to catch Gabrielle as she almost lunged past. "What?"

"It is the way." The female told them. "Go back."

The other males started hooting, standing up and waving their arms. The sound echoed and re-echoed, beating down on their ears as Xena and Gabrielle exchanged glances.

"Go!" The woman begged.

Slowly, they retreated back to the side alcove together. The chaos went on for a few minutes, then faded out as the big male started his thrusting again, grunting lustily.

"Xena." Gabrielle sat down on the edge of the rock. "'I'm not sure I can handle this.'" She admitted softly, feeling a flush of guilt heat her skin.

The warrior sat down next to her, a perplexed expression on her face. "Me either."

Gabrielle looked at her, seeing the angular profile tense in the dim glow. "Really?"

"Yeah."

Gabrielle averted her eyes from the two Hooters. "Should we just get out of here?" She asked. "How... that's horrible."

Xena reached up and scratched the bridge of her nose, then pinched it. "Just close your eyes." She finally said. "I don't want us back out in that damn storm."

It was over before she could really do it. Gabrielle heard the male cough, and she looked up in reflex to see the woman headed back down towards them with that odd, shambling gait. The male was now sprawled in his leaf bed, busy eating something out of the bundle she'd brought him. "Gods."

Xena put her arm around her partner again, pulling her close. "Just take it easy." She said. "We'll get through this."

Gabrielle rested her head against Xena's shoulder.

The woman Hooter reached them and sat down, staring at them in the dim light. "This is our way." She rasped. "You should not have hurt the crooked one."

Xena glanced at the Hooter she'd clobbered, who was curled up in his nest moaning. "He shouldn't have jumped at me." She said, bluntly. "Why did you want us to come here?"

Gabrielle untied the pack from her back and let it slide off her shoulders. "We're sorry if we did something wrong. We were trying to help you."

"You do not understand." The woman wrapped her arms around her knees. "He honors me by doing that." She said. "I have not sprouted in many moons. But I still hope for it."

Sprouted? Gabrielle's brow creased, then cleared as she realized what the woman meant. Xena was remaining quiet after her last statement, her hands busy untangling Gabrielle from the pack and working it free. "Sorry." She murmured. "Do you have... children?"

The woman looked over her shoulder. "They are there." She said, in a disinterested tone. "Those that live."

Xena handed Gabrielle a pear from the pack, and took one for herself. The Hooters here were all males, save this one woman. "Where are the rest?" She indicated the cavern. "I saw more."

"Many places." The woman answered evasively.

"Is this.. a hunting group?" Gabrielle asked. "I noticed it's all males.. except for you."

The woman looked furtively at her, but didn't answer.

The other males rustled around, some going over to where the stretched hides were and scrounging in a shallow rock pit there, taking away dark, filthy looking bones. One came over to stare at them, then slunk away, something square clutched in one fist.

Xena chewed on her pear slowly. She paused, and indicated the back wall, where very dimly, the dark pictographs were just barely visible. "What are those?"

The woman looked behind her, then she looked back at Xena. "Only the old one knows." She said. "And he tells no one."

"Then what's the point?" Gabrielle asked. "Those pictures tell a story, I know it." She went on. "And if no one's meant to know the story, why tell it?"

The woman stared at her in silence.

"Why do you speak, and they don't?" Xena asked suddenly.

For a minute, Gabrielle thought the woman wasn't going to answer that question either. Then she lifted her head, an oddly proud gesture, and looked directly at Xena.

"It is my gift." She said. "The old one told us."

That made no sense. Gabrielle felt the strangeness of the situation getting more and more pronounced. Paladia's ability to draw was a gift. Her own ability to tell stories was a gift. Xena's voice.. her ability to sing. That was a gift.

Speaking wasn't a gift. It was something you learned, as Dori had learned from them how. Gabrielle understood that in a very real way, and so, what the woman was saying to her – she knew that wasn't true.

"Where is the old one?" Xena asked.

"At another place." The woman answered briefly. "With others."

Xena finished her pear and took out a handful of nuts, the results of some very meager gathering they'd been able to do on the way to the overhang. She cracked one open, and picked out a nutmeat, handing it over to Gabrielle.

"What you do?" The woman suddenly asked. "Why?"

Gabrielle paused in the act of taking the nut. "What?" She put the nut in her mouth and chewed it. "Why did she give me that?"

"Why? You are the strong one." The woman indicated Xena.

Xena cracked another nut and shared it. "So?"

The woman seemed nervous. She got up and edged away from them, going over to sit on a nearby ledge in silence. After a bit, she turned her head. "Do not show the big one." She whispered, then went silent again and ignored them.

Xena stolidly shared the rest of her nuts, and then a few lonely, tattered figs she found at the bottom of the bag. "Gotta admit." She mused. "I haven't been this confused since I was six years old."

Gabrielle sighed. "Well, that makes me feel better."

"Figured it would."

One of the younger males hopped over and stared at them, with an obvious physical arousal. Xena picked up her staff and got up. "Tell lover boy he'll lose his manhood if he gets any closer." She told the female, but before the woman could answer, the big male barked gruffly, and threw a rock at the younger male.

The younger male retreated, but not without a protesting hoot. Xena sat back down, and glared at the rain still pouring down outside. "Know what?"

"Me too." Gabrielle pulled her legs up crossed under her. "Gonna be a long night." But her mind was caught with the riddle of the creatures, and now, with so many more confusing clues, the puzzle seemed only to be getting bigger and bigger with every minute.

Oh well. At least they weren't attacking them any more. Maybe, she reasoned, if they could get to talk to the 'old one' - the puzzle pieces would begin to fit in place. Maybe they could even find an easy way out.

Thunder rolled. Gabrielle sighed, and leaned against Xena's shoulder. At least they had each other, and a dry spot to rest.

Better than nothing.

**

One Wild Ride

Part 9

Dori dragged a chair over to the window and climbed up on it, putting her hands on the sill and looking out. Her face wrinkled in displeasure when she saw the weather outside. "Uck."

Ares hauled himself up onto his hind legs and put his paws next to her hands, his big pink tongue lolling out. "Agurr."

"No good, Guff." Dori said. "Too wet. N'body wants to go play." She lamented to her furry buddy. "We gots nothing to do."

Ares licked his chops and snuffled the air. The puppies had been left down near the inn by a prudent Ephiny and the cabin was very quiet. The Amazons had run down to the village for a quick check on things, and left Dori to her own devices for a while, after extracting a promise from her that she'd 'be good.'

Mama said that all the time. Be good. Dori wondered what it really meant. She always just said okay when someone asked her, and then did fun things anyway, but mama never really got mad about that.

She missed mama. She wished mama was here to tell stories, and she wished Boo was here just because Boo made everything more fun.

She missed hearing mama and Boo laugh. It was so quiet without them around.

Dori got down and sat on the chair, kicking her feet out. She was bored. She wished they were back in Eff's place, so she could play with the girls, or down by grandma's so she could be with her cousins. "Guff, you are not fun."

"Growf." Ares sat down and panted.

Dori reached out and grabbed his tongue and pulled it. Ares whined and waggled his head, making her laugh. "Funny Guff." She released him and scratched his ears instead, making him happy.

Dori went over to where her toys were and looked at them, then she went over to the table and climbed up onto a chair, pulling Gabrielle's diary over to her. She knew it was her mother's, and she also knew mama really liked it. She couldn't mess it up, or mama would be real mad at her.

She opened the top and looked at a few pages, turning them, but the squiggly lines were pretty boring. She looked at the first page again. "Dis one's different, Guff."

Ares laid down and put his head on his paws.

The squiggles on the hard side were different than the squiggles on the soft side. Dori wondered why. Frowning, she got off the chair and went to where mama kept her feathers, even though mama thought she hid them real good.

She got out a feather and the little jar and brought them back to the table. "Mama does this." Dori announced, dunking the pointy part of the feather into the jar and pulling it back out. It was covered in black, and it had a funny smell she knew. "Yes."

Ares sighed.

Dori industriously copied mama, finding a space on the bottom of the inside page and making squiggles. When she finished, she looked at her work, then put the feather down. "Donno why mama does that, Guff."

Ares rolled over and stretched out on his side, his paws twitching a little.

"Wish mama were here." Dori got up and wandered around the cabin. "Want mama and Boo." She stopped in front of the wooden chest near the back wall and opened the lid, standing on her toes to peek inside. It smelled nice, and she saw why. "Boo!"

Ares sneezed.

"Look!" Dori hauled out a set of folded brown leathers, grunting with the effort of getting them out of the box. "Look, Guff. Boo's stuff!"

The wolf trotted over and sniffed it, and his tail started to wave back and forth.

Dori dropped the leathers and went back to the box, to see what else she could find. She spotted a boot and pulled it out, then found the other. She leaned over and her hands touched more leather, but this time it was hard. "Oh!"

"Growf!"

Dori fit her hands around the thing she'd found and she picked it up carefully, getting it to the top of the chest before she overbalanced and ended up on her bottom, the thing on top of her. "Owie!" Dori let out a yelp, rubbing her head where the sword hilt had hit it. "No good!"

But at least she had it. She sat with Boo's thing in her lap and looked at it, touching the round part at the end that was curled and pretty. It was harder to hold onto than she thought - Boo picked it up so easy. Experimentally, she fit her hand around the round part and tried to lift it, but it took both hands and all her strength to do it. "Ugh!"

Ares merely twitched his eyebrows, watching her.

Dori put Boo's thing down. "Too hard." She got up and went back to the leathers instead. She unfolded them and crawled inside, sticking her head out of the hole in the top. "Look, Guff!" She waved her arms out the side. "Like Boo!"

Ares thumped his tail.

Dori stood up, grabbing the straps when Boo's stuff tried to fall off her. She shuffled forward, heading for Ares with a giggle. "Boo boo boo.."

Ares got up as she approached and came over, snuffling at her and bumping her with his nose.

"Yahhh!" Dori lifted her hands and let out a yell.

"Erf!" Ares scuttled out of the way and hid behind the bed.

"You a big chicken!" Dori accused, shuffling back over to where the boots were. She sat down again and pulled one on the wrong foot, the leather coming up to the very top of her leg. She observed the result, and pulled the other one on, then tried to get up.

"Guck. Guff, c'mere." Dori grunted, flailing around with her arms. Her hand hit the chair, and she pulled it over, nearly pulling it on top of herself. "Ow."

"Gruff!"

"Shh." Dori used the back of the chair as a handhold and pulled herself up, until she was standing. She gripped the straps and shuffled forward, the boots clunking on the floor. "Ugh!" She frowned. "Guff, this is no fun." She complained. "Too hard!"

Ares wisely remained behind the bed.

A sound outside caught Dori's attention. Someone was coming to the cabin, but it was only one person, and it wasn't Boo or mama. She wasn't really sure how she knew it wasn't, but she knew and it made her sad.

The door opened. Dori turned towards it and spread her arms out, making her yell again. "Yahh!!"

Eff stopped and made a very funny face.

Dori reached down and grasped Boo's heavy thing and picked it up. "I go like Boo!"

Eff put her hand over her mouth and she started shaking.

"Boo, Boo Boo!" Dori said. "Eff, c'n we go find mama and Boo, please?"

Eff came in and sat down. She held her arms out. "C'mere, Dori. You've just made it impossible for me ever to look Xena in the face and not laugh, but I love ya anyway."

Dori amiably ambled over and accepted the hug. "C'n we go get mama?" She asked again. "I miss mama."

"I know, honey." Eff said. "You know what? I sent Poo Poo and Granella out to find your mama and your Boo. How do you like that? They'll find them, and bring them back to us."

"Poo poo?" Dori felt a little sad about that. Poo Poo wa fun. "Will they get mama soon?"

"Soon as they can." Eff said. "Now, where'd you get all this stuff from, huh?"

"Dere." Dori pointed at the chest. "Boo's stuff."

"I know." Eff smiled. "You look just like Boo. You know that?"

Dori grinned. "Boo!"

Ephiny gave the child another hug. "Gods, you're so cute." She exhaled. "I'm only sorry your mama and Xena weren't here to see you in this getup. They'd have croaked."

**

Xena was really glad of only two things. One, that she was near enough to freedom to feel the mist of the rain hitting her skin, and that she'd relaxed all day before they'd left so she could stay up all night on watch.

The creatures were getting so on her nerves, she wasn't sure what to do with herself. They had settled down for the night, she supposed, leaving two of the bigger ones near the entrance on the other side to watch.

The woman had curled up on the bare rocks near the stores.

Gabrielle was curled up in Xena's arms, not quite asleep, but not quite awake, either. Xena had laid her ax, and the staff by her hand, but her left arm was around her partner, the warm contact providing her with as much comfort as she'd allow herself in this strange and dangerous situation.

She wished they were home. Xena felt the uncertainty of the situation weighing on her, and the longer they spent in the valley, the more the thought of them not getting out niggled at the back of her mind. She'd seen no easy way to the top of the cliffs so far, and more and more the possibility of there not being one was becoming likely.

So then what? Xena nuzzled the top of Gabrielle's head, as she felt the bard exhale softly against her neck. Was Gabrielle thinking about Dori, as she was? Wondering what the child was up to, and imagining what she was thinking?

She felt Gabrielle shift a little, her fingers flexing against the warrior's skin. "Gab?"

"Mm?"

"Can't get to sleep?"

After a moment's hesitation, the bard shook her head. "My brain's buzzing." She admitted.

"Me, too."

"I wish we weren't in here." The bard whispered. "Theres just something so wrong in this place."

Xena hugged her a little closer. "If it wasn't raining, we'd go." She replied. "We'll get outta here first light, Gabrielle. I promise."

The bard sighed and closed her eyes. "I feel like throwing up."

The warrior patted her on the side with a gentle hand. "Think positive. Maybe it's morning sickness."

Almost against her will, Gabrielle smiled. "It's the middle of the night."

"Never mattered last time."

"Mm.. except you were the one who was sick all the time." The bard reminded her. "Not me." She paused. "Well, except a couple times."

"Mmhm."

Gabrielle remembered being pregnant with Dori, and the thought made her smile again. "Ah.. it's not that kind of stomach ache." She said, in a regretful tone. "More the tied up in knots kind."

"Mm." Xena grunted. "Yeah."

"You too?"

"Yeah."

"Maybe we're both pregnant." Gabrielle suddenly suggested. "Wouldn't that be weird?"

Unseen, Xena's eyes popped wide open as she stared across the cavern. "Weird?"

"Well." The bard said. "Weirder than just one of us being, I mean. That's weird enough, don'tcha think?"

Xena now found her mind wholly occupied with a problem of a different nature. What if Gabrielle were right? There was no logic behind the bard getting pregnant this time, so what.. what if whatever.. magic.. was involved just got..

Xena blinked a few times. "I never considered that." She finally admitted, in a low mutter.

Gabrielle could plainly hear the increasing heartbeat under her ear. "Are you freaking out?"

"No."

"Yes, you are." The bard patted her on the side. "Forget I suggested it.. I don't know what I was thinking."

"I'm not freaking out."

Gabrielle lifted her head slightly. "Xe, I can hear your heart in there rattling."

Xena sighed.

"Just chill out." Gabrielle interlaced her fingers with the warrior's and lifted her hand to kiss Xena's knuckles. "You can't be pregnant."

Xena rested her chin on the bard's head, relaxing slightly. "Yeah." She agreed. "You're right."

"Mm."

They were both silent for a while. Then Xena cleared her throat. "Why can't I?"

Gabrielle's eyes were twinkling invisibly. "Because, oh love of my life, I would never in six lifetimes live that down. So you can't be pregnant, because I am so not going to spend the rest of my life getting 'those looks' from every single person we know."

Xena couldn't help it. She started chuckling, bouncing the bard a little. "Hey, I have to put up with it."

"No, you don't, because people don't give you those looks, Xena. You're Xena, remember? I'm not. I can just hear Ephiny now. 'heh heh heh, Gabrielle.. didn't think ya had it in yah!'" The bard mimicked their friend's tone exactly. "Oh no. Nuh huh."

Xena laughed harder.

"They won't say that to you, because you'll hit them." Gabrielle went on. "And can you imagine your mother? Thank the gods we're married.. I can just see her pinning me to the wall wanting me to make an honest woman out of you if we weren't."

It was too much. The laughter finally erupted audibly, and Gabrielle joined in, the sound echoing in the cavern weirdly and causing the creatures to all jerk and sit up, coughs and hoots rising in alarm.

Xena leaned her head back against the rocks and enjoyed the moment, even the chaos they were causing around them. At the very least, it would make the night shorter, and really, what more could she ask than that?

For now, anyway.

**

Gabrielle stepped out of the cavern and into the sunlight, feeling the warmth and heat on her face and once again reveling in it. It felt so good to be away from the creatures, and out here in the clean air – the night had lasted forever and the rain had only stopped just before dawn.

To her surprise, she had fallen asleep after all. Gabrielle stretched her body out and sighed. "I'm such a darn lucky little sheep's tail." She mused, knowing Xena hadn't slept a wink in order to guard both of them and wishing she had something to reward her partner with.

A loud noise behind her made her turn and her body went into an instinctive crouch as she looked quickly around for a weapon as the male creatures all started pouring out of the cavern. She'd only taken a step towards a rock nearby when Xena bounded out, shoving creatures out of her way like they were jackstraws.

The two nearest the warrior turned and howled at her, but Xena bellowed right back at them, her temper showing in flashing blue eyes and show of neat white teeth as she got between them and Gabrielle.

With her catskin dress, hide boots and wild hair, it was hard for Gabrielle to say whether she, or the creatures seemed more animal-ish. "Xena!"

"Get back ya little bastards." Xena lifted her ax in one arm.

The Hooters hooted at her, jumping up and down and yelling. Gabrielle took the opportunity to get the rock she'd spotted and she came up behind her partner and put a hand on her back. "Easy, tiger."

The biggest male emerged, letting out a very loud bark. The others turned to look at him. For a moment, the big male glared at Xena over their heads, showing his teeth.

Xena growled right back at him, twirling her ax and bristling with aggression.

The male beat his chest with both hands and barked

"Hon, don't do that back." Gabrielle suggested hastily. "I don't want to see those bruises."

Xena glanced sideways at her, then returned her attention to the male. Instead of beating herself, she made a rude hand gesture at him. "Beat it!" She yelled.

The male yelled back, then lifted his hand and made dismissive gesture at her. He barked, and started off into the forest, clearly expecting the rest of the troop to follow him. Several did, but three or four others remained facing off against Xena, sniffing the air and hooting softly.

The male reached trees, and turned, spotting them. He yelled in rage. The younger males near Xena half turned, hesitating. Clearly, they wanted to stay near the cave, and one barked back at the big male in defiance.

The rest took courage from that, and also resisted the gesture to come.

The result was horrifying. The big male rushed back towards them with a loping, powerful run, and when he reached the first of them he grabbed him by the neck, and bit him in the face, tearing a huge chunk out of his cheek and shaking his head like a dog with a bone.

The younger male screamed in pain. The bigger one threw him down on the ground and kicked him. Then he gestured towards the trees and glared at the rest of them. Chastened, they shied away from him, and started heading towards where the rest of the troop was waiting.

The big male looked at Xena, and spat a mouthful of skin and blood on the ground before he turned and stalked off, leaving the grievously injured male on the ground writhing.

"Nice." Xena's lips twitched into a grimace. "Let's get out of here."

"Xena." Gabrielle gave her back a little rub.

"What?"

"You can't just leave him there like that." The bard said.

"Sure I can." The warrior turned and looked at her. "For one thing, I don't have any healing supplies, and for another, I ain't getting my fingers bit off, thanks."

Gabrielle frowned. "I don't think.. he's going to be biting anyone, Xe." She replied in a serious tone. "But you know something? I think we need every ally we can get here, and maybe he'd be one if you helped him."

Xena started to reply, then abruptly bit off her response when the woman Hooter emerged from the cavern. She half turned her body and put a hand on Gabrielle's shoulder. "I think we should get out of here." She uttered softly. "There's nothing here in our favor."

The bard gazed steadily at her. "You're saying that because you think I'm pregnant, and you don't want me in danger."

Xena closed her eyes. "Gabrielle."

"Yes?"

The warrior opened her eyes again, to find that same even stare facing her, the visible will behind it nevertheless colored with deep affection. "Now, you listen to me." She put her other hand on Gabrielle's other shoulder.

Gabrielle poked her in the stomach with her index finger. "Go help him."

"Gabrielle."

"Go." The bard leaned closer and gave her a kiss on the lips. "Trust me."

It was long, long past the days when Xena could have reacted to the bard's stubbornness with any real anger. It was, as Xena had told her, just who Gabrielle was and she didn't see that changing anytime soon.

Nor would she want it to. It was that crazy empathy with even the strangest, wildest, nastiest creatures that had saved Xena's life way back when, back in Amphipolis, when a scruffy blond half grown girl had taken up for an almost total stranger and changed both their lives.

However. "No." She told Gabrielle gently. "We need all the time we've got here to get as far away as we can, sweetheart. Let's go."

Now it was Gabrielle who was caught in a bind, her instincts warring with the knowledge that if Xena was talking to her the way she was, this was something she shouldn't question.

The Hooter woman chose that moment to slouch up next to them, putting off the decision for a moment. "Hi." Gabrielle turned to her. "Thanks for letting us share a roof last night."

The woman blinked at her, but didn't answer.

Gabrielle glanced at the wounded Hooter. "What happens to him, now?" She pointed.

The woman shrugged. "Dies, maybe." She didn't sound that interested. "No good hunter."

The callusness chilled her. "Don't you care?"

The woman looked at Gabrielle in puzzlement.

Xena put her hands on her partner's shoulders. "Let's go." She said firmly. "We've got to get home."

"You cannot leave." The woman said. "There is no way."

"We'll find one." Xena replied. "You just didn't look hard enough."

Gabrielle leaned back, her shoulders brushing Xena's body. "Why were you trying to get out?" She asked. "If these are your people, and this is your home... why escape?"

The woman glowered at her. "I didn't want to." She said. "My mother did." She turned and shuffled away. "She died trying. You will die also."

Xena and Gabrielle exchanged glances. "Do you care?" Gabrielle finally called after her. "If we die?"

The woman stopped and looked back. "If you die, we die." She answered, and then she turned and disappeared into the cave again.

Gabrielle put her hands on her hips. "What in the heck does that mean?"

Xena snorted softly. "I don't give a damn. Lets go." She turned and started off, catching Gabrielle around the wrist and tugging her along. She already had their pack strapped to her back and had every intention of putting as much space between them and the cave as she could.

"Xe."

Xena felt the resistance to her pulling and she stopped, giving the forest a plaintive look before she turned back around. "What?"

Gabrielle gently disengaged Xena's fingers from her wrist. "I can't leave him here like that." She told her partner. "So if you want to go, go. I'm staying." She took a step backwards, as if to emphasize the decision, her eyes locked with the warrior's.

She hated doing that to Xena. She could see the shifting emotions in the warrior's face, so incredibly expressive in spite of her usual stoic manner. There was anger there, which she knew was justified, and a touch of hurt, which made Gabrielle wince a little in sheer reflex.

A touch of fear, too, which she herself felt whenever she had to be at odds with Xena because of what happened way back when and even though she had faith in their relationship, there was always that chance...

She wasn't looking for another broken heart. She'd barely survived the last one, But she also knew she couldn't leave the creature to die on the forest floor either, without at least trying to help him.

What would Xena do? Gabrielle felt her stomach knot as she waited, her heartbeat thumping in her ears, already half regretting what she was doing.

Xena's shoulders dropped a trifle, and her head tilted a bit to one side. Gabrielle felt a quivering sense of relief as she read the body posture and the warrior lifted both hands and let them drop in visible exasperation.

Good sign. If Xena had straightened up instead, and given her 'that look' – Gabrielle knew she might have been in real trouble. But this was just ordinary warrior piss-off and she knew she could get around that later.

She lifted one hand and made a sign at her partner, adding a wry grin to it that acknowledged she was possibly doing something stupid.

Xena put her hands on her hips and raised an eyebrow at her.

"As if I'd leave you here." Xena shook her head and loosened the straps on the pack she wore, following Gabrielle over to where the creature was still writhing on the ground. Her instincts were warning her against staying, but her heart pushed that aside in deference to Gabrielle's desire to help and wasn't that how they got into most of the pickles they got into?

Ah well.

Gabrielle slowly approached the creature, kneeling down and holding her hand up when he started to cringe and roll away from her. "It's okay." She spoke softly. "I'm not going to hurt you."

The injury was horrific. Half his face was hanging down, showing a huge gap where blood was pouring steadily. His eyes were huge and frightened, and they fastened on her intently. He held his hands up as if to ward her off.

"Xe, you can fix that. Can't you?" Gabrielle asked, as the warrior knelt down next to her.

Xena remained silent for a moment, her pale eyes studying the creature. He had let his head rest against the ground, the loss of blood weakening him, and his hands dropped to the ground in what appeared to be resignation. "Maybe." She finally said. "If he'll let me."

"Hm."

Xena let the pack slide to the ground, and cautiously, she eased closer to the creature. He stared at her with frightened, pained eyes, his body twitching with pain.

She lifted a hand towards him, and he whimpered, trying to roll away from her. "See what I mean?"

"He's scared."

"I'm impatient." Xena pounced on the hapless creature, pinning his body down with her own and kneeling on his arms to keep them still.

He arched his back once or twice, and gurgled in protest, his entire body shaking back and forth. But he was one of the youngest, smallest of the creatures and Xena outweighed him. "Take it easy." She ordered, catching his head with both hands and holding it still.

He tried to howl, but with his face ripped apart, the pain was too much. He cried instead, a pitiful sound that made Gabrielle grimace.

"Keep an eye out for any of them coming back." Xena told her partner. "This is gonna be ugly." She turned back to the creature and with two swift jabs of her hands, rendered him unconscious. "Buddy, it's gonna be better for both of us this way. Trust me."

Gabrielle picked up the staff Xena had brought out with her and held it, her eyes sweeping the clearing. She caught motion out of her left eye and turned, facing the woman as she appeared suddenly from the depths of the cavern, staring at Xena. "It's okay. She's trying to help him."

Xena put her trust in Gabrielle's staff and got to work, fishing her fishbone needles from their sack along with a bit of twisted gut she had left over. She unraveled it and spun the fibers into a thread, then rested her elbow on her thigh. "Gab, I'm gonna need water."

Of course. Gabrielle edged over to the sack and remove their skull. "Be right back." She hustled over to the creek, spotting a worn area where many feet had apparently trod, and many bodies had apparently relieved themselves. With a grimace, she went up stream as far as she could to where the creek came around the corner of the rocks, and filled the skull from there. "Ugh."

Not that she blamed the creatures. The lower town had smelled just as bad, even worse, in fact. She backed off from the creek and turned, heading back to the warrior and her unwilling patient.

Nearby, the woman crouched, watching Xena warily, but showing no signs of wanting to stop her. Gabrielle went past her and delivered the skull, taking a step back as the warrior carefully poured the liquid over the creature's injury, flushing the dirt out of it in a splash of watery crimson.

Unconscious, the male under Xena's hands didn't seem all that alien, or else Gabrielle figured, her eyes maybe were getting used to them. Though his features were thick and distorted, there was an indefinable stamp of humanity on them that underscored her desire to help him.

She watched Xena's skilled hands move the torn flap on his cheek back into place, and then the steady fingers started to sew it together, stitching the ragged skin into some semblance of normality.

The woman creature crept closer, staring in fascination. "My mother was the wise one." She rasped, suddenly. "She knew this."

Gabrielle looked at her. "You mean, she knew how to heal people, like what Xena's doing?"

The woman thrust out her arm pointing to the inside her elbow with one grubby finger. Across the skin was a thin line, a scar, that had been as neatly sewn as any of Gabrielle's. "Only me." She said. "Never them." Her finger wavered to point at the male. "Never them."

"Why?" Gabrielle asked, aware of the ear cocked in her direction from her partner.

"Only me." The woman seemed a bit sad. "Miss her."

Xena picked up the skull, and poured more water on the wound, washing off the blood obscuring her vision. Nothing was worse, in terms of healing, than an animal bite, and in her experience, the creature was probably going to rip the stitches out and end up dying from infection anyway.

She suspected Gabrielle even knew that, but the bard's conscience would not allow her to walk away from it, and so she expected Xena to do the best she could, and then, whatever happened, happened. She no longer expected Xena to come up with miracles.

Xena paused, and glanced at her partner, catching a look of gentle gratitude being tossed her way. She really didn't expect miracles anymore, did she? The warrior wondered suddenly. Hadn't they gotten past that?

With a faint frown, she went back to her stitching, closing the gaping wound with rough, but neat stitches. The result was going to be a very ugly scar, if he lived, but given how ugly he already was, Xena wasn't sure it mattered.

Certainly, it didn't matter to her, and besides, she was miffed at Gabrielle for making her do this. So there.

"What happened to your mother?" Gabrielle asked.

"Died." The woman uttered, briefly. She edged closer to where Xena was, craning her neck to get a good view of what the warrior was doing. "Long time."

Gabrielle remained in her guard position. "Where's the rest of your family?"

The woman just looked at her briefly, with no sense of understanding.

"Your children?" The bard persisted. "You said you had a lot of them."

One hand lifted and made a gesture towards where the creatures had disappeared into the forest. "Some there. Some dead." She shrugged again. "Many dead."

Xena finished her work and sat back, reviewing the results. With a shake of her head, she took the skull and dumped the rest of the water over the creature, then she eased off him. "Look out." She warned, tossing the skull to Gabrielle before she reached down and released the pressure points, jumping agilely clear of the male as he woke suddenly and screamed in reaction.

The male reached for his face, touching the place she'd sewn and then jerking his hands down as he rolled over and scabbled away from her as fast as he could.

"Always like a grateful patient." Xena wiped her hands together and took a step back towards Gabrielle. "Happy now?"

Gabrielle grimaced as she watched the male roll around in the dirt. "He's going to rip that right out." "Probably."

The woman seemed to lose interest. She got up and looked at them. "Stay." She said. "You bring magic, the good things to us. "I am the wise one, but I am not so wise as you."

"We can't." Gabrielle started to say, but the woman daringly came close, clutching at her arm. "Hey.."

"Stay! We are all that lives. You can give them the gift!" The woman told her.

Xena glided up behind her partner, not really worried that the woman was a threat, but taking no chances. "What gift?" She asked bluntly.

The woman looked from one to the other, as though they were stupid. "Little ones." She finally said. "I am the last.. they don't come to me now."

"The last.." Xena repeated. "The last what..the last woman?"

The woman nodded. "They have come, and they have come.. but they come no more." She said. "I miss the little ones. They become like that." She pointed at the still howling creature. "They go to the big one."

As if by magic, they heard the returning hoots of the males, and the big male appeared at the edge of the forest. Across his broad shoulders, he was carrying a dead boar-ish looking animal, it's blood running down across his body.

The rest of the troop trailed behind him, all raising their arms and hooting with triumph at the short but successful hunt. The big male spotted Xena and showed his teeth at her, barking and strutting arrogantly towards where they were standing.

The woman left their side at once, shambling towards him and letting out cries of her own. The injured male scrambled to his feet and ran into the forest, cringing as two of the other males lunged at him, swiping at him with branches held in their hands.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Gabrielle murmured.

"Y'know.." Xena said. "We could have.."

"I know." The bard exhaled. "What are we going to do?"

The big male dropped the dead boar on the ground near the woman and turned to face them, slapping his chest with a blood covered hand, and gesturing imperiously at them to come.

What were they going to do now? That was a very, very good question. Xena took a deep breath, and released it, wondering that very same thing herself.

**

"You think this is a good idea?" Granella lifted her paddle briefly as they came even with a low spot and peered into the underbrush.

"What?" Eponin asked. "Getting the Hades out of that place? Yeah." She dug the edge of her own paddle in expertly to guide them around a half submerged rock. "I think it was a great idea. Let everyone else clean, while we go take a nice boat ride to find Xena and Gabrielle."

The sun was out, flashing sparkles on the surface of the swollen river and splashing down over them, bringing a welcome warmth to counter the cool spray from the rippled surface. Granella took a deep breath of the spring air, feeling half guilty, and half exultant at her brief escape from normal daily life.

It felt good to be out in the world. "Yeah, you're right." She answered Eponin. "Besides, it's in a good cause. I've got a feeling things are going to get really out of control if we don't get the poobahs back home."

Eponin chuckled. "Ain't it the truth? Those townies have more wadded underwraps than the whole damned village during a cycle." She shifted a little, reviewing the river ahead of them. Still overflowing it's banks, the surface had at least steadied in it's flow, allowing them to travel it with relative safety. She could see where acres of forest on either side were still under water, and enough trees had fallen into the river that she had to take good care to keep them from capsizing.

Capsizing would suck. They'd be really wet for one thing, and they'd probably lose their supplies. Eponin was all for an adventure, but she liked her comforts and had no intention of sleeping in wet leathers for a few days.

She was a little surprised Granella had decided to go along, to be honest. She'd thought her former sister had really settled down and liked her home life. "Hey, Gran?"

"Yees?" Granella stroked along competently, glad she'd spent time recently sparring with her sister in laws. It felt good to be out in leathers, too – she'd been pleasantly surprised her old set fit her again and even donning weapons had put a smile on her face.

Was that a bad thing? She'd talked to Gabrielle not a half moon past about feeling a little restless, and had found wry understanding in the bard's eyes.

"How long you figure we'll be out here? They musta got off pretty close, yeah? Xena swims like a fish and no way would they let the water take em that far."

"Well, hard to say. The flooding was pretty bad that day." Granella said. "I think we should just keep our eyes peeled sharp for any signs of them, and then go from there."

"Yeah." Eponin nodded. "How'd Toris take staying with the kids?"

"He was okay with it." Gran smiled. "I think he's been around strong women so long, it's just not weird for him for me to do this. But boy, I heard the sewing circle yammering." She added. "That was pretty funny."

Eponin snorted. "Townies."

"One of them came up to me and was like.. 'you shouldn't be abandoning your children!' and I said.. 'I'm leaving them with their father, but thanks for the concern.' And you know what she said to me?"

"What?"

"Men can't properly raise children!"

Eponin glanced behind her. "We've said that for years." She drawled. "But Toris is an exception. He's a good dad."

"Mm." Granella agreed. "Besides he knows if he acts like a jackass, Xena will kick him into next moon." She chuckled. "If I don't."

They paddled on, using their oars more to steer than propel themselves, since the swift current was doing a fine job of that on its own. Along the banks were signs of destruction, and the debris deposited by the flood was thrown everywhere. Granella spotted half a wagon, and many broken boxes.

Sadly, there were also victims. Animal carcasses were wedged under half submerged trees, some partially eaten, all releasing a stench into the air. Granella was glad they passed quickly, but she grimly kept her eyes peeled on the edges of the water, looking for anything familiar. "Pon, look." She pointed.

Eponin shaded her eyes. "That one of Amph's wagons?"

"Yeah."

"Not much left." The weapon's master said. "Guess those guys really did lose a lot, didn't they?"

Granella ducked her head as they went under a tree, steering closer to the near bank to look at the wreckage. Since the town was her home now, she was a little more involved in the controversy than her Amazon sisters were, and she had a little different perspective. "Well, some did." She agreed. "Some didn't. I feel bad for a lot of the little vendors down in the lower town. They lost almost everything. But they're not the ones bitching."

"Uh huh."

"There were some good people down there, and some of them didn't make it." Granella went on, quietly. "I don't know.. I know the growth was getting out of control, but I'm afraid now, no one will want to stay and rebuild."

Eponin thought about that. "We'll stick around." She said. "I thought for a couple days there everyone was just going to pack up their leathers and beat it, but things have been working out a little better." She slowed the canoe, spotting a box. "That's from the town." She pointed.

"Yeah... from the supply wagon. That was a big loss."

They continued on a while. "Eph's really ticked about those guys dissing Gab." Eponin commented, after a period of silence.

Granella sighed. "They were gone so long. Gave everyone a chance to revise history." She said. "Pissed me off too. Got in my first fistfight since the twins were born over it."

"Yeah?" Pony half turned and grinned at her.

Granella grinned back. "Yeah." She said. "That big jackass who took Josc's place. His son was blabbing over at the well about how they'd really have won out if Gab and Xe'd stayed out of it and I got over it. I slugged him, and he was dumb enough to get up."

Pony laughed. "Damn, wish I'd seen it." She lamented. "That's such crap. They busted their ass for that stupid town."

"Mm."

"Got em that tax thing, and all that." The weapon's master continued. "Think those suckers could have done that?"

"Nope."

"Me either. Hades, no one but Xena and Gab could have done that." Pony said. "I bet Xe's gonna be glad half that lower town's gone. She hated it."

Granella sighed again. "I know... I saw her face when she came back into town. Between that, and the council giving Gabrielle the cold shoulder, it was a sucky homecoming for sure."

"Mm."

"Don't blame them for moving up the mountain."

"Me either. But boy, is the big C pissed about it." Granella paused, dipping her oar in sharply. "Hey, Pon.. I think that's part of the bridge there. Look!"

Eponin quickly ducked her paddle in and drove the canoe towards the shore, cutting across the swift current with some effort. She grabbed a bit of the debris with one hand and held on, as the river took the other end of the canoe downstream and Granella got a solid hold on a branch. "We okay?"

"Yeah." Granella looped a bit of rope around the branch and tied it off to the carved loop on the end of the canoe. "We're good." She pulled herself up into the partially collapsed tree and climbed through the branches, with Pony at her heels. "Yeah, I think it is."

Pony eased off the branch and onto the debris, examining the cracked and beaten wood. She turned over one broken spar and grunted. "Yeah, there." She pointed at the town crest burned into the wood. "Sure is.. is that what they were hanging onto?"

Granella moved further inland, her eyes searching for clues. "Part of it, yeah. The whole thing came down on top of them, and almost..." She paused. "Xena grabbed her just in time."

Pony looked over at her. "Doesn't she always?"

"Mm."

Pony balanced on the wood, feeling it creak ominously under her weight. She edged towards the shore, ducking under the branches and pushing the thick leaves out of the way. "I don't see anything..." She knelt down and touched the water, lapping over the top of the broken bridges as it flooded the land around the river. "Not that anything'd show here. Footsteps, or stuff."

"No." Granella observed the water's surface. "And anyway.. if they'd gotten off this close, they'd have been back already. Xena'd find a way back even if we couldn't."

"Yeah." Pony exhaled. "If they were okay." She looked up. "You think they're okay, right?"

They looked at each other. "You got any reason to think otherwise?" Granella asked, slowly.

Eponin picked up a broken bit of wood and looked at it. She whipped her arm sideways, and sent the bit skittering over the river's surface. "I don't... well, the thing is, it's been too long." She finally said. "A day, yeah, two.. to get back, sure. But it's been longer than that, and you know... I just got this feeling."

"Uh oh."

Pony grimaced. "Besides, what if they run into trouble? They got zip for weapons."

Granella made her way back to the canoe, and stepped into it. "Pon, Xena's never without weapons. You know better. She could make a weapon out of a flapjack."

The weapons' master grunted, getting to her feet and walking carefully back to the boat. "Yeah, everybody says that. But y'know, there's always a first time."

Granella thought about that as she steadied the canoe, holding it firm until Pony had seated herself. It was easy to fall into that, she reckoned, since Xena almost always was exactly what everyone figured she was, in total control and never at a loss.

But she was part of the woman's family, and so – she'd gotten to see some different sides of the two of them than most people, even Pony, had.

She'd seen Xena just lose it a few times, in fact, memorably - once in the stable, she'd tripped over a bucket of grain and ended up sprawling headfirst into the watering trough, nearly knocking herself senseless.

Granella hadn't even known where to start reacting, caught between worry that her sister in law had hurt herself, laughter, and astonishment that the ever graceful warrior could be such a klutz.

She'd ended up simply gawking, all the pithy words coming to mind sticking in her throat like honey butter candy. "Uh.."

Xena, too, had apparently been unsure how to react, embarrassment warring with her own quirky sense of self deprecating humor. She finally rolled over, and put her back against the stall door, giving Granella a wry look as she pulled a splinter from her hand with her teeth. "Hard to believe I conquered half of Greece, huh?"

And that had changed things, at least for Granella. She'd starting laughing, and ended up walking across the barn to offer Xena a hand up, at last seeing a human side to the warrior she'd somehow missed before.

So, was that what Pony was hinting at? Could that humanity have finally caught up with Xena, and by extention, Gabrielle?

Boy, she hoped not.

"Let's go." Pony sighed. "Faster we get downstream, faster we find em and kick this stupid premonition of mine in the ass."

Granella released the rope holding them, and pushed them off into the current again, no longer quite as delighted to be on their way.

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"Stay back." Xena decided enough was enough. She walked forward, heading for the big male with a darkly intent glare.

"Uh oh." Gabrielle brought her staff up and got ready to protect Xena's back. "That's not a good sign."

The leader of the Hooters brandished his fist at Xena, thumping his huge chest and opening his fingers, to display them covered in blood.

Xena stopped just out of reach, and waited, her eyes coldly watchful, and her body tensed.

The hooter yelled and waved his arms, but got no reaction out of the silent, still figure across from him. He jumped forward, then back, then forward again, as though daring Xena to attack him.

Xena knew it was only a matter of time. Maybe it was for the best, she mused, the gods only knew she'd used the battle the leader routine enough times and it usually ended well for her. But if she killed the big male, then what?

A loud bellow deep in the forest brought her head snapping around, ears cocked. Xena glanced quickly back at the Hooter, but the roar had caught his attention too, and he let out a yell, turning and running back towards the cave, waving his arms.

The others started dragging the boar carcass along the rocks towards the opening in a panic, while a few began to gather rocks. Xena dropped back to where Gabrielle was standing and hesitated, focusing her senses on the forest. "What in Hades is that, I wonder?"

Gabrielle glanced at the cave. "Um.. it's scaring them silly, Xe."

"Mm." The warrior took a step towards the trees. "Daylight.. can't be one of the cat things... wonder..." She cocked her head, spotting something coming through the leaves. "What that is."

Abruptly, the branches shattered apart, and a huge animal rushed into the clearing, followed by a second. They stood easily three times Xena's height, and reared up, slashing at the air with gigantic claws. Spotting the two women, the animal dropped down and headed towards them at a gallop, bellowing.

"Not good." Gabrielle started to back up. "Think we'd better... woof!" She had the breath knocked out of her as Xena turned and grabbed her around the waist, lifting her up as she hauled them both as fast as she could away from the oncoming animal. "Xe!"

"Hang on." The warrior yelled, putting all her energy into running. "Don't fight me."

Gabrielle could see what was chasing her, and the last thing she wanted to do was fight Xena. "Is that a bear?" She yelled.

"It's a something." Xena yelled back, heading for the overhang. "Hope it doesn't fit in there."

"Me too." Gabrielle winced at the bouncing that was bruising her ribs and bit her tongue. The bear something was catching up to them, and she could now almost smell its hot breath. "Xe?"

"I am." Xena bounded up the slope to the cavern, lifting her hand suddenly as a rain of rocks pelted out from it and stung her skin. "Son of a bacchae!" She half stumbled as a rock hit her in the leg, and pulled up, letting Gabrielle down. "Watch it!"

Glad to be on the ground, the bard turned just as the bear something reached them. She tried to find it off with her staff, but it swatted the weapon out of her hands with a sweep of its paw and stood up, towering over them.

The second one bounded towards them, sniffing the blood of the boar.

Xena was belting away a hail of rocks, making headway with a great amount of effort. She grabbed Gabrielle and dragged her towards the opening, keeping her body between the rocks and the bard. "Bastards! I'm gonna kill all of you when I get in there!" She yelled at the top of her lungs.

Gabrielle felt the hair on the back of her neck stand up and a hot blast followed it, and she leaped forward, colliding with her partner and shoving her into the cave as something hard and sharp whisked across her back.

Xena swung her ax, smacking one of the Hooters in the head and knocking him out of the way as they stumbled in, barely making it to safety in time.

Inside it was total chaos. The Hooters were all screaming, hands reaching for Xena and Gabrielle while some kept throwing rocks past them, at the mega bears.

Gabrielle grabbed a rock from the ground and got up next to Xena, whacking at the hands grabbing for her. The smell of blood suddenly erupted around them, and there was a scream, and then more rocks..

Hands..

"Xena!" Gabrielle just started smashing anything around her, panic taking over despite her experience in battle. A roar came from outside the cave, and she felt rock chips sting her legs from behind, and another scream...

More blood.

Then she was pushed against the rock, caught in a triangle that pressed against her shoulders and protected her back. She felt compressed, and she put her hands on Xena's shoulders in reflex. The muscle under her touch was shifting violently, and among the echoes, and the roars, and the hoots, she heard Xena's battle yell rise up, cutting and dangerous and achingly real.

A scream, this time much higher. Gabrielle got a look past Xena's elbow and saw the woman Hooter being dragged towards the opening, her leg caught by the mega bear's paw. "Xena!" She grabbed the warrior's arm. "Look!"

"I see it!" Xena smashed her ax down two handed, slamming it again and again on the hands and arms of the Hooters. She got a little space as they leaped back, and she bent to grab a rock, flinging it at the bear and hitting it in the snout. "That's your enemy, you idiots!"

"Xena help her." Gabrielle tried to wriggle past her soulmate's powerful body. "She's going to die!"

Xena picked up another rock and pelted the bear with it, then when it released the woman to strike at her, she ducked under its claws and smashed it in the foot with her ax. Distracted, the bear lunged at Xena, its body too big to fit under the overhang, so it kept swiping at her, bellowing.

Xena whacked at the claws with her ax, smashing the animal's flesh between her weapon and the cave wall. Gabrielle scooted under her and grabbed the woman, hauling her backwards across the rocks to safety. "Okay?" The warrior yelled.

"Go!" Gabrielle fell to her knees besides the woman, grabbing all the rocks she could find and flinging them at the bear. "C'mon!" She turned to the males, who were jostling back and forth, fear of the bear warring with their desires. "Get rid of this thing!"

One of them jumped towards her, reaching out. Instinctively, Gabrielle swung her fist at him, connecting with a crack as the rock in her hand smacked him right between the eyes. Blood erupted over her again and the male screamed in rage, stumbling back and grabbing his face.

The biggest male suddenly appeared, and before Gabrielle could move he grabbed her by the hair and started pulling, yanking her off her knees. "Hey!" She yelled in surprise, reaching up to grab his hand. "Let me go!"

He roared in triumph and pulled her closer, his other hand grabbing for her belt.

She felt an abrupt, silent flush of utter fury, drenching her in shivers and just barely had time to get her self flat before she felt Xena pass over her and leap on the Hooter. She dropped to the ground hard as he let go of her hair and she rolled over, her eyes searching the area around her.

Xena was grappling with the big one, both of them eerily silent now. The rest of the males were jumping and jostling each other in excitement, ignoring the bear at their back.

Gabrielle glanced over, and saw the animal swatting at the air inside, but with less enthusiasm, and she decided they were safe for the moment from it. She turned her attention back to her partner and got up, looking around quickly for something to hit the brute with.

Tense with effort, Xena's back suddenly arched, then moved forward with explosive power. There was a sodden crack, and the warrior let out a growl that sent the bard searching all the more frantically for a weapon. "Xena!"

At that moment, they broke apart and Xena rolled to her feet, getting herself back between the males and Gabrielle, her breathing tense and ragged. The big male stayed on the ground, motionless.

Slowly, the Hooters stopped jumping up and down, and settled into silence, looking uneasily at the big male, and shooting fearful glances at Xena.

The woman moaned, reaching for her head as blood dripped down her leg from where the bear had caught her. 'Ahh... ah...'" She cried softly.

Outside, the bear grunted and wandered off, leaving only a bad smell behind.

The world slowed its spinning, a little. Gabrielle took a deep breath, and put her hand on Xena's back, feeling the arched tension under her fingertips. "Is he dead?" She asked quietly.

"Just out." The warrior replied. "I think."

"You okay?"

Xena didn't answer for a moment, then she finally nodded her head. "Yeah." She glanced around and took stock of their surroundings. "You?"

"Yeah." Gabrielle rubbed her head. "Except this headache."

The warrior took a step back away from the big male. A quick duck of her head allowed her to look outside, and she spotted the mega bears immediately, rummaging and snuffing around the bloody spot the boar had lain in.

One of them laid down and rubbed its shoulder in the gore, grunting.

No quick escape there. Damn it. Xena knew herself to be on overload. She could feel the tingles in her arms and legs, the twitching in her muscles and the shortened breaths as her instincts prodded her to go back after the big male, to lose herself in the anger that erupted when he'd grabbed hold of Gabrielle.

She wished she had killed him. She wanted to. She wanted to more, now, seeing him lying there and all the others looking at her. As she watched, the big male stirred a little, and his hands twitched, making the rest of them hoot and shuffle around him.

Bastard.

She wanted to kill all of them, with no guilt at all attached to the desire. They were dangerous, they wanted to hurt both of them, and there was no reasoning with them. In a way, it was worse than the horde. If she had her weapons handy, Xena suspected her instincts would have gotten the better of her and the only thing that had saved the creatures was the fact that they were damn hard to kill with just her hands.

Damn the bastard had dared to put his hands on her bard. Xena felt her face twitching up in disgust. She took another step back, gently herding Gabrielle a little further from the males. "Animals."

Gabrielle put her arms around her partner, feeling the horrendous discord through their bond. "Easy." She whispered. "We're okay."

"No, we're not." Xena uttered back. "We're stuck in here. With them."

Gabrielle hugged her a little tighter, giving the only comfort she could and finally, she felt Xena's body relax as the warrior returned the gesture, circling her with both arms and exhaling.

There was little else they could do, for now.

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They retreated to the far edge of the cavern, still protected from the bears but as far away from the Hooters as possible. Gabrielle had taken Xena's staff and she was sitting with it across her knees, her hands clasped firmly around it.

The big male had finally sat up, his face covered in blood, a broken nose and two black eyes testament to Xena's ferocious head butt that had fractured the heavy bones. He looked horrific, and the other males seemed spooked by the dark circles around his eyes.

It was strange. The boar they'd killed had been left on the rocks, near the big male's nest. The others occasionally made motions towards it, but the big male raised his hand and yelled, and they backed off, leaving it alone.

The female had curled up on the rocks nearby and was lying there, her leg covered with dried blood and scratches from the bear's claws. She seemed all right otherwise, and her eyes were open, watching both the males, and occasionally Xena and Gabrielle.

It was an uneasy calm.

Xena cautiously edged along the walls and collected some handfuls of twigs and branches, left over from the nests, and brought it back to where Gabrielle was seated, sitting down and beginning to arrange the debris into stack.

"You going to make a fire?" Gabrielle asked, glancing outside. The bears had been joined by two others, who were venturing near the entrance and sniffing the air.

"Mhm."

"Don't you think that's gonna freak them out?" The bard wondered. "Xena, I'm not sure I'm up for another free for all just yet." She flexed one hand, stiff and sore from a punch she didn't really remember even delivering to anyone.

Anything.

Xena removed her flint and striker from the pack and exhaled. "I don't know." She pushed her hair back off her face and rested her elbows on her knees, pausing a moment before she sent a few sparks down towards the tinder. "We'll find out, I guess. I want some damn tea."

Gabrielle looked at her. "Xe?"

"Mm?" The warrior carefully blew on the sparks, causing the tinder to catch and send a tiny spiral of smoke up.

"We don't have any water." The bard said, quietly. "Unless you want me to run out there and get some."

"I'll get it." Xena kept her attention on the fire, tending it carefully as it grew under her skilled hands. "I need the exercise."

"Gabrielle peered outside, where the bears were roaming. "You're not going out there."

"Sure I am."

"Xena."

"One thing at a time." The warrior glanced up, watching the creature's reaction to her fire. Two had noticed, and they were sitting up, staring at her. "Just keep that staff ready."

Gabrielle exhaled wearily. "Okay." She eased upright onto her knees and flexed her arms. "I hope your damn tea's worth it."

Xena heard the edge in her partner's voice, and she turned her head to study the tense figure next to her. There were smears of dirt and blood liberally covering the bard's tanned skin and she could see the faint tremble in the motion as she breathed. "Hey."

"What?" Gabrielle snapped.

"Relax." The warrior reached over and gave her thigh a pat. "There's a crack in the wall over there with a trickle of water. I'm not going out to be bear bait."

Green eyes glared at her. "Xena, I'm not in the mood to play around right now. I'm scared and I'm tired and I'm sick to my stomach."

Xena watched her in silence for a moment, then her lips tensed into a slight smile. "All the more reason for a fire, then." She replied in a mild tone. "It's going to be all right."

"Yeah, sure." Gabrielle watched the Hooters anxiously. All of them had noticed Xena's fire by now, as the smell of the burning wood permeated the cavern. Three of them near the back were standing, glaring at them and the big male had gotten up and was walking over. "Xena."

"Be right back." Xena got up and tightened her makeshift belt. Then she picked up her ax and strode towards the oncoming male, her face tight and set.

"Gods." The bard got to her feet. "She's lost her mind.. Xena!"

Xena didn't wait for the big male to make the first move. She got within reach of him and attacked him, swinging the ax in a short, vicious arc that ended smashing him across the left ear. She let out a yell and hit him again, bashing him over and over again as he stumbled back in shock.

All the other males started yelling. The woman sat up and scrambled back out of the way, hugging the back wall near where Gabrielle was kneeling.

The big male recovered his balance and charged back at Xena, her blows hitting him, but apparently doing little to deter him. It was almost as if he didn't really feel pain, and so the attack could knock him off balance but not keep him from coming back for more.

Frustrating. Xena whirled and delivered a roundhouse kick to his chest, stopping him in his tracks with the greatest effort. She landed, caught her balance, and kicked again, taking a step before she did to put her weight and momentum into it.

He grunted and moved backwards, his arms flailing and his hands grasping for her leg, not fast enough to actually grab her.

Damn it. Xena felt like she was kicking her mother's prize bull. She whipped the ax around again and got him in the side of the head, this time making him cry out. She hit him again and again, wrapping both her hands around the antler ax hilt and moving her arms as fast as she could.

The other males yelled louder. Xena was afraid suddenly that they'd attack her en masse, and she glanced around for a retreat, but they stayed where they were and simply hopped up and down as though an audience cheering at a play.

Her adversary grabbed a rock and threw it at her, hitting her in the stomach. Xena winced, but didn't let up her swings, suddenly making the connection between the watching males, the big male, the boar, and what her goals were.

He screamed in anger. Xena wound up and slugged him as hard as she was capable of right in the mouth, feeling her knuckles hit bone with a searing jolt she felt all the way up her shoulder. Blood spurting out, and she wasn't sure if it was hers, or his.

Whichever it was, seemed to unnerve him. The big male finally cracked under her assault and ran, scrambling away from her as he grabbed his face and howled. He stumbled back to his nest and nearly fell into it, as the other males yelled and hooted so loudly the echoes nearly deafened her.

Xena let the ax drop down, and waited for her heartbeat to slow a little. Then she walked over to the boar and picked it up, grunting at the weight as she settled it onto her shoulders.

She let her eyes travel around the cavern, then she turned and headed back to where Gabrielle was now standing, holding her staff. She kept her eyes on the bard's face, watching intently as Gabrielle watched the cavern behind her, looking for the faintest hint of a reaction that might mean she needed to drop the board and defend herself.

The yelling blocked her hearing with complete effectiveness. But she saw Gabrielle's posture straighten a touch, and her biceps relax, letting the staff come down to rest against her thighs. She could also see the tension in her partner's face, and felt a pang of worry, for both of them.

She stepped past the newly born fire and shrugged the boar off her shoulders, turning to view the cavern behind her.

The male hooters were still all yelling, but that's all they were doing. None of them seemed about to head towards them and several were shading their faces from the fire.

Had her gamble worked? Xena let out a yell of her own and waved her arms. The hooters yelled back, a mixture of anger and fear, but they stayed where they were, and that was good enough for her. She turned around and went behind the fire, seating herself back down next to where Gabrielle was standing.

After a long moment, the bard also seated herself. "You took their food." She said.

"Yep." Xena removed the small knife from their pack and started butchering the boar. "That big guy's the boss. He wouldn't let them eat it anyway." She fed another bit of wood to the fire. "Give me a hand with this?"

Gabrielle edged closer, paused, then eased over until their knees were pressed against each other. She reached out and helped build the fire up, looking past it at the still clamoring creatures. The woman, she noticed, was creeping closer to them, apparently not intimidated by the crackling flames that separated her and Xena from the rest of the cavern.

She let her forearm rest on Xena's leg. "Xe?"

"Mm?"

"Sorry I snapped at you before."

"S'allright."

"I feel so.." Gabrielle groped for a way to explain the horrible churning inside her. "Screwed up."

"This is screwed up." Xena admitted. "We have to wait until those damn things leave and get out of here. I don't trust these bastards not to attack us and they're damn hard to fight off. "

Gabrielle sighed. "And you didn't sleep last night." She said. "So I know you really do need that damn tea."

Briefly, Xena leaned over and touched her head to Gabrielle's, since her hands were covered in gore. She gave her a kiss on the side of her head. "Hang in there. We'll get through this, Gabrielle." She took a piece of rock and set it down next to the fire, and then another, building a wall around the flames.

Gabrielle took the knife from her and pulled over the leg she'd cut off the boar. Ignoring the blood stench, she peeled back the skin and cut slices from the muscle, laying them over the rocks to cook as they heated. It would be tough, and gamey she was sure, but just the thought of hot food was making her hands shake.

She felt a little ashamed at that, but there wasn't much she could do about it. They hadn't had anything substantial since the day before and her body simply wasn't used to doing without any more. Even in the beginning, when they'd traveled the hard roads together, she'd had trouble adjusting to the hard traveling and often skimpy rations.

Ironically, it had been Xena's teasing her about her constant snacking that had made her realize she was finally getting underneath the gruff warrior's skin a little. After all, Xena noticed that, didn't she? Noticed her?

Worth the angst and embarrassment. Incredibly worth it the first time Xena went out of her way as they strolled through some tiny town in some tiny corner of the vast land to buy something for her to munch on, presenting it with an offhandedness that tasted to her mainly of cherished acceptance.

She'd so wanted Xena to accept her as a part of her life. The night the warrior had given her the wooden lamb, she'd stayed up half the night just looking at it with happy tears that even now made her lips twitch into a reluctant smile as she remembered it.

After she laid the meat out, she set the knife down and got up, feeling Xena shift as she turned to watch her. "Be right back." She echoed her partner's words, going over to pick up the skull she'd tossed hurriedly back into the cavern and wandering over to find the spring the warrior had mentioned.

It wasn't easy to find, just a crack really with a trickle of water that quickly absorbed back into the rock but it was enough for her to get a skull full and she carried it back with her to the fire. "Give me the pack?"

Xena silently handed it over, putting a hand on her back as she sat back down. She went back to butchering the boar after a moment, examining the animal to see what she could make of its parts.

Gabrielle turned her head and gave the warrior a kiss on the shoulder, despite all the grime on it. She caught the motion as Xena smiled, and went back to cooking, glad beyond words their partnership seemed solid enough now to weather both of their bitchiness.

A soft clatter of rock alerted her, and she looked to her left, to see the woman crouched nearby, staring at the flames. "This won't hurt you." She said.

"I know." The woman rasped softly. "I have seen this. My mother made it." She held her hand out, feeling the warmth and closed her eyes as if the sensation were painful.

The heating rocks started cooking the meat, and the scent of it rose in the air. A soft hooting echoed and as they looked up, they were now the intense focus of all the eyes in the cavern. "They know what this is." Gabrielle whispered.

"Yeah." Xena looked over at the woman. "Did your mother do this for them?" She asked.

"Yes." The woman replied readily. "It was her power."

Power? Gabrielle glanced at the food. "Because she was the only one who could do it?" She hazarded a guess.

"Yes." The woman nodded. "She was going to teach me." She seemed sad. "She died."

Gabrielle looked at the rocks again, then she looked at her partner. "Her mother wasn't one of them, Xena." She uttered softly. "There's no way."

"Mm." The warrior's eyes flicked around the cavern, furious thoughts evident in them. "But maybe she gave us an answer we needed."

The bard picked up one of the roasted bits of meat and extended her hand towards the woman. "Here." She offered. "Not my best recipe, but it smells good."

The woman readily took it from her, glancing to the side to watch the reaction of the Hooters. There was a touch of triumph, almost a slyness about the gesture, but then she dropped her head and ate the meat, licking her fingers after it.

Gabrielle thoughtfully picked up another piece, and gave it to her partner, who ducked her head gracefully and took it from her fingers. Then she took one for herself, watching the wide eyed looks of the males glued on them.

Was it an answer?

"Good." The woman said. "Strong magic."

Or did it just open up another whole set of questions? Xena started to put more chunks up to cook, and it was almost as if she could feel the whole dynamic in the cave changing. "It couldn't really be that easy, could it, Xena?" She finally asked, hearing a touch of plaintiveness in her voice.

"Worked on me." The warrior replied dryly. "Don't look a gift horse in the ass, Gabrielle."

The bard sighed again, and shook her head, wondering where it would all lead them next, and hoping somewhere, at the end of whatever road they were on, there'd be a path that would simply just take them home.

**

One Wild Ride

Part 10

At dusk, the bears finally wandered off, apparently tiring of waiting for a juicy tidbit to come out of the cave. They left behind piles of scat and an unknown danger, since the forest that swallowed them up again was darkening and refused to reveal how far they went.

Xena was as near to the entrance as safely possible, her attention focused on the world outside. She gave up on the dimming light and turned her head, watching as Gabrielle carefully made her way across the rocks. The bard's face was quiet and pensive, and she wiped her hands off as she passed behind the fire and took a seat to Xena's left. "You all right?"

Gabrielle had to think about that for a while. "I think so." She said, at last. "I can't tell if giving them that meat was a good thing or a bad thing."

Xena rested her elbows on her knees. "I'm sure they think it's a good thing."

"Yeah." Gabrielle let her head fall back against the rock wall with a small thump. "I'm sure they do.. I just don't want them to get the idea that we're going to be doing that a lot."

"Feed them?"

"Mm." The bard rubbed her fingers against her thighs. "Though, it was their kill, so I guess they kind of had a right to it, huh?"

"Kinda." Xena allowed. "But I'm not regretting taking it from them. I was hungry."

A faint quirk of Gabrielle's lips met the statement. "Me too."

Xena watched her partner out of the corner of her eye. Gabrielle had done most of the food giving, and now she was gazing at the cavern roof, a somber look at her face. Naturally optimistic, it was an odd thing to see the bard this down and the warrior wondered if there was more to it than just exhaustion.

"So, what do we do now?" Gabrielle asked, turning her head to peer past Xena into the growing dark. "Stay here?"

Xena shifted to face her. "You don't want to."

Gabrielle lifted a hand towards the cavern and let it drop. "I feel like I'm stuck between a herd of warthogs and a thornbush." She shook her head a little. "What the Hades have we gotten ourselves into?"

Xena hoped that was a rhetorical question. "Don't know how close those bear things are. I don't want to be walking out in the dark with them around." She said. "We'll head out in the morning."

The bard sighed in frustration. "Darn it, Xena. I don't think I can take another night with these guys."

"Well, if you hadn't made me stop to sew up one of em, we'd have been out of here, wouldn't we?" Xena snapped back. "We'd be long gone."

Gabrielle took a breath to answer, then let her jaw click shut, her gaze moving thoughtfully past Xena's shoulder into the darkness.

The warrior waited for a moment, but her partner remained silent, her face settling into a somber cast. "Hey."

"No, you're right." The bard cut her off. She shifted and leaned back. "I've got to stop being such a damn self righteous dipwad." She started to get up onto her knees, then paused as Xena reached over and very gently took hold of her wrist. "Xe, let me go."

"Hey." The warrior added her other hand, turning the grasp into more of an entreaty. Their eyes met, and after a few seconds, Gabrielle's dropped and she eased back down. "Sorry."

"For what?"

"Being a jackass." Xena released her wrist and laid her hand on the bard's thigh instead. "Listen."

"I'm listening." The bard leaned her shoulder against the wall, relaxing a little.

Xena studied her face again. "Frustrated?"

Gabrielle nodded.

"Me, too." The warrior gave her leg a pat. "Let's not take it out on each other."

A faint hint of a wry twinkle appeared in Gabrielle's eyes. "Know something?"

A dark brow lifted in question.

"We've both grown up a lot."

Xena considered that seriously for a bit. Given how much older she was than her partner, she wasn't sure if it was a compliment or an insult. She'd thought she'd grown up fast when she'd had to face off against Cortese, but the more she thought about how she'd acted in the years since then, the more she winced at the hell brat with lethal combat skills she'd turned into.

She was no longer that person. Her eyes shifted to Gabrielle's face. Most of the time, anyway. "Yeah." She agreed. "We sure have, huh?"

Gabrielle eased her legs out straight and regarded them, brushing a bit of granite off one knee. "We grew into each other."

Mm.. now that was really true. The warrior picked up a bit of rock and looked at it, squinting a little at a feathery looking impression along one side. She tried to remember what the exact moment was she'd stopped thinking of Gabrielle as a kid, and started thinking of her as an equal partner.

Hm. "To be honest, I'm outta ideas. You got any?"

The bard licked her lips. "I don't" She said. "Xena, my butt hurts."

In pure reflex, the warrior straightened up, her brows contracting as she gazed at her partner.

"It does. I'm over these freaking rocks." Gabrielle indicated what they were sitting on. "I want to go find a nice bush to sleep on."

Xena's dark brows now elevated into her hairline. Slowly, she looked left and right, then down at herself, then up at Gabrielle. One brow remained where it was, the other lowered.

Gabrielle frowned at her, then apparently re-ran her own words in her head because she let her face drop into one hand and her shoulders started shaking. "oh gods."

Xena put her arm across the bard's shoulders and pulled her closer. "C'mere." She half lifted the blond woman up and ended up with Gabrielle sprawled in her lap, still laughing silently. "Bumpkin."

"Hehehe." Gabrielle laughed harder, burying her face into Xena's chest.

The warrior rolled her eyes, but started laughing along with her, rocking them both gently back and forth. Sometimes laughter really was some kind of medicine, certainly right now it was making her feel a lot better. "Gab-ri-elle. What am I gonna do with you."

"Darned if I know." The shaking slowly subsided, and the giggles eased. "Gods, I needed that." The bard tipped her head back against her partner's shoulder and sighed. "I'm getting to be a grump in my old age, Xe."

"Tch. Poor granny." Xena felt the tension that had been coiling inside her guts relax. "I don't think it's your old age, kiddo." She patted Gabrielle lightly on the side. "You got this way last time."

"Last time?" Gabrielle frowned, giving her a puzzled look.

Xena returned the look.

"Oh." The bard murmured, catching a clue. She remained silent for a minute, then looked back up. "I did?"

The warrior nodded.

"Really?"

"Yup."

Gabrielle played with a bit of her partner's dark hair. "I guess that might explain your hyperactive defend me at all costs stuff, huh?"

Xena's nostrils flared. "I wasn't doing that."

Gabrielle rolled her eyes. "Oh, Xena, please." She moaned. "You picked me up and carried me back to the darn cave.. do I look like I've got a broken leg?"

The warrior scratched her nose. "Hm."

They were both quiet for a few minutes, as the last of the light outside faded into the shadows of dusk. Inside, the soft green glow of the roof of the cavern was augmented, overshadowed really, by their fire and the flickering shadows from it painted them in ocher and gold.

Then Gabrielle disentangled herself, easing off her partner's lap and back onto the rock floor. "I'm going to go get our skin, and see if I can make us more comfortable." She said. "And then we're going to trade off keeping watch so you can get some sleep."

"Gabrielle."

"Save it for the Amazons, WP." Gabrielle had gotten to her feet and now she went over to where their pack was, kneeling next to it and pulling out its contents.

Xena watched her, pulling up one knee and circling it with her arms. A soft sound caught her attention, but she kept her eyes focused on the bard and merely cocked her ears.

The whisper of leaves against stone. A soft scuff of bare feet and the faint creaks of joints too long still in one position.

Breathing. Xena almost stilled her own to listen, the faint humming under Gabrielle's breath sounding echoingly loud in her hearing. She heard the faint scrape of rock against rock and her body stiffened, warrior's instincts flaring as her fingers curled around the hilt of her battered, but still serviceable ax.

A rush of motion. Xena whirled and came up onto her knees, then held fast, sensing nothing near her bigger than a bug. She heard the sound of a body impacting another, and strained her eyes into the low light to see what was going on.

The fire threw shadows across the wall, and in them she spotted the motion she'd heard. Dark figures were running across the rocks in the back of the cavern and the next thing she knew Gabrielle was next to her again in a half crouch, her staff in one hand and her other resting on the warrior's shoulders. "What's going on?"

"Can't tell."

The woman screamed suddenly, piercing and strange.

Male yells echoed it, and then, the sound of rock hitting flesh.

Gabrielle felt her heart hammering in her chest and she took a half step back as Xena rose to her feet, neither of them in any immediate danger but the unknown pressing around them. She couldn't see into the back of the cavern – the light from the fire flooded her vision and made the chaos in the rear nothing but some moving shadows.

She could hear bone breaking, though, and suddenly, a despairing yell – a cry of pain that brought her up onto her toes and nearly sent her into the darkness to find its source. "Xena, wh..."

As if sensing the instinct, Xena put her arm out, her hand clasping the bard's arm. "Fight."

"Why?"

"Don't know." Xena's nose twitched. She could smell blood, over the general stench of the cavern, and then the shadows came forward, scraping and grunting, a crowd of them in a tight cluster that sent her heart racing and every hair up on end. "Whatever it is.. it's not good."

Gabrielle licked her lips and got her other hand on the staff, stepping to the side and giving herself some room to move as the crowd came closer to them.

Near the front of the cavern, they broke apart, and three or four of them continued on, dragging something between them. Hoots of triumph went up, and as she watched, the rest headed in their direction, the flames of the fire flickering off their glittering eyes and teeth.

The four in the front went to the edge of the cavern and threw something out, a bundle of limbs and body that hit the ground outside with a sodden thump and moved no further. The woman had come up behind them and now she screamed again, wailing at the top of her voice and slapping the rock with her hands.

The two closest males now beat their chests and hooted at them. One, a little bolder, shoved into the front and went over to the woman, grabbing her by the hair and pulling her backwards towards the darkness again.

The other males hooted, and ran after him, the sounds weirdly echoing off the stone, and after a moment, the woman's screams fell off, turning into yells instead, the shadows hiding everything from the watching eyes.

Xena let her arm drop, for the first time in a long time at an utter loss as to what to do. Rescue the woman? She had spurned their attempts the last time, and even if she hadn't, going into the darkness with the creatures...

Well, she wasn't a coward. But she wasn't an idiot either.

Gabrielle let out a breath and grounded her staff, staring into the back of the cavern in silence. "Xena?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry I made you stop this morning. We have to get out of here."

"Yeah."

"We have to get out of here." Gabrielle repeated, softly. "We have to

Gabrielle huddled against Xena's tense form, her eyes looking past the shoulder high flames in front of them. They were pressed against the wall near the entrance, with the fire built up as much as they could manage to keep back the rest of the cavern's inhabitants.

She still felt cold, even though the fire was snapping not more than two arms lengths in front of them, and the glittering eyes watching her through the flame only added to the chill. The creatures hadn't slept all night either, shifting and moving around the cave, testing the fire's edge with their hands before darting back.

Xena was seated with her legs crossed under her, the ax resting on her knees and her attention focused on the hooters. Her eyes hadn't stopped sweeping them for an instant during the long, dark night and now that dawn was coming closer there was an edginess there that Gabrielle could feel as faint twitches under the skin she was pressed against.

At dawn, Xena had told her, they'd move. She had the last of the firewood ready, it's end tied with bits of vine and leaves to make a torch in case the hooters tried to block them and they were both so full of nervous energy that any kind of rest, much less sleep, would have been impossible.

Even for Gabrielle, who normally trusted Xena implicitly. It wasn't as if she didn't trust her now, but with the danger so close, she didn't dare cause the warrior one half second's worth of reaction time, and the need to wake her would do that.

So she sat there, gripping her staff and praying for the sunlight as she'd prayed for few things before in her life. In a way, it reminded her a little of the night before the start of the war in Amphipolis, that brief quiet time she'd spent with Xena before all Hades was going to break loose.

At some point, you just want it to start. You want to go, to be doing something, be doing anything but sitting and waiting, and knowing bad things were coming.

One of the hooters barked, and suddenly, rushed at the fire. In a single motion Gabrielle shifted and they both stood up, weapons at the ready, the firelight throwing their shadows in huge relief against the cavern wall behind them.

The hooter stopped just short of the fire and jumped up and down, as though working up his courage. He slapped the rocks with both hands and yelled brazenly at them, until Xena nailed him with a rock in the face.

That knocked him back a little, and he hunkered down on a nearby rock, glowering at them sullenly. Xena watched him for a moment, then she cautiously sat back down. "Know what I wish?"

"You had your sword?" Gabrielle hazarded, as she dropped back down to the hard rock as well.

"No. That I had a damn cart full of Greek fire." The warrior responded with a grimace. "Put an end to this misery in a heartbeat."

Gabrielle gazed into the heart of the flames, unsure if she was more surprised at her outrage over the thought of killing off everything in the cavern or the fact that part of her was considering the notion so dispassionately it made her a little sick.

"Dinar for your thoughts?" Xena said, after a lengthening silence.

"You don't want them." The bard murmured. "I don't think I even want them."

"Mm?" The warrior turned her full attention on Gabrielle.

"Mm." Gabrielle grunted softly in return.

Xena seemed to guess them anyway. She released her grip on her ax and let her elbow rest on Gabrielle's shoulder, brushing her knuckles against the bard's cheek. "Hang in there. We'll get out of this."

Isn't that my line? Gabrielle wondered. Aren't I supposed to be the optimist of the two of us? She leaned her head into Xena's touch anyway, acknowledging a wry pulse of affection for a soulmate who had grown to be far more perceptive than Gabrielle had ever expected.

She'd been in love with Xena for ever, it seemed, and even when Xena began to return her affection, she never really thought.. well, not then anyway, that it would ever be a case of the warrior caring for.. doting on her the way Gabrielle did for her.

She'd timidly come to accept and cherish the fact that Xena loved her, but she never imagined Xena understanding her, much less helping her to understand herself.

Life was funny, sometimes. Gabrielle glanced up as she felt a gentle nudge, seeing those blue eyes studying her intently, expressively, the intelligence behind them peeling away all her dissembling. "I know we will." She replied. "One way or the other."

A gentle raising of one dark eyebrow, and a slight frown appeared as Xena acknowledged the double meaning in her words she hadn't really consciously intended.

Or had she? "We'll be all right." She said. "I just wish we were out of here."

"I know." Xena replied briefly, giving her shoulder a squeeze. "I hear ya."

I hear ya. It was such a relief sometimes to have someone who she could depend on to just be there for her when things got tough. Even if Xena wasn't the unspeakably brilliant fighter she was, or as capable as she was, or as dependable - having that someone was a wonderful thing.

It was a wonderful thing. The bard rested her head against Xena's shoulder and smiled faintly. If you had to be in Hades, it certainly was nice to have someone there with you, wasn't it? "Boo, boo boo." Gabrielle murmured under her breath. "What would I do without you?"

"Beats me." Xena sighed. "Same as I do without you, I guess."

Gabrielle glanced outside, willing the darkness to lighten a little with the coming dawn. "Are we just going to run?" She asked softly.

Xena let her eyes drift across the watching hooters. "That's plan A, yeah." She admitted. "Light something on fire in here.. maybe scatter what we've got across to where that garbage pile is. Keep em occupied."

"Mm."

"Then get the Hades out of here." Xena exhaled. "I don't give a damn if we have to run all day and end up back in that waterfall."

"Go back the way we came?" Gabrielle sounded incredulous. "You said there was no way out that way!"

The warrior was silent for a moment. "I'm not sure there's a way out ahead of us either." She said, after a few short, quick breaths.

"Gods." The bard whispered. "Xena, what are we going to do?"

For one of the few times she'd known Xena, the warrior looked as uncertain as she felt. "I'm not sure." She said carefully. "We'll just have to do the best we can, Gabrielle."

"Poop." Gabrielle wasn't sure now that she wanted morning to come. "Boy, this sucks."

"I know." The warrior put her arm around Gabrielle's waist. "Trust me, I know. I'd give my damn chakram to be at home right now." She said. "I'm as miserable as you are, sweetheart."

Gabrielle shifted a little and laid her staff down, resting it on one knee. She reached over and picked up their skull, lifting it and taking a sip of water, and then handing it over to Xena. "Every storytelling bone in my body for a waterskin."

"Keep your bones inside you, bard." Xena was glad for the banter. The night had been getting so long, and the scary, staggered mock attacks by the hooters so frequent, she'd been nearly ready to lose her mind. "Hey, Gabrielle?"

"Yes, oh love of my life, and focus of my dreams?" Gabrielle knew one way to make herself, and also Xena, feel better was to dive headfirst into glorpy romanticism. "Please tell me there's something I can do for you?"

Xena's face scrunched up, a mixture of embarrassment and pleasure.

"Weeel?"

The warrior cleared her throat. "Got a story handy?"

Ah, an appeal to her muse. Gabrielle allowed herself to be quite charmed. Xena didn't ask her to tell stories often, though if she was there when the bard was telling them she always listened in, even if they were stories about her. "How about a new story?" She suggested. "I was thinking of one the other day.. mind if I try it out on you?"

Xena's eyes widened slightly. "New?" She repeated. "As in, no one else's heard it yet?"

"Mmhm." Gabrielle had to smile at the pleased expression crossing her partner's face, as she could clearly remember the days when asking Xena to be an audience for her new and uncertain talent had gotten a much less enthusiastic response. "I haven't had much time to work on it the past few days, so it's rough."

Xena shifted a little, so she could both see the inside of the cavern fully, and also watch Gabrielle at the same time. They had a while before dawn, and she could really think of no better way...

Wait, yes she could. However, wrong time, wrong place. The warrior cocked her head a little and waited, watching Gabrielle's eyes shift a bit off to one side, going a little unfocused as she ordered her thoughts.

As Gabrielle's skill at storytelling matured, Xena had discovered an almost childlike pleasure in being the first one to hear one of her new tales. She enjoyed listening to her older ones too, though some of the ones about her she wasn't too fond of – but hearing a new bit of her partner's imagination brought a special warmth to her.

She remembered with brief, stark clarity what life was like without that. During their estrangement that shut off all the sweetness between them and replaced it with chill uncertainty. Maybe that was why they were both so very conscious of each other, and they worked so hard to keep things at an even keel.

Neither of them wanted to risk that again. So they paid attention now to the little things, and to each other, and they took these small moments when they could and savored them.

Gabrielle's sharing of her talent was an example of this. Often at night, in the small hours when Dori was asleep and they were alone together, there was an easy intimacy in the act that touched something deep inside her. And so now, even though there was nothing in their current circumstances that was either easy nor intimate, Xena more than welcomed the diversion.

"Remember that flock of birds we saw when we were traveling back home?" Gabrielle asked, suddenly, looking up at her in question.

Flock of birds. "Any... particular.. flock of birds, Gabrielle?" The warrior probed. "We went a lot of places this last time."

"The ones near the lake."

Was that a twinkle of mischief in those green eyes? Gods. How many lakes had they passed? "Um.."

Gabrielle chuckled. "The ones you told me.. they flew all the way to one place in the winter and then someplace else in the summer."

"Right." Oh, those birds. Xena half smiled. She'd thought Gabrielle had been too quiet for too long a time after they'd seen the large group, all headed back to their winter range. "Sure, I remember."

"And then they all flew away, but that one?" Gabrielle went on. "That one stayed, and we watched it until the sun went down?" She said. "And I asked you why it did that?"

"And I said maybe the bird was a little like you, yeah." Xena agreed. "Never wanting to follow the flock."

Gabrielle smiled, her eyes lighting up a little. "That's the one, yeah." She cleared her throat. "So I thought of a story about that bird, and how it lived, and how it was a part of a big family, until one day something happened."

Ah. Xena settled down to listen, her peripheral senses sweeping the cavern around her, taking in the tense, glowering hooters and the quiet figure of the woman, slumped near the wall apparently taken to exhaustion. "Gwan. I'm listening."

"What makes birds do that?" The bard asked, after a second. "Stay all together like that in one big group, I mean?"

Xena wasn't sure if that was the beginning of the story, but since Gabrielle was apparently waiting for her to answer, she did. "Safety."

"That's what I thought." The bard replied. "So here's the story of why sometimes life is worth giving up safety for."

And they wouldn't know anything about that, would they?" Xena felt her lips tightening into a smile. Outside, she heard the first stirrings of birds, a definite precursor of the dawn and she knew the long night was coming at last to an end.

The day might bring something even worse, but at least, they'd go into it smiling together.

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"So, what do you think?" Eponin took hold of a branch and pulled them out of the current again. "I ain't seen any more stuff that looks familiar for a while."

"Me either." Granella paddled her end of the canoe in and studied the underbrush. "And it's getting dark." Her brow creased in worry. "Damn I figured we'd see some sign of them or something by now."

Pony had figured the same thing. "Okay." She pondered their surroundings. The ground sloped up from the flooded riverbed to a craggy bit of rock, topped by thick bushes. "Let's get out here, and make camp. There's enough light to look around up there a little bit.. maybe we'll spot something."

Granella held on to the branch and kept the small craft steady as Pony climbed out, a thick pack slung over one shoulder. She waited for the weapons master to tie off the canoe to a half sunken trunk before she carefully got up and followed her.

They pulled themselves up through the branches until they could see ground under them instead of water, and then they descended to the earth, dropping out onto the rocky, sparse turfed surface as the sun started to dip behind the treeline.

It was quiet, and wild here. Eponin lifted her head and listened, hearing animal life nearby in the brush and calculating they were roughly halfway between Amphipolis and the hillsides where Potadeia was tucked, a mostly uninhabited patch of lands that had little in the way of resources.

For townies, anyway. Eponin smiled, knowing Amazons would view the area quite differently. She indicated a bend in the rocks, which held a pocket of dead leaves in its embrace. "Let's use that. I'll get some branches."

"I'll get some firewood." Granella agreed, carrying her own pack over to the crook and setting it down. She examined the alcove, dusty memories surfacing of many nights spent out during her Amazon apprenticeship, and the years after when she'd been a scout and guard around the village.

When she told the townsfolk about those times, they looked at her like she was nuts, Granella recalled. Spending time out under the stars, surrounded by wild forest and even wilder animals was something none of them would do by choice, and that was just the mildest of her remembrances.

She never told them about learning to hunt. Or the firelit harvest festivals. Or how her sisters had taught her the pleasures of womanhood.

With a chuckle, Granella dusted her hands off and moved off under the trees, glad the rain had slacked off the last day or so and the wood she picked up was mostly dry. As she collected it, she kept her eyes open for signs of Xena and Gabrielle, though after a moment she realized there probably wouldn't be any.

"Hey, Pon?" She called over her shoulder.

"Yeah?" Eponin appeared, climbing up the gentle slope behind them to join her. "Find anything?"

"I was just thinking." Granella picked up another broken limb. "They didn't have much to lose on the way. Xena was in... gods, a shirt I guess, and Gab had her usual number on."

"Huh." Pony used her sword to hack off a leaf laden branch. "I was thinking more of stuff like... broken camps, that kinda thing."

Granella took her armful of wood back to the crook and knelt, laying the pieces down in a pattern. "Anyone could make fires, yeah?"

"Yeah." Pony was laying her branches over the top of the angle to make a shelter. "But Xena does hers in a special way." She said. "Or.. eh, not special, but different."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." Pony surveyed her work, then walked back over to the treeline for more branches. "Always the same size.. always built the same way, put just so between where she and the Maj are bunking.. woman's a freaking anal retentive freak when it comes to that stuff."

"Only about that?" Granella chuckled, as she drew her flint and striker out, and set to work over a ball of moss tinder. The sun was behind the trees now, sending thick, golden stripes to trickle through the leaves, dusting the ground in front of her with molten speckles.

The spring air was cool, and full of the scent of the river and forest around them. She drew a breath in and realized then how she'd grown used to the smells of humanity around her.

When Gabrielle and Xena had first come back home, she remembered Gabrielle collecting Dori one late afternoon, wryly telling her she was taking the kid, and Xena and going up into the hills for dinner, since the stench made her stomach turn. Granella had thought she was being way

overdramatic, and dismissed the argument, accusing her sister in law jokingly of just wanting the excuse to be alone

Now, she wasn't so sure. At any rate, it was nice to be able to hear herself think out here. She blew gently on the tinder and watched it curl and blacken as smoke drifted up from it, tickling her nose with its quiet pungency.

A few leaves rattled over her shoulders, as Pony put the last branches into place and completed their rude shelter. She looked up, seeing flickers of light through the layered foliage, and sat down cross legged, nudging the tinder into the center of her newly built fire, feeding it with twigs as it caught.

"Didn't forget how, huh?" Pony joined her a moment later, settling down on the ground and dragging her pack over.

"Who do you think makes the fire in our cabin?" Granella asked, dryly. "I love Toris to death, but he's got two left thumbs when it comes to this stuff."

Eponin chuckled softly, removing a packet of dried meat and laying it on one knee. "He's all right though." She said. "For a man."

Granella's lips twitched, but she refrained from responding, concentrating on the fire instead. The sun's rays had faded, and the wind had picked up bringing a cool breeze across them. She was glad of the warmth as the flames slowly built, and she pondered a moment what her husband would be up to back home.

Dinner at the inn, most likely. One of the few traits Toris shared fully with his sister was the ability to cook or lack thereof, and serving the twins half boiled tea and hard cereal would guarantee their protest and he knew it. "You know what Cyrene told me the other day?"

"What?" Pony asked, chewing on the dried meat.

"She told me the only hope she had of passing the inn down in any respectable way was if Gabrielle settled down and took it over."

"Huh?"

"She figures Xena could manage it maybe as a bar, and Toris would probably turn it into gambling den."

Pony chewed her mouthful for a moment, a frown on her face. "Oh." She finally swallowed. "The cooking thing."

"Mm."

"What brought that up?"

Granella shrugged. "I was just thinking of what was going on back home."

"No.." Pony waved a stick of meat at her. "I mean, what made Cyrene bring that up? That why she's so pissed off at her Maj? She wants her to be an innkeeper? She's nuts."

"Mm." Granella removed some waybread from her pack and a slab of hard cheese. She put them together and nibbled on them. "There's worse ways to live." She leaned back against the rocks and watched the fire crackle. "They can't wander around forever, y'know."

Pony took a swig from her waterskin. "Know what I think?"

"What?"

The weapons master wiped her lips with the back of her hand. "They'll never settle down there. Not for long."

Granella looked at her. "Pon, they've got a kid, and a house and a family there."

"Doesn't matter." Eponin shook her head. "They got that itch. Gabrielle's got it worse than Xena does... wasn't all the noise and crap in town that drove her nuts, it was all the boring crap that goes on there day in day out."

Granella pondered that as she ate. "She's a dreamer." She finally said, in a quiet tone. "She'll never be Queen, not really. You know it."

"I know it. Eph knows it." The weapons master said. "Only chance she'd have done it was back when."
"The first time."

Pony nodded, understanding exactly what Granella meant. "If Xena hadn't come back, then yeah, maybe. But I'm not sure I'd have liked what kind of Queen she'd have ended up being."

She'd just gained her feathers then, Granella remembered, and she recalled the horror and the sadness of that time, and how frightened she'd been of Velasca. She'd thought Gabrielle was insanely brave to face off against her, but she'd heard Ephiny say something like that to her and what Gabrielle had answered had scared her even more.

"Worst she can do, is kill me. It would probably hurt less."

"Yeah." She agreed somberly. "That woulda been tough."

They both remained quiet for a while, absorbed in their own thoughts as the sky turned to black over them and the fire's golden light edged out into the darkness. Granella finally cleared her throat, and glanced at her companion. "You think they're okay?"

Eponin returned the look, her hazel eyes reflecting the flames. "Truth?"

Granella nodded.

"I think they're in big time trouble." The weapons master said. "Cause if they weren't, no crap, they'd be back already. Even if that kid wasn't waiting on them, they had tons of family in the way of that flood and no matter how pissed off Xena was at her mom and all that, they're family, you know?"

Granella nodded seriously. "Toris thinks the same thing." She said. "That's why he wasn't torked at all about me coming out here with you." She went on. "He's really worried."

"But he said.."

"I know.. I know.. all that stuff about them being who they are and all that. But what he tells me is the truth, you know?" Granella interrupted her. "And even though they fight, he loves her, and you know he loves Gabrielle."

"Yeah." Pony stared pensively at the fire. "You know, I learned a lot from Xena that way."

"Huh?"

The weapons master remained quiet for a moment, then she exhaled. "My mother was going to sell me to a whorehouse." She remarked, in an unemotional tone. "That's how I came to the Amazons. Couple of em.. Renas, her buddy Liv, and a few others, happened on the place and took me instead."

Granella blinked, startled. "Oh." She said. "Sorry.. I didn't know that, Pon."

"Most don't." The woman shrugged. "Old history, but you know, after seeing Xena with Cyrene, makes me believe if I ever did see the old bitch again, I probably wouldn't kill her." She concluded. "Family's family."

Granella thought about her own mother. She'd been born into the Amazon nation and had grown up a part of the nation. She'd always assumed Pony had done the same, as she'd always seemed so natural an Amazon to her. "Yeah."

"So that's why I think they'd be back already." Pony said. "They didn't know how high the river'd go.. Hades, it coulda taken out the upper town."

"Coulda."

"And they'd never leave that kid."

"No." Granella agreed quietly. "You think we can find them?"

Pony drew out her sword, and her sharpening stone, and began a rhythmic scraping. "We gotta." She said, her eyes on the blade. "Ain't no choice, y'know?"

"I know."

Pony looked out into the darkness, her hands working at her task automatically. No choice, true.. but where to start looking?

That was the question she really didn't have an answer to. But by daylight, damn it, she'd have one.

No choice.

**

It was just before dawn, and at last Xena knew a moment of peace. The hooters had all hunkered down in silence finally, after Gabrielle's story was over and the bard had slowly relaxed, her head coming to rest against Xena's collarbone.

The blond woman wasn't quite asleep, but her breathing was slow and steady, and Xena knew she was in that twilight state between waking and dreaming and wasn't really conscious of her surroundings.

Outside, she could hear the faint buzz of crickets and the tentative chirps of early rising birds, and further out the sound of water rippling from the creek. There were no noises she could identify as belonging to large animals around, and she started planning in her mind the steps they'd take to escape from the cave.

Her pack was already knotted, and at her side, with her ax and Gabrielle's staff.

In a moment, she would nudge Gabrielle into alertness. In a moment, she would ready herself to stand, and kick the fire into the cavern and run, her mind already going over the route they'd take and anticipating both the smooth points and the rough spots.

Her breathing started to deepen, and she felt blood move a little more strongly through her, warming her skin and heightening her alertness. She drew in a lungful of the cavern air and regretted it, as the proximity of all the hooters in close quarters put a rancid taste on the back of her tongue.

A bird called outside, and Xena shifted a little, starting to raise her hand to cup Gabrielle's face only to find it gently caught and held, and then kissed. She glanced down to see Gabrielle looking at her through the gloom, alert and waiting, her thumb rubbing against Xena's palm as they sat there breathing in each other's rhythm.

"Ready?" Xena shaped the word silently.

Gabrielle nodded.

"Three." The warrior added, hearing a soft stirring around them, and realizing they were running out of time. "One... "

Gabrielle gathered herself up without moving, muscles tensing all along her body as she slid one foot more under her.

"Two."

The woman woke, looking around in sudden alarm, but relaxing once she saw them there. She put her head down on her forearm and watched them, her eyes a mystery in the shadows around the fire.

"Three." Xena surged upward, getting a hand on Gabrielle's hip as the bard uncoiled ahead of her and headed for the opening, her staff gripped firmly. "Go!" The warrior turned and with a sweep of her leg, booted the burning logs from the fire towards the center of the cavern as the hooters all started to scramble up, a howl rising even as she completed the move.

"No!" The woman got up and started for them, her hand stretched out in entreaty. "No!"

Xena didn't stop to argue. She saw the fire catch on the leaf litter as she bolted from the cavern, following in Gabrielle's footsteps as the bard crossed the rocks and headed for the trees. The fresh air puffed against her face and she sucked it in gratefully, her eyes sweeping over the area in search of threats.

She caught up to Gabrielle as they raced down the small slope, her ears cocked behind her to listen for the hooters. She could detect some kind of motion, but glancing behind her revealed only smoke coming from the opening to the cavern and she didn't stop to ponder it. "Go!"

"I'm going!" Gabrielle tucked her staff against her ribs as the morning air pushed the hair back off her forehead, her body almost shivering in the early chill after the warmth of the fire and Xena's body. Despite that, though, she was glad to be moving, glad to be out of the cavern and away from the creatures and the atmosphere of fear around them.

The early morning forest was just waking as well, and she startled a rabbit.. or what she thought was a rabbit as it scrambled out of her way and scuttled under a bush. There was no time to wonder, though, and they tore through the outer fringe of the trees side by side in silence.

"Anything?" Gabrielle asked, after a few minutes of running.

Xena risked a backwards glance, and saw only forest. "No."

"We going to keep running?"

"Yes."

"Okay." Gabrielle concentrated on the ground, it's uneven nature making speed dangerous. She dropped back a pace behind Xena, letting the warrior lead the way, shifting her staff from her right hand to her left to keep it from thumping her partner as they ran.

She could hear birds all around her now, chittering and flapping in the leaves over their head as they darted up from perches in alarm. Her body had warmed up by now, and she fell into a rhythm as Xena headed across a small ridge and down into a mossy dell.

It was damp in the bottom of it, her boots sinking in a little and throwing up a few spits of mud as they turned and continued along the hollow instead of going up the other side. She realized they were heading towards the other side of the valley, away from the cave they'd hid in before. "Thought you were going back."

"Only if I have to." Xena was running easily, her head turning to the left to peer through the trees. "We know what's back there and it's not good."

"Right."

"We don't know what's ahead of us."

Could be better or worse, Gabrielle mused silently. She wasn't unhappy about it though - any unknown area could hold a way out.

"Damn."

Gabrielle looked quickly to the left, and saw faint shadows at the edge of the trees back the way they'd come. "Well, you figured they'd come after us."

"Figured we'd have more time." Xena sighed, wishing silently she'd had a bigger fire and a pair of much sturdier boots. "Run."

"Hon, I'm running." Gabrielle increased her pace to keep up. "Are we running someplace in particular or what?"

Good question. Xena scanned the old river bed they were currently heading down, feeling the ground sloping a little under her feet. She didn't want to get into a gully, and have the creatures come down

on top of them from the banks, and yet being a little below the level of the ground meant they might not be noticed for a little while longer.

She glanced at Gabrielle, gauging the blond woman's energy level. Despite the lack of sleep and the rapid escape, the bard seemed to be in good form, her powerful strides easy and unstrained. "Let's see how far we can get in this." She indicated the creek bed. "If they get too close, we'll go up."

Gabrielle looked up in reflex. "Up out of the ditch?"

"Up in the trees." Xena muffled a smile, at her partner's grimace. "C'mon.. Amazon tradition."

Yes, Gabrielle knew that. She knew the Amazons were legendary for their ability to travel through the trees, and she knew her partner enjoyed doing that herself.

Gabrielle did not enjoy it, and Xena knew that. She climbed trees when she had to, but her fear of heights made travel through them uncomfortable at best and nauseating at worst and so she hoped like Hades they'd find a better path down the gully. "Great."

They went a little faster, as the ground sloped a little more and the tops of the gully rose up near their eye level. The ancient bank here was undercut, and went back into the ground quite a bit, revealing miniature caves that sprouted the occasional bush.

Xena kept an eye on the shadows between the trees, her ears cocked as she caught the hooter's yells on the air. She saw the gully bending to the right ahead of them, and she picked up speed, the pack bouncing a little on her back.

As she rounded the bend a flash of motion caught her eye and she blinked, as part of the wall seemed to separate and move into the middle of the gully, resolving from a dark shadow into a huge wolflike creature.

"Xena!" Gabrielle yelped automatically, slowing as the warrior threw out her arm to block the way.

"I see it." Xena looked hastily over her shoulder, then she studied the animal. It's hackles were up and it was growling - it's head roughly even with her shoulders. She shifted her grip on her ax and raised it. "Yeahh!"

The animal opened it's mouth and showed it's teeth, then advanced, it's legs stiff and it's hair on end. Xena took a step towards it and brandished the ax, spreading her other arm to make herself appear larger. "Get outta here! Yah!"

The animal's growls deepened and it rushed a few steps towards them, then stopped, it's paws sending bits of shale spitting towards their legs.

As a counterpoint, the yells of the hooters got louder, and more insistent. Xena looked behind her, then she stooped and picked up a rock, throwing it at the beast. "Move!"

The animal snarled at her and ran a few steps closer again, growling hideously.

"Son of a bacchae." Xena sighed. "Trade." She indicated Gabrielle's staff. "Lemme see if I can.."

"Xe, wait." Gabrielle had spotted something. "Hold on a.." She reached for the warrior's arm but found it yanked out of her grasp. "Xena!"

"Gabrielle!" The warrior yelled in frustration. "No wait!"

The bard backed up, grabbing hold of her partner's belt and hauling her bodily along with her, catching the warrior off balance and making progress before she could put the brakes on and stop them.

"Gab!" Xena twisted around and took hold of her hands. "What in the Hades are you doing!" She dropped her ax and grappled with the bard, her boots skidding in the loose shale. "GABRIELLE!!!!" She yelled in anger.

"Shh!" Gabrielle hauled her against the bank and they turned, with their backs protected. "Look!" She pointed. "Look under there!" She urged the warrior, whose eyes were boring right through her. "Xena!" She reached up and took hold of her partner's jaw, turning her head. "LOOK!"

The wolflike creature was still growling, but it had stopped advancing, and was merely standing it's ground, watching them with intent, yellow eyes. After a moment, a smaller, furry body emerged from the undercut, staring at them.

"She has babies." The bard whispered. "C'mon. Let's get out of here." She turned and looked for a way up out of the gully, her heart beating double time in her chest. She reached for a root sticking out from between the rocks and started hauling herself up, only to be gripped around the waist and thrown gently onto the mossy ground on the edge.

She rolled over and got out of the way, as Xena vaulted up to join her. They stood and started running along the edge, dodging between the trees and following the creek bed as the wolflike creature turned to watch them.

The ground became rocky and the ridge they were on angled upwards, as the creek bed angled downwards, moving towards a thickly forested area that overgrew the gully just ahead. Gabrielle was suddenly glad they were out of it, the shadowed darkness making her skin prickle for no apparent reason.

"There." Xena grabbed her shoulder and pointed. A rockslide had happened, recently by the look of it, and several huge slabs of rock had fallen down from the wall ahead and formed a roughly triangular shaped space among crushed trees. "Let's see if we can duck in there and lose them."

Gabrielle followed her as they scrambled down a slope of loose rock, almost skidding into the shelter uncontrollably. They passed under the overhanging rock and skidded to a halt, turning to look behind them as they ducked around a waist high boulder and crouched down.

Shoulder to shoulder, both hand son the rock, fingers splayed as they searched the forest. Neither of them said a word as the yells grew closer, echoing through the forest. The wind blew against their faces, and Xena let out a breath, her nostrils twitching.

Gabrielle stiffened, as she spotted hairy figures loping along the top of the creek bed, the two nearest clutching branches. They were definitely being hunted. She dropped one hand off the rock and took hold of her staff, her heart coming up into her throat.

Xena reached over and put a hand on her back, pressing her very gently towards the rock. She put a finger to her lips and made the sign for 'keep still.', then she leaned against the rock herself and merely watched, only her eyes visible over the stone.

The creatures came closer, and Gabrielle watched them, forcing herself to remain calm and in place as the lead creature sniffed the air, and let out a howl, slapping his branch against a nearby tree. Two birds erupted from the bushes and the creature paused, listening intently.

Gabrielle was abruptly aware of her own breathing, which sounded loud in her own ears. She opened her mouth and felt the air rush across her tongue, her inhale filled with the scent of stone and earth. Beside her, Xena knelt in utter stillness, only her eyes watching intently as the hunters came closer and closer.

They made a huge amount of noise, hooting and smacking the trees, shaking the branches and throwing rocks into the underbrush.

One of the rocks bounded into the shelter they were in and bounced against the boulder they were behind. Gabrielle heard her heart thunder in her ears and she shifted a quick look to Xena's face in question. The warrior's hand, hidden behind the rock made a slight gesture, and she turned back around, remaining in place out of sheer stubborn will.

It was hard. But she trusted Xena.

She did. Gabrielle felt a tremor shake her hands as the creatures climbed up the slope towards them. She really did.

**

Ephiny stared at the woman seated on Xena and Gabrielle's bed, her arms folded over her chest. "You're joking."

"Not even slightly funny." Cyrene replied. "He's promised them two hundred dinars a piece."

Ephiny blinked.

"Two hundred dinars, and there's two score of them. Forty." The innkeeper continued. "And he told us we just have to suck it up and give them everything we've got."

Ephiny slowly sat down on the chest. "Is he out of his mind?" She asked. "You'll be indebted to them for three seasons at least!"

Cyrene shook her head. "I don't know what he's out of, but he's run me out of patience and everything else, I'll tell you that." She said. "We just got out of that town meeting, and I walked up here so I wouldn't go find an ax and get myself in some real trouble."

"Hm." Ephiny laced her fingers together, giving Cyrene's statement the respect it deserved given her history. "You going to go along with it?"

The innkeeper snorted. "He's given the town's word."

"And?"

Cyrene looked wryly at her.

Ephiny shrugged. "Sorry, Cyrene.. but no one in your family, blood or extended, that I've met yet has been much on obeying rules that aren't to their advantage." She watched Dori throw a stuffed toy at the wall, and catch it as it bounced back at her. "No offense."

The innkeeper got up and walked over to the window, leaning on the sill and looking out. "It's not that simple."

"Why not?" The regent asked. "Let me tell you something.. if someone came and told me I'd have to give up our whole year's income I'd kick em in the shins and tell them to kiss my ass." She got up and walked over to where Cyrene was standing. "You're going to tell me that council of yours voted to agree with him?"

"Apparently." Cyrene turned and leaned against the sill. "They think it's fair... but then, most of them are making all their income off the lower town.. the markets there. If they don't rebuild, they're sunk."

"Ah."

"Where as the rest of us... well, sure, I make coin off the place, but.."

"But you have the best inn in town anyway, and you'd get business regardless." Ephiny completed the thought. "You mean to tell me you let those speculators take over the town?"

Cyrene had the grace to look abashed. "We didn't realize it was happening."

"Until they kicked Gabrielle out." The Amazon snorted softly. "That should have clued you."

The innkeeper frowned.

"You know, I never did buy that whole line about how she had divided loyalties." Ephiny continued. "I think they just wanted to make their scummy deals and they were afraid she'd kick their asses."

Cyrene opened her mouth, and then after a moment, closed it again with a faint half shrug. "Well, I'm not sure what we're going to do." She admitted. "Of course I don't want to go along with it.. but I don't want to make an enemy of the whole town either. I do have to live here."

She pushed away from the window and went over to where Dori was sitting. "Hey, cutie pie. What are you up to?"

"Grama, hi." Dori twisted around on the floor so she was facing her grandmother. "Is mama coming?"

Cyrene grimaced a little. "Soon, sweetie. Some of our friends went to go find your mama and Xena, and tell them to hurry up home, okay?"

Dori scowled a bit. "Boo's gone too long." She complained. "No fun."

Ephiny crossed back over to the chest and sat down, watching the child pensively.

"Well, honey, do you want to come down and play with Solon and Lyceus?" Cyrene asked. "I'm not sure your uncle Toris would appreciate another hellion to watch, but I bet you'd have fun."

"Go down there?" Dori pointed in the actual direction of the town.

"Yes." Cyrene agreed. "You want to go?"

Dori considered the request. "No." She shook her head with childish sincerity. "Too loud. Bring ev'rybody here now.. fun!"

Ephiny chuckled softly.

Cyrene frowned. "She learned that from them." She muttered. "Little rascal."

The regent remained silent for a moment. "You're wrong."

"What?"

"She's capable of making up her own mind." Ephiny said, in a sharper tone. "Just like her mothers are. And for the record, I think they made a fine choice moving up here."

Cyrene rolled her eyes. "You would."

"I do." The regent agreed. "You people don't appreciate them in the least." She got down on the floor. "C'mere, Dori... let's play pattycake, like you do with mama."

Dori agreeably crawled over to her and sat down.

"What nonsense. Of course I appreciate them." Cyrene protested. "They're my daughters, for the gods sake." She paced over to the fireplace. "Appreciate them? If I didn't, would I give a damn if they moved here, or some other town, or across the ocean?"

"Then why make them miserable?" Ephiny clapped her hands and patted Dori's. "Cyrene, you know Xena. You birthed her. You really think she'd cut out to live in the middle of a city?"

Cyrene exhaled audibly. She leaned her arm on the fireplace mantle and gazed into it. "No." She finally said. "But I know something about this mountainside they don't. You don't."

Ephiny patted a few more hands with Dori before she looked up. "Don't I?"

Cyrene studied her in a silence that lengthened into discomfort. "I hope you don't." She said, at last. "I really hope not."

Ephiny looked at her with an enigmatic expression, as Dori's burblings drifted between them.

**

Gabrielle felt like the ground was boring holes in her kneecaps, she'd been frozen in position so long. One of the hooters had entered the overhang they were hidden in, and he was sniffing around. She could hear him, but not see him as she had her cheek pressed against the rock they were behind and her head down.

It was nervewracking. She heard, very faintly, the soft scrape of the hilt of her knife against Xena's palm, as the warrior's fingers closed around it and felt the rigid tension of the tall form brushing lightly against hers. The urge to jump up, or run, or fight was almost irresistible.

There was a scuff of bare feet against stone right on the other side of the rock, and Gabrielle more felt than heard Xena draw in a deep breath, more sensed than saw the shiver of energy she knew came just before the warrior would surge into battle, a dark thrill running through their link in anticipation of it.

She'd finally gotten used to feeling that, and right now, in this time and place – she welcomed it. The waiting was killing her.

A scream sounded outside, high and panicked. The scuff of footsteps and a grunt very close by answered, then she could hear the hooter running away, his feet slapping against the stone. She let out a breath, and moved her hand slightly to rest it against Xena's thigh.

"Okay." Xena uttered softly. "He's gone."

Gratefully, Gabrielle straightened up, then rocked back onto her heels to take the pressure off her knees. "Ow."

"Mm." Xena peered over the rock at the opening, which was thankfully hooter free. She could hear a commotion outside, and found herself hoping fervently that the wolf, and it's mate, had come out to find lunch. "Stay here. Let me check things out."

Gabrielle rose to her feet as Xena circled the rock and headed to the opening, but she stayed where she was, stretching her back out and reaching down to rub her knees as she kept an eye on the warrior's tall figure. Xena moved cautiously to the opening, her ax in one hand and the knife in the other, her wrist cocked in a throwing posture.

She stayed still for an extended period, and finally Gabrielle gave in to her instincts and went after her, slipping up behind the warrior and peering past her shoulder.

"Didn't I say stay back there?" Xena asked, in a mild tone.

"Sure. You never said for how long." Gabrielle replied, unperturbed. "Where are they?"

Xena edged outside into the open, her eyes confirming what her ears had already told her. "Gone." She said. "They ran off back down the creek bed... I think."

"Thank the gods."

"Thank the wolves." The warrior observed. "Maybe they pushed them too far."

"Mm."

Xena heard the layers of commentary in the simple sound, and though she was facing away from her partner, she could see her expression in her mind's eye with utter clarity. She knew Gabrielle would have her arms folded, and she knew one eyebrow would be slightly raised, and she knew her lips would be tensed into a faint, wry smile.

She knew why. Xena turned, to find her mental image facing her. "Guess they didn't have you to stop them."

The faint smile spread easily into a warm grin at the acknowledgement. "Hey, I gotta be good for something, right?" Gabrielle walked over and bumped her gently, moving past and peering across the rocks towards the dry creek bed. "So, now what?" She asked. "Think they're gone for good?"

"No." Xena shook her head. "But I think we've got a chance to find a way out until they get up the guts to come back after us." She looked around. "Let's head up there. See what we can find."

"Lead on." Gabrielle ran her fingers through her hair. "Be nice to stop for a drink of water, though." She was aware of her partner's eyes on her. "Boy, I'm glad to be out of that cave."

"Me too." Xena agreed, apparently satisfied with what she saw. She started off across the rocks towards a forested ridge above the old creek. "Damn glad, in fact." She waited for Gabrielle to catch up, and they climbed together across the slanted ground. "We'll look for water. I need to hunt."

"Hungry?"

"Starving. You?"

Gabrielle paused, and put her free hand over her stomach, a bemused expression crossing her face. "Actually.. .I'm a little.. um.."

Xena looked at her, an eyebrow cocking significantly. "Sick?"

"A little queasy." The bard admitted. "But that could be just all the stuff that happened and not sleeping."

"Could be."

They both smiled, and kept walking.

**

The area around them had gone from open and somewhat scrubby, to a deep, thick forest. Gabrielle found herself falling behind her partner as she followed her through the trees, the gaps between them unable to permit them to walk side by side.

The sun filtered only fitfully through the leaves, and she felt an occasional damp chill as the air brushed across her bare midriff. "Know what this reminds me of?"

Xena looked around, tossing her head to move her hair from her eyes. "A forest?"

"Xena." Gabrielle laughed. "Go with me, here, huh?"

"Sorry." Xena reached up to rub the back of her neck with a small grimace. "Headache."

Hm. The bard caught up with her and hooked a finger into her belt. "It reminds me a little of Britannia." She went on. "Just that... I always felt things were old there, you know what I mean?"

Xena did her best not to think of Britannia at all, so in fact, she didn't. "Mm." She made a noncommittal sound. "To me they're just trees." She admitted. "I've seen forests like this before.. up north, places."

Gabrielle casually leaned against her as they walked, her fingers still tucked in Xena's belt. "I didn't mean that in a bad way." She said, after a moment. "It just struck me, when we were there, that there was this feeling of.. I don't know, ancient mysteries around."

Xena eyed her.

"You didn't think so?"

"No." The warrior replied. "They were just trees." She said. "In a hateful place." Her voice dropped a little on the last words, and ended in a sigh.

Gabrielle let the silence settle over them for a while, allowing the cool wind to brush over her as she walked along, using the staff to steady her steps. The leaves rattled around them, but instead of the vaguely forboding feeling she'd had in the valley so far, here the effect was mostly a somber peacefulness.

After the past few days, it was welcome, and she was glad to simply place her boots on relatively dry ground, in relatively dry air, with no odd creatures or hooters chasing her. It was nice to be able to let her mind wander, just a little bit, and she felt some of the past few days' horror leaving her.

Experience did that, Gabrielle acknowledged. She could remember the times when she'd stress over something that had happened for days, worrying over every last moment of it, wondering what she could have done differently, and anxious about Xena's thoughts and feelings.

Eventually, she realized Xena didn't have thoughts and feelings past the first quarter candlemark after something had occurred, and over time she found herself putting events first in perspective then in the past faster than she could have ever imagined.

Living in the moment. That had been a hard lesson to learn, and sometimes, Gabrielle mused, she wondered just exactly how true it was that anything ever got put totally in the past.

"Xena?"

"Mm?"

"Sorry I brought that up." Gabrielle said. "Didn't mean to bum you out."

Xena kept on walking, her eyes flicking over the trees around them as she pondered. Was she bummed out? She didn't think so. It was just that Britannia marked one of her most profound, most damning personal failures and she just didn't like to talk or think about it. Natural, really, she sniffed a little, reaching up to rub her nose where it itched.

Gabrielle's hand released from her belt, and dropped to catch hers instead. She felt the bard's fingers twine with hers and the simple affection in the gesture made her smile. "You know what this reminds me of?"

"If you say Britannia I'm going to bite your thumb." The bard warned her.

"Nah." Xena swung her arm a little, moving their joined hands. "It reminds me of that seaside area we went through on the way home. Where Dori found the little owl?"

Gabrielle shifted her thoughts to a happier memory. "Oh.. where we came across that strange little village?"

"Mm." The warrior nodded.

The bard looked around. "You know, you're right." She agreed. "It had that same kind of rocks, too. Over there." She pointed at the ground, which had thick, moss covered boulders coming out of it. "See that one?" She indicated a truly large one, hunkered down in stripes of sunlight from above.

"Yeah, I.." Xena stopped abruptly, hauling Gabrielle to a halt as well.

"What?" Gabrielle's hand clenched on her staff. She followed the warrior's pointing finger and blinked as her boulder stirred, shifting around and standing up as it heard their approach. "By the gods.. what is that?"

The rock like animal turned, a spine on it's back rising in alarm as it opened it's jaws and hissed at them. It was huge, it's back well over Xena's head and it's skin looked remarkably like the rock she'd mistaken it for.

Xena handed over her ax. "Hold this. Gimme that." She took Gabrielle's staff and cautiously moved towards the animal. It had a pointed snout, and tiny eyes, and she racked her brains to figure out where it seemed a little familiar from.

The animal hissed at her, stepping from foot to foot and rattling it's skin.

"Gosh.. Xena, look at that." Gabrielle murmured, fascinated. "It's like it has armor on." She edged up behind her partner and peered at the animal, which showed signs of being more afraid of them than they were of it. "I don't 'think it wants to hurt us."

Xena studied it. "I don't think it wants to eat us." She clarified. "I don't think it cares if it hurts us, long as we leave it alone." She took a step back, and watched the spines arched over the animal's head relax a little. "Wouldn't mind one of those, though."

"The poky things?"

"Yeah." Xena eyed the spine, which was easily the length of her body. "Wonder if he'd give me one."

"Xena." Gabrielle took hold of the warrior's belt again. "Don't get any funny ideas."

Xena sighed. "I'd probably end up poking myself in the ass with it anyway." She started off again, sidestepping to put distance between them and the bristling creature. "Wish I could find some some damn iron ore."

Gabrielle kept an eye on the animal, which rattled it's skin again, but seemed to realize they meant it no harm and merely watched them warily as they went by. "Why?" She asked. "What does that get us, a hotter fire?"

Xena chuckled wryly. She climbed over one of the smaller boulders and followed a small ridge downward, turning sideways to get between a pair of huge trees. A stand of smaller trunks faced her, and she started to circle them, stopping when her hand pushed against one of the trunklets and it sprang back to her touch. "Hm."

"What?" The bard glanced behind them, at the animal, which was still standing up watching them.

Xena put her hand around the tree, a sapling really, and shook it. The foliage was long and thin, and her fingers fit neatly around it. Experimentally, she slid her hand up, braced her foot against the bottom of it, and pulled. The wood tensed and bowed, but only with a lot of effort on her part, and she let out a soft grunt as she released it. "Might be useful."

Gabrielle watched her. "Bow?" She guessed.

"Mhmm." Xena edged into a little clear space and started chopping at the base of the sapling with her stone ax. "Gotta keep them back when they come after us again."

"Hm." The bard rested her staff against a nearby tree and started to look around the base of the nearby boulders. The pieces of stone were mostly chips of slate type rock, but after a few minutes rooting around, she found what she was looking for. "Ah." She straightened up with a round river rock about the size of her palm. "Xe, think you can cut me the right size piece of skin for a sling?"

Xena glanced up from her work. "Sure."

"Good. I'll find more of these."

The warrior eyed her. "Not too many. We don't have Argo, remember."

Or her carrybag, Gabrielle mused wryly. "You know, that's one of the ways I knew I was getting to you." She picked up another stone, juggling it a bit. "When you let me put stuff on Argo's saddle rings."

Xena had knelt to get a better angle, one hand pushing the sapling aside as she chopped at the base with stolid skill. "Ahhh." She edged around on her knees and started in another spot. "Yeah, that was a clue, huh?"

"Oh yeah."

The warrior continued her work, standing as the sapling came free and laying it on the ground. "You remember the night we spent in Thelus? Where they were having the races?"

"Um.." Gabrielle was a touch confused at the change of subject. "Yeah, oh, with the wagons. Yeah, I do." She said. "When I bet all those dinars on that pretty horse and he was losing and then all of a sudden the winner tripped and fell and he won.. eyah. I remember."

"Uh huh."

"That was a long time ago." The bard said. "But it was sort of cool.. it was nice to win."

"Uh huh."

Gabrielle looked up, cocking her head. "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why did you mention that?"

Xena trimmed the last of the leaves off the sapling and stood up, measuring it against her height and studying her work. "Because I tripped the horse." She said, glancing over at her partner. "So you could win."

"You did?"

"Mm." The blue eyes twinkled gravely. "That's when I knew you were getting to me." She tucked her ax into her belt and flexed the sapling between both hands, winking at Gabrielle before she turned to look for appropriate arrow material.

Gabrielle sat back on her heels and remembered that moment, that small space of triumph in the early moons of their friendship when even the least smile from Xena had left her breathless. She remembered taking the dinars, and celebrating, buying Xena something.. what was it? The warrior had demurred but she hadn't cared.. oh, right.

The blanket. A soft, pretty one in wool that Xena had said would never last a fortnight but was still packed in their traveling gear to this very day, tattered and patched but serving as Xena's pillow anyway.

Gabrielle walked over and slipped the six rocks she'd found into the pack on Xena's back, leaning close and giving her a kiss on the shoulder. "I wonder if everyone we knew was wondering how long it would take us to figure out what was going on."

Xena started to answer, then she stiffened, as a sound on the wind caught her ear. "Ah."

Gabrielle sighed. "Don't tell me."

"C'mon." The warrior pointed. "Let's find some place we can hole up and get ourselves armed." She sounded a bit more decisive now. "I'm about over these guys."

Gabrielle picked up her staff and followed Xena through the trees, heading downwards towards a thicker part of the forest. It was still quiet around them, but the peacefulness had vanished, and she was starting to hear footsteps in every brush of the breeze against the branches.

All at once, she was angry. Angry at the creatures, and at the valley, that were putting so much pressure on them in such a mindless, unreasoning way. "Darn it."

"What?" Xena turned to look at her in question.

Gabrielle noted the dark circles under her partner's eyes. "This place is pissing me off." She put a hand on Xena's hip and urged her forward. "We need to do something about those guys.. we'll never get out of here if all we do is keep running and hiding."

Xena sneezed. "I know that." She half slid, half skidded down a steeper slope, turning to catch Gabrielle as she almost flew past her. "So are you ready to do something about it?"

Gabrielle remained silent as they plunged deeper into the forest, passing tall columns of stone and moving into ground that was damp and dark, and brought a scent of earthy richness as their boots stirred it. "You mean fight them." She finally said.

"They're not gonna negotiate."

The bard looked inside herself, wondering if she'd find the bard or the Amazon looking back out. She found neither, truly, but an echo of Dori's laughter tickled her ears and laid the stakes out neatly in her path. Was she ready to kill the creatures? That's what Xena was asking her. Was she ready to cross that line, because she knew, and Xena had demonstrated, that just knocking them out did nothing but make them come back harder.

If she wasn't, she knew Xena wouldn't hold it against her. The warrior would just do what she needed to do, and there wasn't anything in her heart that would think the less of Gabrielle for it.

But you know.. Gabrielle drew in a breath and released it. She was ready. She'd done her best to give them a chance, tried to communicate with them, and put herself and her soulmate in danger doing it.

Now it was time to cut her losses, and find a way home. "Yeah, I'm ready." She put her hand on Xena's back as the warrior spotted what she was looking for. "There?"

"There." Xena slipped behind two standing stones, taller than she was and covered in fragrant green moss. Behind them was a dell, a curve of granite upthrust from the ground that arched over a leaf covered floor and gave them both shelter and place to defend. "Put that down, let's see what we've got around here to work with."

"Gotcha." Gabrielle tossed her staff under the sheltering rock and took the pack off as Xena shrugged it, and set it down on the ground. "I'll start making that sling."

Xena nodded, dusting her hands off. "I'm going to find sticks for arrows, and see what sap's around." She sniffed the air. "Gather wood."

"I will." Gabrielle patted her on the side. "Be careful."

Xena put a hand on her cheek, gazing with brief intensity into the bard's eyes. "We're going home." She spoke softly. "Whatever that takes"

Gabrielle nodded. "I'm with you." She said. "Whatever that takes."

In the distance, a hooter howled, and they heard the sound of branches breaking.

**

One Wild Ride

Part 11

"So, what do we do?" Granella asked, as she stood together on the banks of the swollen river. "Keep going down there, or start looking up here? I don't know, Pon... we've covered everything down to the plateau."

Pony studied the ground thoughtfully. "They'd have gotten out easy down there." She said. "It's flooded all across the lowlands, but not that deep."

"Mm." Granella rubbed her jaw. "What if they headed to Potadeia, to check things out there?"

Eponin's face tensed into a slight frown. "Hm.. you think?"

Granella shrugged. "Family there, family here... maybe they figured we got more strong bodies to handle stuff around here than they do over there?" She twisted a branch off a half sunken tree and began stripping the leaves methodically. "Be like Gabrielle to want to go check."

"Now." Pony remarked. "I don't think she looked back the first time she got outta there." She turned and looked at the craggy, mountainous territory they were currently in. "But y'know? I got a feeling they're up in here somewhere."

"You do?" Granella asked. "Why?"

Pony shrugged her shoulders. "Beats me. But we're here, and I'd rather hunt up this way than walk down to Potadeia. Place always gives me the creeps." She turned and started up a rocky footpath leading away from the river. "Dunno if it's all those damn sheep or what."

Granella followed her, casting a glance over her shoulder as she picked her way along the loose rocks. She'd been to Potadeia herself once or twice, after the town had been rebuilt. Gabrielle had taken a walk down there and she'd come along to keep the bard company, leading a pack mule that had most of the stuff Gabrielle's family had left behind on it's back.

Hadn't seemed creepy to her. She'd mostly considered her Queen's hometown as a sleepy little village, like a hundred others she'd seen in travels around these parts. Nothing special, except that Gabrielle had come from there, and felt a responsibility for it.

Responsibility, Granella noted, not a love for it. She'd never gotten the feeling that Gabrielle had any real fondness for her birthplace, and in fact, on the way back she'd actually commented very briefly on how glad she'd been to have Xena show up that one fine morning.

Made her wonder, sometimes. Gabrielle was such a mixture of innocence and experience it was hard to tell really what Xena had found when she'd come here. Half the nation, Granella knew, thought the bard had been just a total innocent engulfed by the warrior's charisma but the more she came to know her sister in law, the less she believed it.

Well, the total innocent part. Granella chuckled, as she took hold of a bit of rock to pull herself up with. Gabrielle herself cheerfully admitted to falling for the charisma. She glanced to her left and spotted a sharp cleft, in a split of the mountain. It was stacked with driftwood and mud and she paused to look at it. "Hey, Pon? What's that over there?"

Eponin paused, and looked. "What?"

"That thing over there." Granella shaded her eyes and pointed. "Looks like the water might have gone down into that crack... maybe there's some sign of them."

Pony put her hand on her hip. "Gonna be a mess getting over there." She said, observing the river's edge. It shoved against the debris in the crack, spilling through it with restless insistence. "Worth it?"

"Maybe that's some of the bridge." Granella started back down towards the water. "Looks like it.. yeah, Pon, look!" She pointed. "That's a crate."

Eponin trotted back down the slope and joined her, and together they re-entered the river, going up to their thighs in floodwater as they edged carefully towards the crack in the rocks. "Feel the current?" The weapons' master grunted.

"Yeah." Granella kept hold of the branches in the trees lining the banks as she inched after Pony. "Water's going somewhere down there..." She grimaced. "Ow.. feathered mud." One boot stuck in the muck, and she patiently worked it out.

"Okay, hang on." Pony took a circle of rope from her pack and shook it out, making a noose in one end. She dipped the rope into the water to wet it, then cocked her wrist. "Watch it.. I got lousy aim."

Granella ducked behind a tree limb, and watched as her companion reared back and threw the rope, sending it coiling through the air to land limply in the water.

"Crap." Pony pulled the rope back in and tried again. "Gods, I suck at this."

"Want me to do it?" Granella asked, diffidently. "I get a lot of practice corralling the twins."

With a charming lack of pretention, Pony turned at once and handed her the rope. "Go for it." She stepped back out of the way, sloshing through the water. "Last thing I had to put a rope around was mule and it was standing still."

Granella sorted the rope out, running the thick hemp through her fingers and giving it a little twist as she coiled it up. She gauged the distance, then twirled the rope in a small circle before she let it fly with a flick of her wrist, sending the loop speeding towards the debris blocking the water.

The loop settled over a branch and hung there, until she skillfully drew her end back, tightening the loop around the branch. "There ya go."

"Kiss my butt and call me rooster." Eponin chuckled. "Sweet."

Granella felt a mild flush of pride, as she started down the rope towards the blockage with Pony behind her. Twins notwithstanding, she'd always been good at wrangling and had even helped Xena out a time or two with her colts when she'd been home working with them.

But it was different, doing it as an Amazon again. Granella felt the water rising up her body and she took a firmer hold on the rope as the current pushed against her legs. "Tie that end off." She suggested, as they reached the end of the sunken trees, and risked exposure to the main body of the river.

"Good idea." Pony took the loose end and tied it firmly off to one of the branches, giving it a healthy tug. "All right.. we're good to go."

With a nod, Granella stepped out into the full current, holding on to the rope as the surge shoved against her back and forced her towards the blockage. She kept going, moving down the line hand over hand as the water fluttered her leathers around her and swirled against her skin.

A few steps closer, and she could see the crate clearly now. "Look!" She called back over her shoulder. "It's got the town mark on it!" She took a step closer, and the water came up to her neck. "Uh oh."

"Keep going." Pony was right behind her. "Rope'll hold."

"Yeah?" Granella flexed her hands around the rope and took a deep breath. "Hope so."

The water pushed against them harder, and she moved forward with it, pulling herself along as much as she was pushing with her feet against the retreating river bottom. She'd just come to the conclusion that maybe her idea hadn't been the best one, when the ground sloped up a trifle and she felt hard rock under her. "Ah."

"Definitely from town." Pony was peering over her shoulder at the crate. "And that big one's a pilon from the bridge."

"Sure is, I.." Granella suddenly stepped forward into nothing, and sank into the water, her hands releasing the rope in pure reflex. "Oh.. sh.."

"Hey!" Pony released one hand and grabbed for her back, catching her leathers with her outstretched fingers. "Gran! Whoa! Hey!"

The current grabbed her and shoved her forward, and she felt Pony's hold on her pull her back, but only for an instant before she heard a splash and then she was driven forcefully ahead as the weapons master collided with her from behind. "Yah!"

"Damn it!" Pony spluttered, shaking now wet hair from her eyes. "Look out!"

The river picked them up and threw them against the blockage, their bodies thumping against the debris. "Oh, Hades.." Granella reached out and grabbed a branch, turning her back to the current as more debris collided with them. "Whose stupid idea was this?"

"Hang on!" Pony grabbed one of the planks wedged into the crack and pulled herself up out of current, looking between the branches. "Ho.. boy. Yow! Hey!" The board wiggled out in her grasp, and like a pile of jackstraws the blockage dissolved in a shocking instant, the current shoving the pile of debris out and down and taking them with it.

**

Gabrielle sat cross-legged on the ground, patiently shaping a bit of rock into an arrowhead. She had stone in front of her, and she was holding the point in place, and striking it with a second piece of granite in hopes she'd hit the right spot and chip it off.

Xena was perched on a boulder nearby, keeping watch, and shaping thin branches into arrows.

It was late afternoon, and the sun poured in liquid gold through the trees, dappling them both with a sense of false peacefulness. "How's it going?" Xena asked.

"Not bad." Gabrielle finished her current point, and set it aside, then flexed her fingers. "I think I'm getting the hang of it." She got up and walked over to the large, well laid fire, holding her hands out over it and looking around. "Any sign of them?"

Xena's ears twitched. "They're out there." She replied quietly. "I think they're coming back down the creek bed again. Sounds like it."

"Mm." The bard knelt by the fire and tested the baking fish she'd laid at the edge of with a cautious finger. "I guess having this smelling probably isn't a good thing."

"Don't care." Xena muttered. "I'm not eating raw fish. To Hades with them. Wind's blowing this way anyhow."

Gabrielle glanced over her shoulder at her grumpy soulmate. "Think they'll find us?"

Blue eyes flicked up to study her. "They'll find us." The warrior said. "With any luck, not before sundown. I'm hoping they'll hide for the night, and try again in the morning. If they don't.." She half shook her head. "If they come in close and I can't get these arrows to do us any good, we could be in real trouble."

As if they weren't in real trouble. Gabrielle merely nodded, and dragged a flat stone over to the fire. "Can you take a break and join me? Might as well eat now, right?"

Xena hopped off her rock and came over, dropping to the ground next to where Gabrielle was sitting. She watched in silence as the bard used a slab of bark to move the fish over, and set it down on the stone between them. "Might as well." She muttered.

Gabrielle speared up a bit of the fish on the end of a branch and offered it to her. She watched the warrior take it in silence and nibble it, the obvious storms clouding her eyes as she chewed. "So..what's bothering you so much?"

Xena looked up at her, an eyebrow arching sharply. "What?"

Gabrielle gazed steadily at her.

"You don't think being in a forest with no tools and few weapons about to be attacked by wild animals isn't enough reason to be pissed off?"

The bard took a piece of fish herself and bit into it. "Is there something else we should be doing?" She asked, mildly. "Building a catapult or something?"

"Gabrielle."

Gabrielle shrugged lightly. "Xena, we're doing all we can. We're going to be as prepared as we can. Other than running all night, or diving into the river..."

The warrior exhaled. "What if it's not enough?" She challenged her partner. "What if they come on us, and we can't stop them ,and.."

"And we end up shoulder to shoulder, our backs to the rock wall there?" Gabrielle asked, in gentle tone.

Xena stared at her.

"And we die fighting?"

The warrior maintained her silence, her eyes filled with glinting eloquence.

Gabrielle handed her over another piece of fish. "Then we do." She reached out with her free hand and covered Xena's fingers with her own. "We just do the best we can, Xena. You and me, you know?"

Xena let out a breath slowly. "That's not damn good enough for me." She said. "Not after all we've been through."

And, in a way, Gabrielle understood that completely. Their lives had been lived at high cost, almost from the moment of their meeting, and she knew that same high price should be paid to Hades when they crossed that river as well.

Arrogant, really. That they felt that their lives were worth more than other people's, but she knew she'd paid in bits of her soul for what she had, so if she felt that way, well, then she did. No sense in lying, either to herself or to Xena. "My friend." She curled her fingers around Xena's. "My soulmate. Love of my life."

Xena's expression visibly gentled, responding to the emotion. "Life sucks sometimes, doesn't it?" She murmured wryly.

"It does." Gabrielle agreed. "But you know, we're about the kick assingist people I know, so if anyone's going to get the job done here and go home, it's us."

"Mmph."

"If you can't beat them, Xena.. they can't be beaten." The bard added.

"I can beat them." The warrior's lower lip stuck out grumpily.

"Then we will." Gabrielle put the bit of fish to her partner's lips, and watched her grudgingly take it. "And I'll get an awesome story out of it."

Xena chewed her fish while she studied her partner. "You're really taking this damn well." She commented. "Better than I am."

The green eyes twinkled a little. "That's because I have more faith in you than you do." She said. "And I know we're going to get out of this all right."

"You do."

"I do."

Finally, the warrior smiled, just a little. "Got any idea how to make a catapult?"

"Nope. But I bet you do."

They both chuckled, and paid more serious attention to the fish, caught by Xena in a nearby stream. The sun started to slant further down, bringing shadows into their shelter, and a tickling cool breeze against their faces.

The night would come, soon, and bring whatever it would bring.

**

The moon rose high over the valley, laying a silver blanket over the rocks save where the fire's golden light touched them. Gabrielle looked up from where she was tying one last twist of vine around one of the stone pillars, and studied the white eye in the sky above them. "Okay, this enough?"

Xena came over and peered past her, at the loops of vine. "Okay." She walked forward and picked up a piece of doubled hide, which had lengths of yet more vine connecting it to two slim trees. With a grunt, the warrior walked backwards, until she came to the end of the cords and then she dug her boots in and started pushing in earnest, taking one step at a time as the trees bent back in protest.

"Want me to help you?" Gabrielle asked.

"No." The warrior grunted again. "Just get ready to loop that top part over the rock. She paused, as the tree's elasticity almost overcame her, then she leaned forward and took another step. "Hoo boy."

"Wish Argo was here?" The bard stretched the vine she'd been working on out as far as she could, waiting for her partner to come into reach.

"Damn right." Xena stumbled on a loose rock, and almost catapulted herself into the forest. Her eyes widened, then she caught her balance just as Gabrielle lunged forward and grabbed the edge of the hide, hauling it towards her. "Thanks."

Gabrielle took hold of the vines tied to the rock, and pulled, biting the inside of her lip as Xena took the last few steps towards her and she was able to slip the vine through the band going behind the hide and pulled it thorough.

Xena felt her boots start to slip. "Hurry."

Gabrielle yanked the vine through hastily and got it over the top of the pillar just as Xena lost her footing and slipped to her knees, snapping the vines taut as the stone took the strain of the catapult. "Duck!"

The warrior dropped to the ground as the vines creaked in protest, covering her head with her arms and waiting. Gabrielle ducked out of the way and turned her face, not wanting to get smacked if the vines broke.

After a breathless moment, they both looked up cautiously, to find the rock and vines holding the hide in place.

"Whew." Xena stood up and ducked under the vines, getting out of the catapults way. "It ain't what I'd use in battle, but.."

"It's what it is." Gabrielle studied the contraption. The trees flanked the one path up to where they were, and now the last two were bent over with the vines stretched tightly back to their rock, ready to release debris on anyone coming up towards them. "Rocks?" The bard asked.

Xena half smiled. "We don't have much else up here." She said. "So, yeah. Let's load her up."

They walked side by side back past the fire, which now had a stack of arrows on either side of it, the heat drying the wet pieces of gut Xena used to tie the awkwardly cut arrowheads into place. Some were crooked, as the branches she'd gotten hastily weren't the best, and most were unbalanced, but in close, Xena figured they'd do damage where she needed them to.

The bow was sitting off to one side, with her ax next to it, and besides that was a pile of small stones for the sling Gabrielle wore at her belt.

Xena had scoured the nearby forest for several candelmarks, searching for anything she could use to tip the balance in their favor. But the trees were free of spines and poison herbs for her arrowpoints were nowhere to be found. She'd settled on her arrows, the stones, the big sling, and plenty of firewood.

They worked quietly, moving stones from the overhang to the catapult, putting them inside the half cradle Xena had formed the hide into. When they were done at last, Gabrielle went over to the fire and sat down on the rest of the hide and gazed into the flames.

Xena watched her for a short while, leaning against one of the large stones nearby as she acknowledged the long hours they'd both had without rest. She could see the exhaustion in her partner's face, but it resided there with a quiet resolution, a determination that faintly squared her jawline and tensed the set of her shoulders.

Gabrielle would do, Xena knew, whatever she had to do. She'd proven it over and over again in their lives together and though Xena knew individually greater warriors, in the place they were now there wasn't any other person she'd want here with her.

As she watched, Gabrielle rested her arms on her knees and put her chin down on her clasped hands, pausing a moment before she looked up and over at her partner. Acting on the unspoken request, Xena pushed away from her rock and walked over to the fire, taking a seat next to the bard. "So."

"So." Gabrielle answered, in a slightly husky tone. "Now, we wait?"

"Now we wait." Xena agreed.

Off in the distance, they heard the soft cough of a hunting cat, then a rumbling growl. Xena cocked her ears and listened, hearing the sound again. "Hm."

"Think it's coming this way?" Gabrielle kept her eyes on the flames.

They heard another growl. "I don't think it's hunting." The warrior said, after a brief silence. The growl turned into a yowl, which rose up towards the moon before fading. "I think it's looking for something else."

Gabrielle sniffed reflectively. "Well.." She murmured. "You always told me animals either want food or sex... guess that narrows it down, huh?"

Xena felt a wry chuckle bubble up inside her. "Something like that."

"And boy, I remember you telling me that, too." The bard said. "Gabrielle.. you said.." She dropped her tone. "Stop thinking animals are thinking."

"Mmhm."

"Only thing they want is to eat, and to mate." Gabrielle continued, then stopped.

"And then I said.. and you're always hungry, so what's that say about you?" The warrior chuckled. "I remember."

"Mm." Gabrielle blushed, invisibly. "Wonder what you'd have done if I'd told you what I was hungriest for?" She looked sideways at her partner her eyes half closing. "Assuming my mouth would actually have unglued long enough for me to say it."

Xena circled one knee with both arms and leaned back a little. What would she have done? What would she have done... they hadn't been traveling together all that long then and she' wasn't sure she'd.. oh, wait. Yes, she had. "We'd a stayed a lot longer in that seaside town I'll tell you that."

Gabrielle was quiet for a moment. "You mean the one with those tubs?"

"Uh huh."

"And the little huts down on the beach?"

"Yep."

"Damn." Gabrielle exhaled weightily. "Shoulda said it. That place was nice." She wistfully remembered the rich, salt air. "I thought you didn't like it."

"I did." Xena admitted. "It was just frustrating as hell being there with you."

Gabrielle remembered the warrior's restless discomfort, but she'd put it down then to what she'd thought was her normal grumpiness and usual bad moods. She'd never in a million years suspected.. oh, wait.. no, maybe she had. "Did you put that seashell on my pillow?"

"Me?" Xena batted her dark lashes innocently.

"You." Gabrielle poked her in the arm. "You told me a crab had crawled into that hut and up onto my bed and left it's house there."

Xena chuckled softly.

"You wench." Gabrielle had to chuckle too. "That was my daydream the next couple moons. You leaving me pretty seashells." She bumped Xena's shoulder with her own. "Hey.. can we go back there?"

"Hm?"

"Go back to that place." The bard said. "Once this is all over.. just go there for a few days?"

Xena stared into the flames, the gilded flashes outlining her planed cheekbones. After a little while, she turned to look at Gabrielle. "Sure." She said, in a quiet tone. "I'd love that."

Silence fell, as they both realized they'd crossed some invisible line, into an assumption that they'd defeat these current odds and move on in their lives. Was it the weapons they'd made? Xena had to wonder. Was it putting the battle on ground they'd chosen?

Gabrielle leaned against her and half turned, letting her head rest on Xena's shoulder as she gazed up at the stars. "Donkey." She pointed. "That's a new one."

Xena looked up. "That's because it's a fish."

"A fish?"

"Yeah, there's the tail." The warrior said. "And there's another one, see the fish?"

"You've got fish on the brain. You sound like Dori."

Another yowl sounded from the trees, to the left of where the first had come from, but a little closer. In reflex, Xena reached out and grasped her ax, bringing it closer to her. After a moment, though, the sound faded and she looked back up. "Speaking of.. there's a cat."

"A cat?" Gabrielle twisted her neck around. "Honey, what are you looking at up there? I don't see any cats."

"Right here." Xena kissed her on the lips, feeling a light puff of air as Gabrielle took a quick breath in surprise. "See it now?"

"No." Gabrielle reached up and cradled her partner's neck with one hand as she returned the kiss. "And that stinking cat better stay away from here if it knows what's good for it."

Another yowl, but to Xena's ears it was safety, keeping back hunters far more dangerous to her than it was and giving them a space to rest before the coming dawn. She kissed Gabrielle again, welcoming the distraction as the bard's hand slid up her thigh.

There was danger all around them, but life needed to be lived and so they savored the moment and took the risk, trading nips and caresses in defiance of the night.

Love claimed its place, and somewhere, Gabrielle was sure, Aphrodite was laughing.

**

"How in Hades did we get ourselves into this?" Pony surfaced, spluttering. Her hands reached out to grab the debris swirling around them. "Yahhh!!"

Granella had her arms around a log. She shoved a second towards Pony as the current swept her past. "Gr.. oh, sorry." She grabbed hold of the log until the weapons master took hold of it. "Okay?"

"Ouch." Eponin rubbed her head. "Yeah.." She caught her breath and looked around. They were in the center of a rapidly flowing stream, steep walls rising on either side of them. "Where in Artemis' backyard are we? The river Styx?"

Granella shook her dark hair out of her eyes and studied the fast moving walls. Her brow creased, as she realized the area wasn't at all familiar to her. "Beats me." She yelled. "Let's find a place we can pull ourselves out from."

"Damn good idea." Pony glanced behind them, where the blockage was now gone, allowing the waters of the upper river to flow unimpeded into the narrow V they were currently in. Luckily for them, she realized, the drop hadn't been that bad, but they were flowing downhill now and she didn't really want to find out the hard way where the stream ended. "Figures we go after them and get tossed ass over earlobes ourselves." She sighed. "How about over there?"

Granella followed Pony's pointing finger. A tree had fallen across the stream and was half in the water, extending towards them invitingly. "Looks good." She agreed. "How do we get over there?"

Pony tried to shove her log towards the tree, but the current took her obstinately in the other direction, towards the far wall, where the water rushed against the rocks with impressive force. She kicked out with her feet, but all she managed to do was turn herself around and start going backwards. "Holla!"

"Uh oh." Granella scrambled onto her log, straddling it like a horse as she swept downstream after Eponin. "Pony... get around.. you're gonna...ho!"

"Yow!" Pony crashed into the wall, nearly losing her grip on the log. "Son of a bacchae!" She grabbed the edge of a protruding branch and hung on for dear life, as the log smacked against the wall and swiveled around, whirling her in a circle. "Augh!"

"Hang on..." Granella leaned to one side as her log approached Ponys and held a hand out. "Grab on!"

"And make us both go in circles??" Pony struggled with her log, turning in mid stream and plunging down a small dip into a froth of water that went over her head. If she let go, she knew she was in deep

trouble, and so though the current was wrenching the wood against her tensed arms, she managed to clamp down on it.

The water swirled over her head. She tried to kick up wards, but the suck of the rapids defeated her efforts and kept pulling her under onto her back and she felt a mounting pressure to breathe. The log dipped and crashed against her, and she let go in reflex, as the water pulled her further under.

Granella searched the surface of the water anxiously around the log, not even seeing bubbles in the churn. "Damn it."

Amphipolis seemed, suddenly, very very far away. She leaned over and plunged one hand in, balancing precariously as she felt around in the foam for Pony. After a moment, she gave up and leaned further, deliberately tumbling into the river and sticking her head under the surface.

She opened her eyes, and saw only froth, a whirl of sand and rocks and darkness moving past her at a frightening rate.

As she was about to pull her head back up, she spotted something moving, and instinctively stuck her leg down, feeling a hand grab her ankle. With a buck of her body, Granella surged for the surface, her head breaking above the whirling water and giving her a chance to grab a breath.

Only one. Then she ducked back under and reached for Pony's arm, which was flailing within reach. She grabbed hold of it and pulled up with all her strength, gritting her teeth as they tumbled through the water, bumping off rocks. "Gods be damned, Eponin, get your stubborn old ass UP HERE!"

She pulled one last time and Pony's head broke the surface, her eyes wild and rolling almost back in her head as she drew in a coughing breath. Granella grabbed her by the leathers and tried to keep them both from going back under, her head turning as she frantically looked for some way out of the stream.

Pony coughed again, her arms paddling weakly as they twisted and turned in the water. "Augh!"

The stream curved to one side, and Granella was able to get a hand on a piece of the rock as she pulled both of them into the lee of it. The water rushed past them, but the stone afforded them some respite, and she hung there shaking, her heart pounding loud enough to drown out the rapids in her ears. "Pon?"

Pony reached up and clasped the rock, her eyes closed and her breathing rapid. "Damn it to Hades." She rasped. "Ephiny was right. Every gods be damned time we go out to help them, we get our asses kicked."

Granella braced her boots against the rock wall, glad just to be safe for the moment. "That was pretty bad." She agreed, coughing a little and tasting the mineral tang of the river on the back of her tongue. "You okay?"

"I suck." Eponin enunciated succinctly.

"Mm." Granella raked her hair out of her eyes. "Can we get back up there? Our stuff's all back in the canoe."

Pony turned and grasped the top of the rock they were sheltering behind and pulled herself up to look over it back the way they came. The stream was rushing towards them, white rapids now even more pronounced since they'd broken the blockage at the pass.

From the opening, water was pouring down in a thundering fall, dropping perhaps three bodylengths into the lower stream. "We're freaking lucky." Pony murmured.

"Huh?" Granella pulled herself up next to the weapons master. As the water rumbled down, it parted briefly and they could see a tumble of rocks and debris at the base of the falls, quickly covered again by spray. "Wow."

They both stared at the river briefly. Then Pony exhaled. "Don't think we can get back up that damn thing."

Granella shook her head. "Not without ropes.. coupla climbing axes.. "

"Xena." Pony concluded. "She could just boost our asses up there."

"Mm."

They both turned and let themselves back down into the water, reviewing the options in the other direction. The white water showed no signs of slowing, and ahead they could see numerous boulders poking up from the waves and the deep swirls of whirlpools.

"This sucks." Pony said. "Really."

Granella could only grunt in wry agreement.

**

The morning brought fog. Gabrielle woke to find tendrils of it snaking into their refuge, and knew a moment of total disorientation when she couldn't even remember falling asleep. "Buh.."

"Shh." Xena's hand settled on her shoulder. "It's okay."

The bard blinked a few times, reaching up to rub her eyes as she rolled over onto her back and looked up. Xena was seated with her back against a rock, her weapons arranged all around her. "Wh... Xena, you were supposed to let me keep watch with you."

Xena merely looked at her, with an expression of such tender affection, it nearly made Gabrielle melt into a puddle right there on the ground. It made the fog irrelevant, and the dangers they were facing muted. "So I guess nothing else happened last night."

"Nothing interesting." Xena agreed. "I heard some of those cats coming pretty close, but the fire kept em off. Haven't heard our friends yet this morning." She draped her arm casually over Gabrielle's midriff. "But the birds stopped chattering a couple minutes ago.. so you better throw some water on your face and get ready."

"Mm." Gabrielle stretched her body out, glad of the soft padding of the leaves under the skin they were perched on. "Nice not to be on rocks." She said. "After that cave, this feels almost like our bed."

"Yeah." The warrior agreed. "Warmer too." She crossed her extended legs at the ankles. "But not quite like our bed."

The bard smiled, and sat up, getting to her knees and then to her feet in a reasonably smooth motion. She stepped around the fire and went to one of the standing stones, peering past it into the forest as the fog licked at her boots. "Creepy." She commented, as the thick gray layer seemed to flow from the trees themselves.

She never really liked fog, and suddenly her mind brought up a memory of the war, Xena creeping through the grass under a cover of thick gray, bringing death with her.

Bringing Gabrielle with her as well, the bard following her into that darkness and finding her inner light called on unexpectedly between the stalks of thick river grass. She could still smell the copper stench of blood, and she closed her eyes briefly to banish the image.

A warm hand touched her back, and she turned to look at Xena. "They're out there."

The warrior nodded.

"You think they'll come at us with all this fog?"

"I think they'll use the fog to come at us."

Gabrielle thought about that. "Then they're smart enough."

"They're smart enough." Xena answered quietly. "They've picked up on something every time we've fought them so far."

Gabrielle felt a chill go down her back.

"Get ready." Xena told her. "We don't have much time."

For no real reason, the bard turned and put her arms around Xena, and gave her a fierce hug. Then she released her and ducked under her arm to move over to their gear.

Down below, the fog just continued to roll on in.

**

Silence fell around them.

Gabrielle picked up her sling and fit a rock inside it, her heartrate picking up as she strained her ears to hear what was coming.

Xena picked up her bow and bent it with a smooth, powerful motion, slipping the gut string into place. "Watch near those trees." She uttered softly, taking an arrow and letting it rest on the fist she had closed around the bowshaft.

"Okay." The bard flexed her hands and got her sling ready, giving it a glance and admitting privately just how wimpy it looked next to Xena's longbow. "Like I'm going to do ANYTHING useful with this."

"Aim for their crotches." Xena replied, unperturbed. "Trust me. You'll stop em."

"You're not going to be aiming for that." Gabrielle now saw the faint shadows near the ground, mostly obscured by the fog.

"No."

No. Xena would be aiming for their hearts. Gabrielle took a deep breath, and let it out, turning her focus inside for a brief time, and getting her head into that place she had to be in to fight, and possibly to kill. She usually didn't think about that part much, but this time, with her life, and Xena's life on the line, she took those few heartbeats and made sure her conscience knew its place.

"Gab?"

Gabrielle glanced at her partner. "Yes?"

"Here." Xena handed over her small knife. "Just in case."

For a moment, Gabrielle almost refused to take it. Then her better sense took over and she accepted the blade, sliding it without any comment into the top of her boot. Then she turned and focused on the trees again, spotting the dark shadows creeping closer to them.

Xena watched her briefly, then she turned and drew her arm back, her fingers hooked around the gut and bracketing the arrow nock. She sighted down the shaft, then let her eyes focus on her target, a shifting, barely seen motion under the top layer of fog.

With a whisper of sound, she released the bowstring, the gut coming to vertical just near her ear. The shaft whipped out across the green, cutting through the fog and striking the dark shadow just as she intended.

A scream rent the air. High and terrified.

Female.

Gabrielle drew in a shocked breath. "Xena!"

"I know." The warrior picked up another arrow, as the fog stirred and more shadows appeared.

"Sorry."

Sorry? Gabrielle saw the dark figure rise up from the fog and bolt for them. She twirled the sling around and released it, numb as the rock hit the oncoming hooter. The rock bounced off and did little to slow the creature down. "Gods."

Xena put a shaft into the closest one's gut, reaching for another even before her bowstring finished vibrating. "Keep throwing." She yelled. "Go for the head!"

Gabrielle fit a second rock into her sling and let it fly, shoving everything out of her mind except the need to do what she was doing. She reloaded and whipped another rock towards the dark figures now heading towards them, bouncing in and out of the thick ground cover.

Xena drew her arm back, releasing her arrow and nailing a big male hooter right in the throat. He stopped in mid run, a gurgling sound coming from him, and flopped to the ground, spouting blood everywhere.

The other creatures didn't seem to notice, and kept on coming.

"Xena."

"Yeah." Xena grabbed another arrow and stepped out from the safety of the rocks, nocking it and waiting until the creatures all saw her.

"Xena!" Gabrielle yelled a warning.

"Trust me, damn it!" The warrior shouted.

Gabrielle bolted out from behind her own rock, and released her sling, the rock hitting one of the oncoming hooters between the eyes. "I do trust you!" She retorted. "You just got right in my way!"

Xena released her arrow, taking the hooter Gabrielle had hit right in the eyesocket, sending blood and flesh flying into the air. She let out a wild yell at the same time, as the hooter dropped at her feet, dead, and put another arrow into her bow, swinging it around at her next victim.

He dropped to the ground.

"Fast learner." Xena muttered.

The hooters all hooted back at her, but the motion forward stopped. There was a heavy crack, as though something had hit a tree trunk, and then the fog swallowed the rest of them up and they were gone.

Xena waited briefly, her arrow nocked, before she slowly stepped back behind the shelter of the standing stones, Gabrielle at her heels. They stood together, the crackling fire warming the backs of their legs as they listened intently to the forest surrounding them.

A soft thump.

A gasp.

Stillness.

Wisps of fog trickled into their refuge, dissipating as the tendrils met the flames of the fire with soft pops and the faintest scent of hot rain.

After a few minutes, Xena put down her bow and picked up her ax, starting back towards the forest. "St...hm."

Gabrielle merely tapped her on the butt and jerked her chin towards the trees.

They walked cautiously through the mist, it's gray cling puffing out on either side of their boots as their steps crunched across the scattered rocks. A dark lump loomed into their path, and they both paused, staring down at the huddled figure sprawled on the stone.

Xena shifted, slapping the head of her ax lightly against her thigh. "Couldn't see her in the fog." She said, after a moment's silence.

"I know." The bard murmured. "I didn't realize either until she screamed."

A bit of fog curled around the woman's body, then drifted off as though uninterested by death.

Gabrielle knelt, putting a hand on the woman's shoulder and rolling her body onto it's back. Xena's arrow was protruding from her chest, it's end buried in her heart. The warrior's aim was, as always unerring. "Damn." The bard sighed. "Wonder if she was running from them."

Xena crouched down next to her, examining the woman impassively. "Or leading them." She commented, getting back up and moving on. "I'm gonna check the rest of em."

Gabrielle waited for the warrior's tall form to be swallowed by the fog before she leaned forward and studied the dead woman. Her face was slack and empty, one hand curled into a fist, the other with its fingers still outstretched on the ground.

She hardly knew how to feel, really. There was something about the woman, a mystery that spoke to her storyteller's instincts and left her with questions that now would never be answered.

Death did that. Gabrielle let her hand drop to the woman's clenched one, turning it over and studying the scars and calluses. Death always left questions, and sometimes she pondered how in her own life she'd been given the chance to look past death and find her own answers.

The sun peeked through the branches and laid a pattern of shadow over them, pushing back the fog. It glanced off something shiny and Gabrielle looked closer, seeing something held tight in the woman's fingers.

She gently pried the digits open. Inside the woman's hand, she saw a round disk, a faint tinge of copper color under the worn, dirty surface. "Hm." Curiously, she picked it up and looked at it, letting the sun come in over her shoulder and disclose its details.

It was smooth, but definitely man made. It resembled a coin, a roughly hammered circle worn down by the touch of many fingers over many years. At one time, she could tell, there had been a sigil in the center, and there was a nagging familiarity about the object she couldn't quite place.

"What's that?" Xena had returned, her eyes flicking around the forest. "They're not far."

"I don't know.. she was holding it." Gabrielle stood up and offered Xena the object, balanced on her palm. "I think I've seen something like this before, but..."

Xena took the circle and looked at it closely, turning it over in her fingers. Then she looked up at Gabrielle. "You have."

The bard cocked her head in question. "Have I?"

"It's..." The warrior hesitated. "In Potadeia. Some of the men they.."

"Oh." Gabrielle lifted a hand and half covered her eyes. "Where in Hades is my head. Of course." She took the object back from Xena. "The council token. My.. father had one. It meant he had a vote." Her eyes now picked out the faint impression of the town sigil, long ago worn almost to smoothness. "But where did she get it?"

Xena had been studying her quietly. "Good question." She put a hand on the bard's shoulder. "Let's get our stuff packed up and get moving up the ridge. We scared them off for now, but they'll be back."

Gabrielle was still staring at the coin. Her eyes shifted to the woman's body, pale brows tensing over her eyes as a flicker of emotion crossed her face. "You think she got it from her mother?"

"Maybe." Xena shrugged slightly.

A token from her hometown. Had the older woman found it?

Or was it hers to begin with? Gabrielle studied the regular features half hidden under thick, matted hair and scars over scars. "Xena?" She looked up at her soulmate. "Let's give her a pyre."

Pale blue eyes looked right into hers. Gabrielle could clearly remember a time when her request would have been brushed off impatiently, and in the shadows in the back of those eyes, she could see that impatience, wild and unruly. "Please?"

Xena lifted her hand and laid its palm against Gabrielle's cheek. "Sure." She glanced around. "But let's make it fast. I don't want those bastards to think I'm cooking them dinner again."

Gabrielle grimaced.

"Sorry." Xena walked over and knelt by the woman, folding her arms over her chest and straightening her legs. Her attitude was businesslike and impersonal, as though the arrow sticking out of the horrible wound in the body's chest wasn't hers at all.

The bard turned and went back into their refuge, kneeling and slipping their pack onto her back and tightening the straps. There would be no time to build a rack to put the woman's body on, she knew. Xena would have to lay it directly on the remaining flames.

But that was okay. Gabrielle stood and walked around to the other side of the fire, watching her partner as Xena glided between the standing stones, the body in her arms. It was a way to send her essence on to the gods, and not leave her remains her to be scavenged.

Xena paused just short of the fire and waited for the flames to die down a touch, before she quickly put the body on top of them and backed off, circling around and joining Gabrielle on the far side.

They stood together and watched the fire take this new fuel and consume it, sending a dark smudge of smoke skyward, its fringes moving away from them down the ridge.

Gabrielle closed her hand around the token. "There's a story there, Xena."

Xena lifted her bow and put it over her shoulder, lashing her ax to her belt. "Looking forward to hearing you tell it to everyone." She glanced up the ridge, seeing a bare, but possible path. "Let's go."

Gabrielle watched the pyre a moment more, and then she turned and followed Xena through the stones, leaving rancid smoke and mysteries behind her.

**

"Pon." Granella looked over Eponin's shoulder. "Pon, don't bother."

"What?" The weapon's master gave her a stern look. "We need that gear. I ain't going down the river without it, so.. hey! Where are you going?"

Granella had jumped up onto the rocks and was balancing precariously at the top of them. "Look!"

Pony whirled, her eyes widening as she spotted the nose of their canoe about to come over the falls. "Oh damn!" She scrambled up after Granella. "That's gonna crash."

"Hey, at least we don't have to figure out how to climb back up there after it." Granella flexed her hands. "If it makes it, I'll go in and grab for it." She watched the canoe teeter at the opening, getting caught on either side and going half upended as the impatient water behind it resented the impediment.

"Um.. Gran.."

The canoe turned sideways, and then straightened and plunged down. "Ah, here we go." Granella watched the nose bury itself into the water at the bottom and held her breath. The vessel turned sideways and twisted, but then popped to the surface and started careening towards them. "Okay... c'mon.."

"Gran?"

"What?"

"What if you miss?"

"Huh?" Granella leaned forward a little, getting ready to jump for the canoe. "Then we swim after it.. c'mon!" She crouched, spreading her hands out, and wiggling her fingers.

Pony stared at the water. "Listen."

"Not now, Pon." Granella said. "On three, jump.. one, two.."

"I can't swim."

Granella was already in mid leap, but if she could have frozen in place, she would have. "Whhhhaa!!!!" She let out a yell, as she plunged into the river. The shock of the water blew out any thoughts of her companion and she surged for the surface, looking around for the canoe.

It was only an armslength away, and she was able to lunge forward and get her fingertips on the edge of it. "Ah!" She got a better grip, and turned her head. "C'mon, Pon! I'll catch you!"

Caught in indecision, Eponin was balanced on the rock, her hands clenching and unclenching.

Granella tried to pull the canoe back against the current. "Hurry!" She urged. "This thing's going fast!"

"Damn it." Pony hopped forward and into the water, feet first. She disappeared under the surface, then came up gasping, paddling with her hands in a somewhat frantic manner.

"Well, Hades." Granella kept one hand firmly attached to the canoe, and extended the other, kicking with her feet against the current. "She can't damn swim, can she?"

It seemed odd to her, since Amazons were quite familiar with water, and lived around lakes and rivers. But then, she remembered Gabrielle telling her that she hadn't known how to swim before she'd met Xena, and so maybe, Granella reckoned, it wasn't as common as she thought.

The current swept them both down the river, and Granella saw they weren't getting any closer to each other. "Pon!" She kicked harder. "C'mon, go with it!"

The weapons master was having enough trouble just keeping her head above water. She thrashed around frantically, upright in the water and tried not to let the whirls take her under. "Can't!" She yelled back. "Damn water!"

Granella looked down the river, spotting two rocks upthrust with a deep current going between them. She angled towards them, hoping the river's sweep would cooperate and allow her to position herself and the canoe in just the right way. "Hang on!"

"To what?" Eponin asked, in exasperation. "This sucks!"

Granella managed to get the canoe straight, and then she pulled it into her body, wincing in reflex as the boat caught on the two rocks with a grating scrape that went right through her. "Ugh!"

The current almost ripped her out from under the canoe and forced her thorough the rocks, but she managed to get a boot on each stone and perched there, with the river thundering at her back. "Pon!" She yelled over her shoulder. "Whatever you do, just get here!"

There was no answer, and she turned her head to look behind her, just as the fierce surge of current slammed Eponin into the edge of the canoe with enough force to almost crack the side.

"Crap!" Pony grabbed the canoe and spit out a mouthful of water. "Next time I let the bloody idiot youngsters come do this heroic bull." She coughed. "What in Hades are the Maj and Xena thinking?"

"Well." Granella removed a splinter from her finger. "Y'know, the thing is, Pon.. they're actually good at this stuff."

"Peh."

"Well, they are. I was watching Gabrielle when she was taking those stupid animals out of the river, you know?"

"Someone should have gone and taken her out of the river." Pony stated. "Instead of just hanging around watching."

Granella looked at her. "Would you have tried it?" She asked, with a bit of an edge. "Gone and told her to stop what she was doing and get out?"

Pony cleared her throat.

"That's what I thought. Nobody tells her what to do, except maybe Xena."

"Maybe?"

"Yeah." Granella cleared her throat. "So anyway, she was in that water, and let me tell ya, it was knocking everyone else ass over teapot but not her."

"No?"

"Nope. She was dug in there like a mountain goat grabbing those lambs." Granella said. "Fiesty thing."

Pony chuckled wryly. "Needs to be." She shifted a little. "So, now that I plowed headfirst into this thing, what next?" She asked. "Good plan, yeah?"

"Okay." Gran shifted her grip. "Now we gotta get into this thing." She studied the craft. "I think you better get in first. If I let this thing go, it may just.. uh..."

"Go." Pony reached across and grabbed the other side of the canoe, pulling herself up and into the slim boat awkwardly. "I hate boats." She braced her dripping wet boots and unlashed one of the paddles, raking her hair from her eyes impatiently. "Okay.. you next."

"Um." Granella studied her options. "Can you hold on to that rock.. yeah. I don't want this thing moving out from under me."

Pony put the paddle back down and grabbed the rock they were pressed against, holding it firmly. "Go."

Granella edged over to one side and took hold of the rawhide covered frame, kicking back away from the rocks as hard as she could before she lunged over the side and into the boat. The canoe slammed against the rocks twice, before she rolled over and pushed off with one hand, saving the craft from a third bashing. "Whoa."

"In?" Pony was now looking much more comfortable. "Tell ya what. Let's move it down stream, till we find some place to climb out. Deal?"

"Deal." Her companion agreed, settling herself into the bottom of the canoe and untying the other paddle. "Oh..wait." She got up on her knees and turned around, facing the front of the boat. "There.. helps having someone steer."

"Right."

They sat there a minute, with the water still pushing the canoe hard against the stones. "So." Pony finally said. "Now what?"

Granella studied the currents. "Well... if you shove off from back there, and I push away from this rock, we should head around and into that eddy on that side." She pointed to a somewhat smoother stretch of water.

"And if we screw up?" Pony asked, in a wry tone.

"We'll probably end up in the water again."

"Great." Pony switched her paddle to her outside hand and pushed against the rock. "Centaur poop." She grunted. "This thing's stuck here."

Granella turned around and pushed also, shoving hard against the stone. The canoe moved a little, scraping against the rock. "Push!"

The weapons' master put her paddle down and applied both hands to the rock, pushing against the current as hard as she could.

With a grinding noise, the canoe slid around the rocks and headed downstream, freed into the current that eagerly took it. Granella grabbed up her paddle and started steering with it, watching the whirls of water with an anxious eye.

She wasn't too skilled at riding the rapids, though she'd done a little of that way back when in her junior years. Up above the village, up in the mountains in springtime, when the snows would melt and water would roar down the slopes and give the young Amazons a thrill they usually didn't tell their elders about.

Of course, it stood to reason since the village had been there a while, that the elders had done exactly the same thing in their time, but no one ever really came out and said that. It would have taken out some of the illicit fun in the activity.

Right now, she was not having fun, licit or illicit. Granella saw a whirlpool coming and she braced herself for it. "Watch it." She warned. "We're gonna twist."

"Ugh." Eponin grimaced. "Tell ya, when we catch up with them, boy...whoaaa!" She let out a yelp as the river caught them and spun them in a circle. "Yow! Hey!"

Granella dug into the water with her paddle, yanking them free of the whirlpool and into the next set of rapids. She only hoped they'd find a place to get out soon, before they got themselves back into real trouble.

As if they weren't already.

**

Despite everything, Gabrielle found herself enjoying the walk they were on. She was just a step behind Xena on the narrow path, listening to the soft crunch of their footsteps against the loose gravel as they climbed the ridge.

She should really be in a horrible mood. She'd gotten only a little sleep, Xena had gotten none at all, they were being chased by creatures, she'd witnessed the death of the one person who could really have told them what the truth was, and it looked like it was going to rain again.

And yet, she could still feel a sense of inner contentment that actually surprised her. "Hey." She put her hand on Xena's shoulderblade. "Tell me something."

"Robins lay eggs." Xena replied promptly. "Anything else you wanna know?"

Ah. So Xena was in a pretty good mood, too. Gabrielle moved her hand lower and gave her partner a pat on the butt. "I love you."

Xena looked back over her shoulder, her eyes half obscured by her shaggy, windblown hair. "Right back atcha."

Gabrielle smiled at her, feeling a deep warmth erupt from her guts as though she'd swallowed a sunbeam, and it reached out to light up Xena's baby blues in a very charming way. "You know what the most amazing thing about being in love with you is?"

Xena turned her attention back to the path, a grin visible on her face. "I'm afraid to ask." She demurred. "If we get any gooey, we're gonna slide off the damn path together."

Gabrielle chuckled. "Yeah, we've been kinda mooney lately, huh?"

"Kinda?"

The bard laced her fingers into Xena's belt. "I can't help it." She admitted. "It just feels so good, and I remember what it was like when it didn't."

"Mm." Xena's expression grew a little more serious. "Me too." She put a hand on the rock wall and let her fingers trail over it. "Those were some hard days."

"Yeah." Gabrielle nodded. "Falling in love was so easy." She said. "Staying in love is the hard part." Her eyes shifted to Xena's profile, watching as the warrior nodded a little bit. "That's why loving you is such a precious gift."

"Likewise." Xena replied, her voice a little husky.

They walked quietly for a minute, rocks rattling down the path as their footsteps disturbed them. "You know what the most amazing thing is for me about being in love with you?" Xena asked, after they'd rounded the next crag.

"What?"

"Being in love with you." The warrior paused, leaning her hands on a stone and peering over it. The path arced up to the left, but then it petered out at a sharp promontory. "Dead end."

"Don't care." Gabrielle eased up next to her and leaned on the rock. "We'll just find another way."

"Another another way?" Xena asked, wryly.

"What about down there?" Gabrielle pointed to another path, slanting downward back into the dense forest. "Better than going back this.. " She looked over her shoulder. "Xena."

"I know." The warrior didn't look down the ridge, where dark, furred figures were creeping. "Yeah, well.. I guess we're going down." She sighed. "I was hoping this would meet halfway up the damn wall.. maybe we could find a way to climb out."

Gabrielle tipped her head back and reviewed the towering cliffs. The stones rose high above her head, the striations running vertically and promising little in the way of handholds. "Let's see where that leads." She indicated the lower path diplomatically.

"No choice." Xena led the way down, holding in to the rocks as her makeshift boots slid on the gravel. "Damn it."

Gabrielle took hold of her belt and placed her own boots carefully, having a slight advantage from the stiffer soles. "Too bad we just can't slide down."

Surprisingly, Xena snickered. "Remind me to show you something when we get home."

"Okay." Gabrielle agreed mildly. "Wish like Hades I was home." She added. "I miss Dori."

"Me, too." The warrior said. "Wish like Hades she was here."

Gabrielle observed their surroundings, and their current lack of resources. "Really?"

"Yeah."

"Looking for someone else to talk to?" The bard queried. "Cause honey, having her here right this minute wouldn't be much fun for any of us."

Xena slid a few more feet, and then they were on a more even part of the track and she found good footing. "I could carry her on my back." She protested. "She was good, that last month before we got home."

Gabrielle smiled to herself. "That's true." She said. "But with those creatures chasing after us, and you having to fight off animals the size of our cabin, I'm kinda glad she's missing out on this little adventure of ours."

Xena ducked, as a bird suddenly rushed out of a hidden nest, nearly taking some of her hair with it. The bird screamed in protest, and wheeled, diving back at them. "Well." The warrior fended it off with her bow. "Yeah."

The bard managed to get her staff up and as the bird came in again, she knocked it away from her partner's head. "Let's get past here... maybe she has babies."

"Common theme this round." Xena trotted down past the cleft, though, with Gabrielle right behind her as they got away from the enraged bird. "What is it with us?"

"Babies on our minds?"

They ducked behind a scrubby tree and peered back, seeing the bird wheeling around its nest, but apparently not inclined to follow them further now that it had won its point. With a shake of her head, Xena turned and continued on, feeling a damp gust of air flutter against her body.

Rain? She looked up, but the clouds were just still gathering above them. Another puff of air brought the smell of rich moss to her, and she decided they were probably headed towards water instead. Not unexpected, given the terrain, but she hoped it wasn't just a huge flood they'd have to wade through.

The trees started reaching up to welcome them, thick leaves rustling slowly in the breeze. The path they were walking on grew a little broader, enough for them to walk side by side and Gabrielle took immediate advantage of that and moved up next to her partner's fur clad form.

It was dark, under the trees. The sun penetrated only fitfully through the leaves, and they felt it grow much cooler as they left the shelter of the rocks and walked deeper into the forest.

Gabrielle felt the ground with her staff, finding it soft, and somewhat yielding. She could sense the difference through her boots as well, and the soft jarring in her joints eased as she walked across the leaf littered earth.

She spotted some mushrooms, and tapped Xena on the arm. "I'm going to grab those."

"Help yourself." The warrior stopped by a tall tree and looked behind them, arching her neck to peer back up the path they'd descended. Nothing stirred in her vision, but she was too canny a hunter herself to feel anything like safety because of it.

How would they come? She wondered. Had they learned something from her use of the bow, as they had her use of the stones before? She knew they couldn't duplicate her weaponsmaking, but would they change their strategy?

That was the danger, Xena recognized. These things that were more than animals and something less than people didn't fit into any pattern she was familiar with, and so - everything was a chance.

"Xe?"

Xena turned to see Gabrielle standing under a tree, looking up into its branches. Her hand was curled around her staff as she leaned easily against it and the pose made the warrior smile. "Gabbrielle?"

"Apples." The bard pointed. "Too high for me to knock down."

Xena joined her at the foot of the tree and looked upward. Sure enough, the upper branches were speckled with green and red fruit, held tantalizingly out of reach. "Guess you want me to go up there."

"Nah. Hold this. I'll do it." Gabrielle handed her the staff and put her sack down, then started to climb the tree. She'd gotten to the first branch when a long arm fitted itself around her midriff and tightened, pulling her back off the trunk.

She could have held on, and resisted, but she let go, and found herself set gently back down onto the ground. "I wasn't doing it right?"

Xena merely kissed her on the top of the head and handed her back her staff. She laid her weapons down and crouched, leaping up to grab a higher limb and pulling herself up onto it. "Too slow." She called back, as she strolled up towards the trunk and hopped to an upper branch.

"Wench." Gabrielle grinned, watching her move through the tree as though it were the walkways outside their cabin. She hated heights, and didn't like climbing trees, but she also didn't like Xena thinking she had to do it for her.

Confusing. But Xena had settled the matter in typical style and she'd end up getting what she was after in the end anyway. "Toss them down.. I'll catch them."

Xena plucked one and dropped it, then moved on to another, selecting certain fruits according to her own criterion and letting them fall down to Gabrielle's waiting hands. The breeze up in the top of the tree was a little less damp, and on it, Xena suddenly caught the distinct smell of wood burning.

She paused and sniffed hard again, convinced she'd just imagined it, but she hadn't, and the breeze was now coming down the path towards them from the way they came.

What did it mean? Xena pulled down a few more apples and carefully let them fall, looking down to meet Gabrielle's eyes as the bard watched her. She could see the now serious expression on the bard's face, and wondered if she smelled the smoke too. "That enough?"

"Yeah!" Gabrielle nodded. "C'mon down here." She glanced behind her, and then looked back up, mist green eyes looking unusually vivid in the filtered sunlight.

Xena did, dropping down through the branches until she was on one with a clear shot to the ground, and then simply stepping off it, tumbling into a flip before she landed on the earth. "Listen.."

Gabrielle had just finished stuffing the last apple into her pack. "Something's coming."

"You smell it?" Xena picked up her bow.

"No." The bard got the pack onto her back and fastened the belly strap. "I felt you smell it." She picked up her staff. "Whatever 'it' is."

Xena studied the forest, selecting a path through the trees that led away from the ridge they'd descended from. "It was smoke." She explained, as they slipped between the trunks. "And I don't know what that means."

Gabrielle followed her, flexing her thigh muscles a little as they started a faint downward trek again. "Hasn't been any lightning." She mused. "But we did leave that fire in the cave, Xe."

"I know." The warrior muttered. "We also..." She paused, glancing back at Gabrielle. "I also killed their only female." She said. "Not sure what that's gonna mean to them."

The bard remained quiet, considering her partner's words as they walked further into the woods. "You think they realize that? I mean.. that they realize what that means?"

"Yeah."

Gabrielle watched as a squirrel dashed away from them, its tiny black eyes peering back at them from a further, safer tree. "Why do you think that was, Xena?"

The warrior walked around a fallen tree, stepping over its rotting hulk. "What was?"

"That she was their only female."

Xena actually stopped walking, and turned to look at Gabrielle. Her brows drew in together and she frowned, cocking her head to one side in question. "You know something?"

"What?"

"That's a very damn good question, Gabrielle."

The bard blinked mildly at her. "Thanks." She murmured. "I figured you knew the answer."

Xena shook her head. "Hadn't even asked myself." She admitted. "They have some pretty damn big predators... maybe they just weren't lucky."

Maybe. Gabrielle edged past her and continued further through the trees. Maybe the women were just smaller, and weaker, and easier prey. She glanced at her partner. Xena equaled the creatures in height, if not in bulk, and she was capable of fighting them one on one, but the bard sensed that in a group, Xena didn't fancy her chances much with them.

So did the women all die by accident? Gabrielle juggled the coin she'd found in the woman's hand and studied it as she walked, rubbing her thumb over the long faded insignia on it. "She must have been really lonely, after her mother died."

Xena glanced over at her, but remained silent.

"I was trying to imagine what it would be like, having no one to talk to, or even.. I mean, no one who you could share your thoughts with." The bard continued. "It's so sad."

"Mm."

Gabrielle stopped walking and leaned on her staff. "It reminds me of when I was in Chin." She said, in a soft tone. "All those days waiting for you."

Xena stopped as well, eyeing her uncertainly.

"I couldn't really talk to anyone.. except Ming Tien." The bard said. "Couldn't really understand what was going on.. all those nights just sitting there second guessing myself." She looked over at Xena. "Hoping you didn't end up..." She exhaled, and rubbed her eyes. "Never mind. I don't know why I'm.."

Xena leaned her bow against a nearby tree and walked over to her, gently cradling the bard's face in her hands. "Easy."

"I was so scared." Gabrielle whispered."So scared I'd lost you." She blinked, and tears rolled down her face. "It was so much worse than when you'd died."

The smoke, and the creatures no longer mattered. Xena took a step closer and stroked the tears away with her thumbs, gazing down into the shadowed depths of Gabrielle's eyes. "I was wrong." She murmured. "I owed us so much more than I owed her."

The bard's expression was so open to her, those eyes drinking in every word, every shift of her face with pa perfect trust re-earned the very, very hard way. "I'm sorry, Gabrielle."

A tiny smile appeared. "Me, too." Gabrielle responded huskily. "Shouda never let you go alone." She sniffled, glancing aside. "Gods, you must think I'm nuts.. bringing this up now."

"No." Xena leaned closer, letting her head rest against the bard's for a moment, before she kissed her on the forehead. "Just pregnant." She added wryly. "Little different than last time, huh?"

"Ooohhh." Gabrielle slumped against her, shaking her head. "From whiney to maudlin. Not sure I like the change." She slid her arms around Xena and enjoyed the simplicity of a hug. "Boo, I want cookies."

Xena managed a laugh, relieving the wound tension inside her. "How about an apple?"

"That's how we got into this the last time." Gabrielle released her, and dug into the pack anyway, wiping the back of her hand across her eyes. "All right.. let's go." She handed an apple to Xena and took one for herself. "Let's find our way out of here. I want to go home."

Xena put her arm over Gabrielle's shoulders and they started walking again, deeper into the forest that now surrounded them.

"Xe?"

"Mm?"

"You're really being mellow about everything." Gabrielle said. "Kinda different from last time too."

"Maybe I know what to expect this time." The warrior said.

"Mm." Gabrielle wrapped her arm around Xena's waist as her equilibrium returned. "Glad one of us is handling it better."

"Mm."

**

One Wild Ride

Part 12

Xena moved cautiously up onto a log, balancing as she made her way across a boggy sunken area. Her makeshift boots were already damp, and she could feel her toes squishing unpleasantly inside of them. "Careful."

"Mmhm." Gabrielle had hopped up behind her and was making her way along, her eyes fixed firmly on the bark under her feet. The wave of intense emotionalism seemed to have passed, leaving her a little drained in it's wake but she determinedly kept up with her partner and refused to give into that.

The sudden descent into bad memories disturbed her, though. Was it really the baby? Gabrielle glanced down at her midriff in reflex, though it naturally displayed its normal muscular flatness without any hint of impending motherhood.

It could be, she supposed. Or maybe just a reaction to being stuck in the darn valley, and all the problems they'd had so far.

Or maybe she missed Dori.

"How are you doing back there?" Xena asked.

Gabrielle glanced affectionately at the back of her partner's head. "I'm about to drop."

Xena whirled with graceful rapidity. "What?"

"Just kidding." The bard's eyes twinkled. "Chill, Xe."

Xena pointed a finger at her, shaking it a little. "You're a little troublemaker sometimes, you know that?" She paused, rocking a little on the log and studying their surroundings. "Not sure where this is getting us."

"Someplace wet."

"Yeah." Xena observed the soggy ground. "I'm hoping as we get closer to the cliff wall, it'll start going up." She turned and began walking along the log again. "At least with all this water, we'll probably lose those damn .. things."

Gabrielle followed, silently envying the warrior's easy balance. She'd gotten better over the years, but she had to work at it and even now she needed to concentrate and hold her hands out a little from her body to keep upright and not fall off.

Xena never had to do that. She just strolled along as if she was on a footpath outside her mother's inn, only taking care to make sure her bow cleared the trees on either side of them. As she got to the end of the trunk she stepped gracefully off, her head turning back and forth as she searched out the best way for them to go.

Gabrielle could now hear running water, and a waterfall too, she thought. "Xena?"

"Mm?"

"I could go for a drink."

"Really, or are you just kidding again?" The warrior asked.

"Really." Gabrielle came up behind her. "I hear some falls."

"Me too." Xena angled a slightly different path to through the bog. "Least we won't be leaving footprints."

"No." Gabrielle pulled her boots out of the muck with a sucking bloop. "Ah, I remember the last time I had to do this." She mused. "Outside Athens."

"Ahhhh. Yeah." Xena winced, reaching down in reflex to rub her knee. "I remember that too. Stupid horse." She grumbled. "I'll feel that every damn cold morning."

The bard patted her on the back. "You were amazingly brave about that."

Xena eyed her. "What?"

"You just were." Gabrielle said. "Your face, when you straightened up and realized how badly you were hurt.. you were white as a sheet, but you just kept on."

Xena walked on a few steps. "Don't I always?"

"Mmhm." The bard nodded. "It just struck me right then, because... I guess because..." She fell briefly silent. "Well, darn.. I don't know why it struck me, but it did. I remember thinking how incredibly brave you were."

"Hm. And there I was, thinking how incredibly stupid I was." Xena remarked, with an easy smile.

Gabrielle pulled her boots free of the mud again. "You're never stupid."

"Sometimes I am." The warrior disagreed. "Sometimes I don't think first. I just do. That's stupid."

The sound of the waterfall was getting louder, and Gabrielle could smell water on the breeze. "That keeps us alive a lot of times. It's not stupid."

"Eh." Xena plucked a few leaves from a tree they were passing and examined them, bringing them to her nose to sniff curiously. "The older I get, the more I question that whole end justifies the means thing." She admitted. "There are so many things I wish I could go back and do over."

Gabrielle was faintly surprised to hear that. Xena was usually someone who believed in leaving the past in the past and moving on, and it was the first time she'd heard her talk like this in a while.

"Anything in particular?"

Xena quietly shredded the leaf in her fingers as she thought. "Things with us." She said at last. "You know."

"Mm." Gabrielle did know. "Yeah." She caught up to the warrior and walked alongside her. "But you know, we've talked about all this before, Xe. We both went through a lot, but I mean, here we are."

"Here we are." Xena glanced around them, giving her younger partner a wry look.

"Hm."

"No, I know what you mean." The warrior put her arm around Gabrielle. "Every time I really think about something I would have gone and changed, I think about how that would have changed everything else, like.. maybe I wouldn't have been where I was that day we met."

"Uh huh."

"I wouldn't have changed that."

"Me either." Gabrielle agreed. "You know, I was thinking about that the other day. That day we met." She fell behind Xena a step as they went between two huge trunks. "I think when you were in just your wraps, and muddy."

"Huh?"

"It reminded me of the first time I saw you." Gabrielle hopped up onto a rock and shaded her eyes. She could now see the falls through the branches, and she licked her lips in anticipation.

"Ah." Xena found a rocky path down to the water, above the mud and gratefully took it. "Some mud covered gorgon, yeah. I remember that. Surprised you all didn't run screaming." She paused, scratching her jaw. "Some of you did, matter of fact."

Gabrielle chuckled, as she balanced on the rocks after her partner.

Xena went to the water's edge and knelt, looking around before she dipped her hands in the water. The lake they'd come upon ended in a half circle cliff, with a small waterfall dropping down its length into the depths.

It was a moderately pretty spot, with the sun coming down through the trees, and glinting off the lake surface. The lake wound off into the boggy marsh they'd just come through, and filled the low area, which had flocks of water birds feeding around it.

"Oo." Gabrielle pointed. "Look at that one, Xe. It's so pretty."

Xena glanced at the wading bird, its long legs rippling the water as it stalked about pecking for minnows. The bird was white, with a delicately pink blush of color across its back. "Nice."

The bard knelt beside her. "This looks like a dead end." She cupped some water into her hands and drank from it, feeling the cold water travel down her throat and into her mostly empty stomach.

Xena sighed. "Sure does." She drank her fill, and then stood up. "I'm gonna go check out that wall near the edge of the falls anyway. Maybe we'll get lucky."

Gabrielle regarded the warm sun. "I'll go with you." She decided. "We can dry off pretty fast afterward." She got up and tightened the pack on her back, following Xena as she waded into the lake.

The falls weren't that extensive, and there was really no appreciable current. Gabrielle concentrated on following in Xena's footsteps, drawing in her breath a little as the cold water touched her bare midriff. She stifled a yawn as she got used to the chill, and hooked her fingers through Xena's belt.

The lake wasn't really that deep. It took them about a quarter candlemark to move close to the falls, and as they got closer they could see some interesting things.

One, the rock seemed to have multiple flecks of color inside it, and it glittered in the sunlight. Gabrielle thought it was quite beautiful, and she edged over past the falling water to see if she could find a loose piece of it. "Dori'd love this."

Xena glanced over her shoulder. "Damn right." She agreed. "Get her a nice chunk. We're gonna owe her some good presents, long as we've been gone."

Gabrielle chuckled, finding a good size piece and hefting it. She spotted something pale colored in the water nearby, and she moved closer, shifting the rock to her other hand and bending over to probe the dimly seen bottom.

Her fingers closed on something surprisingly smooth, and she pulled it back up into the sunlight, blinking at it for a long moment before her mind identified it. "Xe!" She called out urgently, taking a step back. "Over here!"

The sound of splashing behind her heralded her partner's approach, and in a moment, the warrior was at her shoulder, peering over it. "What?"

"Here. Look." Gabrielle handed her the tannin stained object. "It's a bone. I found it there... it looks.." She hesitated.

"Human." Xena examined the bone intently. It was just the length of her hand, and finely shaped. "Arm, I think."

"That small?" Gabrielle asked, in surprise. "I thought it was part of a hand, or something."

Xena eased past her and crouched down, feeling around in the now silt stirred water. She froze in place, then she looked back over her shoulder at Gabrielle, her eyes widening a little. "Um.."

"What?" Gabrielle put her hand on Xena's shoulder. "What is it?"

The warrior seemed caught in indecision. Her eyes searched Gabrielle's face intently, then she lifted her hand from the water and opened her fingers.

Resting on her palm was a small, perfect skull.

Gabrielle stared at it in startled horror, before she reached out and touched it with a fingertip. "Oh no." She whispered. "Xena, that's just a baby!"

The warrior nodded somberly. The tiny, fragile thing was not only to her eyes a baby, but a very tiny infant. A newborn, come somehow to this lost, wild place. "It is. Yeah." She agreed. "Here.. um.. hold it, maybe I can find..."

Gingerly, Gabrielle took the skull, putting it onto her open palm and looking at its cracked, sunken features. Her mind went immediately into wondering how it had come there, what its story was. Had its mother been killed? Maybe one of the cats..

"Gabrielle."

The bard's attention snapped immediately to her partner, hearing a tone in her voice she hadn't heard in a very long time. "What's wrong?"

Xena was up to her neck in the water, both hands under it. Her eyes were filled with a stark knowledge. "There's more here."

"M.."

They looked into each other's eyes, exchanging an understanding that went beyond speech. Gabrielle waded over to Xena's side and knelt down, until they were almost nose to nose. Then she reached her own hand down, feeling along the warrior's arm until she could feel what Xena was feeling.

It was horrific. Gabrielle started breathing faster, as her fingers traveled over piles of thin, slightly slimy bones, laying haphazardly in a jumble of lost possibilities. "Oh, gods." She whispered, eyes wide. "Xena, what is this?"

With a profound look of distaste, the warrior brought up a handful of the bones and sorted through them. Her face was twitching slightly, and Gabrielle edged over to huddle against her, feeling sick to her stomach.

All those babies. A vivid picture of Dori as an infant flashed into her mind, and she closed her eyes, remembering the solid, living weight of her and those incredibly bright eyes. "Gods."

She could hear the soft clacking as Xena looked at the bones, and pressed against the warrior's tall frame, she could hear the increase in her heartbeat.

Xena cleared her throat softly. "They're all... they're all girls." She murmured. "All little girls." She stared down into the water, as Gabrielle turned her head to look as well. They both paused, then tipped their heads back and looked up, at the cliff edge where the waterfall came over. There was a jutting escarpment to one side, and if they squinted, they could just make out a winding path leading up to it.

"Bastards." Xena spoke in a rough, clipped tone. "Lousy bastards."

"You think they..." Gabrielle stared at the ledge, then back down at the water, almost a direct line to where the pile of bones lay. "Why?"

Xena looked at the tiny pelvis in her hand. At one time in her life she'd have laughed at it. At another time, she'd have broken down in tears.

Now, she felt a deep, ferocious anger ignite inside her guts, as the fates of the tiny children made themselves felt in the eddies of the water around her and the slow, inch by inch reconstruction of her soul made her want nothing less than justice for these little ones. "Let's get out of here."

Gabrielle took the bone from her, and they both started wading towards the far shore, in silent accord.

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Xena stood quietly by a tall tree, one hand resting on the bark, the other lying on her thigh, fingers tapping. She could hear the rustle, far off, of something approaching, and her nose already detected the strong smell of burning wood.

A deer bolted past her, panting. It stared at her, wild eyed, then ran past, its legs plunging through the swamp and kept going.

It would be back, Xena knew. There was no exit from this low pocket they'd found themselves in. The only way out was the way they'd come, and that way was already blocked by hooters hunting them.

Xena turned and leaned her back against the tree, removing a block of glassy, smoke colored stone and a piece of antler from her pocket. She tapped the stone gently, removing a flake of it and producing a sharp edge along one side.

"Xe?" Gabrielle sloshed up next to her. "I found this. Is it what you wanted?"

Xena examined the plant in the bard's hand, and nodded. "Nice. Good job."

Gabrielle put the plant back in her carriesack. "How's that coming?"

"Pretty good." The warrior displayed her efforts. The stone had started out in a very rough leaf shape, and now she'd chipped off an edge along three sides, making a broad point about the size of her hand. "I'll need some gut to tie it off, though."

"Yeah." Gabrielle swung her pack down and opened it. She pulled out a large, dead rabbit and held it up. "I thought you might." She said. "So I grabbed this when I could."

Xena grimaced slightly. "Thanks." She dropped the stone into her pouch. "I know you hate doing that."

"Yeah." Gabrielle admitted. "I do, but I can if I have to, and it's not fair to make you do everything, y'know?" She looked around. "There's rocks over there. How about I skin it for you?"

Xena knew if there was one thing Gabrielle hated more than hunting, it was skinning. "I'll do it." She held her hand out for the knife.

The bard shook her head. "You're doing something." She indicated the pouch. "I'll take care of this, and then maybe I'll find some dry wood."

"Ah."

Gabrielle walked along the bog until she got to the boulders, climbing up on top of one of them to get her feet out of the wet. She sat down with her legs hanging off the edge of the stone and put the dead rabbit between her knees, moving it around as she decided where to start cutting.

She could hear the motion heading towards them as well, and smell the smoke, but somehow all the nervousness she'd felt before was gone, replaced by a kind of stolid anticipation. She knew they were trapped in the marsh, and she also knew the hooters were probably now really angry, but that was all right because she and Xena were also really angry at them.

Who would win the confrontation she knew was coming? Well, Gabrielle was egotistical enough to think there wasn't much on earth big enough or tough enough to take her and her partner down, so she spared the hooters a moment of cold sympathy.

Only a very brief moment. The piles of infant bones had done something to her psyche, and all the maternal instincts inside her were churning, images flickering erratically through her mind's eye of all those tiny little babies, bewildered, unknowingly being tossed to their deaths.

She had to stop what she was doing, and just breathe. Her eyes closed, and she waited for conflicting emotions to work through her, part of her thinking of Dori's birth, and part of her thinking about Hope's.

Gods.

She remembered, suddenly, the uncomprehending trust in Hope's eyes, as she put her in the basket, and let her go, down an unknown river, towards unknown dangers but away from the one, great known one looming over them.

"Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle opened her eyes, to find Xena standing next to her, one hand resting on her thigh and a look of concern in her baby blues. "Sorry." The bard exhaled. "Need to give my imagination a rest, I think." She went back to cutting open the rabbit, stopping again when she saw the blood covering her fingers.

"Gimme." Xena gently took the knife from her hand. She leaned on the rock and started neatly butchering the carcass. She had to lean her forearms on Gabrielle's leg to reach it, and through the contact she felt a faint trembling. "Once we get past em." She remarked in a mild tone. "We'll make for the place we came in. I think I can find a way back up to the gorge."

"All right." Gabrielle rested her hands on the warm stone, rubbing the dried blood off her skin. Ghostly images faded now, banished perhaps by Xena's close, vibrant presence and she was able to move her thoughts away from death, and babies, and lost opportunities and on to firewood.

Or something else useful. "Xe, I can do that." Gabrielle tried to take back her task. "And anyway, you're making my leg go to sleep."

"Am I?"

"Yes." Gabrielle patted her partner's arm. "C'mon.. how much time do we have, anyway?"

Xena lifted her elbow up off the bard's thigh and glanced over her shoulder. "Not much." She admitted, handing the knife over. "Tell you what."

"I'll finish this, you go lay some traps."

"Something like that. Yeah." The warrior rested her cupped hand on Gabrielle's knee. "Are you all right?" She asked again. "The truth, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle looked up and into her eyes, knowing the soul that looked back at her from them was as split between light and darkness as her own waking nightmares just had been. All the good things in her life, and all the bad, sprang from this same source, and knowing that let her regain her balance once again as she gently shoved aside the memories for another time. "Yeah." She reached over and moved some of Xena's hair from her eyes. "I just feel for those poor kids."

"Me, too." Xena leaned over and gave her a kiss on the leg. "Get your fire going. We're gonna need all the energy we can come up with to deal with those bastards."

Gabrielle complied, swinging her legs over the rock and hopping off into the marsh again. She slogged through the calf deep water to where a tree had fallen, the surrounding ones too thick to let it down into the mud. She started breaking off dead branches, tucking them under her arm as she moved down the trunk.

Collecting a stack of branches, she then sought out someplace to set them, and spotted a flat rock not that far off. She trudged over and set the branches down, arranging them into a pile before she turned to locate some suitable tinder.

She saw some dried moss, and started towards it, but stopped dead in her tracks when a warning hiss sounded very close by. Her eyes flicked around the surrounding water, searching for the source. For a moment, she thought she'd been mistaken, then a ripple moved out from the water and a head rose up not a hand span from her leg, hooded eyes watching her intently.

Move? Gabrielle decided not to. She remained dead still, her eyes fixed on the snake. It was large, as big around as her arm and it was definitely threatening. "Xena." She called out, projecting her voice. "Got a problem."

She heard the warrior leave her rock and start to come over, and she could imagine the wry expression on her face. Some things about them, after all, never had changed. Then she heard the splashing stop, and she reasoned that Xena had seen what her problem was.

"Okay." The warrior said. "Don't move."

"Not moving." Gabrielle agreed.

Far off, she could hear branches breaking. She risked a glance to her left, and saw Xena approaching in utter silence, her focus entirely on the snake. "Should I back up?"

"No." The warrior said immediately. "Just be still."

Gabrielle could feel her boots sinking into the mud, but she did as she was told and remained still. The snake rose up another few inches and wavered back and forth, its tongue flicking out as it eyed her kneecap. "Don't do it." She implored the animal. "Please? I'm not here to hurt you, and if you bite me..."

The snake whipped its head forward and aimed for her leg. Gabrielle's reactions were fast enough to recognize it, but she was unable to move from the muck and steeled herself for the strike.

Xena lunged forward as she saw the same thing, reaching out her hand towards the snake as it opened its jaws wide. "No ya don't!" She got her hand on the neck as it flew past her and ended up plowing headfirst into the water, smacking the snake against the rock as she narrowly avoided banging her head.

Gabrielle tried to get her boots loose and go to her partner's aid, but the muck defeated her and she stumbled forward, throwing her hands up in time to break her fall and ending up nearly cracking her brains open against Xena's knees. "Whoa!"

She rolled over quickly, thumping her back against the warrior's thighs and spluttered as a mouthful of half stagnant water found its way into her mouth. "Bah." She looked around. "Did you get it?"

"Got it." Xena surfaced, sitting up in the shallow water and holding up her hand. In her fist, the snake was clenched, its body curling around her arm in futile coils. "Good job." She complimented the bard. "Just what I needed."

"A snake?" Gabrielle edged around to get a better look at the animal.

"Poison." Xena shook, dripping swamp water everywhere. "For my arrow tips." She glanced at her partner. "Next time, just point, huh?"

Gabrielle made a face, lifting both hands out of the water and shaking them. She looked around, then exchanged looks with Xena, who was removing bits of decaying wood from her cheek. "You know something, Xena?"

"What?"

"If anyone who listens to my stories about how cool and together we are were here and saw us right now, we'd have to move to a deserted island and change our names to Puck and Scooter."

Xena leaned back against the rock and chuckled, scratching her jaw with her free hand. "Yeah." She admitted. "Glad you always leave these parts out."

"Mm."

Xena shoved herself to her feet and kept the snake away from her body as she headed back towards the rabbit. "Hurry up if you don't want this raw. We've got about a candlemark before those damn things are on top of us."

"Like Hades." Gabrielle pulled herself to her feet and went after her moss, flicking dead leaves off her arms as she walked. "Hey Xena?"

"Yeah?"

"Why should we wait for them?" Gabrielle asked, as she gathered the moss. "We've been doing that the last couple days, letting them come to us. Why don't we just go to them?" She looked up after a period of silence, to find Xena looking back at her. "Bad question?"

"Get the fire started, and we'll talk about it." Xena replied quietly, turning back to her task, the snake now hanging from a nearby branch.

Gabrielle stared at her back for a brief moment. "Gotcha." She went back to the rock and got out her flint, wondering what had prodded her to ask that.

Conscience? Or the echoes of those infants screams? Gabrielle exhaled, as the first sparks fell on the moss. Or maybe she was just tired of being here.

Whatever.

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The river took them rapidly forward, and Granella spent most of her time fending them off from rocks half buried in the white foam. "You doing okay?" She hollered back to Pony. "It's getting squirrely up there."

"Squirrels can kiss my feathers." Pony said. "Let's get the Hades out of here."

"We're getting." Granella peered down the rapidly flowing stream. She couldn't see past a curve at the far end, but the roar of the foamy water around her was getting louder than she thought it should be. "Eponin, do you hear something?"

Pony removed her paddle from the water, where she'd been trying somewhat fruitlessly to guide the craft. "What?" She asked. "I hear a million things. Birds. River. Squeaking canoe, more river.."

Granella concentrated, lowering her head a little towards the surface. It wasn't quite a rumble, more of a.. "Let's steer for the far shore there, at the curve." She pointed with her paddle.

"Sure. Easy for you to say." Pony grumbled. "This thing aint' going nowhere I want it to."

Granella dug her paddle in and did her best to guide the canoe forward. The racing currents made it tough, though, and the light craft was bouncing over the top of them, skittering around and being shoved towards the center of the river.

They were nearing the curve. "Paddle harder, Pon!" Granella called out. "If we can get to that point there, maybe we can get out."

Pony looked ahead to where she was indicating and grunted. "Yeah, well.. I dunno. Even if we get out, where're we gonna go? Maybe we should just take the ride wherever it's taking us."

Granella leaned forward, as the swept toward the curve, her eyes focusing past it downstream. "Uh.. Pon.."

Eponin craned her neck and spotted the waterfall thundering down ahead of them, a sheer dropoff filled with blue sky and spray. "Gotcha. Paddling my ass off." She dug her paddle in and used all her strength to haul against the current. "Crap."

"Double crap." Granella confirmed, paddling just as hard. "I got a feeling I know where that goes and we don't wanna go there."

"Don't care where it does, don't wanna go there." Pony switched sides, driving the canoe towards the far shore by sheer strength. "Not unless it drops my ass right into my bed."

Granella spotted a boulder in the stream and got the front of the canoe past it, shoving off with one hand and pushing them closer to their goal. She could see the far shore much closer now, but it was passing by with frightening rapidity, as the coursing waters picked them up and pulled them forward towards the falls.

On the shore, she could see sunken trees protruding, and she was praying to Artemis that they could get close enough to latch onto one and prevent them going over. Though, she suddenly realized, Eponin had made a good point.. then what?

Well, first this. Then what. Granella felt the ache in her shoulders and arms as she dug as hard as she could into the water. She could see a jutting bit of rock wall, with a shimmering swirl of water around it, and she aimed for it, spotting a good half sunken trunk they could grab onto. "I'll swing the back end around... get that!"

Pony dropped her paddle and reached out as Granella dug hers deep into the water, swinging the canoe around against the current just long enough for Pony to grab the last bit of the trunk.

"Got it!" Pony felt the current nearly rip her arms from their sockets. "Son of a bacchae!" She yelled. "Get a rope round this damn thing!"

Balancing carefully, Granella crawled back and looped one of their ropes onto the tree, tying a slip knot and pulling it taut. She looked around the canoe. "Don't think those spars'll hold."

"Yeah." Pony agreed.

"Um.." Granella tightened her grip on the rope, holding them in place. They were poised on the center of the curve, and as she watched a tree swept over the falls, tipping upright and plunging out of sight. Behind their rock, though, she could feel a bit of a lessening of the force, and if they could get tied off..

"Hey." Eponin said. "Slide that rope up under the front of this thing, and tie it across the middle." She took a better hold on the branch. "G'wan, I can hang on."

Granella turned forward and looped the rope over the front of the canoe, pulling it back between her and Pony. She wrapped the free end around and tied it snugly. "You sure? I think."

"Sure." Pony released her hold, with a wary expression, ready to grab on again. The canoe remained steady, however. "See?"

"Yeah." Gran sat back and looked around. "So now what?"

"Beats me." Pony also examined their surroundings. "I think we're screwed."

Granella nodded briefly. The walls rose over their heads to a forbidding degree, and going back the way they came wasn't an option. "I think you're right." She sighed. "Shoulda stayed in Amphipolis."

For once, Pony was right with that sentiment. "Happens every time. It's that Gabrielle thing."

With shocking suddenness, the branch they'd tied off to broke, and the canoe lurched into motion. "I was wrong." Pony yelped, scrabbling to get a hold on something. "Now we're totally screwed."

Granella got her fingertips on the rock promontory and clutched it, making the canoe swing wildly behind her as it swung around the rock and sent Pony's end downstream. She could feel a completely different stress abruptly take hold and her grip was ripped from the rock as she felt the canoe drop out from under her. "Ahhh!!!"

"Craaaapp!!!!"

**

"So where are they?" Gabrielle whispered. They were seated on a tree limb, with a decent view of the path down. The wind was blowing fitfully through the branches, clouds fluttering overhead and changing the landscape from sun drenched to just simply drenched.

Xena pressed her cheek against the bark and exhaled. The creatures weren't behaving as she'd expected, again. She'd figured on them coming down at her and Gabrielle, had heard them approaching in fact, and then for some unknown reason, they'd just simply stopped.

They could still smell smoke, but it wasn't getting any closer and there were no longer sounds of anything coming towards them, not even frightened animals.

So, what the Hades? "Let's go find them." Xena decided. "I'm over this." She dropped lightly out of the tree, then dropped her bow and turned, lifting her arms up. "Jump."

Caught in the midst of climbing off the branch, Gabrielle just looked at her. "Sweetheart, I'm not Dori." She lowered herself to hang from her arms, and then released her grip, landing not far from Xena. "We've got enough problems without me throwing your back out."

"Hah." Xena picked her bow back up. "You're just chicken." She started back up the way they'd come, a quiver of arrows now hanging over her shoulder.

She was glad enough to get out of the swamp. The constant dampness around her legs had become extremely annoying, and as they climbed up the sloping ground she was relieved to feel firmer earth under her.

Behind her, she could hear Gabrielle's stolid following footsteps rustling the drying leaf litter, and she turned her head to glance at the bard. "Hey."

"Mm?" Gabrielle looked up from a rock she'd been pondering in her hand. She put the rock in her bag and caught up to the warrior. "Do we have a plan?"

Xena shrugged. "I figured we'd start making our way out. We've gotta go back that direction anyway." She fell silent, shifting her grip on her bow. "See what happens."

Gabrielle wiggled her toes inside her wet boots and sighed. She didn't like that kind of plan, because usually whenever they left it to 'see what happens' – something usually did happen neither of them liked. But, since she didn't have any better plan to suggest, she kept quiet.

They walked through the trees, and around a set of moss covered boulders, and stopped, as a large deerlike creature in the next clearing spotted them and snorted. "Uh oh." Gabrielle muttered. "Do we need more boots?"

Xena removed an arrow from her quiver and fitted it to her bow, watching the huge animal carefully. "No." She said. "But if it comes after us I'm nailing it." She glanced briefly at Gabrielle. "I don't care if it has a half dozen babies."

The megadeer snorted again, and pawed the ground. It waved its head, crowned by an even more impressive set of antlers than the last one had at them.

"Stay back." Xena warned.

"Right behind you, Xe." Gabrielle tucked herself between the rock and her partner, peering around her elbow and watching the beast. "It's not attacking us." She observed.

"Yet."

They could see the head and shoulders of the animal through the bushes, and it stared back at them, tossing its head in agitation. It opened its mouth and brayed, the hornlike sound echoing across the forest. It didn't move, though they could see its legs shifting through the leaves.

Xena took a step forward, and waved her arms, one with the bow in it. "Yeah!" She let out a yell.

The megadeer started backwards, but didn't go further, braying louder as its eyes rolled in panic. "Stay here." Xena ordered, the paused. "Please."

Gabrielle gave her a pat on the butt. "G'wan."

Xena slowly moved out from behind the rock and approached the clearing, her bow held at the ready in case the animal's anger overcame its apparent fear. She chose her steps carefully, her eyes fixed on the deer's movements.

Something struck her as odd about them. He was jerking his hind legs, and she wondered if he wasn't sick. "Hey boy." She murmured, stepping around a bush and craning her neck to get a better view. "What's wrong, huh? You stuck or.."

A lifetime of battle and the soul of a warrior read the signs before her mind could logically interpret them. Fire erupted inside her and she was already surging backwards, dropping her bow and grabbing her ax, voice raised in warning as the first flicker of motion disrupted the underbrush around the deer.

A lifetime of living with Xena already had Gabrielle in motion herself, fixed on her partner as the warrior had been fixed on the deer, reading Xena's body language and bolting forward, her staff already swinging as the first of the hooters leaped on them.

She got the edge of her staff between his legs and tripped him up, only to find two more on top of her, hands reaching to strike and hurt rather than grab and take. She rolled out from under them in a desperate move, coming up onto her knees and whirling her staff in a circle, its other end tucked under her arm and pressed against her side.

A crack, and blood flew, bits of bone striking her in the face as she ducked under a pair of long, hairy arms that went akimbo in midmotion. She blinked a splash of blood from her vision and whirled, senses searching for Xena's presence.

Dark energy swirled around her, and she was pressing her back against her partner's, feeling that visceral thrill that came from fighting at Xena's side, utterly trusted. She got her staff around and popped a hooter in the face, smashing the end of the stick between his eyes and jerking his head back. He reeled, and she slid her hand down and whipped the staff up and across her body, whacking him as hard as she could.

Xena gripped her ax with both hands and beat off the two hooters nearest to her, using the weighted stick almost as she would have her sword. She and Gabrielle were against a tree, and half protected by a second, but a quick look around told her the hooters had gained reinforcements.

The woods were dark with them. It was taking every bit of her skill to keep them from taking both of them down, and the only thing saving them was the damn trees. "Gab!"

"Too many!" The bard yelled back. "Xena I can't keep... damn it!"

Xena spared a glance over her shoulder, to see two hooters land on Gabrielle, ripping her away from the safety of the trees. The bard was fighting as she went down, powerful legs kicking out at anything that presented a target, and staff moving, but the warrior could feel the panic deep in her guts.

She didn't even have to hear the yelling of her name.

Some things, Xena acknowledged, never really did change. She back kicked the hooter trying to bite her leg and slipped between the trunks, raising her ax and bringing it down on the skull of the closer creature on top of her partner.

He snarled and grabbed for her leg but she whacked at him again and again until he scrambled away, howling at the top of his lungs. Then she tossed the ax aside and grabbed the second hooter, lifting him up bodily using strength from the gods only knew where and tossing him off Gabrielle.

The bard rolled to her feet immediately, bringing up her staff and whipping it right past Xena to smack into the creature she had felt creeping up on her. "Thanks!" The bard yelled.

"Same as." Xena grabbed the ax, then crouched and exploded upward, back flipping and landing behind the six hooters that had taken up the attack. She shoved one into a second, and then tripped a third into Gabrielle's solid swing, but knew they both couldn't keep it up. "Gab!"

"Moving!"

Xena grabbed a hooter by the arm and dug her feet in, turning powerfully and swinging him around and off his feet, into the others clustering around them. Then she released him and bolted, grabbing Gabrielle by the arm and heading down the slope.

With a huge yell, the hooters followed, their footsteps thundering over the ground.

Xena circled around at the bottom of the ridge and leaped up onto the rocks, running along them and heading right back up towards the path. Gabrielle stuck to her like honey on a child's face rocks and all, and they both powered side by side up the grassy sward with the entire horde of hooters chasing after them.

Neither wasted time speaking. Xena picked the best path she could and concentrated on moving on it as fast as she could, and she knew Gabrielle would do her best to be right there with her.

They raced up through the forest, dodging trees and bushes, and leaping rocks. Here, Gabrielle had the advantage, since her strides were shorter, and easier to change up as they hurtled up the uneven ground. Her pale hair was plastered straight back from the wind and both hands were balled, her staff tucked under her arm with its lower end just barely missing the earth.

Xena reached the rocky part of the path and swept it with her eyes, spotting a boulder about the right size and letting out a whistle as she swerved over to it, slowing up and grabbing hold of the sun warmed surface.

Gabrielle got in next to her, and they dug their feet into the sliding gravel, thighs tensed, and cords standing out on either side of their necks as they shoved the boulder along and down into the path of the oncoming hooters.

With a groaning protest, the rock moved, first sliding, and then tumbling over as it hit the slope.

They didn't stop to see how effective it would be. Xena turned and started running again, her eyes already scanning the path ahead for her next offensive. She felt her boots slip and cursed, throwing a hand out to break the fall she felt coming.

Gabrielle grabbed her arm and pulled her along, giving her support enough for her to regain her balance and get a better grip on the ground, and a step later she was back in business. "Thanks."

"I hate putting stitches in your knees." Gabrielle grunted.

"About as much as I hate it." The warrior agreed. "Over there." She pointed at a higher grade and they shifted direction, towards a stand of densely packed trees that offered some hope of protection. They dodged between the trunks and turned to look back, spotting a momentarily hooter free path behind them. "Okay."

They pressed their bodies against each other and took a moment to collect themselves.

"Okay." Gabrielle rested her head against Xena's shoulder and caught her breath. "That really sucked, Xena."

"I know." The warrior agreed. "Let's just keep going. Maybe we can lose them on the way back to where we came in."

The bard nodded, putting her hand on Xena's back. "You okay?"

Xena was staring back along the path. "Bastards."

"That was sneaky." Gabrielle said. "They were trying to trap us."

The warrior exhaled heavily. "Almost did." She admitted. "Damn they learn fast." She tightened down her belt, looking over her shoulder at the arrows. "All the good they did."

"You can make another bow."

Xena tucked the ax into her belt. "Nah. I'll just stab them with the damn things if they catch up with us. C'mon." She started through the trees moving at a fast walk as they dodged between the thickly overgrown trunks.

Behind them, they heard the hooters start yelling. "Found us." Gabrielle sighed, as she broke into a run, following as much in Xena's footsteps as she could manage, trusting the warrior not to run them both into a tree.

It always was about trust, after all, wasn't it? All they had out here was each other, and the trust had to be reciprocal and complete or their chances were...

Well, even worse than they were at the moment. Gabrielle was glad for their rabbit meal now, as she felt her body respond to the need to run with a level of steady energy both gratifying and reassuring.

They continued to climb up the wooded slope, leaping up onto fallen trunks and running along their length to get above the clinging undergrowth slowing their pursuers. The bard was careful to keep her staff close to her body, not wanting to catch its end on a limb and be pulled over backwards or knocked silly.

Been there, done that way more than once, and right now they had all the trouble they really could handle.

**

Ephiny strode across the town square, dodging various village residents as she headed for the inn. She mounted the steps and stiff-armed the door, surprising several people on the other side of it. "Excuse me." She muttered, pushing past them and heading for the front of the room.

"I don't care what you told him." Cyrene was saying, in a loud voice. "You'll not get a half dinar from me." She said. "As if I had a stock of them... you think running an inn is cheap? My profits go back into what I sell. Do I look like I wear silk clothing?"

The town reeve was standing opposite her, his hands on his hips. "Look, Cyrene, like it or not, we're all in this together. I gave my word to those men, and that's that! The town owes them!"

"No." the innkeeper stated, folding her arms. "You'll get nothing from me, and that's that! Not from me, and not from my family. We weren't a part of your shady deals."

"But you gained by them, did you not?" The reeve countered. "Your inn prospered."

"My inn would have anyway." Cyrene lifted her head proudly. "I needed none of your cheap scuttles for that."

"Absolutely." Ephiny chose that moment to chime in. She walked over and stood by Cyrene. "This always was the best in the region."

Cyrene gave her a sideways look. Ephiny returned it.

"Who asked you?" The reeve shot back at her. "Get out of here, Amazon. You have no say in this."

Ephiny walked over and smacked him in the face, startling everyone. "Talk to me again like that, you townie pissant, and I'll eunuch you." She stared him right in the eye. "As Gabrielle's regent, and the guardian of her heir, I've got every right to be here and to speak for her. And for Xena."

The reeve glowered at her, one hand covering his cheek. "They never were a part of this town." He said. "Else you'd do what we asked, Cyrene... if you've not got the dinars, sell those arms – they'd get a good price."

Ephiny gave him a disbelieving look. "What henbane did you get into? They both nearly died for this town." She shot back. "More than once.. or did you conveniently forget that?" She asked. "They're more a part of this place than you are."

Cyrene slapped her hand on the table. "Damn right. Xena was born here, more than you were, you pickled hen's egg. Sell her weapons? You must be out of your mind."

"Reeve, you're wasting your time. They're not going to help us. We need to just go do what I said in the first place." The man standing next to the reeve said. "Find someone who can get us what we need."

The two men left, pushing their way through the crowd in the inn and slamming the door behind them. Cyrene made a face, then lifted her hands and let them fall. "What in Hades has gotten into these people?"

"Sell Xena's weapons?" Ephiny clapped her hand over her eyes. "I'd cut my arm off before I'd see that happen." She said. "Have those guys lost their minds?"

Johan emerged from the kitchen. "More's the pity, no." He glanced at the still muttering crowd. "Problem is, we made him the reeve." He said. "We don't follow through on his promises, town gets a bad name."

"Yeah." One of the men closest agreed, glumly. "That's what he's counting on us knowing."

They turned and looked at Cyrene.

"Don't be looking at me." Cyrene warned. "I didn't agree to putting him in charge and you all know that." She pointed at the man next to Johan. "And got accused of putting my family ahead of the town, if I recall, as though Gabrielle really wanted to be leading you lot."

Ephiny suddenly felt better about her queen's family. Not that she'd really suspected Cyrene had joined in the campaign to oust her, but it was nice to see the dour, abashed looks on the faces around them as the innkeeper made her point. "I'd say you got what you deserved, but I like some of you."

Cyrene chuckled under her breath.

"Ay, but fact is, we need to fix up the problem." Johan said. "Like or no, truth is, if we don't make good on his promise we'll all lose for it." He sat down on one of the chairs. "So what's to do?"

Ephiny wandered over to the window, looking out it. "Well, y'know... if it were me..."

The room turned to look at her back, and waited in silence.

Ephiny turned. "I'd ask Gabrielle." A hint of malicious mischief appeared in her hazel eyes. "However, since she's not here, and I'm not sure she'd answer you if she was..."

"She would." Cyrene snorted. "So, what are we going to do about it? I wasn't kidding. We don't have a stock of dinars here to give." She said. "And neither do my kids, unless I'm very much mistaken."

Ephiny pursed her lips, now finding herself in something of a quandary. She didn't think Xena and Gabrielle had a hoard of dinars themselves. Neither ever seemed to want for much, but after all, most of what they needed they were able to find or make themselves, and Gabrielle had told her once she did have a few dinars put by from her traveling bard days.

Certainly, Xena always had coin for the market, or a toy for Dori, or something practical for Gabrielle. Ephiny had found herself smiling at the warrior's pretend casual shopping trips, and the now impossible for her to hide adoration for her family.

So much had changed. Ephiny sighed. But so much had not. "So, we have to figure out what to do about the jackass, huh?" She said. "Well, we sure don't have extra dinars lying around." Her eyes went to Cyrene's face, thoughtfully. "But maybe we can dig.. something up."

The innkeeper's expression remained dourly pessimistic. "I say let him come up with an idea first." She objected. "Damned if I want to pull his stinky hind end out of the wringer."

The crowd began to disperse, some shaking their heads, others shrugging. They filed out, leaving Cyrene alone with Johan and Ephiny. Johan extended his booted legs and studied them, frowning.

Cyrene sighed and sat down. "Isn't this a festering pile of cow droppings." She said. "Blithering idiot."

Ephiny sat down as well, resting her elbows on her knees. It was a tough question, and frankly, a problem outside her willingness to deal with. In the Amazons, she, or Gabrielle made decisions. However, they understood they lived as part of a large sisterhood, and those decisions could be debated, and if enough Amazons objected, overturned.

The debate was an important part of that – because it allowed her, and Gabrielle too, to see viewpoints they needed to in order to effectively govern their tribe. It also, on the other hand, allowed them to present arguments to the tribe that they might not have considered, and especially when it was Gabrielle arguing, they had a chance to sway opinion that way.

Everyone hated to argue with Gabrielle, though. They'd rather argue with Ephiny. Gabrielle had that gentle presence about her that made you feel bad when you disagreed with her, and the arguments she came up with to counter objections were usually feather curling.

And of course, there was always Xena lurking in the background, usually sprawled somewhere nearby, pretending to watch birds, or work on a bit of her armor, but providing a silent reminder of Gabrielle's ultimate backing.

They pretended, sometimes, that it didn't matter. But Ephiny knew the truth, and so did most of the others, and no one really wanted to try running roughshod over their queen no matter how passionate the argument and risk getting one's butt thoroughly kicked.

If Gabrielle didn't do it first, she wryly acknowledged. "So." She said. "How much did he promise them, anyway?"

"Five hundred dinars." Johan said, grimacing at the look on Ephiny's face. "Yeah, it's a lot. Not sure where he got that figure from."

"Fool." Cyrene shook her head. "Truth is, we shouldn't give them a damn groat. No one guaranteed they'd be successful here. Trading's a gamble – we all know it." She got up. "Now... mind you, folks lost everything down there. No one's said a word about helping them! Just his buddies!"

Johan scratched his jaw. "True."

Ephiny twiddled her thumbs. "I think we should help the guys down there that need it." She said slowly. "We can bring down grain, some stocks."

Cyrene nodded. "I'll send food." She said. "And we can send people to help build up shelters." She added. "But nothing for that bastard's freeloaders!"

Ephiny got up. "Right. Well, I'll go round up some bodies." She said. "Ah.. She hesitated. "We might have a few pieces of stone.. some pretty stuff we picked up we could donate to the cause."

Johan held up a hand. "Tis like ransom, if you do that." He warned. "Soon as it comes out we've got anything like that around, it'll be bad. Grain and staples, that's one thing, but gems? Nah."

"He's right." Cyrene nodded. "But thanks for the offer, Ephiny."

Hm. "Anytime." The Amazon waved, and headed for the door. "Anyway, I'm sure Xena and Gabrielle'll be back in a day or so, with our guys, and then we can figure out a real solution."

Cyrene watched the door close, and let her hands rest on the table. "I wish I believed that." She remarked quietly. "But as the days go on, Johan, I feel more and more that I was right to start with, and they're in trouble."

Johan patted her hand. "The other gals'll find em." He told her. "They'll be all right, Cy."

Cyrene snorted, and headed for the kitchen, shaking her head.

**

The waterfall thundered down, two figures lost in it's spray as they hurtled towards the pool the fall ended in, the roar stealing the yells of alarm and sending them off into the ether.

"Son of a bacchae!" Pony held on to the canoe with all her remaining strength, as they hit the water on the bottom. She felt herself ripped loose from the craft, and plunged under the surface, hitting the bottom with shocking force.

She could feel the thunder of the waterfall over her, and in panic, she shoved away from the bottom of the lake and groped for the surface. Stupid.. stupid.. jerk.. stupid.. gods be damned... She got her head above water and promptly was driven under it again by the force of the falls.

Underwater, she flailed with her arms and legs, unable to free herself from the downward flow. With a surge of panicked strength, she managed to sweep her arms and felt herself move out of the current and towards the sunlight again.

Damn it! Eponin struggled to the surface again. She managed to get a few feet downstream, and out of the water flowing from above with a fierce effort, churning with all her might. She blinked her eyes to clear them and looked around. "Granella!"

The canoe was floating away a couple of body lengths beyond her, but there was no sign of her companion. Pony immediately turned in the water a full circle, treading unsteadily. She could see sticks and other debris, but nothing else. "Gran!!!"

A low cough made her swing around again, and she spotted the dark haired woman crawling out of the water on the far edge to collapse on the muddy earth. "Damn it." Pony headed in that direction best she could, one eye on the drifting canoe. "You okay?"

Granella waved a hand weakly at her. She turned around and sat down, coughing and retching.

"Crap." Pony started gamely after the canoe, paddling through the water as she cursed under her breath. As she got closer, the craft drifted further away, as though taunting her. "Stupid piece of crap!" She growled. "Stop! Stop boat!"

The canoe hung up on a half submerged log obediently, and waited for her to catch up to it. Pony got a hand on the side and then hung there, her teeth chattering a little in the cold water. She turned her head and looked up at the falls they'd tumbled down, shaking her head in disbelief as she gauged its length.

"Pon?" Granella croaked. "You got it?"

"Tell ya what I've got." Pony yelled back. "I've got my ass in a wringer, and no damn way to get out of it. I wanna go home!"

Granella sat down on the bank, her booted feet still in the river, providing a disturbance for the water to ripple over. She coughed a few more times, getting up the water she'd inhaled as they'd tumbled over the cliff side and headed straight down.

One waterfall in a day had sucked. Two?

Gods.

Where in the Hades were they now? Granella looked around in bedraggled bewilderment. "How could this place exist, and us not know about it?" She shook a clod of mud off her hand, then wiped the back of it across her eyes. "Damn it."

She'd wanted an adventure. What was it Gabrielle had once said to her about always wanting what you couldn't have?

"Gran?"

Granella looked up again, then slowly hoisted herself to her feet, waiting for her knees to stop shaking before she started down the bank towards where Eponin was. "Hang on."

"Hanging." Pony got a better grip on the canoe, and edged around to the side closest to the shore. She examined the rope that had been tying the craft and wrinkled her nose at the frayed edge. On one hand, she was annoyed they'd tied it in a way that would have let the fiber rub enough to cut through, but on the other hand..

Well, at least they still had the damn thing. She pulled herself up a little and peered inside, noting the packs still strapped to the cross supports. Still had it, and what was in it, which given what it had just gone through was some kind of gift of the gods.

Pony sighed. Maybe Artemis was taking pity on them. She turned her head to see Granella picking her way carefully down the rocky bank, covered in muck and scratches, looking about as different from a townie as ever was possible.

Not caring, just like a true Amazon wouldn't, what she looked like, just working to get the job done.

It made her smile, just a little. "Once an Amazon..." She muttered under her breath, as she rooted in the packs for another rope. "Always an Amazon." She pulled out a waterskin, then tossed it from her in disgust. "Lucky for me."

She was glad, now, that it was Granella she was out with and not one of the others. Even Eph, since half drowning in front of her lover wasn't something Eponin wanted to have to hear about the rest of her life. With Granella, since she wasn't part of the tribe anymore, the pressure was off on having to live up to her position all the damn day long.

And, as she thought that, Pony suddenly, incongruously, gained an understanding of what Xena had once told her, about how she felt she always had to be proving herself, with the Amazons. Something Pony had never really comprehended, until she felt it in herself, right then.

She blinked. "Huh."

"Pon?"

"Yeah?" She shook her head and pulled a snarled rope from the bottom of one pack. "Sorry. Thinkin."

"Aint we both." Granella yelled back.

Pony cursed at the rope and shook it, saving the rest of her thoughts for later.

**

The wind howled, as clouds raced once again across the sky, bringing the smell of rain across the hills. High up on an escarpment that towered over the trees two figures clung, fighting against the draft as they moved higher up into the rocks.

They stopped before a crack in the rocks, a bodylength in width, and the first of the two figures leaped over it lightly, turning to look back as she did.

Xena extended her arm across the rocky gap back towards her partner. "C'mere."

Gabrielle didn't even consider protesting. She took hold of the powerful hand and readied herself, then leaped across the chasm to land safely at Xena's side, refusing to look down at the roaring water below. "Thanks."

"Anytime." The warrior gave her a pat on the back. "We're almost to the top. Hang in there."

"Hanging." Gabrielle had strapped her staff to her back, to free both hands for climbing, and now she dusted off small bits of granite embedded in her skin. "Long as you don't ask me to look down for those creeps."

Climbing up the steep, rocky wall had been risky, but Xena had calculated it would slow down their pursuers and so far that seemed to have worked. She looked behind them, and saw nothing but bare rock down to the treeline.

"Ah."

Xena's grunt made the bard turn around again, and she let her eyes follow the warrior's pointing finger. It led to a shadowy crack in the rock, and she was glad enough to follow Xena along the granite ridge as the wind pushed them both against the stone.

The crack turned out to be a good size cleft, and they ducked inside it quickly, pressing their backs against the wall and listening above the wind's howl.

"Anything?" Gabrielle deferred to Xena's superior senses without regret.

Xena remained silent for a moment, her eyes half closed, and her nostrils flared as she concentrated.

Gabrielle watched the tension in her body relax though, and so she relaxed too, glad to be out of the wind and out of the view of the creatures. Now that they were standing still, she let the fact that they'd been running for candlemarks catch up with her and make her aware of how tired she was.

"Okay." Xena put a hand on her shoulder, the touch comfortingly warm. "Sit down. Let's take a break."

Stone or no stone, the bard was glad to slide down the wall and stretch her legs out, leaning back and kneading the tops of her thighs with both hands. "Works for me."

Xena sat down next to her, exhaling heavily. "This stinks."

Gabrielle leaned against the warrior and put her head down on Xena's shoulder. "I hate to pull the old silver lining speech out, Xe, but we're both here, both alive, neither of us is hurt, and it sure has stunk worse in the past, y'know?"

Xena rested her head against Gabrielle's. "I know." She said, then fell silent, her eyes going distant.

Gabrielle waited a bit, before she shifted a little and looked up at Xena's profile. Her face was still, only the pale blue eyes moved across the interior of their little cave with blunted intensity. The bard

reached over and took her hand inside her own, watching the faint tension appear as an unconscious smile followed.

After a moment, the blue eyes fluttered closed, then turned to meet Gabrielle's. "Know what just occurred to me?" Xena asked, in a mild tone.

"What?" Gabrielle felt herself getting lost in that gentle regard.

Xena lifted their joined hands up and planted a kiss on the back of Gabrielle's knuckles. "This has been the silver lining of my life." She replied, and then after a minute, a half grin appeared. "This.." She held up their hands. "Not this." She indicated their situation with a jerk of her head.

"I knew what you meant." Gabrielle answered, her voice husky. "I'm just pissed I didn't say it first. I'm supposed to be the bard in the family, darn it."

"Sorry." Xena exhaled, a gentle warmth that stirred the hair on the top of her partner's head. "Gabrielle, Gabrielle, Gabrielle."

"Mm." The bard snuggled closer. "How long do we have here?" She asked, after a brief pause.

Xena eyed her profile. "Tired?"

Gabrielle nodded.

"Long as we need to have."

"Donkey poo answer, Xe."

The warrior chuckled. "Honestly, I don't have a clue. Those guys have been beating my odds all day long." She patted her leg. "So g'wan and take a nap while you can."

Gabrielle shifted over and laid down, with her head in Xena's lap. "What about you?"

"I'm all right." The warrior said.

Green eyes studied her face intently. "Because of those herbs I found?" Gabrielle asked. "That's what it was for, wasn't it?"

Xena nodded.

"Want to give me some?"

The warrior shook her head firmly no. She laid her arm over Gabrielle's middle, giving her a light thump above her navel with the side of her thumb. "No way."

Gabrielle continued to watch her. "How long can you keep that up?"

"Long as I have to."

"Donkey poo answer, Boo."

Xena only smiled in response.

Gabrielle rolled her eyes in mock despair and then closed them, allowing her body to relax as much as she could on the hard stone. Xena's fingertips moved lightly over her skin, a lazy pattern that slowed her thoughts faster than she'd anticipated, and sent her tumbling into sleep in the space between one breath and the next.

Xena let her head rest against the rock wall, her eyes still fastened on her now dozing partner. Asleep, her face relaxed and open, Gabrielle always appeared more her true age than she did when she was awake, and it always gave Xena a tiny, bittersweet tang to recognize that.

She remembered so clearly the kid Gabrielle had been when they'd first met and if she allowed herself to think about it, she could step through those times when she'd seen that kid grow visibly into the woman her partner was now.

Ah well. Xena set her arrows down by her right hand, along with her ax, and judged the opening to the cleft. If need be, she could, she reasoned, defend it reasonably as it was narrow enough to force them to come at her one at a time.

Xena thought about that for a bit, and pondered the idea of forcing them to do just that. Then she half shook her head. "Nah." She murmured. "They'd figure it out too fast and take off."

But what, really, were her options? They could keep running, and end up back at the waterfall, maybe. The second one they'd hid behind, but that led nowhere, and the one cleft with the skeletons...

Here, with no one to see her, Xena allowed herself a shiver. That had crept even her out, and she didn't want to think about trying to find a way out that route. Besides, the cave seemed to be going down into the earth, rather than up.

So. Xena turned her eyes back to Gabrielle. The stress of their misadventure was showing on her – bone and muscle was clearly visible under her skin, no shred of reserves were left to gentle the powerful form and left no doubt of the Amazon part of her dual nature.

Scars and sinew. If you didn't know her, or see the bright smile, and hear the storyteller's talent, you would never guess now a poet lived in there too. Xena sighed, knowing her own ambivalence about that, but acknowledging Gabrielle's obvious pride in her hard won skills.

Life's choices, they were funny and unexpected sometimes, weren't they? Xena studied her right hand, turning it over and flexing its fingers, the palm thick with muscle and callus from her swordhandling. With a shake of her head, she returned it to rest on her knee. However unexpected, they did tend to mark you, for good or evil, as she knew only too well.

Ah well.

Their one other option, she hadn't talked to Gabrielle about yet. If they could find no ground level retreat, the only other choice might be for them to climb out, to scale the towering cliffs that held them captive. Xena's brow furrowed, as she thought that through. Alone, she knew she could probably do it, but with Gabrielle...

Gabrielle.

Terrified of heights, the bard was. Xena had felt that kind of fear inside herself too many times to discount the problem that was for both of them. It wasn't something to be scoffed off, or made little of, and Xena knew well she couldn't just ask her partner to simply push past it and climb anyway. It just wasn't that easy.

Made all the more difficult because Xena knew she'd done just that – she'd forced herself through the unreasoning terror, not even for a life threatening reason even. Just for their joining. Gabrielle knew that, and no matter what Xena said, she knew the bard would feel she had to step up and do the same, if it meant them getting out of here and going home.

Could she? Xena gazed at the familiar planes of her soulmate's face. She knew the courage was there, no question about that. But it took more than courage sometimes, it took cussedness, and that, thankfully, Gabrielle had less of than she did.

In her sleep, Gabrielle lifted her hand and covered the one Xena had lying over her stomach, folding her fingers over the warrior's hand as a faint smile appeared on her face.

"Yeah." Xena whispered, a mirroring smile on her lips. "Feel that? Feel all that love in there, Gabrielle?" She let the fingers of her free hand run through the bard's fair hair. "Never in a million years thought I had that in me, and you came along and pulled it all out."

Life was a funny thing sometimes, Xena mused. You just never knew where your choices were going to take you, even if you were convinced they were bad choices. She'd been convinced leaving her army was the worst mistake she'd ever made, after all.

Going home.

Going down that long, dusty river road.

Burying her weapons, ready to give up her life.

Gaining instead her future, in the unlikeliest of places.

Finding, after all her hoary and jaded experience, the one great love of her life in the open innocent eyes of a village girl barely more than a child.

You just never knew. So maybe, even though they were in a very tough spot, and had some very tough choices ahead of them, it would all work out.

The sun poured into the cleft, breaking through the clouds and drenching them in a bright warmth. It glistened in Gabrielle's pale hair as it burnished their tan skins to a rich gold. Xena turned her face into it, reveling in the touch of the light as it spilled over them both.

Far off, in the distance, she could hear the faint rattle of rocks, and she knew their time here was limited, but she determined they'd use every moment of it, taking the small peace for all it was worth to them.

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One Wild Ride

Part 13

It was a calm, sunny day. Gabrielle walked through the trees, feeling the warmth of a spring breeze against her face as she peered through the branches. Dinner was bubbling, and Xena was nowhere to be found, though she'd left some time ago to 'wash up.'

Gabrielle could, she knew, just start calling her name out, but somehow the thought of that on this nice, peaceful day didn't appeal to her. So she wandered down through the trees, out of the forest and into the sunlit meadow that sloped down towards the river.

Halfway down, she spotted Xena. The warrior was sprawled in the grass, head pillowed on a tussock, boots off, in just her leathers.

Snoozing in the sun.

Gabrielle stopped in her tracks, blinking, unable to believe her eyes for a long moment. Was her partner sick? She hadn't seemed that way, but they had stopped very early, and maybe.. Gabrielle felt a touch anxious, unsure in their newly intimate relationship of how she should act. Should she leave Xena alone?

Go and fuss over her?

What was Xena expecting her to do? Their relationship up to now had been so defined, even with the changes in it, and now.. now everything was different again. New. Strange.

A little scary.

Then one of Xena's hands lifted and made a come ahead gesture in her direction, and Gabrielle started walking again, ending up next to where the warrior was lying. "Hi." She greeted the supine woman. "There you are."

"Hi." Xena murmured. "Something wrong?"

Gabrielle sat down, wrapping her arms around her knees. "No. I was just looking for you, for dinner." She paused. "Um.. I meant to eat dinner. For us to eat dinner." She let the words trail off, feeling the blush warm her skin. "You know what I mean."

Xena chuckled softly, one blue eye opening and peering at Gabrielle. "Uh huh?" She glanced lazily at Gabrielle. "Hungry?"

"Mhm." Gabrielle nodded. She sighed, as the late afternoon sun bathed her face. "Boy, it's a nice day, isn't it?" She added, feeling a little awkward. "Pretty clouds."

Xena reached out and circled her wrist with long, warm fingers. "C'mere."

"Where?"

"Here." Xena patted her stomach. "Lay down."

Willingly, Gabrielle did, feeling the leather warm on her cheek as she settled into the thick river grass next to Xena, and the warrior's arm draped itself over her midriff with casual familiarity.

"There. Now it's a perfect day." Xena closed her eye and exhaled, her fingertips lightly brushing across Gabrielle's skin. "Right?"

Gabrielle reached up and folded her hand around Xena's, accepting the vast change that had now taken over their lives, and believing, at last, in this new reality. This was her life now. This gentle, knowing touch that made her breathing quicken, and her heart pound was real.

She and Xena, together, was real.

"Yeah." Gabrielle agreed softly. "This is awesome."

Awesome. Being in love was awesome. Having Xena be in love with her was awesome.

Life, right now, really just rocked.

"Hey." Xena patted Gabrielle's cheek gently to wake her. "Gabrielle?"

The sea green eyes drifted open, regarding her sleepily. "Mm."

"We gotta get out of here." The warrior told her, regretfully. "Sorry." She traced the line of one of the bard's eyebrows. "Dreaming good dreams?"

"Dreaming of you." Gabrielle answered, with a smile. "Dreaming of us." She turned her head and kissed Xena's hand. "I love loving you." She added. "Did you know that?"

Xena looked at her for a long string of heartbeats, before she smiled. "I knew that, yeah." She answered. "I remember when we first got together, you'd sit across the fire and just look at me." The warrior's nose wrinkled up. "What an expression you had."

"For me it was like Solistice every day." Gabrielle agreed. "So I bet I did."

"Really?"

"Oh yeah." The bard looked up at her. "Every time you kissed me, it was such a gift."

Xena's expression altered, to one of wistful sadness. "G.." She stopped, as her partner lifted her hand and pressed her fingers against her lips.

"Don't say it." Gabrielle whispered. "That gift is back and that's all I care about."

Xena's lips twitched, and she nodded.

They both were momentarily quiet, then Gabrielle sat up, rolling her head to loosen a crick in her neck before she got to her feet. She walked over to the entrance and looked out, seeing the sun nearing the rock walls. "It's late."

Xena came up behind her, putting a hand on her shoulder. "We'll risk moving after dark." She said. "At this point, I'm more scared of those damn bastards than I am the cats."

Gabrielle hesitated, then turned, looking up at her. "Are you scared?"

The warrior's brows knit slightly. "Of course I am." She said. "Gabrielle, you know better than to think I don't know what being afraid is all about." Her hand lifted and cupped the bard's cheek. "You know me better than that."

"I know." Gabrielle put her hands on Xena's stomach. "That's why I don't think you're afraid." Her eyes searched her partner's intently. "I think you're worried. I think you're aggravated." She pushed gently. "I think you're frustrated."

"Mm." Xena didn't deny any of it, finding a fascination in the golden flecks in the depths of Gabrielle's eyes.

"I don't think you're afraid. Because we're here. We're together."

And, Xena knew in her heart, that was the truth. She smiled, brushing her thumb against Gabrielle's cheek. "Okay." She conceded. "I'm more concerned about the hairy jerks than I am the cats. Better?"

Gabrielle really didn't know why that mattered to her. It seemed strange, but she brushed it off as just part of the stress they were both under. "Much." She agreed. "So, we wait for dark?" She asked, giving the warrior another little push. "You could have let me sleep longer."

Xena chuckled. "I could have. But my leg was numb and I figured we'd better off if we get something to eat and untangle our brains before we go off into the pitch black."

"Bah." Gabrielle exhaled. "Hoisted on my own grumbling stomach." She leaned against Xena as the warrior put her arms around her, enfolding her in a warm hug that made her want to just snuggle up against her partner's body and go right back to sleep.

She was tired. Gabrielle admitted to herself. Her body was giving her warning signals that she knew she ignored at her own peril, and knowing she had to ignore them or face a larger peril didn't change that fact. She wavered a second, but the grip tightened and she gave into it, relaxing against Xena's tall form. "Don't do that." She warned. "Unless you want me to fall asleep on you again."

Xena rubbed her back. "There's a runoff just outside the rocks there. Let's get some water on our faces." She bumped Gabrielle towards the opening, and the bard reluctantly turned and trudged in that direction. They ducked outside the cleft and looked around, seeing little but the late afternoon sun and a breeze that moved tenacious tufts of grass in the rock as they passed them.

It was quiet otherwise, high up on the rocks here. Xena studied the landscape as they traveled over it, and regretted the fact the rock escarpment was isolated from the valley wall. It sloped down on the far side to the thickly overgrown bottom, and disappeared into a dark forest that clustered all around it's base.

It was an island of sorts, and Xena knew well that descending from it would put them both into danger again. She wondered, though, why the creatures hadn't followed them. She knew they could climb, so was it something about the stone that held them back?

"Xe?"

"Mm?" Xena turned towards the bard, who was now leaning against the rock with one hand. "What?"

"We forgot our deer skull." Gabrielle managed a wry grin. "I think we're both still a little out of it. I'll go get it." She turned and headed back for the cleft, leaving Xena to shake her head and continue on over to the mossy crack in the rocks that promised water.

It was a shallow basin, at best, but it was enough for her to cup her hands into and she did, bringing them up to her face and sniffing the water before she splashed it briskly over herself. It was shockingly cold, and her eyes popped wide open as she sucked in a surprised breath, the chill bringing all her senses into focus with almost painful suddenness.

She licked her lips, and tasted the hints of moss in the water, tickling her tongue as she swallowed. "That's a waker upper, for damn sure." She cupped up another handful and drank it slowly, feeling the icy liquid roll all the way down into her stomach and settle there.

"Got it." Gabrielle came up with the skull. "Water okay?"

"Cold." Xena warned as the bard stuck her hand in it. "But not bad."

"Yow." Gabrielle removed her hand and shook it rapidly. "Where in the heck's the glacier?"

Xena looked up in reflex, but the top of the escarpment was only a few bodylengths above their heads, and was snow free. She shrugged and took another double handful, stepping back to allow Gabrielle to fill the skull as she sipped the water, her eyes traveling over the forest beneath them.

Gabrielle set the skull down and dipped her hands in, copying Xena's scooping motion and bringing her hands to her lips. She tasted the water first, cocking her head a little bit. "Mm." She murmured thoughtfully. "That reminds me of those caves we found, up in the north?"

"Uh huh." Xena slowly nodded. "I remember."

The bard shook her hands out lightly and stepped closer, leaning up to kiss Xena on the lips. She felt Xena's arms drop, and the brief sting of the cold water as the remains of it hit her knees. Then the warrior eased closer and returned the kiss, a sudden surge of passion taking both of them somewhat by surprise.

Gabrielle wrapped both arms around her partner's neck and let the emotion sweep through her, washing aside the weariness and setting her skin to tingling. "Ungh." A small sound escaped her. "Darn than feels good."

"Does, doesn't it?" Xena pulled her closer. "Still feel like sleeping?"

"Anything but." The bard admitted, her heart pounding, as she felt Xena's hands slide up her sides. "Whew." She intended on backing off, but her body didn't budge, pressing itself against the warrior's as she felt Xena's breathing match hers.

It banished the chill, and she could feel a warm flush spread through her, pleasantly erotic and welcome. This was, Gabrielle well knew, neither the time nor the place for what they were doing, but she found herself not really caring and apparently Xena didn't either.

Maybe they were both going crazy. Gabrielle took a ragged breath and let her forehead rest against the warrior's collarbone. "Oohh... Xena."

Xena chuckled softly. "Now maybe you get an idea of how frustrating it was for me before." She nibbled the bard's earlobe. "Let's get washed up."

"Wash this." Gabrielle nipped her in a very sensitive spot.

"Yowp." Xena returned the favor. "All we've got is rocks around here, kiddo. Don't get me started." She warned. "Or we're both gonna be bruised."

The bard laughed, an oddly light sound that echoed through the rocks. "Well, Hades." She slid an arm around Xena's waist and picked up the skull with her free hand. "At least it woke me up."

"Yeah." The warrior agreed, in a wry tone. "Me too."

A soft rattle of rocks made them both stop in their tracks. Gabrielle released her hold on Xena. "What was that?"

Xena stiffened immediately, judging the distance to the cave which held their meager weapons with her eyes. "Damn it." She started for it, then stopped as a dark figure appeared between them, and the entrance.

Without waiting for it to move closer, Xena bounded into action, heading for the creature with both arms outstretched and a wild yell echoing across the canyon below.

**

Ephiny emerged from the council chamber and strolled across the central square of the village, heading for the children's playground. She could hear the small voices laughing all the way across the grass, and as she turned the corner, she wondered what was so funny.

She stopped, and blinked. "Solari?"

The hapless looking Amazon looked up at her from her seat in the mud. "Yes, your Majesty?"

Ephiny observed the gaggle of children, all watching with innocent faces, the small pod of puppies nearby with wagging tails, and one conspicuously stretched out full grown wolf near Solari's feet. "What's going on?"

"Eff!" Dori trotted towards her. "Funny!" She pointed at Solari. "She fell over Guff!"

"Uh huh." Ephiny put her hands on her hips. "That what happened?" She asked her fallen warrior.

Solari shook the mud off one hand as she rolled over and got to her feet. "Damned if I know.. one minute I'm headed to the kitchen, next think I know I'm in the dirt." She glared at the children. "And it ain't funny, you pipsqueaks!"

"Funny." Dori objected. "Guff lay down dere, you watch the birdie, no see him. Go boom."

Ephiny shifted her eyes to Solari. "Well?"

"You gonna believe her?" Solari put her hands on her hips.

"Well." The regent perched on a fence rail that ringed playground. "Either I doubt Gabrielle's truthfulness, or Xena's powers of observation. Hm. Let me see."

Solari scowled. "She's just a kid!"

"C'mere, Dori." Ephiny held her hands out. "C'mon over to your auntie Eff."

Obligingly, Dori ambled over to her, climbing up onto the railing and into Ephiny's arms with a lithe agility stunning in it's offhandedness. "Hi." She looked up at the blond woman with intelligent green eyes.

"Hi." Ephiny cradled her, letting her legs dangle down. "What kind of birdie was old Solari looking at, honey?"

"Hey!" Solari protested. "I wasn't!"

"Dat one." Dori pointed. "Black one, red wings with the white tail fevver."

"Uh hum. You know what that's called?" Ephiny asked, seriously.

"Boo says dat's a dam bird." Dori informed her earnestly. "Too loud in the morning."

Ephiny started laughing. "She does, huh?" She said. "Does your mama know she calls it that?"

"Sure." Dori nodded. "Mama tells Boo make birdie go shhh."

The regent cocked her head and looked at Solari. Dori also looked at Solari.

Solari sighed. "Hades." She brushed more mud off herself. "Freaking kids."

Ephiny patted Dori on the side. "Careful." She warned Solari. "This freaking kid's gonna rule this tribe one day, and if she's got half what I think she does, she's also got a very, very long memory."

Solari studied Dori. "Ya think?"

Ephiny nodded, a serious expression on her face. "I do think." She said. "I've gotten to spend a lot of time with her the last couple of days and you know, she's not really the terror we thought she was."

Solari gave Dori a skeptical look. "Uh huh." She glanced pointedly at Ares, who lolled his big, pink tongue out at her in return. "Whatever you say, Ep."

"Watch where you're going next time." The regent told her, as she let Dori loose. "G'wan, Dori.. back to playtime."

Dori squiggled loose, then got up on the top rail of the fence, walking along it back towards the other children. She got to the end of the fence and jumped off, landing on the grass and running back towards the waiting girls. "Go play hide?" She called out.

The children all scattered, running in a half dozen directions, their footsteps stirring a cloud of butterflies into the air. They ran through them, yelling, but Dori stopped to watch, half turning as her eyes followed the colorful insects in flight.

One flew past her, and she stuck her hand out, intercepting it's movement. It landed on her hand and sat there, fanning it's wings as she peered at it in delighted fascination. "Look!" She called out to Ephiny. "Pretty!"

"Love it!" Ephiny waved a hand at her. "Don't eat it." She added, under her breath as she shook her head a little, turning to see Solari watching the child with now serious eyes. "See what I mean?"

Dori reached out and gently touched the wings of the butterfly with one finger, pulling it back when the panels flexed up and down as her eyes widened. "Ooh!"

Solari leaned on the post. "Not sure what I see." She replied forthrightly. "Cept a mix up of both those two."

"Exactly." The regent said. "Sol, I love Gabrielle and you know it, but she can't ever be our queen."

Solari looked at her in surprise. "What?" She said. "Eph, she is our queen. You forget that?"

"In name, sure." The blond woman agreed softly. "But in reality, she's focused on one thing, and one thing only and that ain't us." Ephiny explained. "That's never, ever gonna change."

"Huh."

Ephiny looked down at her hands. "And I don't want that to ever change." She paused. "Xena's never gonna be an Amazon."

Solari half shrugged. "She's alright." She said. "Trust her more than some others round here." Her eyes flicked around the village, then went back to Ephiny. "Y'know?"

"Yeah, I know." Ephiny nodded. "Me too, but that doesn't change the fact that she's focused on only one thing too." She said. "That ain't us either, and I don't want that changing ever again."

"Mm"

Ephiny leaned on the fence and watched the kids play. Dori had released her colorful friend, and was now hunting for the other girls, her nascent tracking skills already apparent. "But this kid... yeah. If she ends up with Xena's brawn, and Gabrielle's heart... I'd swear fealty to her."

Solari picked a bit of loose wood off the fence. "Long time before that." She commented. "Anyway."

"True." The regent said. "But I'm glad I've gotten a chance to take care of her. Made me think about things a lot."

"Uh huh." Solari leaned next to her. "What if they don't come back?" She asked suddenly, staring ahead as Ephiny gave her a swift, startled look. "C'mon, don't tell me you didn't think about that."

The regent looked away, and didn't answer.

**

"Okay." Pony sat down on a half submerged log, resting her elbows on her knees. "Here's the deal."

Granella took a seat next to her. "Here's the deal. This sucks." She removed a splinter from her thumb. "Next time I get the bright idea to try adventuring, smack me."

"You smack me first." Pony gave her a wry look. "Look, we can't get back up that fall." She indicated behind them with her thumb. "I figure this water's got to let out somewhere... maybe the plains below Potadeia. Let's just get in the damn boat, and see where it takes us. I don't feel like hiking anyway in these damn wet boots."

Her companion studied the flowing stream, and then she turned around and reviewed the scrubby, harsh surroundings. "Fine by me." She agreed. "Let's chew something, then get going. Might as well dry out a little."

"Good idea." Pony went over to the now very securely tied canoe and removed their packs, bringing them back over to the log. She handed Granella hers, then set her own down on the ground and started rooting a pack of trail rations out of it.

Granella took her leather cup from her pack and walked over to another log, half suspended in the water. She leaned on it and dipped the cup into the water, then stopped as she spotted something. Quickly shifting the cup to her other hand she reached under the log and removed a scrap of fabric caught in the bark, lifting it out and peering at it. "Pon!"

"Yeah?"

She turned and held the fabric up. "Found something!"

Pony got up and ambled over to her, peering at the fabric. "Okay." She drew the word out. "And this.. means something to us?"

Granella fingered the bit of green wool. "It's the same color as the shirt Xena was wearing." She said.

"Yeah?" The weapons master took the piece from her and looked at it, rubbing her thumb over the weave. She closed her eyes, and tried to remember the neatly folded piles of shirts she'd seen in Xena and Gabrielle's cabin, some new, some much mended. Was it the same? "I dunno." She finally shook her head. "Could be.. but it could be anyone else's down there. Let's see if we can find anything else."

"Right." Granella tossed the cup of water out and tucked the folding cup in her belt, then started searching. They fanned out, scanning the ground around the log with intent eyes, moving the leaf litter aside cautiously.

To one side, a large, dead tree had fallen over, one side suspended over the ground forming a slight overhang. Pony walked over to it and knelt down, studying the ground inside. She put her hands on the earth, finding it damp, but not soaking. Underneath, the leaves had been stirred and shoved aside, and the earth compacted, as though something had lain underneath.

Something? The weapons master scanned the depression with skill, running her thumb over a dip that might have held an elbow. Slowly, she lowered herself to the earth and looked underneath, drawing in a breath when her eyes found what she hadn't really thought she was going to find.

Caught in the bark were hairs. She reached up and took hold of them, tugging them gently from their entrapment and drawing them out into the light where she could see them better. "Gran." She got to her feet and headed for where her companion was kneeling nearby. "Think you were right."

Granella got up and came over, looking at what she held. A small tangle of dark and fair hair rested in Pony's palm. She touched it with one finger, the dark strands fairly long, and the light ones shorter. "Ah. Yeah."

"Okay." Eponin exhaled. "Well, we know we're going the right way, at least." She turned and looked around. "Boy, it must have sucked not to have anything with them."

"Yeah." Granella nodded. "C'mon.. let's get to the getting and find em. Maybe this once we'll be useful.. least we can lend em our gear."

Pony put the entwined hairs into her pouch, then followed Granella back to where their packs were. "We can eat while we float."

"Yeah." Granella found herself wanting to get going, now that they had something to be going after again. "Let's go."

They threw their packs back into the canoe and Pony untied it while Granella got into the back seat. She joined her, then used her paddle to push off from the shore and into the current.

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The creature screamed, his eyes widening on seeing Xena's form descending on top of him. He shifted to one side, and flattened himself to the earth, covering his head with his arms.

Xena's reflexes probably saved both of them. She recognized the change in posture in mid air and turned her leap into a sideways flip instead, nearly catapulting herself off the escarpment. She caught the edge of a rock and swung around, landing lightly to one side of the creature with a double hopped bounce. "Damnn it!"

Gabrielle picked up a rock and stood ready, her eyes shifting between her partner and the hooter. The creature shifted, and she saw it's face. "Xena!" She called out. "It's the one you saved!"

Xena edged closer, her body tensed as she watched the creature's every motion, anticipating an attack despite the bard's words, and the craven posture. "Gonna be short lived saving if he tries that again." She growled.

The bard slowly lowered her hand, letting the stone rest against her thigh as she studied the prone figure. The creature, now that she was looking closer, didn't seem to be much threat to them. His fur was matted and dull looking, and she could see blood on the rocks where his face had pressed against them.

After a moment's silence, the creature curled onto his side and looked around, spotting Xena and freezing again. "Ahge!" He uttered a sound, raspy and unlike the barking they'd heard until then.

Xena kept her distance, dancing lightly across the rocks to put herself between the creature and Gabrielle before she relaxed a trifle. "Huh."

Gabrielle nudged her to one side. "Honey, you're blocking my view." She took a cautious step towards the creature. "Hey there. It's okay. We won't hurt you."

Xena looked plaintively at the sky, then shook her head and reached out to take a firm hold of the back of Gabrielle's belt, stopping her from going any closer.

The creature looked apprehensively at both of them, then let his eyes settle on Gabrielle. The wound on his face was raw, and the stitches had split in two or three places, but the swelling had gone down and it only looked painful and distorted, rather than grotesque. He touched his fingers to his face, then held his hand out to her.

Gabrielle looked into his eyes, then she reached behind her with one hand, tugging at Xena's fingers only to find the pressure relaxing as the warrior took a step forward.

"G'wan." Xena said. "But I'm yanking your blond butt out of there if he moves."

With due deference to her skirt, Gabrielle slowly knelt down, just out of reach of the creature. "Okay." She told him. "Now.. I'm gonna be nice, but do us both a favor, okay? You be nice too."

There was no real comprehension in his eyes, just fear, and some pain.

Gabrielle reached out and touched his hand with her own, folding her fingers around his stubby, powerful ones and gripping them lightly. She could feel strength in them, but they were trembling also, and she leaned a little forward so he could rest his elbow on the ground.

He shifted, and for a moment, she thought they'd made another goof. She felt Xena's hand tighten on her belt, and took a deep breath, in case the yank she could sense coming knocked the wind out of her. "Hey.. easy!"

But the creature only crawled a little bit towards her, still cringing, as he held on to her hand. "Agha!" He gurgled again. "Bah."

"Xena."

"Mm?" The warrior was now almost over her shoulder, peering at the creature.

"Is he trying to talk to us?"

Judging there was relatively little danger, Xena knelt down next to her partner and released her belt, bringing her arms around to rest on her knee. She stayed back though, when the creature tried to crawl away from her, whimpering. "You, maybe."

Gabrielle edged forward, towards him. "Take it easy." She told him. "Xena won't hurt you."

"Long as he doesn't try to hurt you." Xena amended.

"Mm." The bard sat down cross legged near the creature, who curled up in a half ball, watching her intently. She squeezed his hand and waited, watching him right back.

Sometimes, she'd found, you really just had to give people a little space and have some patience. A soft throat clearing nearby from someone who tended to have little of one and need the most of the other almost made her smile, and she reached back to pat Xena's foot with her free hand. "If you want to grab some dried rabbit, I think we're okay here."

Louder throat clearing.

"Okay, but could you sit down? I think he thinks you're gonna bite him."

Xena muttered, but she complied, sitting down just behind Gabrielle and picking up a small rock to study.

Gabrielle waited for silence to fall, then she returned her attention to their strange guest. "Okay."

"Gurf." The creature seemed to be having trouble opening his mouth, and she realized the swelling from his injury was causing him some pain. "Xe?"

"Hm?"

"Can you do anything else for him, for that cut?"

"No."

Gabrielle exhaled a bit, at the firm, definite tone. But she had to admit the cut was actually healing, and maybe anything the warrior did would make it worse.

So she settle down, and patted his hand with hers. "So." She watched his face. "Why are you here?"

"Gurf." The creature coughed.

"Did you come to us for help again?"

"Aguh."

Gabrielle drew a circle in the dust covering the rock, and the creature's eyes widened. He covered them with his free hand and howled, cringing from her and trying to pull the hand she had hold of free. "Okay.. okay." The bard yelped, swiping the circle away with her palm. "Relax, it's gone!"

The creature's head lifted, and he peered at the ground, then up at Gabrielle. "Gurf!"

Gabrielle released his hand and let hers drop to her knee. "Xena." She sighed. "I'm not getting this."

The warrior clasped her shoulder. "Don't look at me." She advised. "If you can't talk to em, what chance do I have?" She studied the creature. "Hey."

Warily, he looked at her.

"What do you want?" Xena fixed him with a pale blue glare.

The creature pressed himself against the rocks, and lowered his head, refusing to meet her eyes.

Gabrielle turned to Xena. The warrior shrugged, holding her hands out. "This is so frustrating." The bard acknowledged the sentiment. "Xena, I just know he's got something to say to us, and we need to hear it." She swiveled back towards the creature and eyed him in silence for a little bit.

Xena also studied the huddled figure. He was smaller than most of the others, she realized, almost scrawny in comparison with the bigger creatures she'd been fighting. Standing, he'd barely top Gabrielle's height, and his arms and legs were less hairy and straighter, more like their own.

"Gurf." The creature reached timidly out again towards Gabrielle. "Anaa.."

He wasn't wearing any skins, or bits of hide, and he gave the distinct impression of youth, though Xena wasn't sure if that was something real, or just his size tricking her eyesight. It was hard to tell from his face, since his injury distorted his features but there was something in his eyes...

Something in his eyes. Xena tilted her head to one side and then she leaned forward, catching him by the jaw before he could squirm away and turning his face to the fading light.

"Xe?"

"Sh." Xena watched the eyes widen in fear, but the creature remained still in her grip. There was something... ah. "Gabrielle, look at his eyes." She urged. "See?"

Gabrielle leaned closer and peered at them. She glanced over at Xena in question, one blond eyebrow lifting slightly.

"The color." The warrior said.

The bard studied them. "Okay..they're gray." She said, slowly. "Is there significance to that..oh, wait." She gave her head a half shake. "Hers were, too, right?"

"Right." Xena released the creature. "The rest of them weren't. They were all dark."

"Really?"

The warrior nodded. "Yeah." She rested her elbows on her knees and frowned. "So, that tells us..." She paused, letting the words drift off.

"Tells us?" Gabrielle repeated. "Well, they could be related, I guess."

"Mm."

They both fell silent as the creature squirmed and grunted. "But he's sort of like the others." Gabrielle continued. "So I guess..."

"Yeah." Xena exhaled. "You think she was his mother?"

The creature looked up at her. "Anaa." He gurgled, his eyes searching Gabrielle's face. "Anaa.."

The sound suddenly rang a chord of familiarity with Gabrielle. She leaned forward. "Are you saying mama?" She asked, curiously.

"Anaa!" He reached out to her again.

Mama. It could be, Xena acknowledged silently. Given the dead woman's condition, and her age, she really looked nothing like her partner, but in contrast to all the other creatures around, she supposed Gabrielle was the closest thing going.

"Oh boy." Gabrielle sighed. "I'm not ready to be his mama, Xe."

Xena laid a hand on her back. "Relax. At least I don't think he's gonna hurt us." She studied the huddled creature.

"Anaa?"

Gabrielle leaned towards him and touched gentle fingers to his battered face, allowing the gentle compassion just under her skin to emerge, finding it in her to feel sorry for the young hooter, despite their recent past. "Hey."

He seemed to melt at her touch, his look becoming almost childlike. "Anaa.. gut." His expression, what there was of it, lost its tension and he simply lay there, his hands resting on the rock.

"Poor thing." Gabrielle murmured. "He is trying to talk to us, isn't he?"

"Mm." Xena had her chin resting on Gabrielle's shoulder. "For what it's worth, yeah." She agreed softly. "I don't think he's really got it in him, though. Not if he's half animal."

The bard wondered about that, but had to admit she saw as much creature in his eyes as she did humanity, and suddenly she felt a chill, thinking of what it must be like stuck half one thing and half another like that. "The others seemed to shun him." She recalled. "He's not quite like them, I guess."

"No."

"Not quite like her."

"No." Xena repeated. "Poor bastard."

"Yeah." Gabrielle said. "I can almost remember what that felt like." She clasped one of the creature's hands in hers with more confidence. "I almost can."

Xena glanced sideways at her, but after a moment, kept her silence.

**

Xena paused at the edge of the rocks, extending her senses into the darkness of the forest before she went any further. Behind her, Gabrielle was leaning on her staff, her eyes turned back over her shoulder to the outcropping they'd so recently left.

Atop it, the young creature was still crouched, making soft hoots every so often, but refusing to follow them.

"Y'know, Xena." Gabrielle murmured. "Maybe he knows something we don't."

"We know what he knows." The warrior replied, unperturbed. "It's dangerous in the forest at night. You could get eaten."

"Mm." The bard turned her attention to the dark treetops. "So are we saying he's smarter than we are for staying out of the forest at night?"

Xena started down into the trees. "I never said we were smart." She replied. "You coming, or you staying with him?"

Gabrielle knew it wasn't really a serious question, even though she heard the hint of an edge in her partner's tone. She followed in her bootsteps, feeling her way with the end of her staff as they slowly made their way down off the craggy peak.

She wasn't entirely unafraid of the way ahead of them, and she didn't deny the shiver of apprehension as the shadows closed over her and the faint last light disappeared around her. Ahead of her, she could just barely make out Xena's fur clad form and she wondered again just how smart this really was.

"Gabrielle."

"Yes?"

Xena had paused just inside the forest, and now Gabrielle joined her and they stood side by side in the gloom. The trees whispered to either side, and off in the distance an owl hooted. "I know you think this is crazy." The warrior said.

Gabrielle took her hand. "Actually, I don't." She replied. "Staying up there, isolated, where everyone could see us was crazy." Her fingers tightened. "And in this place, everything's dangerous. Even us." She bumped Xena with her shoulder. "So c'mon, before we attract too much attention standing here."

Off in the distance, they heard a rough barking. "Ah." Xena turned and peered back up the slope. "Look."

Gabrielle did, spotting their young friend now standing up, half crouched, peering back the way he'd come originally. She could see the agitation in his stance. "Animal?"

Xena shook her head. "It's them." She started into the forest. "Let's go."

"But it's night time." Gabrielle glanced over her shoulder as she followed. "I thought they hid then."

The warrior started to move faster. "Yeah, well..." She ducked past an overhanging limb. "Told ya they learned fast."

"Yeah." The bard gave the rocks one last look, as the creature scuttled over them, and hesitated. "Xe.. I think.."

Xena turned and looked, watching the action. She saw the young creature apparently make up his mind and start shambling in their direction. "Great." With a shake of her head, she sidestepped a boulder and bounced a few steps down. "Move."

Gabrielle hopped after her, staying close as the darkness overwhelmed the both of them and she was walking blind for a long minute until her eyes adjusted and she could see faint outlines. "Xe?"

"Here."

Warm and reassuring, the warrior's hand latched onto her wrist. "Just follow me." Xena added. "Walk in my steps." She moved forward confidently, releasing Gabrielle's arm when she felt the bard take hold of her belt.

It was so dark, she could barely see Xena against the trees around them. Gabrielle resisted the urge to simply close her eyes, and concentrated on staying right behind her partner, stepping as much as she could into the same spaces.

She knew Xena could see where she was going, the warrior's eyesight was amazing, and she'd learned the hard way that just because she couldn't see what Xena was doing, the reverse wasn't always true. "I think he's coming after us."

"Yeah." Xena's voice came out of the darkness ahead of her. "Just keep moving."

The warrior could hear the damn creature, in fact, making far more noise than she and Gabrielle were. She looked around, the shades of gray in the underbrush grudgingly giving up their details and the faint glitter of animal eyes peering at her from under leaves.

She could see a faint path, and she followed it, her ax gripped in one hand while the other held the knife. A soft hooting almost made her freeze, before her senses identified it as the owl they'd heard before, not one of the manlike creatures.

Her head tipped up and she searched the branches, spotting the owl as a faint outline in a tree nearby, seeing the motion as it turned its head to keep ghostly sparkling eyes on her as they went past. She sucked in a lungful of air, and tasted the light muskiness of its feathers on the back of her throat, glad it was the most pungent thing she could smell around them.

No cat. No hooter. No odd but ultimately useful deerlike creature. Just the owl, the earth, the trees, a few weasels, and them, for now. She caught Gabrielle's distinctive scent as the fitful breeze changed direction, cloth and leather and warm skin, and the hide pack she carried on her back with their stuff in it.

Comfortingly familiar. Xena felt the ground slope under her feet and she slowed a bit, gazing warily ahead of her to make sure they weren't about to step off into an abyss. "Easy."

Gabrielle pressed her body up against Xena's back. "What is it?"

"Pitch." Xena started moving down sideways, tucking the knife into her belt and holding that hand out for balance. She could see boulders poking their heads up from the earth and she eased between them, her ears now picking up again the sound of moving water. "Gods be damned."

"Gush, gush gush." Gabrielle muttered. "Go to fishes, Boo."

"Fish this." Xena sighed. "Hang on.." She spotted a shelf moving at a more level route and stepped over onto it, putting one foot in front of the other. "Real narrow, Gab."

"Feel it." Gabrielle took a second to catch her balance, aware of the open space on her right hand side. "Hang on a minute."

Xena paused, and waited as she shifted her staff to her right hand, and took hold of Xena's belt with her left. "Okay, go."

The warrior started moving again, a little more slowly as she paced along the narrow shelf. To her right, the ground dropped rapidly, and as they worked their way forward in the dark, she could hear the sound of the water increasing to a roar.

Not good. She looked ahead of her, hoping the shelf would open out a little. If they were attacked from behind now.. Xena flexed her hands and swallowed against the surge of anxiety that threatened to close her throat.

Could she backflip over Gabrielle's head? As she stepped along, Xena calculated the angles, and the risk if she missed and ended up plummeting off into the dark abyss.

Not good.

Resolutely, she faced forward and moved a little faster, seeing a bend in the path ahead and hoping there was better footing beyond it. She put a hand on the rock as she got to the corner and looked past it, then cursed softly.

"What?"

A gap at least a bodylength in size broke the path, leaving nothing but sheer wall on one side, and dark gloom on the other. "There's a break here." Xena said, carefully. "So, this is what we're gonna do."

Gabrielle remained silent, but her fingers clenched on Xena's belt and the warrior could feel that, and she heard the sound of the bard swallowing.

Xena measured the break. "I'm gonna jump over it." She said, pausing to listen as she thought she heard motion behind them. "Then I'm gonna reach back and grab your hand, and you jump to me."

It sounded so simple, really. Gabrielle felt her guts tighten. Except that Xena's voice belied her calm instructions, and she could feel the racing pulse just under the skin where her hand was pressed against Xena's back. "Okay." She replied softly. "I'm going to let you go now."

She felt the warrior take a deep breath, and then the warmth of that contact was gone as she released her grip on the woven belt and stood waiting, the darkness seeming to close in around her. She could barely see Xena's outline, and the path ahead of her was nothing but a faintly lighter shade of gray against the blackness to her right and the darker gray of the stone wall at her left.

"Take a step back." Xena said.

"Okay." Gabrielle cautiously did so. She sensed, rather than saw, Xena readying herself, then with a step, and a motion of air, she was gone.

Straining her ears, she counted silently until she heard the soft impact as Xena landed on the other side, a scuff of her rough boots against stone, and the sound of her hand smacking against the rock wall.

Small gap? Gabrielle felt her throat go dry. Like Hades it was.

"Okay." The warrior called back to her. "Throw me your staff."

Gabrielle closed her eyes. "Say that again?" She could almost imagine the frown, but cocked her ears as she heard Xena repeat the words, then she reared back and tossed the weapon, aiming for the sound since she couldn't see anything of her partner at all.

"Got it." Xena said. "Okay."

The bard felt her knees go weak. Gods, I can't do this. She edged up to the end of the path, feeling the sharp slice in the stone with her boot. "Xena."

"Take a step back from where you are, and then go for it." Xena said. "Just jump as hard as you can. I'll catch you."

"Xena."

"Gabrielle, trust me." The warrior rasped, urgently. "They're coming up after us. When we get past this, we've got some breathing room." She added. "Now.. jump!"

It wasn't really a matter of trust. Gabrielle took an unsteady step back, and breathed out hard, then sucked in air as hard as she could. Or more precisely, she did trust Xena.

She just didn't trust herself. "I don't.."

The sound of pursuit was now evident. She could hear the hooters yelling behind them, and a thrashing, banging sound as they plowed through the forest evidently trying to scare anything that might want to eat them away.

"Go!" Xena barked, making her nape hairs prickle. "Gabrielle, just do it!"

And then, sometimes you just had to do it. Gabrielle backed a little more, then shifted and bolted forward, on the second step launching herself into the darkness and throwing her hands forward blindly with her heart, and her soul ringing around her ears.

Xena grabbed her out of mid air, and she was yanked forward, thumping against stone and Xena's body with equal force. She wavered, then Xena's arms closed around her and the entire mountain could have fallen over and it wouldn't have disturbed her a bit.

"Gotcha." The warrior whispered into her ear. "Piece of baklava."

Sure. "Boy." Gabrielle exhaled. "I think I'm ready to retire."

"Now?"

"Right now."

Xena gave her a long hug, then released her. "C'mon. Let's get someplace we can talk about it." She handed Gabrielle back her staff, and continued along the ridge, as the sounds increased behind them. She only hoped what lay ahead wasn't someplace worse.

**

They climbed another half candlemark, and then it started raining. Xena felt the first drops of rain hit her head and she cursed, since the narrow ledge they were still threading was covered in moss.

"Damn it."

"Something coming?" Gabrielle was holding on to Xena's belt with one hand, and the wall with the other. She'd given over her staff for her partner to probe the path with.

"Wet." The warrior sighed. "This thing's gonna be slick in...in..."

"Two shakes of a lamb's tail?" Gabrielle wearily finished for her.

"Something like that, yeah." The warrior agreed. "Let me see if maybe we'll get lucky this time and there'll be some kind of overhang just up there. I think I see one."

"You know when a lamb shakes it's tail twice?" The bard commented. "It's been pooping."

Xena stopped, and turned her head. "What?"

"Just thought I'd mention that."

The rain came down harder, and Xena felt her boots begin to slip on the steep path. "Bacchae." She lunged forward, throwing one hand out to catch the edge of the rock. "Hang on!"

Gabrielle felt her start to slide and she stepped forward, her own boots still having a decent purchase on the ground. She caught Xena's weight against her and held on to the rock wall, feeling the strain come on to her thighs and calves. She got her shoulder up against the warrior's hip and leaned forward, doing the best she could to push them both up the slope.

For a moment, she thought they were both going to slide backwards, as the angle and Xena's larger size threatened to unbalance her. Then the pressure relaxed, and she felt her partner inch forward, her boots still scrabbling in the moss.

She staggered up behind her and pressed hard against the stone, as the rain suddenly drove into their face, removing what small amount of sight she had. "Xena!"

"HANG ON!" The warrior bellowed back. "Got shelter!"

Gabrielle was hanging on for dear life, in fact, and she almost yelped when Xena abruptly disappeared in front of her. Her fingertips grasped frantically for the warrior, then she felt her hand grabbed, a shocking warmth in the dark and the rain, and she was pulled forward in a smooth, powerful motion that brought her up several steps and around a rock corner to her left.

The rain stopped, and she wiped the moisture from her eyes as she pressed her body against Xena's. "Whoa!"

"Okay?" Xena said. "This thing goes back a little. Ready?"

"Go." Gabrielle felt herself being guided, and she moved deeper into the darkness, already hearing echoes in front of her that made her understand the overhang was actually a cave. "How far?"

"Not far." Xena pulled her a few more steps. "That's as far as I can see a damn thing.. shelf here. Siddown."

Gabrielle could see absolutely nothing, but she took it all on faith and sat down, finding a smooth rock surface under her, a little higher than she expected, but welcome. She felt Xena sit down next to her, and the soft clatter as the warrior put down her staff. "How big is this thing?"

"Have no idea." Xena said. "Don't want to go and find out. Way our luck's been going there's a damn Minotaur in here with a hangover."

Gabrielle glanced over her shoulder, but saw nothing but darkness. "Do you.."

"Can't smell anything back there." The warrior said. "Just rocks."

"Oh."

For a little while, they just sat there, listening to the rain together. Facing forward, Gabrielle could now see gray shadows outside the entrance to the cavern, and if she turned her head, she could see, just faintly, Xena's profile.

The weather seemed to be getting colder again. The rain drove a chill wind into the cavern, and they both slid back to escape it, ducking behind the angled rock wall that ended the shelf they were seated on. "Wow." Gabrielle whispered. "We're just not getting a break this time, are we?"

Xena wiped the rain from her face and flicked it off her hands, then rested her elbows on her knees. "We sure aren't." She agreed, with a tired sigh. "This sucks." Her head dropped and she cradled it against her fists. "Damn what I wouldn't give to be sitting in my mother's inn."

"Me too." Gabrielle pressed her knee against her partner's. "Heck, I'd even go for sitting in my mother's kitchen."

"Me, too." Xena replied, glumly.

They listened to the rain for a bit longer, then Gabrielle started wringing out her skirt. "We done whining?"

"Yeah." Xena got up and untied her belt, removing the cat skin and starting to twist the hide in her hands to rid it of some water. "One good thing. This weather'll keep them away from us at any rate."

"Hope they decide to chance it." Gabrielle remarked. "And they get to that stupid gap." She knew Xena was looking at her, but her temper was at its ragged edge. "Yeah, I know. I'm supposed to be the pacifist."

"S'allright." Xena ruffled her partner's wet hair. "I'm right there with you. Hope every one of the bastards dropped right through it and ended up broken to bits."

Gabrielle drew her knees up and circled them with both arms, hugging herself for warmth. "So, we're safe here for now, right?"

"Yes." Xena answered, in a positive tone. "They hadn't gotten on that ridge before we jumped the gap. No way they can make it past there now. Not in this weather."

"Good."

Xena replaced the fur and tied it, then sat back down. "Yeah." She sighed. "Except it's dark in here, and we're not gonna be able to do much about that."

"Mm."

"And it's getting cold." The warrior added. "Damn it."

"Sure is." Gabrielle agreed. "But if we get under that skin I'm carrying on my back, we should be okay, right?" She shrugged the pack off and untied it by feel, reaching inside to pull out the folded hide. "I've got an apple or two here left."

Xena hesitated. "Well.."

"You're not going to say something silly like you're going to pace around in the dark trying to stay awake, are you?" Gabrielle's voice came out of the darkness, with a touch of wry warmth in it. "Since I know you don't have any more of those herbs."

The warrior exhaled audibly.

"C'mon, Xena. Don't be silly." Gabrielle sat back, reaching out to put a hand on her partner's shoulder. "You said yourself we're safe, for a while here."

"It may stop raining."

"It's not going to dry out, or stop being dark without warning." The bard said. "Xena, come on."

The warrior got up, even the sound displaying agitation. "I don't like taking any more chances than we have to, Gabrielle! We're in a damn bad place here!"

Gabrielle counted under her breath until ten. "You said it was safe."

"I know." Xena replied. "It's just really hard for me to trust that."

"So.. it's okay for you to lie to me about it then?"

"That's not what I meant."

"That's what it sounded like. Just feed me some placating story and pat me on my head."

Xena leaned against the wall. "Gabrielle."

"Well, it did."

The warrior didn't reply to that. She remained quiet, just sitting in the dark, the only evidence of her the soft breathing Gabrielle could hear. "Are you pissed off?" She asked, after a while.

"Yeah."

The bard felt her way along the shelf, and spread the skin over the both of them, her hip coming into contact with the warrior's. She could feel the discord between them, this close and while she didn't really regret saying what she had, she regretted saying it.

If that made any sense.

"Want to do me a favor?" Xena suddenly asked.

"Sure." Gabrielle was glad the silence hadn't lasted long. "Anything." She added, then paused. "But if you ask me to leave, I'm going to burst out crying. Not sure how productive that's gonna be."

"What????"

The bard shrugged a little. "You said you were pissed." Even with the darkness, she knew Xena was looking right at her, and her mind pictured the warrior's expression with little effort.

"Gabrielle." Xena's voice was equal parts exasperation and affection. "Can the drama, wouldja?"

"Hey, I'm a bard." Gabrielle stated. "If you wanted stolid pragmatism, you should have married an Amazon." She paused. "Oh.. wait a minute..."

She felt the faint motion against her shoulder as Xena chuckled soundlessly, and she relaxed, kicking her bootheels against the rock as she squiggled her toes inside the soggy hide. "So what is it?" Gabrielle asked. "Now that we've stopped whining and pissing each other off?"

Xena put her arm around Gabrielle's shoulders, pulled her closer, and gave her a kiss on the side of her head. "Wanna let me use your lap for a pillow? I'm about to keel over."

"You got it." Gabrielle said. "Trade places with me, so you can stretch out." She got up and eased past Xena, then sat down again and scooted back until she could feel the stone wall against her shoulders. "Okay." She sensed Xena in motion next to her, then felt the damp weight as the warrior put her head down. "Set?"

"Ungh."

Gabrielle stretched out the skin by feel, covering as much of Xena's length as she could, then she let her arm drape over her partner's shoulders.

It felt good to be sitting still, with the expectation of remaining that way for a little while. They had only been traveling a few candlemarks, and so – if the rain kept up, Gabrielle figured they'd be able to stay put at least until sunrise.

Good idea, since the chill in the air was becoming pronounced, and she was glad of both the hide, and Xena's close proximity. She suspected the next day might bring new challenges if the temperature kept dropping as if they needed any more.

"Gab?"

"Hm?" Gabrielle glanced down, even though Xena wasn't even as much as a shadow in the darkness.

"You didn't really think I'd ask you to leave, did you?"

Gabrielle chuckled softly. "No." She said. "I'm just frustrated, like you are, and taking nonsense." She rubbed her thumb over the skin on Xena's shoulder. "It's like everything is so against us. I mean, sometimes we do have that happen, Xe, but not like this."

"No." The warrior agreed. "Not like this." She let her eyes close, as the herbs she'd been taking to stave off sleep faded on her, and her body almost shivered with the need for rest. In a way, she'd gotten lucky, since if the rain hadn't started, she'd have found some way, any way...

Damn. Xena felt Gabrielle shift slightly, as their combined body heat made it a bit more comfortable, and the shivers abated. "Least we found this place." She murmured. "Luck's not all bad."

"Very true." Gabrielle reached into her sack and retrieved an apple, taking a bite of it. "Wanffm appf?"

"Nah."

"Mofrme." The bard chewed the fruit and swallowed. "So what's next?"

Xena sighed. "Beats me." She admitted. "Honestly, Gabrielle, I'm out of ideas." Her hand lifted and covered the bard's. "Everything I try just isn't working."

"Well." Gabrielle relaxed as best she could against the rock wall. "Nothing I tried worked either."

The warrior lay there quietly for a while, her eyes closed, but not quite asleep. Then she moved, turning her head so her cheek was pressed against Gabrielle's stomach. "How about this." She said. "If the river's gone down.. those falls will have slowed. Maybe stopped."

"Okay."

"We go back there, see if we can climb up where we fell down." Xena said. "Once we're in the upper valley.. we find a way to climb up that, and we're home free." She added. "We know that crevice isn't far from the cabin."

Gabrielle pondered the idea. "That's a lot of climbing." She finally said. "I'm not great at that."

"I know." Her partner said gently. "But I'm not seeing any other way, sweetheart."

The bard nodded, albeit invisibly. "Okay." She answered. "If that's what we have to do, then that's what we have to do." Her voice firmed. "Now, you close those baby blues, and get some sleep."

Xena already had her eyes closed, and she felt better, now that she'd broached the idea of climbing to Gabrielle. She had no illusions that it would be as easy as she'd made it sound, but at least it gave them a goal.

It was better than nothing. "If you hear anything.."

"Don't worry. I will." The bard pulled the skin a little more closely around them. "We'll be fine, Xena. Just relax."

"Mmph."

"Shh."

Gabrielle waited until she felt Xena's shoulders relax under her arm, and heard the warrior's breathing even out and deepen. Though she was bone tired, her mind was now racing with the thought of having to climb up the sheer cliff she remembered the waterfall being over, and cold as it was, sweat broke out on her palms just thinking about it.

What she'd said to Xena was one thing. What she actually could go through with was another, and here in the privacy of the darkness, and the thunder she could admit that to herself. Xena knew what she was asking of her.. but after all, Xena had stared down her own fears on more than one occasion and while Gabrielle knew her partner didn't expect her to measure up that way, she expected it of herself.

So, whatever it took, right?

Right.

**

One Wild Ride

Part 14

It was mid-morning before the rain finally stopped, and the misty green gloom outside was penetrated by weak streams of sunlight that only barely penetrated the entrance to their cave.

The air was damp and cold, and Gabrielle hugged her self, and rubbed her arms as she edged out to look around for the first time in daylight. She blinked a few times, as a gust of wind blew droplets of water from the soaked branches and they hit her. "Wow."

Xena emerged and stood next to her, leaning against the rock wall. "Huh."

Gabrielle turned. "You look like a wagon rolled over you, Xe."

"Feel like it." The warrior agreed, rubbing her face. "Downside to the damn herbs."

Another patter of drops hit them. Xena let her hands fall to rest against her thighs, as she looked around them, at the rain darkened cliffs on either side, and the thick green forest below them in the crevasse.

It was quiet. She could hear the roar of running water far below them, and the soft patter of falling rocks somewhere down the path. But the animal noises seemed very muted, as though the living things around them felt a bit like she did – tired and cranky.

She knew going to sleep had been a bad idea. Xena rested her head against the cold, wet stone, feeling the droplets of icy water soak into her hair. The chill felt good against the back of her neck, and it eased the throbbing headache she'd woken up with.

It was almost like a hangover, she reflected wryly, only causing it wasn't nearly as much fun. She wished it would keep on raining, in fact, as her body really wanted to just go back inside and go back to bed. "Well." She pushed off from the wall and took a few steps up the slope, peering at the path ahead of them. "Doesn't look too bad."

Gabrielle took the precaution of grabbing hold of her partner's belt before she edged over to the open side of the path and peered down. After a second, she quickly stepped back. "Xena, that's far."

"Uh huh. I know."

"I'm really glad I didn't know that last night."

"Me too." Xena sat down on the path and sprawled her legs out, leaning back against the rock with an audible thump. "So." She observed her mud splattered footwear. "We got any apples left?"

Gabrielle studied her scruffy companion with a look of wry sympathy on her face. "I'll see what I can dig up." She ruffled Xena's hair. "Be right back."

Xena picked up a piece of granite and sidearmed it off into the open air, blinking a little as a few sunbeams found their way to her and laid warm stripes across her legs. "Hey, Gab?"

"Yeah?" The bard's voice echoed softly from inside the cavern.

"How about you be the WP today, huh? I'm not up for it." Xena called back, sticking out her tongue and peering at what she could see of it, since the surface felt fuzzy to her.

"I can't. I'm too short." Gabrielle responded. "Sorry!"

"Bah." The warrior exhaled. "Damn it."

Gabrielle sat down on the ledge inside and dumped her makeshift pack out, sorting among it's contents for something edible. She found a few nuts, and one withered apple, but not much else. "Ugh." The bard glanced at the inside of the cavern, now that the light was allowing her to see details. "Wonder if there's any water back there.. I could at least make some tea."

She picked up the skull and wandered towards the back recesses of the cave, cocking her head to one side and listening hard for any signs of water. There was a sharp bend as she reached what she'd thought was the back wall, and she eased around it, peering into the shadows with wary caution.

Xena would have detected anything really dangerous, but you never could tell sometimes. Gabrielle thought she heard a tinkle of water, and she walked down the crooked passageway, her boots scuffing lightly on the uneven surface.

Suddenly, she stopped, as her fingers trailed over a patch of wall, where the shadows seemed to be clustering into what could almost be a design. She leaned closer, and then drew in a breath, as she recognized some of the painted signs she'd seen in the first few days.

They covered the wall just past the bend, and she took a step back to study them. Her shoulders impacted the opposite wall lightly and a bit of rock worked loose, falling down to patter near her toes. She glanced at it, then went back to puzzling over the paintings, her eyes running over the unfamiliar shapes.

"Hm." She shifted, and another bit of rock worked loose, thumping against her knee.

Then it brushed against her knee again. Gabrielle looked down sharply, to find a skeletal hand a fingerspan from her kneecap, poking out from a dark crevice in the wall. "Yow!" She hopped to one side, and felt her lungs expanding for an instinctive yell.

At the last minute, she clapped her hand over her mouth, and jogged off around the corner instead, heading for the opening to the cave.

Xena looked up as Gabrielle emerged, her eyes taking in the skull in one hand, and the position of the other. "Something wrong?"

Gabrielle removed her hand from her mouth. "Xena."

The warrior blinked. "That's me, yeah."

"Just didn't want to yell it out." The bard said. "Listen, I found something in there."

"Apples?" Xena replied hopefully.

"No, hon." Gabrielle extended her hand. "C'mon. Let me show you."

With a sigh, the warrior got up and followed her inside, stifling a yawn as she rubbed the back of her neck. "It's not another damn dead end is it?" She complained. "I'm just not in the mood for more annoyance if you know what I mean."

"I know." Gabrielle led her around the bend, and stopped, pointing. "But.. it is sort of a dead end. Just not our dead end."

The warrior put her hands on her hips, her eyes studying the skeleton hand hanging out into the open. "Ah."

"At least this one's an adult." The bard said, in a soft voice.

"Mm." Xena walked past her, and then she crouched down, peering into the darkened alcove with its bony resident. She looked back towards the entrance, then sighed. "Too dark in here."

"Yeah.. " Gabrielle peered around in the shadows. "If there was just some wood in here, I'd make you a torch." She mused. "I wanted to see those pictures better too."

Xena felt around in the alcove, her fingers tracing lightly over the bones of the skeleton held inside. The shadows were so profound, she could see little but a gleam of white. "This is making me mad." She commented. "I'm in no mood for being frustrated right now."

Gabrielle put her hands on her partner's shoulders and leaned over, giving her a kiss on the head. "Just chill out for a minute. Let me go find a branch or something and get some light in here."

"Meh."

"Xe."

The warrior leaned back on her hands. "Sorry." She tipped her head back and looked up. "I really woke up on the wrong side of the cave this morning." Her lips twisted. "I feel like mom's fertilizer pile."

"Hey, at least it stopped raining, and there's no hooters around." Gabrielle said. "So now that I've jinxed us, let me go get that darn torch before it starts raining and we get attacked." She trotted off, leaving Xena to keep their bony find company.

The warrior watched her leave, then she returned her attention to the crevice, but remained leaning back in a relaxed pose. After a few silent minutes, she laid all the way down flat on her back, putting her hands under her head and crossing her ankles. "Well, buster." She addressed the skeleton. "Since I can't see ya, might as well just relax here, huh?" She tipped her head back and looked up at the cave ceiling. There were a few of the glowing spots she'd seen in the hooter's cave, but not enough to shed any real light on the corridor, either where she was, or off in the shadows further down.

There was a further down, that much she knew. Xena could smell water on the faint puff of air brushing over her, and the faintest hint of an old burning smell, which made her wonder if there wasn't maybe an old firepit nearby.

She could get up and look, but her headache had intensified, and it was easier just to remain where she was, and leave the problem in Gabrielle's capable hands. There were gnarled limbs just outside the entrance, and she was sure the bard could manage to scrape something up to set fire to.

She even suspected Gabrielle didn't mind, really, since the times when Xena acted the lazy bum were so rare as to be almost nonexistent. Once, she'd done that out of her desire to convince herself she didn't need anyone around her, doing anything for her.

Even after their relationship had evolved past its initial stages, she still had been wary of relying on anyone other than herself, though she came to accept Gabrielle's reliance on her and pretended the double standard was just how they both were.

It was only after they became parents together that she found that all changing. When she finally accepted Gabrielle as an equal, and Gabrielle grew into her role as a mother – then it became okay for her to dump the stoic routing and just whine sometimes.

Not often. Just like Gabrielle didn't do it often to her, but every once in a while they both allowed each other those little venting moments. Xena exhaled, undisturbed by the bones almost grazing her left foot, her eyes idly tracing the tiny glowing spots above her.

She wondered what was going on back home. They'd been gone long enough by her calculations, that it was likely someone had started out after them. Ephiny, maybe, or Solari and Pony, she figured. Of course, they'd never find her and Gabrielle since the odds of them risking the river, or even if they did, getting caught in the same currents were so unlikely as to not even be worth mentioning.

Figures. The warrior closed her eyes. The one time they actually needed help, they wouldn't get it. Why couldn't this be the one time ten.. maybe twenty... Hades, the entire Amazon nation and all the militia couldn't have stumbled through some cave somewhere and ended up at the bottom of the passageway she was lying in right now?

She'd even be glad to see her mother.

"Okay." Gabrielle came around the corner, complete with a roughly thrown together and lit torch in her right hand. "I think this'll do it."

Xena rolled her head to one side and regarded her partner. The torch lit her features and outlined the cavern in an orange glow, but neither of them were looking because they were both looking at each other. "Nice." The warrior complimented her. "Can you find us a flying magic carpet and some pears now?"

Gabrielle rolled her eyes, then she abruptly paused, as their surroundings revealed themselves. "Xena."

Xena hitched herself up onto her elbows and looked around, then, without a word, she pressed herself up and into a crouch, balancing with the fingertips of one hand braced on the rocky floor.

Inside the crevice, as they'd expected, a skeleton rested, its body covered in scraps of withered fabric and tattered furs. It was an unremarkable set of bones, but the hollowed out holes in the rock wall around it were far from that, holding a wide collection of things including piles of gemstones, and roughly made tools.

And one held rolls of parchment.

"Oh. Wow." Gabrielle slowly turned in a circle. "Xena, what is this?"

"I'm not sure." The warrior studied the skeleton. It was female, and of middling height. More or less Gabrielle's size, and unremarkable in its structure. The shreds of clothing remaining seemed very rough and homespun, she touched a bit of the wide weave, feeling its uneven texture.

Gabrielle found a place to wedge the torch and she did so, settling down predictably next to the slit that held the rolls of parchment. "I think we may find some of our answers here, Xena."

"Or more questions." The warrior lifted one of the gems and looked at it. "Wow." She held it up to the torch, and it glittered with a deep, green heart. Her eyes slid past the storage, and she spotted a firepit, now visible in the torch's light. "This was home, I guess."

The bard was delicately unrolling the first of the parchments, handling it with an almost reverence. It's surface was mottled and stained, but she could see a soft, faded purple on it's surface she recognized instantly as berry ink.

At last. She leaned closer to the light and tilted the surface towards it. At last they'd find out something.

Anything.

**

"What is it?" Xena carefully sorted through the tools, setting aside several for their own use.

Tried to teach, but doesn't want to learn!

"It's.." Gabrielle squinted a little, at the faded writing. "It's a diary, I think." She replied. "I started in the middle here.. let me see if I can find something near the beginning so we can maybe see who she was." She carefully rolled up the scroll she was looking at, and selected one from the bottom of the pile.

"I thought we know who she was." Xena examined a worn scraper. "The talking woman's mother."

"Yeah, but.." Gabrielle frowned as she tried to make out the faint letters. "That's probably who this was, but who was she?" She clarified. "I mean, who was she before she..."

Xena looked up. "What?"

The bard leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees. She ran her eyes over the letters, with a faint shake of her head. "Her name was Elbere."

The warrior glanced over at her, noting the shifting emotions crossing her partner's expressive face. "And?" She prompted, after a long moment silence.

"She's from Potadeia."

Xena nodded slightly. "Not totally unexpected." She remarked. "Given where we are.. coulda just as easily been from Amphipolis."

"Yeah." Gabrielle murmured. "She mentions some names here... her parents, but I don't recognize them." Her brow creased. "At least I don't think I do."

Xena squirmed over and peered at the parchment. "Damn.. pretty faded." She said. "Why don't you take that outside? Daylight'll be easier to read it by."

True. Gabrielle silently acknowledged. "Yeah, but you know.. there's something about this dark creepy hallway with a skeleton in it that makes reading theses here a lot more exciting."

Xena simply looked at her, eyebrows hiked.

"You know.. atmosphere?" The bard suggested.

The warrior shook her head. "No, I don't."

"Xena." Gabrielle reached over and tweaked her nose. "Use your imagination. I know you have one."

"Go outside before your eyeballs fall out of your head." Xena scolded her. "How's that for imagination?"

Gabrielle gathered up an armful of the parchments. "Nyah." She stuck her tongue out at her partner and stood. "See if you can find that water... I pulled down enough dead wood to make a fire and I've got some mint left in my pack."

"All right." Xena gave her a pat on the leg. "We'd better get moving once we're done with that. I don't want to spend another night here."

Gabrielle trudged around the corner and back into the main cavern, carrying the parchments over to the entrance with her. She poked her head out and cautiously looked both ways, then she sat down facing the lower slope they'd come up the night before and unrolled the scroll again.

The additional light really helped. "Let's see now." Gabrielle murmured, tracing the reasonably scribed letters with her fingertip. The words were relatively simple, and some were misspelled, and she wondered how young the woman had been when she'd come to the valley.

My name is Elbere. I have come here from a town named Potadeia, where my father and mother, Alaba and Elucia live. I am writing this down because I am the only one here and I want to keep things in my head.

Okay, well. Gabrielle scanned a few more chunks of writing, mostly descriptions of the valley, and the fact that it was cold, and the girl had been scared and unsure of what to do. Not really too much different than her own early diary entries, to be honest.

She looked up and across the open chasm to the far wall, a faint, self deprecating grin crossing her face. Just before the flood she'd taken a few minutes to reread the first few pages of her well worn book, and wondered yet again how Xena had dredged up the internal fortitude to put up with her in those early days.

For that matter, sometimes she looked back and wondered how she herself had found the stubbornness to hang in there, relentlessly searching for a friendship anyone would have doubted existed.

It could only really have been true love, she decided. Knowing Xena as she knew her now, knowing herself as well, nothing else made any sense at all.

She rolled up the parchment and selected a second, unrolling it and turning it to the light. Her brow creased, and then her expression went sober as she read.

It is what I was scared of. I am with child. I want to kill myself.

Mist green eyes lifted again, going momentarily unfocused. Then Gabrielle forced herself to continue reading.

They called me a liar. I told my parents he took me in the barn, but they said I was just a stupid liar. Now what can I do? Someone is watching me. I am scared.

"Wow." Gabrielle murmured. "Sucky parents in Potadeia. Who'd have guessed it."

I can't find enough food to eat now. How can I find enough food to eat if I have a baby? I wish I could kill it. Mara knew how to kill babies. I wish she'd told me.

Gabrielle didn't know how long she'd been sitting there, staring at the words before a warm hand closed on her shoulder, and she felt Xena's presence surround her. She looked up at the warrior. "I'm not sure I want to read these, Xe."

Xena sat down next to her, swirling something in the skull that emitted a fragrant steam. "Here." She handed Gabrielle the hot tea, and took the scroll, scanning it as the bard sipped from the edge of the makeshift cup. "Ah."

She let the parchment roll up into her hand. "Well, maybe there's stuff we can use in some of these others. She'd got to have known about the damn creatures."

"Mm." Gabrielle grunted. "How's your head?"

Xena half shrugged, and opened another parchment. She read the first few lines. "Ah. Here." She leaned over so Gabrielle could read too.

They finally accept me.

"Sounds like she's older here." Gabrielle said.

"Yeah." Xena agreed.

They want to see Mara. I try to keep her away from them. I am afraid she might get hurt. The females want to touch her all the time.

I saw one of them get taken by the big male – terrible! As soon as Mara can travel, we must get away from them and find a way out.

"So, I guess she managed to have her kid." Xena commented.

"Uh huh." Gabrielle took a sip of the hot tea, glad of it's warmth traveling down and warming her stomach.

They don't understand anything. It's like they are animals, but they're not. I am scared of them a lot, but they gave me food, and we would have died if they hadn't found us.

The big male one keeps looking at me.

Xena leaned over and accepted a sip from the skull. "Think I know where this is going."

The bard nodded. "Yeah. Me too." She said. "But did you notice, Xena.. she mentioned other females."

The warrior turned the parchment over, finding some hesitant, almost childish sketches on the back. "Yeah." She turned the scroll around, puzzling over them. "This them, you think?"

Gabrielle studied the sketches. They could, she supposed, be the hooters, but they could also be dogs, or a goat. "Beats me."

Xena turned the parchment back over, then stopped, stiffening when she heard a faint scuffling noise from inside the cavern. "Uh oh." She got up, leaving the parchments with her partner. "Stay here."

"Or else?"

"Just stay here." Xena sighed. "Please?"

Gabrielle patted her foot, and started drinking faster, as Xena disappeared into the cavern. "Knew it couldn't last." She put the skull down and gathered the scrolls up, tucking them under her arm before she stood and followed the warrior inside.

Xena crossed the cavern quickly, heading for the rear passage as the noises she heard became louder. She rounded the corner just as a figure scrambled up out of the darkness towards her, bringing a gust of wet, musky stench with it. "Hey!" She let out a booming yell.

"Augh!" The creature stopped in it's tracks, it's figure outlined in the torchlight. "Ugh!"

"Figures." Xena muttered, recognizing the young male. "What the Hades do you want!?" She growled. "Ya stupid piece of.." She turned, hearing a sound behind her, to find Gabrielle rounding the bend. "Your boyfriend found us."

"So I see." The bard grimaced. "He smells worse wet than Ares does."

The young male shifted from foot to foot, watching them anxiously. "Guh!" He lisped, holding up a hand to shield his eyes from the torch.

"So I guess that's a way out." Xena mused, then stiffened. "Or a way up." She bolted past the creature, knocking him to one side as she scrambled over to where the water disappeared, cocking her head to listen. For a moment, all she heard was the roar of the water, then, as she focused past that, closing her eyes, she picked up something else. "Son of a bacchae!"

Gabrielle grabbed the torch from the crevice and started towards her. "More coming?"

"Bastard led them up here." Xena turned, glaring at the male with definite, murderous intent. "Know what, buddy? That's gonna be the last favor you do us." She started towards the creature, who backed away from her in fear.

"Xena." Gabrielle caught her arm. "He didn't do it on purpose." She peered into the tunnel that ran alongside the water, seeing it slope downward.

"Yeah? How do you know he didn't?" Xena asked shortly. "Gabrielle, he's almost gotten us killed twice. You want to risk a third time?"

Gabrielle turned and looked at her. "How many times did I almost get you killed?" She looked her partner right in the eye. "Xena, he hasn't attacked either of us. You can't just kill him in cold blood."

In the torchlight, Xena's eyes were almost the rust colored. "Yes, I can." She replied, simply.

"No, you can't." The bard indicated the bend. "Let's get out of here."

"Gabrielle..."

"Xena, look at him." The bard pointed at the creature, who was cringing near the ground, watching them with wide eyes. "Are you telling me you could just walk up to him and kill him? Are you?"

The warrior felt the restless rage just leak out of her, as the words penetrated, and she absorbed the incredulity in Gabrielle's tone. "No." She sighed. "But damn it, Gabrielle!"

The sounds coming up the tunnel were now audible to the bard. "I know." She started towards the exit, holding the torch before her. "We helped him, Xena. It's probably the nicest thing anyone did for him his whole life.. of course he's following us."

Xena snorted, shaking her head as she followed the bard out and into the main part of the cavern. Her sense of hearing judged they had a few minutes to gather their things, and she went right over to the pack and started stuffing things into it.

Gabrielle watched her for a second, then she walked over and put a hand on Xena's back. "After all, I followed you after you saved my life, didn't I?" She glanced past the warrior, as the creature crawled out and into the main cavern, watching them warily.

"Yes, you did." Xena hoisted the pack onto her back and tightened the straps. "However." She put both hands on Gabrielle's shoulders. "You were adorable, and I fell in love with you." She looked at the creature. "If you'da looked or smelled like him, I'd have tied your butt to a tree outside Potadeia and you'd probably still be there."

"Glad I took a bath that morning then." The bard said. "Let's go." She tossed the torch into the crackling fire and turned, following Xena out of the cave.

They turned left and started up the narrow path, climbing into fitful sunlight with hints of possible rain

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The rain had finally ended over Amphipolis, and mud covered bodies were straggling back and forth between the ruins of the lower town and the upper village, carrying debris and supplies. A makeshift shelter area had been set up between the river and the upper town gates, and small wisps of smoke were straggling up from cooking fires as men and women worked at salvaging what was left to them.

Across the river, a laden sledge was standing, a horse hitched to the front of it. Ephiny turned from the pile of salvaged boxes and put a final one on the sledge, tightening down a bit of rope over it. "Sol?"

Solari appeared, with a pack on her back from around the pile. "Sounds like the gear's on it's way down." She pointed to the slope above Amphipolis, where a train of Amazons were moving down towards the town. "Made good time."

"Yeah." The regent agreed. "G'wan over there and meet em. I'll bring this over."

Solari hesitated. "Uh.."

"Scoot." Ephiny shooed her. "Move your feathers before I pluck em."

The dark haired Amazon obeyed, sloshing into the river at the fording point, which had been carefully marked with red painted poles. It was only marginally safe, the water was still flooding, and they'd been lucky that same flood had brought silt down to fill in the bottom so the level was swimmable.

It was still dangerous. "Let's go." Ephiny took the halter of the draft horse she was standing next to, and started to lead him forward. "Watch out, there!" She called out, as a box came tumbling down and crossed her path. "Hey!"

Two men were trying to pull another wagon out of the slowly ebbing flood, with little success. Ephiny stopped and watched them, wiping a bit of mud off her face. "Hey!" She called out to them again. "If you hang on, I'll help you drag that out when I get back."

The man nearest her turned, and gave her a grateful look. "Thanks." He stepped back from the wagon, cocking his head to look at her. His companion merely hitched himself up and sat down on it, swinging his feet in silence. "You're Ephiny, right?" The closer man asked, running his fingers through is mud stained hair.

"That's right." The regent agreed, as the man came over to her. He was young, younger than she'd realized at first with all that mud, and he had somewhat rakish good looks. "And you are?" He was somewhat familiar, and her mind scrambled to place him, as she had the feeling they knew each other. "Ah..."

"Mikah." The young man supplied readily. "I was on the.."

"Oh!" Ephiny held up a hand. "Yeah, I remember. You came back with us from Athens." She gestured towards the wagon she was leading. "Want to give me a hand getting across the ford with this guy... faster I go, faster we get back and get your wagon loose"

"Sure." Mikah went around the horse's head and took the other side of the halter. "It's not our wagon though. "

"No?" Ephiny walked forward, urging the horse into the still hastily running water. "You just being nice to someone, or you stealing it?" She glanced over the horses neck at her companion, who blushed slightly. "No offense."

"I've had worse thought." The young man walked stolidly forward. "But no.. it's the wagon that had all the theatre gear in it." He explained. "We're trying to salvage what we can.. but it's not like anyone thinks we're important enough to give a hand to."

Ephiny remained briefly silent, as they waded through water rapidly moving up to their shoulders. The horse snorted uneasily, not liking the push of the current against him, and the sledge he was dragging behind.

Mikah, she recalled, had joined the theatre group, and was one of their regular actors. To his credit, he'd established himself before Gabrielle had returned, but her acknowledgement of him had done him no harm either and he was popular with both the new towners and the old.

"Well." She guided the horse towards the ford exit on the old town side of the river. "People lost a lot."

Mikah looked behind them, then he quickly ducked under the surface of the water and came back up, shaking his head and running his free hand through his hair. Rid of the mud, it turned from stolid brown to blond, and he raked it from his eyes as he peered back at her.

Ephiny gave him a brief smile.

"I know about all that." Mikah said. "I was there.. down there when the river flooded." He plowed through the water at her side. "It was really scary. We were just outside, taking a break when we saw the bridge get swept away."

"Mm." They started up the bank to the old ford, once again the only way to cross the river. Ephiny remembered being on the far shore, watching Andreas' army marching up that very ford, when the wall of water from upstream had rushed down and taken them by surprise.

Taken the Amazons by surprise as well, save her. Ephiny straightened a little. But not her. She'd been one of the painful few, who'd known the truth. "I didn't see it." She told Mikah. "Did you see Xena and Gabrielle go downriver?"

Mikah nodded.

They trudged out of the water and onto the muddy ground, Ephiny guiding the horse carefully as his big hooves slipped and he snorted in alarm. "Easy, big guy."

Mikah patted the horses' shoulder. "They were talking bad about them."

Ephiny glanced at him sharply. "Xena and Gabrielle?"

"Yeah."

"Useless bastards." The regent shook her head.

The young man nodded. "That's what we figured too.. and you know, with us at the stage, we really like them."

Ephiny's eyes twinkled. "Especially Gabrielle?"

Mikah looked at her. "Well, some do." He allowed, with a hint of a smile. "I kinda like Xena." He said. "I got to see some of those stories first hand, so.."

"Me, too." Ephiny led the horse over to where a staging area had been set up, to locate anything salvageable. She tied the horse to a makeshift hitching post and started unloading the sledge of it's boxes. "Give me a hand here?"

"Sure." Mikah willingly started grabbing the boxes. "You think they're okay?"

Ephiny paused to look down the river, which at long last was starting to grudgingly return to it's banks. "I think it would take more than a flood to take them down, is what I think." She said. "I hope they're okay. They're both good friends."

A woman passed by, with a basket. She glanced at the two of them, then kept walking, shaking her head a little.

Ephiny watched her from the corner of her eye, one eyebrow inching up. She waited for the woman to pass out of earshot, then she straightened up. "Wonder what her problem was."

Mikah shaded his eyes and peered after the woman. "Oh." He scratched his nose. "That's Seallas... she thinks we're all perverts."

The regent stood right up, and put her hands on her hips. "Excuse me?"

The young man shrugged, assuming a relatively amiable expression. "You know the reputation us players have.. and you Amazons... mm.. wanton women." On the last words, his voice dropped into a sultry drawl, and he wagged his eyebrows at her.

Ephiny abruptly remembered something Gabrielle had told her.. or rather, something the bard had hinted at way back when during the Athens disaster. "You're not serious." She laughed a little. "C'mon, they don't believe those old wild naked Amazon stories, do they?"

Mikah studied her for second, then he chuckled softly. "You mean they're not true?" He asked. "What a disappointment."

The regent leaned on the sledge, a smirk crossing her face. "I didn't say that." She demurred. "Matter of fact, I know some naked Amazon stories I bet would scare the frilly little shoes off the likes of her." She jerked her head in the direction the woman went in. "And I know you didn't hear them from Gabrielle."

The young man's brows lifted a little. "Oh... yeah?"

"Yeah."

Mikah chuckled, and shrugged. "Anyway.. she was one of the ones talking bad about them.. and her husband. I got in a fight with him."

"Fight?" Ephiny paused in her box unloading and balled her fist, holding it up in question.

"Yeah. I lost." The young man admitted with wry grace. "I'm not much of a fighter.. but I could have taken a risk once and I didn't.. so I decided to try and make up for it this time." He lifted the last of the crates off, and set it on the ground, then dusted his hands. "Okay.. now what?"

Ephiny unhooked the sledge from the horse's back. "Now we take him back over." She announced. "And pull your wagon out." She glanced up at the sky, seeing the sun begin to take its downward pitch to evening. "Should be enough time to do that before it gets dark."

Mikah joined her at the horses' head and they turned him and started back across the ford. "It's really nice of you to help us out." He said. "We'll have to make it up to you."

Ephiny turned her head and regarded his profile. Then she headed into the water, a speculative grin on her face. All the thoughts and considerations she'd been pondering settled into her guts with a solid purpose, as she felt the coming together of timing, opportunity, and circumstance. "Hm.. yeah." She remarked. "We Amazons never do anything for free."

"Ah." Mikah ducked under the water again, then surfaced and neatly stripped off his tunic. He sloshed along next to her, wringing the fabric off as he moved through the chest high water. "And we players always pay our debts." He assured her. "So believe me..we'll make it worth your while to give us a hand."

Ephiny ducked her own head under, shaking it to rid herself of the mud. She kept one hand on the horse's halter, as the big animal stolidly swam along pulling her. She came back up and wiped her eyes. "Oh, I bet you will." She drawled, ducking under the horses neck to watch his reaction.

He smiled. "And here I thought you Amazons had no use for men."

Gotcha. The regent grinned right back. "Oh, we've got uses for em." She assured him. "If they're pretty enough." She went back to the business of getting across the ford, leaving Mikah to ponder what he might, or might not have gotten himself into.

While she pondered what she was definitely getting herself into. But you know, Ephiny...sometimes, she mused. Sometimes, you just had to get to the getting.

Y'know?

**

"Give me your hand." Xena paused in mid-stream, the water up over her thighs. "It's slippery here." She waited for Gabrielle to grab hold and then moved forward cautiously, the fast racing water shoving hard against them.

Gabrielle leaned forward against the current, casting a brief, wary glance downstream at the frothing rapids and the dropoff she could see just in view. Craggy rocks rose on either side of them, compressing the water into a fast flowing, dangerous rush.

The crevasse had abruptly disrupted their path, leaving them little choice but to climb down into it, and cross the water, so they could keep going up the other side. "You know what, Xena?" Gabrielle felt the mossy rocks sliding under her boots and she kept her balance after a fierce struggle. "Usually, when we get into this stuff, it's because we were asking for it."

"Eh?" The warrior felt ahead with one boot. "It's deeper here." She warned. "What do you mean, asking for it?"

Gabrielle grimaced as the water covered her skirt and hit her stomach, the icy flow making her muscles tighten up in reflex, making her already unhappy guts grumble all the more. "You know me." She said, after a long sigh. "I'm always saying something like.. 'gee, it's so quiet here, Xena!' and then bam, sixteen long hair punks are coming at us with whips and chains."

Xena forged ahead for a few steps. "I don't remember that ever happening." She disagreed. "Did I miss that?"

Sometimes her partners literal nature still surprised Gabrielle. "No... I was being facetious." She lurched forwards and almost went to her knees in the water, saved when Xena shifted her grip and kept her upright. "I mean, we'll do something like complain about how beautiful the weather is, and then rains buckets on us.. like tempting the fates."

"Oh." Xena reached out and clutched a rock mid stream, pulling herself along using it's bulk to break the flow of the water. "Sure. Whatever you say."

Gabrielle decided her train of thought was best left abandoned, and she concentrated instead on staying upright. It took less effort that way, and she wasn't really up to arguing anyway. It was possible, she considered, that Xena felt the same way and didn't want idle chatter either.

Anyway. The bard swallowed, and licked her lips, wishing again they had a skin to take some of the damn water with them.

Xena paused as they both came even with the rock, and took a second to look ahead of them. The water ran right up to the opposite wall, and there was no easy way out of it except to climb the sharp crags and unstable looking boulders. She sighed and leaned against the rock. "Damn it."

"What?" Gabrielle scooped up a mouthful of water and drank it. "Tell me something else is going wrong now."

Xena turned her head and raised an eyebrow at her. "Would you rather I didn't tell you?"

"I'd rather be dry and at home in my rocking chair near the fire." The bard replied. "That tell you anything?" But she relaxed her body posture and bumped her partner with one shoulder, refusing to let the crankiness get the better of her. "We're gonna have to climb that, aren't we?"

"Mhm." Xena turned and started into the current again. "I'm not looking forward to it either, just for the record." She hit a rock with one foot and it turned, sending her sprawling into the water. "Son of a.."

Gabrielle lurched forward as well, grabbing hold of the back of the warrior's skin shirt with scrabbling fingers. "Hey!" She tried to pull Xena back up, but the fast flow of the water and her partner's larger size defeated her, and she found herself losing her balance as well. "Yow!"

Xena half turned in mid fall and put a hand out to grab Gabrielle, and that was their undoing as they both toppled into the fierce flow and were taken by it.

"Damn it!" The warrior twisted and tried to get her feet under her, but the current was too fast and all she could do was get her head above water and work to make sure Gabrielle did the same. "Hang on to me!"

Gabrielle didn't waste breath or strength on answering. She already had her fingers clenched in her partner's clothing, and she was busy resisting the swirling water's tendency to shove her head under the surface.

Rocks banged against her legs, and then her shoulders, and then they were in the white water and it was all she could do to grab some breaths between surges of water that alternately sucked her under and threw her up into the light.

She felt Xena grab her by the shoulders, and the next thing she knew the warrior snagged her around the waist and half lifted her up, allowing her to shake her head clear of the water and take a few needed deep breaths.

The rocks were flying by. She raised one hand to protect her face, then rolled onto her side as Xena surfaced next to her. "Augh."

"Keep your head up!" The warrior yelled.

"I'm trying!" Gabrielle yelled back, padding with her free hand. "What are we going to do!?!?"

Xena searched the rapids ahead of them for a place to grab hold and get out. She shoved her feet down, but the water had perversely deepened and she couldn't touch bottom. She looked around for anything that might float and help them, but found the water clear of debris as it poured forward towards the dropoff.

She could see past the dropoff, and see the stream continuing on, so the drop wasn't the drastic kind they'd fallen down initially but.. Damn it. Xena felt the frustration of the whole thing rise up and make her want to scream.

"Xe?"

Xena turned her head. "I DON'T KNOW." She bellowed, her temper snapping. "DAMN IT!"

Gabrielle blinked at her.

Damn it. Xena felt a whirlpool grab them and she reached for Gabrielle as the current sucked her under and they both tangled arms and legs in the relentless grip of the stream. She opened her eyes under the water and saw nothing but darkness below them, then as the urge to breathe clamped around her throat she frog kicked for the surface, one arm curled around the bard.

It was hard to break the hold of the water. It wanted to grab her, and toss her back down into its depths, with an almost malevolence she could feel clutching her.

Gabrielle seemed to sense it. She started kicking as well, , somehow keeping her legs clear of Xena's as they struggled together towards the surface.

Xena saw a rock just under them, and she got a boot on it, kicking forward and sending them both out of the whirlpool and back into the current. An errant surge picked them up and half ejected them out of the water, and they gasped hoarsely as the air hit their faces.

The possibility of drowning seemed very real. Xena felt, for one of the few times in her life, a surge of panic take hold of her as she fought against the uncaring force of the water.

Her chances would be greater, she realized, if she let go of Gabrielle and used both arms.

"Xena!" Gabrielle grabbed hold of her arm. "We're going over!"

Again. Xena got a mouthful of water and almost choked on it, as she turned her head to see the approaching falls. There was nothing in their path she could grab hold of, nothing to stop them nothing to.. "Just hang on." She managed cough out. "Don't let go of me."

Gabrielle heard the note of exhaustion in her partner's voice, and she tightened her hold. "I got you!" She shouted, just as the surge of the water picked them up and took them over the edge of the drop. She stared down, in horrified fascination as they seemed to hang in the air for a moment, then they dropped down a racing slope, the force of the water tumbling and tossing them around as it tried to rip them apart.

The sensation of falling was terrifying. The only thing that allowed Gabrielle to retain her sanity was the desperate need to keep hold of her partner, and not let the water drive them apart.

Not let anything drive them apart. Gabrielle bore down and clenched her hands, as she felt Xena curl around in mid fall and take hold of her as they fell, grabbing gasps of air when they could. She closed her eyes as she felt the bottom coming up, hearing the thunder of the water all around her.

All around them.

She could hear the thunder of her own heart over it, going past fear to a place where she just wanted it to be over.

They hit the water at the bottom and went under, tumbling out of control and almost losing their grip on each other as the waterfall drove down on top of them and forced them deep underwater.

It was sense numbing, the roar and the thunder and the pummeling, and it took everything Xena had to remember to kick off against the bottom and fight towards the sunlight.

It was like her life, in a way. The thought popped into her mind, as her body came close to failing her, exhausted from fighting the water just as she had been exhausted from fighting the darkness once upon a time.

She was just so tired.

Gabrielle's head broke the surface and she sucked in a huge lungful of air, seeing dark streaks against the back of her eyeballs from the pressure of holding her breath as long as she had. She rolled over and pulled Xena up with her, watching anxiously until the warrior's head popped up and she was meeting a dazed, pale blue pair of eyes. "Xena."

The warrior turned her head and looked back, to see the relatively low waterfall thundering behind them. Then she turned again to look around, as they floated in a now mostly peaceful lake whose far end sloped to a sandy beach, promising an easy spot to climb out. "Well." She reached up and pushed the wet hair from her eyes. "Beats climbing those rocks."

Gabrielle treaded water next to her, looking shaken and exhausted. "I think I'm going to lose it." She rasped, blinking visible tears from her eyes.

Xena looked at her for a long moment. "Me too." She admitted, in a small voice.

A small silence settled as they stared at each other. Then Gabrielle sniffled, and reached up to rub her eyes. "Let's go over there and get out." She said. "And take it from there."

"Yeah." Xena exhaled. "Good idea."

Slowly, they swam together across the surface of the lake, it's placid surface ruffled by the cool breeze. Reaching the shallows, they stood and waded out onto the beach, to collapse on the sand, side by side in the sunlight.

Xena rested her elbows on her knees, and lowered her head into her hands.

Gabrielle sat absorbing the warmth long enough to stop shaking, before she lifted one hand off her thigh and let it rest on Xena's leg instead.

She tried to come up with something to say, but her mind was just blank. She pressed her cheek against Xena's shoulder in lieu of that, the chaotic discord she could feel through their link coming close to making her physically sick.

If the creatures came on them now, she didn't know what would happen.

She closed her eyes.

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The sun edged a little further towards the west, painting the silent pair in gold as a curious peace settled on the small valley. Overhead, a hawk circled, tipping it's wings lazily as it hunted, finding nothing on the surface of the lake save wind ruffled wavelets on the surface.

In the bushes on the lakefront, a bird began to sing, yodeling softly as the breeze rustled the branches it sat on, the leaves twisting to reveal flashes of it's red feathers.

Xena finally felt her heartbeat start to slow down, and she blinked, seeing damp sand as she looked past her fingers. The pale grains were plastered all over her legs, and from the corner of her eye she could see Gabrielle's boot extended just past hers.

Inside, she was still shaking. She could feel the twitching along her forearms and she knew if she lowered her hands they'd shiver like leaves in the wind.

What in the Hades had just happened to her? The warrior swallowed, grimacing at the sick churning in her guts. She could feel Gabrielle leaning quietly against her, and she was half afraid to look, wondering what the bard was thinking.

Even after all these years, she knew how much her partner depended on her. Damn, for all those years and more, she'd depended on herself. Falling apart hadn't been in her plans today. Or ever for that matter. So what the Hades was she supposed to say to her?

Gabrielle's fingers moved lightly across the skin of her thigh, an absent, comforting gesture. "Xe?"

Xena straightened up, letting her hands drop to her knees as she turned her head towards her partner. "Ugh." She sighed softly.

Gabrielle looked up at her, lips tensing slightly. "Ugh?"

They both looked away, then Xena's eyes dropped to the sand. She turned over her hands and looked at the palms, which were scuffed and bruised from her attempts to stop them from going over the falls. She glanced at the water, and suddenly felt that the last thing she ever wanted to do ever again in her life was go into it. "Know something?"

"What?"

"I've been facing death since I was fifteen years old." Xena spoke quietly. "But I've never felt so much like crawling under a rock as I do right now." She cradled her head in her hands again. "Damn this place."

Gabrielle exhaled softly. She put her arm around her partner and simply hugged her, unsure of what else she could do to comfort Xena. "I know what you mean, sweetheart."

"Do you?"

The bard held up one hand, and they both watched it shake. "The thought of those guys chasing after us, and catching up to us again is making me sick." She replied in a quiet tone. "I don't know what to do."

Xena shifted, closing her hands and resting her head against her fists instead. "Me either."

Gabrielle looked across the lake, which in any other time of her life would have seemed pretty, and now only seemed hateful. "You know what I wish?"

"What?"

"I wish you had your sword."

Xena turned her head, to watch the bard's profile.

"I wish you had that, and the chakram, and that wagon of damned Greek fire." Gabrielle whispered. "If I thought you'd do it I'd ask you to call in a favor from Ares and just get us out of here." She slumped against the warrior, closing her eyes. "I just want to go home."

Xena felt her breath grow short again, this time for a completely different reason. "Are you serious?"

"Yes." Gabrielle blinked, and felt exhausted tears run down her face. "Xena, we're never going to get out of here. I can't climb those walls and you know it. I don't even know if you can...and not with those damn things after us, and the rain, and this blasted water.."

"Yeah." The warrior extended her boots out. "That's how I feel too." She admitted. "I feel like we're running and running and running and getting nowhere." She sighed heavily. "I'm so damn tired."

Gabrielle draped her arm over her partner's legs. "So am I." She rested her head against the warrior's shoulder. "My soul's tired. Everything's tired"

Xena exhaled, leaning her head against her partner's. "Yeah."

The bard remained silent for a moment, then she curled her fingers around Xena's arm. "You know what else?"

"What?"

Gabrielle drew in a shaky breath. "If I am pregnant, I'm probably going to lose this baby from all this.. it only took a stupid wrestling match with Menelda last time."

Xena stopped breathing entirely for a long moment. Then she looked at her partner.

"Like that's even going to matter if we don't make it out." Gabrielle whispered, giving her head a little shake. "Gods. Poor Dori.. I promised her..." She fell silent, biting the inside of her lip. "Oh, Xena."

Xena felt her heart skip at the words, but they also moved her thoughts from her own inner chaos to her partner's, an effect Gabrielle had always had on her, even from the very beginning. "Hey." She put her arms around the bard. "We're not dead yet."

Gabrielle buried her face into Xena's shoulder, her body jerking. The warrior gathered her up and hugged her, rocking them both a little in the soft sand. "Hey." She murmured into the bard's ear. "Easy."

Gabrielle sniffled, exhaustion making her eyes flutter. . "Can I ask you something?" She asked, hoarsely.

"Sure." Xena sniffled a little herself.

"Remember when you were hurt.. that time." The bard said. "And you said.. dying was almost a relief for you because you were so tired?"

Unexpectedly, it triggered real tears. "Yeah." Xena uttered, clamping her jaw shut after that.

"Did that kind of tired feel like this?"

The warrior's throat tightened, and for a very long moment answering was out of the question. She remembered that moment, that dark surrender. That giving in to the inevitability of life after such a long period of fighting so hard against it.

She remembered the flames.

She remembered Gabrielle's soul screaming. "No." She finally muttered. "It's not like this at all."

The bard exhaled.

"I didn't have any clue I had anything to live for." Xena cleared her throat, wiping the back of her hand across her eyes. "I can't say that now."

Gabrielle half turned towards her and huddled close, putting her arms around the warrior and simply holding onto her. "I felt like that once." She said, falling silent after that for a few moments. "You're right. We can't say that now."

Xena rested her cheek against the bard's damp hair. Her head hurt, and she suspected Gabrielle's did also, and she figured both of them were probably hungry as well as exhausted. She knew she was, at least. Her eyes dropped to her partner's face, and she saw tears there, tracking down through the soft down on Gabrielle's cheek and through the traces of mud smeared across her jaw.

She reached down and gently brushed the droplets away, feeling the skin under her fingers tense just slightly. There were dark circles under the bard's eyes and there was something in her very body posture that made Xena hurt for her. "Gabrielle?"

The bard didn't stir. "Yeah?" She muttered, a dour tone coloring her voice as it very seldom did.

The warrior gazed out across the water, then dropped her eyes to the pale head tucked under her chin. "I love you."

After a very quiet moment, Gabrielle shifted, turning around so she could look up at Xena. She let her head rest against the warrior's arm as she studied her face in pensive silence.

Then a small, wry smile appeared and her eyes gained a faint twinkle. "You know..that's about the only thing you could have possibly said to me that could have made me even think about smiling," Gabrielle said.

Xena's lips twitched. "Hey.. after all these years, I gotta know a little about what does that, huh?"

It seemed to be the right thing to say again, because Gabrielle's expressive face relaxed visibly, and a gentle warmth entered her eyes. "Yeah."

The warrior studied her. "You okay?"

Gabrielle felt so drained, it was hard to do anything but simply look up at the angular, disheveled figure cradling her and find some kind of peace in the knowledge that at the very least, they were in Hades here together. "I'm scared." She studied the bloodshot blue eyes looking back at her. "I'm scared we'll lose everything here, Xe."

The warrior nodded slightly.

Gabrielle lifted a hand up to touch her partner's cheek. "I don't want to."

"Me either." Xena leaned her head into the touch. "Let's get some water.. get ourselves together. Figure out what we're gonna do."

"I'd rather just stay here." The bard replied honestly, letting her hand fall down to rest on Xena's chest. "I just can't keep going right now."

The sense of relief almost shocked her. Xena felt guilty, that she was letting Gabrielle's needs cover her own real desire, making the bard ask for something Xena really should have just offered her. She let her eyes lift and meet her partner's. "Honestly.. me either."

One blond eyebrow lifted slightly.

"Gabrielle, you know me better by now, doncha?"

With a faint smile, the bard snuggled close again, giving Xena a comforting pat on her side.

Xena eased back against the warm sand, letting the soft surface cradle her head and take some of the strain off her neck. Her headache, made worse from the emotion stress she'd just gone through was now throbbing so hard it was making her eyes water, and she figured a few minutes just resting where they were was just what she needed.

She wasn't even sure she cared where the creatures were, or if they were right behind them.

Gabrielle shifted, squirming around until she was snuggled up against Xena's right side, where she almost never laid in deference to her partner's sword arm. She put her head down on Xena's shoulder and relaxed in the warm sand as well, trading off the knowledge the grains would get into uncomfortable places for the relative comfort of the soft surface.

The sun splashed down on them with grudging benevolence, and the breeze gentled, brushing over them with a touch of warmth that promised summer sometime in the future.

Xena looked up at the clouds moving over them, and let her mind go blank. She'd only been chasing herself around in circles anyway. They had very few options, and she knew Gabrielle knew that. So what was the point in going over and over them?

She really didn't know where they were going to go from here.

**

Gabrielle had her eyes closed, listening to the birds singing all around them. Though she was tired, sleep had escaped her and she'd spent her time just lying in Xena's arms and allowing the peace of their surroundings to soak in.

The birds sounded so pretty. Gabrielle opened one eye as she heard a sweet song very nearby and was rewarded by a beautiful blue and green bird landing on a rock not an arms length away. It sat there, head cocking at her as it sang, its beak pointed skyward.

After being beaten up by nature for so long, it was odd to find herself charmed by it. Gabrielle hiked up her leg and lifted her arm, resting her elbow on her knee and extending her hand towards the bird. She watched it study her briefly, then smiled as it flitted over and landed on her hand, its claws lightly pricking her skin.

"Hi there." The bard murmured. "Aren't you a pretty boy?"

The bird chirped at her, edging up her hand and watching her with a sharp, round eye.

"Want to lend me your wings?" Gabrielle asked it. "I'll give em back, honest. I just want to use them for..oh,... a candlemark? Just to get home? What do you say?"

The bird hopped off her hand and onto Xena's arm. It nibbled a bit of the fine hair on the warrior's skin, then took off, spreading its wings and soaring over to a nearby tree. Gabrielle watched it go, and then she turned her head to look up at her partner.

As she expected, Xena was awake, her eyes filled with shadows as she gazed somberly back at the bard. "Feeling any better?" She asked her. "I know you didn't sleep much."

Xena exhaled, and then shrugged one shoulder. "Thinking too much." There was, however a certain tension missing from her face, and the bard knew if she smiled, she'd probably get one back.

She smiled. Xena's face crinkled briefly into returning grin, and then they both shifted at the same time, snuggling closer to each other in an almost humorous unison. "How about you?" Xena asked. "Didn't catch you sleeping either."

"Eh." Gabrielle did feel better. Not because their situation had gotten any less horrible, but because she'd had a chance to sit down and rest, and just...well, think about things. They'd been running, or sleeping, or fighting or half drowning for so long she'd almost forgotten what it felt like to just sit still and ponder for a little while. "I'm not as freaked out."

"I think we should make a fire and get something to eat." Xena commented. "What do you think?"

"Do you seriously think I'm going to object to either of those ideas?" Gabrielle inquired. "How's your head?" She stroked Xena's forehead with her fingertips, watching the pale blue eyes track the motion of her hand.

"Mixed up." The warrior readily admitted. "But I'm hungry, so we gotta do something."

Gabrielle leaned forward and gave her a kiss on the lips. "Okay." She said. "That sounds about right. I can't just keep laying around here."

"Mm." Xena picked up a handful of sand, and watched it trickle out through her fingers. "Me either. I guess." She tipped her head back and looked up at the sky. "Much as I want to rest, I can't."

Gabrielle gave her a gentle hug. "Let's go do what we do." She said. "And see where it gets us."

They got up, brushing the sand off each other as the sunlight turned a burnished gold and painted them with fire. Gabrielle ran her hands through her hair and grimaced at the tangles, then she shrugged and gave it up. "I'll make the fire, if you want to grab us a fish."

"Okay." Xena untied the belt on her catskin and removed it, shaking it out vigorously before she draped it over a tree branch. Then she removed her makeshift boots and dropped them before she trudged towards the lake, head a little down.

Gabrielle watched her, a knot of worry tightening in her guts as she took in the warrior's posture. Then she sighed, and started collecting firewood, using the dried bits tossed up on the lake's edge as she built a reasonable size fire and worked on starting it.

Halfway through packing the tinder, she paused and smiled faintly, remembering the day when Xena had finally allowed her to perform this all important task, after she'd begged and begged for weeks to do it. She'd been so nervous she almost burned herself twice, but in the end, she'd managed to produce a workable result, and earned herself Xena's grin of approval.

Gods, that had felt so good. Gabrielle shook her head and clucked her tongue under her breath. "What a goofball I was." She expertly sent a few sparks into the tinder, watching alertly as they caught in the dead pine needles she'd stuffed at the bottom of the branches.

At least they'd chilled out long enough for her striker and flint to dry. Gabrielle raked her hair back, blowing gently on the smoulder her sparks had started. The scent of the burning tinder tickled her nose, and she rubbed her face with the back of her hand, stifling a sneeze.

This would definitely be no time to get sick. The bard shook her head slightly, wondering how they'd avoided it until now with all the drenching and the exhaustion she knew was now taking its toll on them.

She cupped her hands around the tiny fire, and blew on it again, feeling the warmth reach her skin as it caught and grew. Well.. at least she was concentrating on something productive, like Xena was – and wasn't that what the warrior had taught her all those years ago? Fix what you can fix, and worry about the rest later.

She heard a splash, and then a second, and when she looked up at the lake she was rewarded by the sight of Xena wading back out towards her, a squiggling fish clamped in either hand. The sun sparkled off the water droplets on her mostly bare skin and Gabrielle took a moment to properly appreciate the view.

Xena seemed oblivious to it all. She walked over and sat down on a rock near the fire, glancing at her burden. "Figured this'll do us for now." She commented briefly.

Gabrielle fed her nascent fire with some twigs. "Yeah.. of course, I really want a huge pot of your mother's stew, but I guess a couple of old fish'll hold us."

The warrior cocked her head a little, a wryly uncertain look on her face. "Listen." She studied the sand. "You want me to go ask Ares?"

"No." Gabrielle answered automatically. Then she looked up. "Yeah." She exhaled. "I don't know. I don't know what I want, except I want to be out of here." She sat down next to the fire and fed it a few more branches. "I could.. I could try asking Aphrodite, I guess."

Xena slid off her rock and sat down next to Gabrielle, leaving the fish on top of the rock. She put a few branches into the fire, her expression pensive. "I guess." She agreed slowly. "Better her than him."

Gabrielle knew that was true. She also knew asking the gods for help went against all her instincts, and most of her experience. "I don't know.. it's so hypocritical." She admitted. "Do I even really believe in them, Xena? Last time I prayed to any of them you're the one who answered my prayers."

Xena went very still. "When was this?"

"In the cave. With Elevown." Gabrielle answered, keeping her eyes on the fire. "Got down on my knees and asked them to keep you safe." A tiny laugh was forced from her. "Pretty selfish when I think about it. I know you wouldn't have wanted that."

The warrior thought about that for several minutes, watching the fire grow as the sun started to go down. "You were scared." She said, at last.

"Yeah." Gabrielle sighed. "I was." She looked over at her partner. "But the more I thought about it afterward.. I think I realized the reason I don't believe in the gods much anymore is because of you."

Xena's brows contracted. "Because I don't?"

Gabrielle held her hands out to the fire. "Because you are what you are."

The silence that fell after that was so profound, Gabrielle could hear her own heart beating in it. She could feel a sense of shock coming through the link she had with Xena and it took a lot of inner fortitude for her to turn her head and look at her partner.

She'd never said that to Xena before. They'd never discussed it, even after it had become clear to them both where Dori had come from. She knew Xena hated the idea of being anything other than just as human as everyone else was but she also knew that.. well... Xena wasn't like everyone else. "I know you're not into hearing that." She murmured, apologetically as she saw the stunned expression on her partner's face. "Sorry."

Xena got up and walked off, heading into the trees and disappearing without a word.

"Whoops." Gabrielle mentally slapped herself. "After all this time you still can't keep your mouth shut, can you Gabrielle?" She got up and retrieved the fish, taking out her little knife and cutting them open. "Why did I do that?" She wondered. "I know how she feels about that whole subject."

She neatly filleted the fish, setting the bones aside for other uses and carrying the flesh over to the flat rock she'd build the fire around. She set the fish on the rock and sat down next to it, hoping the smell of it cooking would draw her partner back over.

She watched it cook, her arms clasped around her knees.

"Are you saying you think I should be getting us out of here?" Xena's voice suddenly erupted from the shadows behind her, tinged with anger. "Is that what that's all about?"

Gabrielle felt the chill in the tone, and she closed her eyes in pure reflex. "No." She answered softly. "It just came out. I didn't mean anything by that." She turned and looked at Xena. "You really think that's what I think?"

Xena didn't answer. She was standing behind the rock, her hands on her hips, anger in every line of her body.

"Maybe it's what you think." Gabrielle figured she might as well go all the way out on the limb, since she was halfway there already. "Maybe that's why you're so freaked out."

"I'm not freaked out."

"Honey." Gabrielle injected as much love into her voice as she was capable of. "You said you were, remember?" She got up and walked over, her heart in her throat until she was sure Xena wasn't going to turn her back on her.

It had that feeling, that kind of anger she saw in Xena's eyes. That kind of cold intent that had formed the wedge between them the last time. "Xena." She stopped and reached out, touching the warrior's bare stomach hesitantly. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say that."

"Why not?" The blue eyes glared at her. "It's true, isn't it? Didn't we decide not to lie to each other anymore?"

Gabrielle felt tears stinging her eyes, and her throat closed up, as fear grabbed her without warning. She stared mutely at her partner, her hands suddenly feeling like ice as they trembled lightly against the warm surface they were touching.

Their eyes locked.

In the coming twilight, an animal roared. The sound broke the stillness, and Xena shifted, leaning in towards Gabrielle and reaching up to clasp her head between both hands. "Gabrielle."

"I.. I'm.. sssorry." The bard stuttered softly. "Please don't b..be mad at me."

Xena pulled her close and hugged her. "I'm not." She admitted. "You're right. I'm mad at me." She muttered, letting out a frustrated breath. "I've been listening to too many of your damn stories."

Gabrielle was pretty sure her knees were going to give out, so she encircled Xena with both her arms and held on tight. They were both so fractured at the moment, every little thing smacked against them with unusual force and the last thing they needed to do was start fighting again with each other.

The last thing.

Another roar, this time closer. Xena rubbed Gabrielle's back gently. "We should get the fire built up."

"We staying here for now?" Gabrielle whispered. "Until the morning?"

"Yeah." Xena said. "There's a path out.. down between two ridges.. I just tripped over it while I was out there sulking." She glanced at the fire, feeling a certain sense of equilibrium returning to her.

"You weren't sulking." The bard mumbled. "You were right to be pissed off."

Was she? Xena watched the golden red sunset turn the surface of the lake to a glassy crimson. "No." She took a deep breath, and released it. "It's the truth, and we both know it. I just wish it was more damn useful at the moment." She hugged the bard again. "It's all right."

Gabrielle hugged her back, as she watched the sunlight start to fade. What would the night hold, she wondered. Healing for them?

Or just more horror.

**

One Wild Ride

Part 15

Xena wrapped her arms around her knees, her eyes watching Gabrielle's face through the flames of their fire. It was dark out now, but the sky was clear over their heads and the stars twinkled crisply in the depths of it.

The bard was leaning back against a bit of trunk Xena had dragged over to their camp, using the firelight to fix the upper part of one of Xena's boots. Her eyes were intent on her task, her fingers skilled with the bone needle and length of gut they'd salvaged from the bottom of their pack.

It had been a quiet dinner, both of them with their attention turned inwards as they sat side by side near the warmth of the flames. But the quiet had been one of reflection and not anger, and Xena found herself grateful for that.

She was tired. They both were. The camp was relatively unsafe, and there was nothing close by that she could reasonably move them into. The yowling animal had moved off, but she was sure there were others out there, and always, she listened for the creatures who posed a far greater danger than random hunting predators.

"Xe?" Gabrielle's voice unexpectedly broke the stillness.

Xena jumped, a little, and leaned forward. "Yeah?"

"Do me a favor?"

Xena cleared her throat. "Sure."

Gabrielle paused in her needlework. "C'mover here."

The warrior got up and walked around the fire, settling down next to Gabrielle. "What's up?"

The bard squirmed closer to her and pressed her shoulder against her partners. "I was cold." She admitted. "And... I just don't want us messing with each other right now." She went back to her task, blinking a little as an errant draft brought the smoke from the fire over them.

"Messing?" Xena curled her arm around Gabrielle, feeling the chill of her bare skin as she let her hand rest against the bard's thigh. "You are cold." She observed. "Want me to kick the fire up a little?"

"Nah." The bard rubbed her cheek against Xena's shoulder. "You're enough."

Xena smiled, and gave the blond head resting against her a kiss. "Still upset?" She ventured to ask. "You've got that scrunched look on your face."

"Tired, I think." Gabrielle answered. "This place is pounding the spunk out of me." She let the thread and needle rest on her leg, as her body relaxed against Xena's. "I don't think we've ever been in a place like this before, where everything seems to be working against us all the time."

Xena listened to the tone of the words more than the text of them, hearing the soft rasp in Gabrielle's voice, a huskiness that usually only appeared when the bard was, truly, nearing exhaustion or had been telling stories for hours.

"Y'know.."

"Shh." The warrior rubbed her back lightly. "Just leave it, hon."

Gabrielle fell silent, a faint smile now tugging at her lips. "I will if you will." She elbowed Xena very gently in the ribs.

"Erm." Xena cleared her throat, tacitly acknowledging the accuracy of the comment. She spent a few minutes just watching the flames, allowing the gentle dance to relax her as Gabrielle went back to sewing on her sadly tattered boot.

In the lake nearby, fish were jumping. Xena could hear the splash as they broke the surface, then she listened as the whirr of wings flashed by them. An owl, maybe, or other night hunter attracted by the idea of a fresh dinner as they had been earlier.

She could hear the peep of an infant bird somewhere, nearby.

The normality of the sounds comforted her. After spending so many days offbalance, it felt good to be in a space where her senses felt more at home. She tipped her head back and regarded the stars as they twinkled solemnly at her, the familiar patterns visible as she scanned the sky.

She knew those same stars were covering their home, and if they were there, she could step outside their porch and look up at them, maybe even with Dori in her arms since the child had started noticing the pretty lights overhead.

Wasn't long, she figured, before they could start playing the pattern game, just as she and Gabrielle had all those years ago. What shapes would Dori see, she pondered a moment. Bugs, probably. Xena exhaled and dropped her eyes, letting her chin rest on Gabrielle's head.

Bugs, and pretty rocks, and animals. She could almost hear that piping little voice finding them, and as the thought crossed her mind, the determination to make it reality erupted inside her. It pushed back the uncertainty a bit, and gently nudged her thoughts from a quiet despair to something more productive.

Gabrielle finished her sewing project and held it up. "What do you think?"

Xena lifted one hand and took hold of the boot, turning it to the firelight as she examined it. The bard had patched up two holes, and closed a gap on the bottom, and if not dashing, the footwear was at least whole again. "Nice." She announced. "Good job."

Gabrielle slid the bone needle through a fold in her skirt and shook the boot out. "Give me your leg."

Xena extended her bare foot and watched as her partner put the boot on and tied the gut laces to hold it in place. She wiggled her toes inside the hide and smiled as Gabrielle tweaked them. "Thanks."

"Anytime." Gabrielle patted her leg, then let her hand rest on Xena's thigh, her thumb stroking the skin there in absent affection. "Wish all our problems were fixed so easily." She looked up, studying Xena's face with a somber expression on her own. "What's next for us, Xe?"

What's next? Xena laid one hand over her partner's. "What's next is, we take it one step at a time." She said. "No more plans. We do it like we used to.. just make choices as we go."

"No plans?"

"No."

Gabrielle considered that in silence for a bit. "We used to do that?" She finally queried, looking up in some puzzlement.

Xena took a breath to answer, then she paused and scratched her jaw in an almost sheepish gesture. "Well, I used to." She admitted. "I don't think I ever told you that."

Gabrielle's eyebrows rose. "No plan?"

"Urm.. no."

"You just let me think there was one, didn't you?"

Xena paused, then nodded. "Yeah." She agreed. "Seemed like a good idea at the time." She added. "Better than letting you think we were both lost somewhere and clueless."

The bard merely looked at her for a long, unblinking minute before she suddenly started laughing. She leaned against Xena helplessly, holding her stomach as she nearly convulsed.

"Uhm." Xena looked around, as the sound echoed over the lake.

"Bwahahahah.... Oh gods." Gabrielle continued laughing, barely able to speak. "You fraud!!!"

Paradoxically, the words made Xena smile, and she started chuckling right along with her partner. "Hey, you bought it, you little punk." She reminded her. "What the Hades was I supposed to say when you said 'gee Xena, what are we gonna do now?'" She asked. "Beats me, Gab? Let's toss a dinar? Whatcha in the mood for this time?"

Gabrielle laughed even harder, collapsing into Xena's lap and rolling over onto her back to face the sky. "I'd have rolled over and passed out." She said.

"Or run screaming." Xena demurred.

"You said I never screamed."

The warrior rolled her eyes. "Details. Details." She laid her arm over Gabrielle's abdomen. "Of course I told you I knew what I was doing. Think I wanted you to leave me?"

Gabrielle's chuckles faded and they looked at each other in a suddenly lengthening silence. Finally, the bard lifted her hand and gently laid it along Xena's cheek. "All those years, I wish I'd known how two sided that fear was."

Xena's eyes dropped momentarily, then lifted again, their pale depths collecting the flames from the fire. "Likewise."

Gabrielle didn't move her hand. "Xena." She hesitated. "If we don't make it out of here.." She caught Xena's hand as it moved to cover her lips. "Listen to me." She waited, watching storm clouds enter her partner's eyes but loving her anyway. "If we don't make it out of here, I want you to know something."

"If we don't make it out of here, my knowing anything's a moot point." Xena replied, shortly.

"Xena." The bard gentled her voice. "No matter how short my life's been, I've seen more... done more.. felt more.. than any dozen other people." She waited, but Xena merely looked at her. "I have no regrets. There's nothing I could look to and say... 'boy, wish I'd done that.'" A breath. "I've done it all, and I've done it with you."

Xena swallowed audibly.

"So.. I'm okay with this." Gabrielle finished, in a soft voice. "I'm all right."

Gently, the warrior took Gabrielle's face between her hands and lowered her head, so they were almost eyeball to eyeball. "I am NOT." She enunciated clearly. "All right with this."

Gabrielle blinked in surprise.

"I do NOT want my life to end here, no matter how entertaining I've made yours." Xena's tone gentled, to ease the harshness of the words. "I missed out watching my son grow up.. damned if I'm going to give up watching my daughter."

The bard's jaw dropped a little, her eyes widening.

"And you shouldn't either." Xena leaned forward and kissed her gently on the lips. "So can the eulogies, my love. We're going home."

Gabrielle really wasn't sure if she should feel ashamed, or relieved. Unable to decide, she settled on simple surrender, laying her trust into Xena's hands with no regret. "I love you." She whispered. "I'm with you." She laced her fingers behind Xena's neck and returned the kiss. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be." Xena pulled her head back just enough to make eye contact. "I understand what you're saying, Gabrielle. I'm just not ready to give this life up yet." She watched intently as the green eyes meeting hers warmed and softened. "Besides... we can do anything, you and I."

Gabrielle's face relaxed into a grin. "I think that may be the nicest thing you ever said to me." She shifted and glanced past Xena's shoulder, her eyes tracking something, as her lips moved silently.

"What?" Xena resisted the urge to turn around and look.

"Shooting star." The bard supplied. "And that sucker got a whopper of a wish to take with it."

"Ah." Xena relaxed, and returned her attention back to those gentle eyes, now fastened on her face. It evoked in her a rising passion, as her heart reached out to Gabrielle's and she cradled the bard in her arms. They had been on a rough road, this last little while, the two of them.

Sometimes it paid to concentrate on the little things, when the big things got out of hand.

Gabrielle's eyelashes fluttered closed as she pulled Xena's head down again and their lips met. She could taste the faintest hint of mint as she explored, her fingers stroking the warrior's face and feeling the subtle shift of her jaw muscles as she moved.

The bones felt stark, and very close to the surface to her. Gabrielle opened her eyes a little, letting her vision confirm what her touch had discovered and she gently smoothed her thumb over the angular planes as Xena's gazed dipped to hers.

Those eyes. Gabrielle felt herself get lost in them, and she pulled herself up to indulge in another kiss, her body already pressing itself closer to Xena's as a familiar tingle started in her guts. The warrior's touch slowly slid down her side and across her hip, easing her skirt up and causing her breath to catch.

The breeze brushed across her skin, now almost feeling good as Xena's fingertips trailed heat across her inner thigh, a slow, almost teasing motion that set her heart to pounding. She plucked at the belt holding Xena's fur garment on, pulling it free as Xena shifted and they slid together and she felt the slightly scratchy deer hide under her shoulderblades.

She could see the stars outlined around Xena's body, and just before the warrior's lips started moving down her breast, she spotted another shooting star streaking through the pattern of the Warrior, right overhead.

Now.. was that an omen, or what?

**

Gabrielle settled her staff end down between two rocks and used it to keep her balance as she balanced along the top of one of them, stepping down onto the ground as she walked along in Xena's shadow.

It was noon, near as she could reckon, and they'd been on the move since dawn after availing themselves of a few more fish, and a nest of waterfowl eggs just laid that Xena had almost stepped on coming up from the lake.

Given everything, she felt pretty good, better than Xena did probably since she'd at least gotten some sleep curled up in the warrior's arms all night. Totally unfair, Gabrielle readily acknowledged, but Xena insisted on staying awake, so really, given a nice, warm, protective blanket like that what was she supposed to do?

She could have stayed awake also, of course. Gabrielle stepped up onto another rock and paused, glancing ahead of them past Xena's steadily moving form. They were on a downward slant again, the path between the scattered boulders winding and narrow, threatening to catch hold of their boots. They were taking good care not to twist an ankle, and the progress so far had been pretty slow.

Slow, but steady. The bard slid past a rock taller than she was and sucked in a breath as the edges scraped along the bare skin of her back and middle, briefly wondering how Xena had skulked through there before her without at least a stifled curse.

She pressed her hands against the stone, its rough surface cool against her palms and the scent of moss strong in her nostrils. "Xena?" She called out, as she wriggled out from between the stones.

"Hm?" The warrior paused, and looked around, one booted foot on a slab of rock, the other planted firmly on the path. "You okay?"

"Sure, I'm fine." The bard caught up. "Does this path lead down to that plateau, you think?" She put a hand on Xena's arm and looked past her, at the boulder strewn space.

"Could be." Xena said. "That's what I'm hoping, anyway." She amended.

"It's taking forever." Gabrielle sighed. "So many darn rocks."

Xena turned and started leading the way again. "It's steeper ahead. Maybe we can find a faster way down." She suggested. "That'd be nice, huh?"

"Hm." Gabrielle gave the path a dubious look. "I don't know, Xe... with our luck we'll come around that corner and it'll just be a dead end again."

The warrior ruffled her hair. "Don't make me the optimist in this relationship. Huh?" She advised, as they worked their way around another boulder. "Look.. let's get up over this pass, and then maybe..."

"Maybe what?" Gabrielle poked her head past Xena's arm again, as they reached the narrow pass between the rocks. "Oh." She let out a soft groan, banging her head against Xena's stomach. "Why do I say stuff like that? You should just glue my teeth shut."

The warrior sighed, resting her elbow on the rock. In front of them the path abruptly vanished, down a very steep slope covered in loose bits of granite. She turned and looked behind them, then swiveled back around and started for the edge.

"Xena."

"Yeah?" The warrior ambled over to the drop off, testing the start of it with one cautious boot. Several chips slid out from under her toe and scuttled down the slope, starting a small landslide. "Hm."

Gabrielle walked up next to her and stood there, hands on hips, with her staff resting against her shoulder. "Sheesh." She muttered. "So.. we go back the way we came? Xena, this sucks."

"Mm."

"Was that yes, we go back the way we came, or yes this sucks, or both?"

Xena sniffed reflectively. "I'm thinking"

Gabrielle took the hint and shut up, studying the steep slope in front of them. It was long, and it arced around a pile of boulders near the bottom, shooting off into who only knew where after that. It was

too long for them to make their way down if the granite went out from under them, and she winced at the thought of taking a tumble and ending up going down head first.

She also winced at the thought of climbing back up the damn mountain, just to end up where they started. The constant going in circles was giving her a headache, and she felt a bubble frustration emerge as a soft growling sound.

Xena rested her arm casually across the bard's shoulders. "Tell ya what, Gabrielle."

"Uh oh." Gabrielle rolled her eyes around to watch her partner. "That tone of voice usually means I'm in trouble."

The warrior poked a thumb at her own chest, and her brows lifted. "Would I get you into trouble?"

"Constantly."

"Ooh.. no." Xena prodded her. "YOU get ME into trouble, madame bardic nutbread." She accused. "But listen.. I've got an idea on how to get down this thing."

'Yeah?' Gabrielle sounded dubious. "Without sliding on our butts?"

Xena cleared her throat.

"You know we'll be taking stitches out of each other for six moons if we try that."

"Not sliding on our butts, no." The warrior admitted. "C'mere." She untangled herself from Gabrielle and walked over to a shallow shelf of granite, sticking out from the side of the mountain. "Up here."

Gabrielle watched her step up on the slate. "It doesn't look really sturdy." She observed, seeing it wobble under her partner's weight.

"I know, c'mere." Xena held out a hand.

"What are we going to do?" Gabrielle resisted the motion, laying her staff over her shoulders and staying just out of reach.

"You don't trust me?" Mild, blue eyes regarded her.

"Whenever you say that, I usually shouldn't." Gabrielle sighed. "I end up in the mud, or in the water, or upside down or..."

"C'mere."

"Xena."

"C'mere." Xena wiggled her fingers at her. "Don't make me come over there and spank you."

"As if." Gabrielle reluctantly complied, walking over and joining her partner on the slab of rock, which did indeed teeter under her as she stepped up onto it. "Okay. Now what?"

"Trust me?"

Gabrielle closed her eyes. "Oh, no." She moaned. "I'm in trouble."

Xena chuckled, and put her arms around her partner. "Relax." She put the edge of her boot against the edge of the slat, and readied herself. "All right. Here's the deal.."

"Xe?" Gabrielle found a comfortable spot and nestled closer. "Just shut up and do whatever it is you're going to do."

"Okay." Xena jerked suddenly, throwing her weight on the front edge of the rock. It teetered briefly, then slid free from the mountain with a grating crunch, falling onto the granite slip and lurching forward.

"Oh boy." Gabrielle wrapped her arms around Xena, holding her staff behind the warrior gripped in one hand.

They tilted forward, and then the rock started moving, grinding down the slip and picking up speed as it hit a steeper patch.

Xena braced her legs wide and kept them both balanced, as the wind picked up and blew her hair back behind her and their speed increased. "Heh."

"Xeeennnaaa!!!!"

The warrior crouched, shifting her weight forward a little as the slate hit a patch of already sliding rocks, and they skidded sideways, twisting half around before she wrenched them straight again and they continued to drop. "Yeah!"

"Xee- NAH!" Gabrielle yelped, as they whirled around again, and she felt them drop into a dip that sent her stomach rocketing towards her boots. "Auuuuggghh!!!"

"C'mon, Gab... relax!" Xena had caught her balance now, and she was starting to enjoy the slide. "It's fun!"

Gabrielle opened one green eye and glared up at the warrior with it. "No it's not!"

"Sure it is! Look!" Xena coaxed her. "Just turn your head and see what it's like... it's great!"

Gabrielle could feel the motion all round her, Xena's shifting muscularity and the thrust of the wind against her skin. She chanced a quick look forward, and saw a huge rock approaching at frightening speed. "Augh!" She quickly turned her head back around and buried her face into Xena's shoulder. "Just revive me when it's over."

Xena patted her on the back and concentrated on steering, spotting a small, arching ridge on the side of the rapidly approaching boulder. She slid her weight to one side, and the slate responded, moving toward the ridge as they tilted precariously.

The edge of the slate rode up on the ridge and turned, taking them in a rough arc around the boulder and through a chute between it and another big rock. Xena threw her weight to the other side as they curved around it, and they shot out from between the stones and were suddenly airborne.

"Auuuuuggghh!!!" Gabrielle felt her guts drop out from under her again and she sucked in a breath, holding it to keep her stomach from coming out of her ears.

"Hang on!" Xena licked her lips, squinting into the wind as the slate landed, twisting under them and whirling them around in a tight circle. She held onto Gabrielle and fought for balance, then she felt the slate almost come out from under them as the slope abruptly dropped into a dip.

They bounced, jarring them both as Xena fought viciously to keep her balance and keep them both upright, her eyes suddenly seeing the thick thorn hedges rapidly approaching.

Oh, Ares left nut. Xena's eyes widened almost to their fullest. Gabrielle would forgive her a lot, but not that. "Hang on! Tight! I'm gonna jump!" She yelled a warning to her partner.

Gabrielle latched onto her with powerful arms and took a deep breath, keeping her eyes closed and just feeling the motion as Xena's body coiled, and her thighs tensed into a crouch, and then there was a crunch, and a jolt, and the smell of thick greenery as the warrior erupted upward, taking the bard with her into the sky.

"Ugh!" Gabrielle's senses went out of whack as she felt the rotation and realized she was upside down, then before she could react she felt Xena's body twist powerfully in mid air and she was wrenched sideways.

"Ground!"

Gabrielle bent her knees just as the ground came up and they landed, the slope of the ground throwing them completely off balance and sending them tumbling together onto thankfully moss and grass covered earth that nevertheless pitched them downward in a helpless roll.

"Xxxxxeeennnaaaaa!!!!"

Xena tried to slow their decent, but the ground gave her no handhold and she resorted to wrapping Gabrielle up in her arms and protecting her as best as she was able instead. The bard's staff bounced free and followed them down the slope, and she could only hope something bad wasn't at the end of it.

Like thorns.

Or hooters.

Xena caught the smell of large animals suddenly, very nearby.

Or worse.

**

"Don't move."

Gabrielle popped her eyes open at that, just barely having caught her breath. She was on her back, on the ground, and there was a sound of lots of moving animals around her. "Where are we?"

"Just don't move."

The bard carefully peeked around in a circle, without moving her head. What she'd thought were huge, furry trees suddenly shifted and as she looked straight up, she saw what they were attached to. "By the gods."

"Shh."

"What are they?" Gabrielle whispered.

"I don't know, but I don't want them to step on us." Xena muttered. She eyed the huge animals with apprehension. Each one appeared almost the size of their cabin at home, and they had thick fur and long, snake like snouts.

"Uh.. me either." Gabrielle resisted the urge to scoot closer to her partner and instead, watched with wide eyes as the nearest animal extended it's snout towards her and appeared to be sniffing her leg. "Oh sheeps, Xena.. if that thing tickles me I'm toast."

The warrior nibbled the inside of her lip. "Think about something else."

"Like what?????"

Xena let her head rest against the moss covered ground, as she peered up through the leaves. "Like.. how we get ourselves into situations like this."

Gabrielle cleared her throat meaningfully.

A bird crossed through Xena's line of sight. "Seemed like a good idea at the time." She mumbled under her breath.

Gabrielle rolled her eyes, and held her breath as the animal moved a step closer, it's weight compressing the ground with an audible sound as it shifted it's attention higher on her body. The snout stopped around her navel and she watched nervously as the flexible tip lowered to brush her skin.

Xena made a soft noise, and Gabrielle felt a surge of energy through their bond, that sense of impending motion that now let her fight skin to skin with her partner and not be in danger. "Xe, hold it." She uttered, urgently. "Just wait."

The animal's snout touched her, a curious, prickly feeling that wasn't ticklish as much as it was scratchy. Gabrielle looked up at the animals head, and caught sight of it's eye, midway up the huge head that towered over her. It was dark and round, and it was focused on her with a mild intensity.

Her body relaxed a trifle, arduously gained warrior's instincts judging no immediate threat. "Hi there." She murmured. "What are you, hm?"

The animal traced a curious circle on her belly, then moved its attention to Gabrielle's face.

"Gabrielle." Xena decided to risk it, and moved closer to the bard, rolling over and getting her hands and knees under her. A quick look around confirmed her fear that the animals were ringing them completely, and getting out from between them was going to be complicated if not dangerous.

"Easy, tiger." The bard whispered. "It's not hurting me." She glanced sideways, seeing Xena's brilliant blue eyes now a short arm's length away. The warrior's catskin tunic was covered in grass stains and mud, but that did nothing to disguise the quivering power just under it. "It's okay."

For Xena, it was anything but okay. She watched as the animal curiously felt around Gabrielle's face with its snout, the flexible nub on the end touching the end of the bard's nose as her partner's green eyes avidly watched it.

The animals were enormous. They had tree trunk like legs, and a huge, heavy body covered in fur, ears like flaps that waved incessantly, and the long, snakelike snouts, which curled out from between massive, curling tusks.

Gabrielle's nose twitched as the hairs on the creature's snout tickled it, and she reached up in reflex to rub her skin. The creature seemed to find this intriguing, and the snout then explored her hand. She could feel the soft warmth as it breathed out, and daringly, she curled her fingers around the bristly skin and felt it.

It was ridged, and flexible at the same time, and the touch as it squeezed her fingers was gentle. She rubbed her thumb across the inside of the snout and almost jumped as the animal snorted a little, making a soft, gurgling noise. "Oh. Sorry."

The animals shifted, causing Xena's nostrils to flare, and then, from between the trunklike legs, a much smaller specimen emerged. It ambled over to Gabrielle and poked her in the ear with its smaller snout, a high pitched yodel issuing from its mouth.

The bigger animal above her bugled back, wrapping its snout around the smaller animal and holding it still.

"Oh." Gabrielle very slowly sat up, pushing herself upright. "Xena, it's a baby."

Xena had eased back down and was now lying on her side, propping her head up on one hand. "Yeah. It's a baby." She agreed dryly. "Do me a favor and don't scare it."

"Me?" Gabrielle pulled her legs up under her and rested her elbows on her knees. She raked her hair from her eyes and looked around at the living forest, finding a dozen set of dark, unfathomable eyes looking back at her. "Im' going to scare it? Xena, they're scaring me."

"Me too."

The baby creature pulled away from its tether and rambled over Gabrielle, knocking her backwards with surprising force as it headed over to investigate Xena.

"Hey!" Xena sat up suddenly, then stopped as the animals all shifted, and the one nearest her trumpeted loudly and stamped a foot. She hesitated, as the small animal butted her with its head, her eyes widening as it started to boldly yank at her hair with its snout.

Gabrielle got back up and cocked her head, glancing at the big animals, then at the little one mauling her beloved partner. "Hey." She said, in a thoughtful tone. "You think this is how everyone else feels with Dori?"

"What?" Xena reached up to prevent her eyeball from being plucked. "What are you talking about?"

The bard removed a clump of mud from her cheek and grimaced, as she rotated her shoulder and it popped audibly. That got a reaction from the big animal, and she froze in place as the snout draped itself over her shoulder, and she could feel the warm breath tickle her underarm. "Uh... nevermind, just at thought." She murmured, watching in bemusement as the animal examined her joint.

"Listen you little.." Xena managed to get her hair untangled from the baby animals' clutches. "Cut that out."

"Xe?" Gabrielle noticed the big animal eyeing her partner with a less than friendly expression. "Be nice."

"What?"

"Be nice, please?" The bard lowered her voice. "These things are really big, and they have really big teeth and really big feet." She eased up to her knees, gingerly giving the huge leg next to her a pat. It was as big in circumference as she was, and felt very solid.

Xena fended off the curious baby and stood up slowly, as the big animals shifted uncertainly and raised their snouts. "Take it easy." She held both hands out from her body, and straightened to her full height. Next to the animals, it wasn't that significant but it scared the baby and he backed away, squealing. "Hey!"

The big animal next to Gabrielle trumpeted angrily, and shoved past her, heading for Xena. Without much real thought, the bard bolted between it's legs and got between it and her partner, turning and throwing her arms out in a blocking motion. "Whoa!!!!!"

The big animal raised it's snout and let out a brassy trumpet and the rest joined in, shifting and stamping, deafening the two humans in their midst. Gabrielle backed up until she bumped into Xena, her arms still spread wide.

The biggest animal rushed towards them, but they were almost against the ring of animals behind them, and there was nowhere to run. Xena started to pull Gabrielle behind her, but the bard resisted, as the big animal was upon them and she opened up her lungs and bellowed at the top of them.

The animal stopped, and bellowed back. Gabrielle made eye contact with it and yelled again, a wordless sound that erupted from her guts.

For a moment, everything stopped.

The biggest creature raised it's snout and poked Gabrielle with it, twining it's flexible nub into her shirt and tugging roughly.

Xena reached around and grabbed the snout, removing it from her partner's chest and pushing it away. Then she folded her arms around the bard and glared at the animal.

The animal's snout returned, this time smacking Xena's arm.

The warrior's glare became something darker, as she felt her temper starting to flare. "Watch it, buster. I don't care how big you are."

"Xe."

"Gabrielle, I wouldn't let Zeus put his hands on you." Xena told her, bluntly. "So whatever this is better just back off."

The bard glanced down at the mud streaked arms draped over her. She took Xena's hand in hers and turned it palm upmost, giving it a gentle kiss before she laced their fingers together. Then she looked back up at the creature, finding it's eyes now fastened back on her.

The snout came back, but this time it snuffled at their joined hands before it reached around to pluck a bit of Xena's cat skin shirt with an air of disdain.

"She doesn't like that." Gabrielle whispered.

"She?" Xena whispered back. "Too bad. I'm not gonna take it off."

The animal tugged the catskin again, and bugled angrily.

"What's it pissed off about?" The warrior muttered. "I killed it, didn't I?" She released one arm from around Gabrielle and slid the ragged sleeve of the garment up, exposing her bare shoulder. "See?" She

addressed the animal, falling silent as the snout returned, sliding it's tip up her arm and exploring the now exposed skin.

"She's thinking." Gabrielle murmured. "These are way smarter than those dumb hooters."

The animal regarded Xena soberly. Then she lifted her trunk and bugled, causing the others to shift and start moving.

"Uh oh." Gabrielle inhaled sharply. "Should we.."

"Stay still." Xena finally felt back in control of the situation. She wrapped her arms more firmly around Gabrielle as each of the animals passed by them, snouts reaching out to brush them, touch them, in one case, curl around a bit of her hair.

Everything but harm them. The animals walked steadily away, the biggest one herding the baby who looked repeatedly over it's shoulder with small, wide eyes at them. They moved into the forest, leaving nothing behind them but a thick scent of musk, and muddy ground pounded flat.

Xena waited for them to disappear, before she relaxed, exhaling shakily and letting her head rest against Gabrielle's. "Whoo." She uttered. "That's the most dangerous animal we've seen here yet."

"Mmm. Glad your bluff wasn't called?." Gabrielle asked gently. "I sure am glad mine wasn't."

Xena arched her neck so they could make eye contact. "Were we bluffing?"

The bard considered the question briefly, before she looked out after the vanished herd and smiled. "Way smarter than the hooters." She said, in wryly oblique agreement. "You know, I think I liked them."

"Mm."

Gabrielle tipped her head back. "Now. Can we talk about this 'trust me' thing?"

Xena peered past her. "Oh look." She pointed. "Aren't those walnuts?"

"Xena."

"Hey, gotta grab em while we can."

"I'm going to get you for that." Gabrielle allowed herself to be tugged towards the trees anyway. "You know where we're going now?"

"After those animals." Xena replied. "Should be easy enough to follow."

"Should they?"

The warrior pointed. "Yeah."

Gabrielle peered at what she was indicating. "Wow." She muttered respectfully. "That poop's bigger than my head."

The warrior knelt beside it, and used a stick to poke the dropping apart. "Hm." She glanced over her shoulder, to see Gabrielle studiously looking elsewhere. "Grass eater." She stood up. "Should be safe to trail em." She dusted her fingers off and ducked under a branch. "Besides, I think they liked you."

Gabrielle strolled along behind her, not disputing the words. There had been something gentle and fascinating about the animals despite their size and it was nice, she reflected, to be able to feel good about something she'd found in the valley after all.

And who knew? Maybe they had a story to tell her.

**

"Why here?" Mikah asked, as he turned in a slow circle looking at his surroundings. "Why not your place? I've heard so much about Amazon villages. I was looking forward to seeing one." He turned back around toward Ephiny and waited, watching her face.

"Why not my place." Ephiny went to the table and uncorked a flask there, pouring herself a small cup of wine, pausing to swirl it before she continued. "Well, mostly because my place isn't my place. It's our place." She met Mikah's eyes steadily. "And I think this place has good karma for what I'm looking for."

The blond man strolled over to where Xena's armor was hanging, casually – but in an obvious place of honor. He touched it with his fingers, watching her from the corners of his eyes. "Kinky." He commented. "I like that. Haven't seen much of it since Athens."

Ephiny took a seat at the table, and waved him over to a second. She waited for him to sit down, then she pushed the wine flask over. "What exactly did you do in Athens? I asked Gabrielle once. Didn't get much of an answer."

Mikah poured himself a cup and rested his elbows on the table. "What did I do in Athens." He repeated. "What didn't I do in Athens?" He waggled an eyebrow at her. "I was an indentured worker at one of the lowest class whorehouses."

"Yeah?" Ephiny sipped the wine.

"Yeah." The blond man said. "I ran off from home when I was twelve.. got into some trouble in a few places. Ended up in jail in a place not twenty leagues from here."

Interesting. Ephiny found herself intrigued by the man, as well as acceptably attracted to his appealing good looks. "For what?"

Mikah grinned rakishly. "Seducing the innkeeper's daughter." He admitted. "Kind of got my start young."

The Amazon laughed. "No kidding."

"Yeah, well... I got lucky, she didn't sprout, and they let me loose about a month later." He said. "I just kept walking after that.. found food where I could, and eventually ended up outside Athens one summer day." He took a sip of the wine. "I was lucky... I copped a ride in the back of an ale wagon that ended up in the docksides."

"That's lucky?"

Mikah met her eyes again. "I could have ended up a real slave, in some patrician's private rooms. I didn't. The inn wasn't the best, but at least I felt like my own person there."

Ephiny was surprised at the complicated emotions she could read into his words. This was, she realized, more than just the feckless player she'd first thought. "Ah." But then of course – Gabrielle wouldn't have taken an interest in him if he had been now would she? "Tough life."

He shrugged. "Not always." He got up and walked over to Gabrielle's writing table, reaching out and touching her diary with a curious fingertip. "Sometimes, sure. But whose isn't?" He turned to look at her. "I had some good times.. good friends there."

Ephiny drained her cup and poured another. She watched him look around the cabin, his eyes drinking in the details. "Life's like that." She agreed quietly. "Sometimes it's good, sometimes it's lousy."

Mikah returned to the table and sat back down, resting his chin on his fist. "But if I hadn't been there, I wouldn't have been in the kitchen when Xena walked in, now would I?" He said. "And I wouldn't have wanted to miss that."

Ephiny chuckled. "Ah, yes." She nodded. "The Warrior Princess haze. I know it well." She continued. "She strikes many people that way."

Mikah nodded. "I wanted her." He replied with surprising frankness. "Like I've never wanted anyone in my life."

The Amazon's eyes opened wider. She took a breath, then exhaled. "Lucky you didn't try anything."

Mikah looked wryly at her. "She's very dangerous, I know." He got up and circled the table, settling in the chair next to Ephiny. "But you know.. I like that."

Ephiny put her cup down and covered his hand with her own. "You have no idea what you'd have gotten yourself into." She told him. "But I do understand."

"Do you?" He watched her intently.

The Amazon smiled. "Yeah, I do." She reached up to tweak his snub nose. "But let's not talk about unattainable goals, okay?"

"Okay." He smiled back. "So. What's a nice Amazon like you doing in a place like this?" He reiterated an earlier question. "Since I know you've got a partner, and all that."

"And all that." Ephiny traced her finger around his jawline. "I do, and a damn fine one. Only one thing she's lacking. Know what that is?"

Mikah's eyes dropped to his lap. "I've got an idea."

"Mm. Know what we Amazons use men for?" She didn't want there to be any misunderstanding here. The kid was cute, but that kind of complication in her life was something she really, really really didn't need. She watched his eyes track her hand, lashes fluttering a little. "Hmm?" Do ya?"

"Appetizers?"

Ephiny laughed, genuinely amused. "You're cute." She told him. "And you're funny. You remind me a little of a friend of mine." She got up and walked around him. He turned as she did and then stood and they circled each other gracefully. "We try to find a friend." She added. "When we want children."

He blinked, then his eyes widened, and softened a little. "You want me?" He seemed surprised. "For that?"

"For that." Ephiny stuck her fingers into his belt and tugged. "You up for it?"

Mikah looked down again. "I think I am." He said. "No one's ever wanted me for that before." He moved closer to Ephiny, reaching out to touch her face. "Is this your..

"No."

They leaned forward at the same time, and kissed. "I was married before." Ephiny said. "A long time ago.. I have a son."

"Ah." Mikah seemed to relax visibly. "He must be a babe, still."

Ephiny smiled, acknowledging the compliment. "Actually, he's a centaur." She leaned against the center support in the cabin. "So was his father."

"A centaur?"

"Mm."

"Any truth to those stories..."

"Really want to know?"

Mikah's eyes widened. "I think I should warn you." He said. "That I'm easily intimidated."

The Amazon put her finger tips on his chest and pushed gently, shoving him towards the bed. "I'm not."

"Obviously."

Ephiny paused, her expression sobering. "I try not to hold on to old memories." She told him. "They're not all good ones." Her eyes dropped, then lifted. "Some are downright ugly."

Mikah took hold of her hand. "I'm sorry." He answered, in a gentle voice. "I'll try to give you some sweet ones." He stepped forward and kissed her, and they eased round each other in a circular motion. "And thank you for thinking of me for this. It's an honor." He pulled back a trifle. "Isn't it?"

"It is." Ephiny felt her body beginning to react. "It really is." She brushed her body against his, and felt him respond. "And if you're really, really good..." She unlatched his belt. "Maybe I'll make you an Amazon."

Mikah found himself pulled down onto the soft surface of the bed. "Is that painful?"

"Maybe."

"Hmm."

**

Gabrielle rested her staff across her shoulders and waited as Xena scouted out a patch of thick underbrush to one side of where the animals had gone. It was late afternoon, and they'd spent the balance of the day following the herd and moving down the side of the mountain after them.

It had been almost peaceful. She twisted her body to either side, and exhaled, letting her wrists drape over the ends of the staff. She'd felt not really safe, but at least, not hunted as long as they were near the big animals, and since they were going in the right direction, the one she and Xena wanted to go in, well then, why not follow them?

They'd stayed back though, not wanting to risk the creatures thinking they were going to be attacked. Though.. Gabrielle had to smile, she had to wonder what exactly she or Xena could do to them with out any weapons to speak of.

Kick them? They'd hardly notice it, if they did.

Xena emerged from the brush and headed back towards her. She was shaking one hand, and licking her thumb on the other, and that could only mean one thing.

Gabrielle trotted towards her. "Got lucky?"

"Got stung." The warrior ruefully held up her hand. "Bastards.. but on the other hand.. " She removed the half skull from under her arm and displayed it. Nestled in the center was a big chunk of honeycomb, and drips of the golden treat were trickling down the side.

"Great." The bard chortled, evading the skull and taking her partner's wounded hand instead. "Let me see." She studied the reddened spot. "Ow.. is that still in there?"

"Pulled it out." Xena replied succinctly. "Barbed."

"Ow."

"Yeah... but worth it." The warrior sucked on a piece of comb contentedly. "It's all right. I'll dunk it in the lake later."

Gabrielle fished a piece out herself and licked it. "Mm." She could taste the local wildflowers in the sweetness, a rich hint of rose and jasmine that almost reminded her of home. "Tastes like your mom's last batch."

"It does." Xena looked over her shoulder. "There's a patch of thick scrub just over that hillock. The herd's camped near the lake on the side of it. We can stop here for now."

"Okay." Gabrielle agreed. "I could use a break." She took the skull from Xena's hands and they walked side by side down the slope, the late breeze coming up into their faces. She could smell the lake as they walked along the thick hedge, and a hint of the animals, and as she listened, she heard one of them trumpet. "You think they know we're here?"

"Yeah." Xena was examining her stung hand. "Damn, that hurt."

"Do you think they mind us following them?" Gabrielle wondered. "Xena, I've never seen animals that were so smart, have you?"

The warrior walked along in silence for a moment. "Argo's that smart."

The bard smothered a grin. "Well, I know, honey, but she's just one horse. Do you think all horses are as smart as she is?"

"Hmph." Xena made a face. "Probably not, no." She admitted. "But these things.. I mean, Gabrielle, look at this place." She extended her other hand and indicated the valley. "How could all these things live down here, and we never know it? You said it yourself, that honey tastes just like mom's."

"Almost, yeah."

"So.. " The warrior sounded frustrated. "Bees make honey from flowers, and it's all different. You know that."

"Right."

"So if we're so close to home the honey tastes the same, damn it.. "

"I know." Gabrielle patted her on the back. "We'll figure it out. There has to be some trick to it, Xena. Hey.. maybe it's Aphrodite, playing a joke on us."

Xena looked at her.

"Okay, maybe not." The bard murmured. "There has to be some explanation, though. Maybe those animals are part of it." She suggested. "Let's find out more about them."

It was, Xena had to admit, as good an idea as any. And at least, they had honey. She fished out another piece of comb and took a bite. That had to count for something.

**

It finally felt like things were turning around. Night had fallen, and in the shelter of their thick hedges by a nice fire, Gabrielle was at last able to lean back and relax.

It wasn't the same thing she'd felt the previous nights, when utter exhaustion had overtaken her. This was more of a usual end of the day tiredness that made her glad she was simply sitting down and had the long clear night ahead of her.

The small patch of bushes had been kind to them as well – she'd found two kinds of berries and Xena had discovered an apple tree and a clump of earthen tubers. Forgoing any hunting, Gabrielle had roasted the tubers, sprinkling them with the salt crystals Xena had captured for her and they'd shared the fruit drizzled with honey and hot tea in peaceful contentment.

"This seems almost normal." Gabrielle commented.

"Shh."

"Well, it does." The bard

"I know. But if you keep saying that, some damn three headed whatsit's gonna land in my lap." Xena told her. "And it's nice just to sit and listen to the fire."

"You telling me to shut up?" Gabrielle inquired.

"No."

"Yes, you were."

"Gabrielle, don't start that." The warrior leaned her head back and looked plaintively at the stars overhead.

"Just kidding." The bard wriggled closer and lifted the skull, taking a sip of cooling tea and then offering the makeshift cup to her partner. "So, any idea what those things are?"

Xena leaned over and took a mouthful of tea, then sat back. "Saw something like them once." She admitted. "A long time ago."

"How long?" Gabrielle glanced at her, a knowing twinkle in her eyes. "Grandma."

Xena smiled briefly. "Feels like.. no, it is another lifetime ago." She said. "Dry, damned place off west somewhere. But they weren't hairy, and they were smaller." She rested her forearms on her knees. "Men rode them.. used them to do some amazing things."

"Really? Like what?"

"Lift trees, with that snout thing, push stuff over. Pull houses down." The warrior replied. "I never got close to them, though.. I don't think they liked me."

"Animals always like you." Gabrielle disagreed.

"Those didn't."

Hadn't they? The bard sipped her tea thoughtfully. "I think they did.. I think that baby did, that's for sure. Just your clothes – I think it bothered them." She smoothed a hand over the catskin on Xena's leg. "Maybe they hunt those big guys?"

"Maybe." Xena allowed that it was possible. "Just one more big question."

Gabrielle stifled a yawn. She looked around, and thumped her heel on the ground. Finding it solid, she handed over the cup and got up, stretching her back out as she wandered over to the thick bushes, examining them.

Xena stayed where she was, content to watch. Gabrielle knew what she was doing, finding leaves and other things that would ease their comfort to sleep on. It was a task she'd taken on herself about mid way through their relationship often to the bemusement of her traveling companion.

Especially that first time.

**

"What are you doing?" Xena stopped and stared, hands on hips.

Gabrielle peeked over an armful of leaves. "Me?"

Xena turned around in a circle, then looked back at her. "Yes you. Who do you think I'm talking to, Argo?" She walked over to the bard. "What is all that?"

"Um." The bard shuffled around her and walked to the two sets of furs laid side by side near the fire. "I was jus thinking, you know how you said the ground here was so hard?"

"I said that?"

Gabrielle turned and looked over her shoulder. "You said that. Before. Uh.. before we had dinner. Don't you remember?"

Xena scratched her neck. "Uh.. right."

"Anyway." Gabrielle lifted up Xena's fur and started laying the soft branches underneath it. "I thought you'd like something maybe to make it not so hard."

The sound of the fire crackling was suddenly amplified, enough so that Gabrielle turned her head again to make sure it wasn't getting out of control. She found Xena staring at her, both brows lifted, eyes widened. "What?"

Caught flat footed, Xena closed her jaw with an audible click, then turned on her heel and headed off into the dark forest. "I'll be back."

"Okay." Gabrielle blinked at her retreating form, then she turned back around and continued her task. "You know something Argo?" She commented to the mare, who was cropping grass nearby. "I think Xena's been a little strange lately, don't you?"

"Brpophihf."

"No, really." Gabrielle continued earnestly. "Wasn't that weird, what she just did? All I'm doing is putting these leaves I found under her bed to make it softer.. that's not weird, is it?"

Argo munched her grass in silence.

"I mean, I'm just trying to be nice." Gabrielle finished laying down her armful of leaves, and flipped Xena's fur back over, patting it experimentally. "Well.." She sighed. "It's not much better, but anything helps, right Argo?"

"Poffnfmt."

The bard got up and started back into the bushes, to get more leaves. She wasn't sure what had given her the idea to do it, just maybe something about how Xena had talked about the ground, or maybe it was just they'd been traveling rough for so long this time or...

Gabrielle sighed, and leaned against a tree. "Or maybe you're just in love with her and you don't really know what to do about it." She muttered under her breath. "At least I didn't make it any worse." She pushed back the sense of confusion, and used her little knife to cut more of the soft branches. "She just thinks I'm a silly kid."

Argo stopped chewing, then shook her head.

"Yes, she does." Gabrielle sighed. "The gods know, I'm no Ulysses. I feel so stupid sometimes, Argo. Why do I have to feel like this? Why can't we just be friends again?"

The mare, surprisingly, ambled over and bumped her in a friendly manner. Gabrielle let the branch she'd been holding fall, and she put her arms around Argo's neck and hugged her. "I thought love was supposed to feel good, Argo." She said. "Not hurt so much."

Argo stood quietly, giving Gabrielle a place to rest her cheek and a soft patch of fur to absorb the few tears that escaped her

**

Xena sat down on a tree stump, resting her elbows on her knees and her head against her clenched hands. She exhaled, blowing a lock of dark hair, her face tensed in frustration.

Damn it." Her body shifted, restless and antsy and finally she ended up standing again, pacing back and forth.

Damn it. She put her hands on her hips and looked at the ground, unable to push aside the growing uncertainty and the emotions that were tying her guts up in knots and making her damn palms sweat. "Damn it. I am too old for this."

The wind blew through the trees overhead, making an almost chuckling sound. Xena tipped her head back and glared at the leaves, and then, just as suddenly, the anger drained out of her and she was left with only a simple ache in her chest instead.

It had been a very long time since she'd felt that echo, or the dryness in her mouth. To now have it happen with someone she'd regarded, no taken for granted as a friend was knocking her off balance.

Knocking her off balance. Xena ran a hand through her hair. Gods.

She turned and went back towards the camp, stopping just out of the firelight and looking at the empty set of furs just to one side of the flames. She could see the slight lumpiness under hers, and if she closed her eyes she could see again Gabrielle's intent, yet gentle expression as she put the padding in place, her body outlined in the glow.

Funny. Xena caught her breath. How you could live with someone for years and never notice how beautiful they were until you fell in love with them.

Damn it. Xena swallowed. "She was just being nice." She muttered to herself. "That's all. So take all that other crap and stuff it."

Gabrielle emerged from the other side of the clearing, her arms full. She walked across and knelt down next to her furs, but her shoulders were bowed, and there was something in the way she was holding her head that tugged unexpectedly at Xena's heart.

What parts of it that weren't thumping in an exasperating double time that was.

Gabrielle finished her task and eased over to sit on her sleeping fur, legs sprawled as she aimlessly shredded one of the remaining leaves she'd had left over. After a brief pause, she looked up at the fire, and the light sparkled off a single tear as it trickled down her cheek.

Impatiently, she wiped it away with the back of her hand, and then she shook her head and reached for her diary, pulling it over and sprawling onto her side as she opened it.

Xena took a deep breath and started forward, She was halfway across the clearing before Gabrielle either heard or sensed her, and looked up, her mist green eyes meeting Xena's in a moment of bone deep honesty that slowed the moment to starlit silence.

An owl hooted.

Then Xena's foot caught on a stone half buried in the turf and she lost her balance, pitching forward to land sprawling on her furs, her head only inches from Gabrielle's elbow. "Son of a..."

Gabrielle quickly put a hand out to steady her. "Wow! Careful!"

That touch stilled the dark echo inside her, and Xena at that moment knew herself lost to it. Could she really keep fighting this?

Did she even really want to?

"Hey." She reached over and cupped her hand around the bard's knee, patting it lightly. "Damn good thing you put the leaves under here, huh?"

"Well." Gabrielle paused to swallow. "I wasn't really expecting... uh..." Her eyes tracked to the hand still resting casually on her leg. "Yeah."

Yeah. Xena patted the surface next to her. "I think my leaves are springier than yours."

"Uh..."

"C'mere, try em."

"Uh..."

"You gotta do this every night now, y'know."

"Wow."

Xena chuckled wryly, lacing her hands behind her head as the sweet memory slowly dissolved around her. Those had been such confusing times for both of them, that stretch when they'd become more than friends, but not quite lovers.

Confusing and definitely frustrating, but it made her smile to remember it anyway. Gods, they'd been such goofballs. No wonder everyone gave them those looks when they'd assured them no, they were 'just friends, really.'

What was that Autolycus had said to her after that whole mess? "Sure, babe. That's why EVERYONE wants to be your.. 'friend.'"

Ah well.

"Hey, Xena?"

She looked past the fire to find Gabrielle leaning against a tree looking back, those mist green eyes now confident and knowing as she held up a handful of what looked to the warrior's sharp eyes to be blackberries.

"Want to taste something sweet?" The bard asked, with studied innocence.

Xena crooked a finger at her. Love really hadn't turned out so bad after all, in the end.

Had it?

**

"Did you hear that?" Eponin turned, standing up as a wild scream rent the darkness. "What in Hades..."

"Wish it was." Granella got up from her crouch near the fire and grabbed her bow, efficiently nocking an arrow to its string and turning. "In Hades, that is."

Eponin listened again, cocking her head, but the noise wasn't repeated and after a few minutes, she relaxed a trifle and slid her sword back into its sheath. "Being out on that water had its good points." She commented, as Granella set her bow down and went back to the fish that were cooking.

"Yeah." Granella agreed, as she turned their dinner. "But you know, there's always crocodiles."

Pony stopped in her tracks, and turned. "What?"

"Never mind." Granella hid a grin. "Just a story I heard Gabrielle tell once." She reached over and took a swig of water from her waterskin. "Who knows where she gets these things from."

"Huh." The weapons' master strolled to the edge of the river they were camped by and looked across the moonlit surface. "She lives most of the things she tells, yeah?"

"Yeah."

"What's that like.. you know?" Pony mused. "What's it like knowing every time you get up in the morning you might end the day wishing you'd stayed in bed?"

Granella removed the fish from the fire and split it up, putting a half in either of their two wooden travel plates. "Well." She got up and walked over to Pony, poking her in the shoulder with a plate edge. "Y'know, I'm thinking those two probably wish they'd stayed in bed more than most."

"Well, sure.. that's what I..." Pony took the plate, and the double entendre registered. "Oh, well yah, that too."

They both chuckled.

Pony wandered over to a rock and sat down on it, breaking off pieces of the hot fish gingerly and blowing on them before she put them between her teeth. They had made good time during the day, and she was feeling better about their trek. "Wish we'd find more sign of em." She said, after a thoughtful chew. "Hate to be spending all this time going the wrong damn way."

Granella found a spot on the ground near the fire and sat cross-legged, her plate in her lap. The night was cool, and she discovered she wasn't really used to being out in leathers anymore. Now that they were off the water, though, she was feeling a bit more comfortable.

At least the rain had stopped. She furtively glanced at the sky as the thought crossed her mind, relieved to see brilliant stars overhead. "I wish we would find something too." She answered Pony. "At least we know they're down here somewhere. Place isn't that big."

Pony glanced around them, and shook her head, but went back to eating her fish in silence.

Granella found a moment to enjoy the almost quiet, even the sounds of creatures rustling off somewhere in the bush. It was so different than what she had become used to lately that she found the wildness of the place soothing her – there were no cursing drovers, or yelling children around to grate on the ears.

You could hear yourself think out here. She sucked a fishbone clean thoughtfully.

"Hey, Gran?"

Granella looked over at her companion. "Yeah?"

Pony's eyes were flicking back and forth, across the dark edge of the trees. "You get the feeling we're being watched?"

"Um." Granella cleared her throat a bit. "No, honestly." She admitted. "Should I?"

Eponin drew her sword again and stood, setting her plate aside on the rock as she walked away from the fire, and towards the trees. "I dunno." She said. "Lemme go see if I'm not losing my mind."

"Be funny if it was them!" Granella called after her, half jokingly. "Careful you don't get tossed on your butt into the water."

Pony snorted, but she kept walking, slowing to allow her eyes to adjust to the darkness as she left the circle of firelight and entered the gloom. She didn't really think it was Xena and Gabrielle – the two of them were capable of pulling a prank, sure, but this wasn't the time or place and she figured they knew that.

Besides, it felt wrong. As she eased into the forest, she felt her hackles raise, her body reacting to a danger she couldn't see or hear yet. You could call it imagination if you wanted to, but she'd lived as long as she had as a warrior by paying attention to it. "Gran." She called back. "Watch it."

Granella took the warning seriously. She tossed her plate to the ground and grabbed her bow again, checking for her long dagger in its thigh sheath as she stood up and prepared to back up her companion. Like any other warrior society, there were different levels in the Amazons, and she and Pony had always been in different ones.

Pony was, in addition to their weapon's master, one of the leaders of the heavy fighters who wore partial armor in big fights, and used longswords much like Xena did.

Or, well, tried to. Granella managed a brief, wry grin. Her own group, the scouts, eschewed the swords and carried bows and light weapons instead, suited to their smaller frames and different skills. Both groups had friendly competitions with each other, but in all, they knew their place in the village and were mostly content with it.

She nocked an arrow and followed Pony, careful to aim the shaft up and to the left so an accidental release wouldn't pin her companion to a tree or something equally embarrassing.

Maybe, she thought suddenly, that was why Xena and Gabrielle drove the Amazons nuts. They really didn't fit into any of the long established patterns, and so... well, they challenged those traditions. Xena worked equally well with any weapons, or no weapons, and was so amazingly light on her feet despite her size it frustrated Pony's group to no end.

And Gabrielle? Forget it. An Amazon Queen whose best weapon was a big stick and a lot of talk. No wonder half the nation was confused and out of sorts. Granella shook her head and stepped quietly into the forest, her eyes catching Pony's figure just ahead of her. "Here." She uttered, in a low voice. "What is it?"

Pony held up a hand and made a sign.

Granella paused and put her back to a tree, sliding over to one side so she could draw her bowstring back and lower the tip, still keeping it to one side of where Eponin was standing. Her heartbeat picked up, and she was aware of a chill down her spine as a world she'd thought she'd left behind suddenly re-emerged around her with sobering speed.

Pony shifted her grip on her sword, cocking her wrist and bringing the blade up to rest against her shoulder as she edged further into the dark gloom of the trees, the leaves now whisper gray in the starlight to her eyes. She could smell the strong scent of the earth under her feet and the soft green smell of the foliage, but in all that, behind the nature, was a taint of musk.

She closed her eyes and listened, pushing aside the rustle of the leaves in the wind and finding a different motion beneath them. The boots she had pressed to the ground felt a soft percussion and she flexed her toes, feeling the faint jar again.

Something coming towards them, heavy enough to make the earth feel it.

The motion stopped, and Pony could all but feel the unseen eyes on her, watching. Judging.

Waiting.

Slowly, she sucked in a gutful of air and held it. Then she let out a bellow loud enough to hurt her throat, hoping she didn't startle Granella into shooting her in the butt.

There was a moment of stillness, then suddenly the bushes erupted towards her with frightening speed, and she got a bare glimpse of something very big, and white teeth and glowing eyes before she jumped to one side behind a tree and let it go past. "GRAN!!!"

Granella had only a split second to let Pony clear out of the way before she released her shaft and grabbed for a second as the big thing in motion came rushing out of the darkness, its body the size of horse. She got off a second shot, but then had to dive behind a tree as the thing came on her, howling and yowling at the top of its voice.

She scrambled in the other direction, trying to get space between her and the animal so she could reload her bow, wishing now that she'd taken the high power crossbow she'd kept in a chest in their cabin. Behind a bush she whirled and reached for an arrow in her quiver as the animal plowed to a halt and whirled, heading towards her.

Granella drew back her arm and took a deep breath at the same time, releasing the shaft just as the animal leaped into the air.

It hit, but didn't even slow the creature down and she only barely twisted in time to avoid a direct hit, the animal's claws raking her as she turned and dove for the ground as Pony came up over her going the other direction. "Pon!"

"Yahhh!" Eponin drove the sword point right into the thing's mouth, ramming it with all the force she could until the sides of her hands slammed against the animal's teeth and she felt its hot breath against her face.

She released the sword and lunged past the animal, as it tumbled in mid air and fell to the ground, its legs paddling as it gurgled. "Hades!"

Incredibly, the animal turned and came at her, and she just had time to grab the hilt of her sword and yank it sideways, pulling the head towards her as she swung to one side and throwing her weight groundward as she heard Granella's bow release.

The shaft passed so close to her face, it burned her cheek before it buried itself in the animal's eyeball and she and it crashed to the ground tangled together.

Granella scrambled over, her eyes wide. She had an arrow already readied in her bow, but as she got closer, she lowered it when the animal remained still. "Pon?"

"Son of a gods be damned horse ball." Pony dragged herself out from under the animal and sat there, giving its leg a healthy kick. "What the Hades is that?"

"Was that." Granella came closer, staring at it in the low light. "Is it a bear?"

"Damned if I know." Pony braced a boot on either side of the animal's face and yanked her sword free. The creature looked a little like a bear, but it was lower to the ground, and went on all four legs. "Looks more like a big badger."

"Really big."

The weapon's master wiped the gore off her sword and got up, backing to take a better look at the animal. "Ugly sucker." She commented. "What the...?" Kneeling down, she lifted up the snarled lip of the animal, and exposed two huge front teeth, extending almost rodentlike over the lower. "Scratch the badger. It's a damned monster rat."

"Or a beaver." Granella walked around the now dead animal. She knelt at it's feet and examined one. "Look at these.. damn, we were lucky." She exposed a huge, curving claw. "I think he clipped me."

Pony got up and walked behind her, spotting the bloody rakes against her companion's fair skin easily. "Yeah." She agreed. "Down your shoulder on the back." She crouched down, touching the parallel lines. "S'allright."

"Shallow?" Granella asked. "Didn't feel too bad."

"Yeah." Pony got up and circled the animal again. She stopped at it's head, and put her hands on her hips, watching the flies already buzzing around it. "No chance of moving this thing." She observed.

"Hades, no." The other woman got up, dusting her hands off. "I vote we move camp. Something's gonna come eat this, and I'd rather not be here when it does." She started moving towards the fire. "I'll get packing."

Pony didn't like the idea of moving in the darkness, but she could find no better option and staying where they were was a bad idea. She already could hear rustling in the underbrush, and it was only a matter of time before scavengers showed up to claim a meal.

She crouched down again and touched the animal's fur, which was surprisingly soft and thick. "Boy, Eph'd love this in our place." She mused. "Be nice by the fire." Her thoughts paused, and she found herself surprised to be missing her partner, and wondering what she was up to.

Probably chasing Dori. Eponin wrinkled her nose, and stifled a grin.

"Pon?"

"Yeah." Pony stood up regretfully. "Sorry, just hate to waste good stuff." She kicked the animal's foot again and turned, making her way back towards where Granella was kneeling. "Yeah, let's cross over the river, huh? There's a turn up there looks okay."

"Sounds good to me." Granella said "Any place without bull size rats sounds good to me too."

"Gotcha."

"Bet Gabrielle would have gotten it to sit down and play tricks."

Pony snorted, and shook her head.

**

One Wild Ride

Part 16

Xena found herself jerked out of a surprising sleep, her body reacting to the bellow that roused her by bringing her to her feet even before she'd properly opened her eyes. Her hands reached for weapons she didn't have and she whirled, throwing her arms out in a defensive motion as her senses sought an attack she could defend against.

Her heart was pounding as she fell into a half crouch over the utterly still, but awake Gabrielle, the silence of the night now beating against her ears.

Gabrielle moved carefully, reaching up to put her hand on her partner's tensed leg. "You all right?"

Xena listened hard to the wind, trying to recall from her waking memory what the sound was. "Yeah." She felt her breathing slow, and the shaking in her legs eased. "Yeah, sorry. Thought I heard something."

The bard sat up and gathered her wits about her, after being shaken so unexpectedly from a deep, pleasant dream of Solstice, and home, and laughter. "Well, you could have." She offered. "There was that cat sound we heard earlier, remember?"

"Wasn't that." Xena sat back down, rubbing her face with one hand. "Ah, maybe I was dreaming." She leaned back against the boulder they were camped next to. "Teach me to fall asleep at the wrong time."

Gabrielle took up a spot next to her, stretching her legs out and pressing her thigh against her partner's. Privately, she doubted that, since Xena's instincts were what they were, and if even in sleep, she'd heard something, well then, she'd probably heard it. "Were you dreaming?"

Xena shrugged.

"I was." Gabrielle acknowledged. "No screaming, though. It was a really pretty dream, about us."

"Mm?"

"It was your birthday." The bard supplied. "We were opening presents." If she closed her eyes, she could just catch a faint image of the last of the dream, and wondered what she'd managed to give Xena that had resulted in the look of delighted wonder on her face.

Xena smiled in reflex, despite the lingering tendrils of alarm still prickling over her skin. "That does sound nice." She allowed. "Wish we were home right now."

"Me too." Gabrielle took a breath to go on, then stopped, as a loud trumpet broke the silence. "Oh!"

Xena's eyes widened. "Maybe I wasn't dreaming." She said. "I think that was the sound I heard."

"It's those big animals." The bard said. "What's happening? Do you think they're being attacked?" She reached for her staff automatically.

Another trumpet sounded, this one higher, and brassier. Xena started to scramble to her feet again. "Let's go find out."

Willingly, Gabrielle got up and followed her, grabbing their pack and swinging it to her back as she trotted in Xena's footsteps towards a break in the bushes.

They pushed their way through the underbrush, adding a few scrapes as they struggled through brambles and ducked under low overhanging branches. "Ugh." Gabrielle shook her hand rapidly, as she felt a slimy sucking on it. "Slugs!"

"Guhh." Xena grunted. "Figures." She increased her pace. "Over there."

They heard another trumpet, and this time, more joined it. Gabrielle pushed forward anxiously. To her ears, it had a frantic sound. "Hurry." She told her partner. "Something must be wrong."

Xena didn't reply, saving her strength for the stubborn foliage that was now not only blocking her way, but depositing slugs on her. "Give me your staff." She reached back, closing her fingers on the smooth wood and taking hold of it. "Thanks."

"Anytime, hon." Gabrielle patted her back, then dropped back a step as her partner started to take short, savage swings at the bushes, sending twigs, leaves, and she suspected, slugs flying off into the darkness. While she never really felt good about killing anything, slugs were way down on her list of things to sympathise with, and so, she merely tried not to hear them slapping into trees around her.

They finally broke out of the hedges and found themselves on a small ridge overlooking a flat plateau. In the starlight, they spotted the big animals all clustered around one area, and milling around anxiously. "There!" Gabrielle pointed. "Look!"

"Something's got them upset." Xena agreed. "Cat, maybe?"

"Let's go help them." Gabrielle retrieved her staff from her partner's hand and started down the ridge at a good clip, feeling a bit more confident in the silver dimness. "C'mon, Xe."

Xena just watched her for a moment, before she shook her head and started down after the bard.

"You know something?" She called out. "Ya little...Gabrielle!"

"What?" Gabrielle shouted back over her shoulder.

"Next time you ask me how we get into things like this, I'm gonna hand you a damn mirror!"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." Gabrielle waved her free hand in the air. "C'mon, Xena... they're the only things we've found here so far we've liked!"

The warrior broke into a jog, catching up to Gabrielle as they rambled down the slope together side by side. They passed through a lower fringe of sparser trees and as they emerged from them onto the plateau the moon edged grumpily over the valley rim and bathed them in unexpected light.

"Ah." Xena spotted the big animal herd just off the center of the plateau. "Least we can see what's going on." She glanced up, judging the angle. "But we don't have long, so..." The warrior loped ahead, her longer stride eating up the distance rapidly.

"Now who's rushing?" Gabrielle sped up to catch her, the long grass lashing against her thighs. Something moved in front of her and she jumped over it with wide eyes, then exhaled as she recognized it as a rabbit. "Whoa, buddy.. watch it!"

The big animals made noise again, this time louder, and she saw one turn its head and spot them. "They see us, Xe!"

"Yeah." Xena watched the animal carefully as they closed in on the herd. The one who had seen them lifted its snout and waved it, almost as if in greeting, and made a sound, but to her admittedly limited knowledge of the noises, it didn't sound threatening.

She hoped. As they got closer, she slowed and put an arm out to keep Gabrielle from flying past her. "Easy."

Gabrielle obediently eased her pace, putting her free hand on Xena's back as they eased closer to the big animals. They were clustered somewhat tightly in a group, around what she now realized was a small lake. She could hear splashing from the center of the crowd, and now that they were closer, frightened squeals.

"Oh." Gabrielle had ducked down and was peering through the legs of the animals. "Xena, I think that's the baby!" She scrambled fearlessly forward, reaching the sides of the nearest of the beasts before she felt a tug on the back of her belt. "Stop that!"

"Just making sure I don't lose you." Xena replied, unperturbed. "Watch it. One of these thigns could move and mash you and never know it." She slowed the bard's progress, keeping a very wary eye on the two animals on either side of them.

Gabrielle boldly put her hand on the nearest animal's leg and leaned against it, easing around it so she could see what they were all looking at. "Oh!" She inhaled in alarm, spotting the problem. "Xena, look!"

"I see it." Xena put an unobtrusive arm around her partner's middle in case she had to toss her out of harms way. At the edge of the little lake was a huge patch of churned up mud, and in the middle of that was the baby animal, caught fast.

The big ones kept shifting and moving towards him, but their feet were sinking fast into the soft mud, and after a few steps they backed out nervously, sending up a cacophony of sound that was ringing Xena's eardrums from the inside out.

"We can help it." Gabrielle started to move past the animal, but it shifted and let out a squall, and she stopped, as the groups attention turned to them and she could sense anger in the attitudes around her. "Um.."

The animals moved restlessly, and the one nearest raised its snout and waved it, swinging it dangerously close to Gabrielle's head.

The bard ducked. "Uh... Xena, can you do that animal magic of yours?"

"Now you're asking me?" Xena picked her up and hauled her backwards, turning to drop her behind where the warrior was standing. "Stay."

Gabrielle knew perfectly well neither of them really expected her to obey the command, but she nodded, and watched as the warrior turned and faced the biggest of the animals, her body posture altering significantly as she moved forward.

"Easy." Xena focused on the animal, who was watching her with angry eyes and an upraised snout. She spread her arms out a little from her body, and opened her hands, turning them palm upward and letting her fingers relax.

These were not horses. Xena knew that. But when you didn't have a common language with another creature, you had to start somewhere. Gabrielle had been right all along. "Okay." The warrior took a cautious step forward, blocking the baby animals squealing out of her mind for the moment. "Now.. listen."

Her voice pitched lower, gentler without her conscious thought, and she kept eye contact with the animal despite the fact that its eye towered over her. "You got a problem there, right?" She shifted her eyes to the baby, then back, very quickly.

The animal stopped trumpeting. It stared steadily at Xena, then, in uncanny mimicry, it looked at the baby and then back at her.

Xena felt a prickle run up her spine. There was intelligence behind that eye, and she knew she'd better respect it. "Okay." Slowly, she knelt, and untied the girth holding her boot closed. "Now... here's the deal." She pulled off her boot and tossed it in Gabrielle's general direction, then switched knees, and did the same for the other.

"What are you doing?" Gabrielle asked, in a low voice.

"Stripping." The warrior spared her a wry look, before she stood up and focused on the animal again. She moved a step towards it and it shifted, raising its snout over her head, moving to block her advance, and staying between her and the baby.

Its back legs sunk into the mud, and it shifted anxiously.

Xena took another step forward, the sticky mud just solid enough to hold her weight. She made eye contact, then deliberately she looked down at her own feet, and then back up at the creature's eyes.

Still sinking, the creature moved, flapping its ears and curling its snout up as it moved away from the baby, and towards Xena, and towards more solid ground.

"Xe." Gabrielle swallowed a nervous dryness in her throat as she watched the huge beast tower over her partner. The animal next to her shifted, and looked at her, its snout slithering in her direction curiously. She caught it in her hand and kept her eyes glued on Xena's casually erect posture as the warrior stood her ground and let the agitated creature come right up against her.

Next time, Gabrielle. The bard exhaled. Think. Think about what the Hades you get into. She tightened her grip on her staff, having no illusions as to whether it would do anything against the huge animals but knowing she'd at least be in there swinging. "Xena!"

"Easy." The warrior lifted a hand in reassurance. "Don't hit anything yet, okay?"

Xena could almost sense the teeth grinding behind her, as she let the big animal bump into her with its snout, the impact nearly knocking her over. She was now nose to snout with it and before she could move back, it wrapped its snout around her and the grip tightened.

Uh oh. Xena's sensitive ears caught the sound of Gabrielle's increased breathing and the soft scuff as the bard set herself to attack. "Gab, stay still." She warned. "I think it's just checking me out." A moment later, she almost regretted saying it as the animal lifted her up and turned her sideways, making her fight to remain still.

"Xena!" Gabrielle bolted between the legs of the nearer beasts and headed for the big one, her staff out in a ready position. She charged right for the animal's legs and got her hands set, aiming for its kneecaps. "Let her down you.... You.... !!!!!"

Xena had a good look at the animals eyes from upside down and she saw them widen at this sudden, noisy attack. "GABRIELLE!!!!" She bellowed at the top of her voice. "STOP!"

Somehow, the bard did, skidding in the mud and slamming into the animal's legs instead. She bounced off and backed up, just barely keeping from falling on her butt. "Let her down!"

The animal swung around, stepping away from Gabrielle and back into the mud. She tossed her head, and at the top of the swing she released Xena's body, throwing it towards the baby with a negligent strength and a single, brassy bugle.

Feeling herself released, Xena found her place in mid air and flipped, her body easily handling the rapid change of direction and twisting to bring her feet under her as she landed not a bodylength from the baby animal, the impact driving her almost to her knees into the goeey clay.

The big animal turned back to Gabrielle and bugled again, defiantly.

Gabrielle hauled off and whacked it in the kneecap as hard as she could.

Snorting in surprise, the animal backed, then swung it's snout at her, pausing when Gabrielle shifted her staff warningly, glaring up fearlessly at it's big eye.

Caught between wanting to help the floundering baby, and anxiety about her reckless partner, Xena grabbed up a handful of the mud and threw it, hitting Gabrielle on the side.

The bard jumped back, and turned, surprised at the attack from an unexpected source. "Hey!"

"Chill, wouldja!" Xena said. "'I'm fine!" She turned to the baby and yanked one of her feet free of the mud to move closer. "Now, kiddo..." She told the small animal. " You just relax, huh?"

The baby bugled in fear and tried to struggle away from her.

"Shh.. shh.." Xena held her hands out, keeping one eye on the huge beasts shifting restlessly around her equally restless partner. "It's okay. Easy now." She got within arms length of the animal and crouched down, getting to it's eye level.

It was scared. Xena could feel that, see it in the small face. The animal was sunk up almost to it's shoulders now and it was weakening, it's cries growing softer as she watched. Touched, she held a hand out to it, palm up. "Easy, little one."

The baby looked at her, and then it looked over at the rest of it's herd. The biggest of the animals raised it's snout and waved it.

The baby looked back at Xena, and, hesitantly, extended it's snout towards her and touched her hand.

"I won't hurt you." The warrior told it, gently, as she folded her fingers around the snout, rubbing it softly with her thumb. "We just want to get you outta here." Cautiously, she edged closer, the mud sucking at her legs, but unable to hold the more slender, and irregular surface as it was the creatures'. "Easy."

The baby stayed quiet, only it's eyes moving to watch her as she got up next to it, and started digging one leg free of the mud. "Gabrielle?" Xena looked up, surveying the mud. "Get some branches."

The bard looked around, then back at her. "How about long grass?"

"Fine."

Gabrielle laid her staff down and ducked between the creatures, taking her knife from her belt and starting to saw at the wheat colored grass. A glance overhead told her they didn't have much moonlight to work by, and she hacked at the thick, tough stalks as fast as she could.

She got an armful, and went back to the mud's edge, laying them down in a clump before she turned and started back for more. "Hope I can do this fast enough." She muttered, knowing the grass would soon sink in to the clay surface.

The vibration of the ground nearly knocked her down, and she turned to find the rest of the herd behind her, watching her intently. One of the smaller creatures came up next to her and wrapped its snout around a thick batch of the grass, ripping it from the ground with little effort. It looked at her, and waved the batch, in an almost inquiring manner.

Gabrielle got up and held her arms out. The animal stepped forward and gave up the bundle to her, then stepped back. "Wow." The bard managed to get out. "You really are smart, aren't you?" She headed for the edge of the lake. "Xena, you won't believe what just happened."

"Busy now." Xena was almost under the baby, one arm supporting a leg, the other wrapped around it's body.

The bard dropped her load, then started back, only to find the animals approaching, each with a snoutful of grass. "Hang on, hon. Be out to you soon."

Xena grunted, straining her body to support the baby, which, though young, outweighed her by a good deal. "C'mon, kid... you can do it."

Gabrielle quickly spread the grass out towards them, yanking her boots free of the sticky stuff as she moved back and forth. She got to her partner just as the moon started to set and threw the last armful down. "Okay!" She got down next to Xena, and grabbed the baby's other leg, as it struggled to get free of the mud. "Boy... glad Dori's not this big."

The warrior snorted. "Where'd you get the scythe?" She rasped.

"Didn't." Gabrielle slipped and dropped to her knees. "Ow." She got an arm under the baby's knee, then wrapped her other arm around it and strained her back muscles to their fullest trying to pull the leg free. "Sheeps!"

Their heads both jerked up, as a wild yowl floated over the plateau. "Oh, peachy." Xena hauled upwards. "C'mon kid, you don't want to be kitty chow."

The baby squealed, apparently recognizing the sound, and it started to struggle harder, lashing it's snout around and whacking it's earstwhile rescuers.

"Ow!" Gabrielle repeated, ducking. "Cut that out!" She managed to pull the baby's leg free and she grabbed the flat, round foot and put it up onto the straw covered surface. "C'mon! You can do it!"

Xena got behind the animal and wrapped her arm around a hind leg, getting her thigh muscles into the picture and tensing her entire body as the baby struggled. "Get the other front leg!"

"Getting!" Gabrielle sprawled over the top of the animal, landing mostly on her head and shoulder in the mud on it's other side. She squirmed around and got her arm under the stuck right leg and hauled upward. "Pull baby.. you can do it!"

The baby seemed to understand, and it started yanking it's leg as she tugged, it's snout reaching forward to touch the grass.

"Pull!" Gabrielle gasped.

"One..." Xena readied herself. "Two.."

"Three!" The bard finished, and they hauled in unison, as though their bodies were joined together.

With a squeal, the baby lunged forward, and got both front legs on the straw. It pulled forward, almost crawling on it's knees as Xena gave it one last shove from behind.

"Xena!" Gabrielle yelled, spotting long, racing figures on the shore. "Look!"

The big animals spotted them too, and as one, the herd wheeled and charged, making the ground shake and the air vibrate with their trumpets.

The baby squealed in fear, it's small snout waving as it cried out to it's family. Xena scrambled up onto the straw and pulled the baby forward. "C'mon, little one. This stuff won't last."

"Xena... " Gabrielle grabbed her. "Look."

"I know." The warrior said. "But we've got to get this done while we can, Gabrielle. Let them take care of the cats." She got an arm around the baby's head and coaxed it forward. "Give me a hand here, huh?"

Gabrielle tore her attention from the warfare ashore and struggled up next to the baby, taking hold of its leg and helping Xena to move it forward. "C'mon, sweetie." She listened to its soft cries. "It's okay."

They just reached the edge of the lake when a scream rent the air. Xena and Gabrielle turned to see one of the big creatures stomping on something on the ground, its snout waving angrily in the air.

"Wow." Gabrielle's eyes widened. "Look at them go."

Two cats tried to jump on the biggest animal, but it knocked them aside with its tusks in mid air, and they heard a squall as one cat was impaled with a toss of the big animal's head.

Casual. Just as casually as it had tossed Xena. Gabrielle exhaled shakily. They were playing with a fire they didn't really even understand. "Whew." She wiped mud from her eyes.

"Mm." Xena's nose twitched, catching the scent of blood and musk, and she sat down next to the exhausted baby, glad enough to let something else do the fighting for a change. She patted its shoulder. "You all right, little one?"

The baby waved its snout, reaching over to touch Xena's face with the soft nub on its end. It explored her cheekbone curiously, a gentle tickle that made the warrior's lips twitch just a little.

Gabrielle plopped down next to her, as the last of the moonlight faded and left them in the starlights' bare dusk, the stench of mud and animals all around them. She could feel the stuff caking all over her skin, and it was starting to itch, but she was too tired to do anything but sit there, and lean against Xena's equally muddy body. "I'm glad we did that."

"Me too." Xena now had her hand open, and the baby was curling its snout around her fingers. "But I don't want to see what we look like when the damn sun comes up."

Gabrielle chuckled wearily.

The thunder against the ground warned them, and they looked up to find the herd returning, coming to cluster around them, towering over them and blocking out the stars as they shifted and shuffled, standing shoulder to shoulder facing the two of them, and the baby.

Everything went quiet.

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Gabrielle waited for several breaths before she turned her head cautiously towards her partner. "So now what?"

Xena was busy watching the big animals, who were apparently just as busy watching her. She cautiously shifted her position, easing away from the baby. "Don't move."

"No problem." The bard was content to lean on her elbows, despite the caking of the mud and rest, twisting her head from side to side to relieve the beginnings of a headache. She was very happy they'd gotten the baby animal out of trouble, but she was beginning to wonder what kind of trouble they'd gotten themselves into in the process.

It always worked out that way, she reflected. The greater good always had a price, and usually they were the ones who ended up paying it. She found a small rock on the ground, half buried in the mud and she picked it up to look idly at it, the rough surface rubbing against her fingertips.

"Stop that."

Gabrielle looked over at her partner in some puzzlement. "It's just a rock." She said, then straightened as she realized she wasn't being addressed. The baby animal had gotten to its feet and was busy

exploring Xena with its snout, pawing over her soulmate's skin with impunity. "Aw." She chuckled softly. "That's so cute."

"This isn't funny." Xena was trying to get the animal to stop fondling her. She was watching the big animals from the corner of her eye, but they didn't seem inclined to interfere, and in fact, seemed a bit amused as well. "And how do you know it's a he?"

Gabrielle cleared her throat gently. "I'm at eye level with his.. um..."

"Ah."

"Mm."

The biggest of the animals now moved forward, its steps making the muddy, caked ground vibrate. It stopped next to the baby and reached out to caress it with its snout, urging it away from Xena and into the circle of the herd.

The baby protested, bugling and running behind the warrior, to stand there with its snout draped over Xena's shoulder.

"Hey!" Xena leaned on both hands and looked behind her at the baby. "Cut it out before your mama over there gets mad at me!"

Gabrielle started to laugh silently. She covered her mouth with one hand and forgot her exhaustion, wishing she could capture and keep the image in something other than her memory.

The big animal reached over Xena's head and tapped the baby on his back, a gust of breath from the tip of its snout blowing the warrior's hair back.

Xena took the opportunity to roll towards Gabrielle and come up onto her knees, catching the bard by the arm and pulling her up right. "C'mon."

"Awwww." Gabrielle pointed at the now squalling baby. "Honey, he likes you!"

"Gabrielle." The warrior sighed.

"Well, he does." Gabrielle approached the mother animal and held a hand out to her, delighted when the creature reached out and took it in her trunk, tickling her palm with the nub on the end of it. "Are you happy with us now?" She tipped her head back and found the animal's eye, towering above her. "We're okay, huh?"

Xena cautiously approached, as the animal shifted and made a snuffling sound. "They're really something else." She admitted. "Look at those tusks." She leaned closer to inspect the curving white tooth, then straightened, as the animal amiably moved and tilted its head a bit, to give her a better view.

"That's so amazing." Gabrielle stepped closer, putting her hand out to touch the tooth, feeling faint ridges on it. "It's pretty."

Masked in shadows, Xena's face suddenly went pensive. "Mm." She murmured. "Where I saw the smaller ones... a lot of them were killed so they could take these." She touched the tooth. "To carve things."

Gabrielle turned her head, her jaw dropping slightly. "You're kidding, right?"

"No."

"Wait." The bard turned all the way around and faced her. "You're telling me they killed one of these animals.. these huge, huge animals, just for that?"

Xena nodded somberly. "They were smaller." She said. "But yeah."

Gabrielle looked away, then back at her. "Not even.. I mean, we use animals we kill, Xena. I know that." She said. "But for food, and whatever else.."

"Yeah." Xena cut her gently off, sensing the animals were getting restless. "Let's not talk about this right now, huh?"

The bard's brows creased, what could be seen of them that wasn't covered in mud, then her eyes shifted to the animals. "Oh. Right." She murmured. "Well, you brought it up."

Xena wrinkled her nose, then reached up and scratched it, removing a patch of dried gunk as she did so. "How about a bath?"

"Uuunnnggh." Gabrielle issued a tiny groan.

Xena took that as the answer it obviously was, and after giving the big animal a last pat on the snout, she started to edge around her.

The animal bugled, wrapping her snout around Xena and pulling her to a halt. The baby also scrambled after them and thumped into the warrior's knees, letting out a surprised blatt. It wrapped its snout around Xena's leg and sat down, flapping its ears vigorously.

Xena exhaled. She took a firm hold of the big animal's snout, and unwound it from her body. Then she did the same thing with the little one's, springing sideways a entire bodylength after she got free and ducking between two of the other animals.

"Hey!" Gabrielle scrambled after her, hoping they didn't get squashed.

The big animal trumpeted in surprise, then the entire herd shifted and moved around, getting out of the big one's way as they wheeled and started after their escaping entertainment.

"Next time, Gabrielle." Gabrielle put on a burst of speed and caught Xena as they got clear of the mud. "Just plug your darn ears."

"Nah." Xena headed for a rock escarpment over the lake, where she was reasonably sure the animals couldn't follow them. "They're just playing with us." She felt a thunder under her feet as the herd got up to speed and chased them.

"Uh.. huh." Gabrielle glanced behind them. "Xe, we left our pack back there."

"Yeah, I know." The warrior reached the rock escarpment and scrambled up onto it, turning as she got to the top an extending her hands to Gabrielle. "C'mon.. we can go back for it."

"Go b.." Gabrielle caught hold of her fingers and tensed her shoulders instinctively as Xena lifted, hauling her up off the ground with little effort on her part. She got her feet on the top of the rock just as the first of the big animals got to them, and a snout snaked between her legs as she hopped awkwardly forward out of reach. "Yahh!"

The animal bugled indignantly at her, and she turned to see the whole herd standing there watching them. Behind her, Xena chuckled softly, and as Gabrielle turned, the warrior put her hands firmly on her hips and smiled. "Now what?" The bard asked. "This rock isn't that big."

Xena turned and went to the edge facing the water. "Doesn't need to be." She turned and extended her hand as the animals started bumping against the rock, jarring them both. "Uh oh."

Gabrielle lurched forward, grabbing hold of Xena just as Xena reached and latched on to her waist, and just as the animals snouts curled around both their legs. She felt Xena's body coil and knew what it meant, and as the pressure increased around her middle she closed her eyes and held her breath.

Her feet left the ground, and she felt the cool air surround her, as the touch of the animals and the thick, musky scent of them fell back to be replaced with the strong, clean smell of water. She just had time to tak another breath when they plunged into the lake, and the darkness of the air was replaced with the colder, denser darkness of the water.

Xena's hold on her never wavered, though, and she just waited as the warrior kicked hard, sending them back to the surface in a shower of chilly droplets and starlit sky overhead.

"Bwha." Xena spat out a mouthful of water. "That was colder than I expected."

Gabrielle shook the hair out of her eyes and looked back at the shore. "Oh gods.. Xena! Look!!!"

The warrior whirled in the water, her eyes widening as she watched the animals shove the rock they'd been standing on into the lake. "Woah!"

Two of the largest animals then nudged it out of the way and strode into the sloshing lake, heading in their direction with utter determination.

"Uh.. Xe?"

"Yeah, I'm thinking."

Gabrielle felt below her, and realized it was too deep to stand. She treaded water uncertainly, watching the animals as they plowed towards them. "Hey!" She did the only thing she could think of, and splashed them with the water. "Whoa there!"

To her surprise, and likely to Xena's as well, the animals stopped, and bugled. Bard and warrior exchanged glances, then Gabrielle shrugged, and splashed them again, sending a sheet of water towards them and drenching their snouts.

The biggest one gave her a look, then lifted her snout from the water and pointed it at the bard, blowing a sudden blast of water right back at her.

"Bah!" Gabrielle held a hand up to shield her face.

The other one got the idea, and blasted Xena, showering the warrior. "Hey!" She splashed back, and in a moment, there was a full on water fight in progress.

It really was no contest. The animals had an inexhaustible supply of air and water, and it was costing them much less energy to douse the two humans than it was for them to battle back. The biggest one bugled in triumph when Xena turned her back and got between Gabrielle and the shore, blocking the worst of it as she went nose to nose with the bard.

Gabrielle took advantage of that and kissed her. "Our life is so darn bizarre." She chuckled softly. "Wait.. a sheep'll drop out of the sky next."

Xena tilted her head back and looked up in reflex. Then she turned and glared at the animals. "Okay, you win. Now cut it out!"

The big animal sprayed her with water again, wagging her snout at Xena. Then she waited, snout waving over the water.

"She wants us to come closer." Gabrielle said, positively.

"And you know that... how?"

The animal slapped the water's surface, then sprayed them again. She wagged her snout, curling the nub at the end at them.

Xena looked at Gabrielle for a long moment, before she exhaled, and swam a few strokes back towards the animal. She paused and waited, lifting her hands clear of the water in a questioning gesture.

The animal bugled at her, a sound that was almost like laughter.

"I swear, Xena.. she understands everything you're saying." Gabrielle marveled. "I know she does. That's amazing!" She paddled over to where Xena was treading, wishing she'd taken off her boots before jumping in.

"Hmph."

Gabrielle gave the back of her partner's neck a friendly scratch. "C'mon, Xena... so many rotten things have happened to us here - isn't it nice when something cool happens instead?"

"Grumph." The warrior started back towards the shore, towing her partner until her feet hit gravelly bottom and she could stand. She kept an eye on the animals, who had now all moved into the water, and were drinking and spouting at each other.

"Grumpy old thing." Gabrielle got her boots under her and stood, emerging from the water up to her shoulders. She rubbed her skin, now only tingling from the cold and wished for some soap to get the gray muddy residue off.

Xena stripped off her catskin and rubbed it, fur to fur under the water. "Yeah, yeah." She muttered, standing up and baring her body to the starlight to the waist.

The animal nearest her bugled in surprise, and came sloshing over. The rest of the herd followed, nearly swamping both women with their wake, and investigated Xena's relatively pale skin with interest. The warrior watched them warily, but continued her task.

Gabrielle also removed her garments, first using the roughness of the cloth to aid the water in scrubbing her skin, then sloshing them vigorously in front of her. From the corner of her eye, she spotted the baby ambling into the water and heading towards her, snout held high above the water.

It was amazing, she thought, how ready she was to assign benign intelligence to these huge beasts, when they'd found so little of either in their own kind here.

But then, she and Xena knew better, didn't they? Better than most that many things were in the eye of the beholder, and nothing was always as it seemed? "Hey, little one." She greeted the baby cheerfully. "Can you swim?"

The baby stopped near her and reached out with its snout, pulling curiously at her skirt. Gabrielle swam closer, and scratched his ear with her fingertips. "Darn, he's so cute."

Xena merely watched her, seeing the gentle loving warmth so typical of the bard ignite in her eyes as she interacted with the youngster. One of the bigger animals draped its snout over her shoulder and as she turned her head, she noticed it was watching the two also.

Damned if there wasn't something intelligent in there. "Don't worry." She told the animal. "She loves everything."

The animal observed her, a twitch of the ridged skin around its eyes giving an uncanny impression of a raised eyebrow.

"Even me."

The animal patted its snout against her cheek, and Xena had to smile. Then something tickled her hearing, and she frowned, reaching up in reflex to put her fingertips near her ear. The sound stopped, then happened again.

"What's wrong?" Gabrielle had noticed the motion.

"I hear something... not sure what it is." Xena said.

Gabrielle cocked her head, her hands stilling the curious snout of the baby. After a moment, she glanced back over at Xena. "I don't hear anything."

The tickle returned, something so faint, and so low Xena almost thought she was imagining it. It was more a vibration against her eardrum than a noise, but it was unlike anything she'd ever heard.

She looked at the big animal, only to find the liquid, intelligent eye watching her just as closely.

Another mystery? Xena heard the sound again. Or maybe the answer to one?

**

"Almost dawn." Pony observed, as she dipped her paddle in a little deeper. "Figures."

Granella arched her back a little, stiff from the long hours in the back of the canoe. The bit of land they'd thought they'd stop at had turned out to be a rocky point with an unexpected marsh behind it

unsuitable for anything but a handhold before they launched back down the river to find someplace else.

Problem was, there was no other place. They'd passed leagues and leagues of marshy riverbank, where the flooding had overrun the land and drowned most of the foliage on either side of it. Though the waters were beginning to recede, the swamp remained and so they'd kept on, hoping for better after each bend.

Now they swept around a last angle in the stream, finding a stiff current they had to stroke against, and as they cleared the cliff walls, they found themselves in a lake. "Well, damn." Pony sighed. "Lookit that."

The lake dead ended as the walls rose up to a plateau high overhead, and a small waterfall spilled off the edge of the plateau to drop at the far end.

"Guess we're done cruising." Granella agreed. "There's a landing over there. Might as well get out, and wait for dawn."

"Yeah." The weapons master said. "Maybe there's a way around that thing...path over there." She pointed towards one side of the plateau.

They beached the canoe at the landing and got out. "Whoa." Pony stretched gratefully. "Hey, we can get a little bit of shuteye.. looks pretty quiet here."

Her companion tugged the canoe a little further up, and tied the rope on the front firmly to a rooted tree. Then she turned and surveyed the area, what she could see of it in the dim starlight. There was a short, grassy slope that led up from the water, the grass poking from the edge of the lake and indicating it's rain swollen state. "Nice."

The slope ended in a rocky embankment a little taller than they were, which curved around and provided a relatively safe camping spot. They dragged their gear up against it and sat down, extending their legs out across the soft grass.

The night sky was still inky black, scattered with twinkling stars, and Granella felt a moment of peace settle over them. The soft sound of the waterfall behind them was scant enough to be soothing rather than annoying, and she could smell honeysuckle on the wind.

She tipped her head back and studied the edge of the cliff far over their heads. "Hey." She looked over at Pony. "Y'know, maybe if we get up that thing, we can find a way out."

Pony turned around and looked. "Worth a shot." She said. "Specially since... yeah, I can see Xena and Gab thinking the same damn thing."

"Yup." Granella wriggled into a more comfortable position. "Now, if we could just find some sign of them, I'd be happy."

"Me too."

Pony sighed. "We gotta stop saying that." She said. "It's like a jinx."

"It worked the first time." Granella said. "Like a charm."

They both fell into introspective silence. After a moment, Pony got up and shook her boot vigorously, and then she started walking along the wall they were sheltered near. Granella hesitated, then remained where she was, twisting sideways and lying down flat on her back as she listened to Pony's low, tuneless whistling.

Briefly, she wondered what was going on back home. The twins were surprisingly well behaved most of the time, so she figured Toris would have them under control, but she'd sensed a storm brewing over the flooding of the lower town and she hoped the lid would stay on that until they got back.

Until they brought Xena and Gabrielle back with them. She suspected that the trouble rearing it's head wasn't going to be fixed by anyone other than them, because anyone else would crumble under the pressure of all those merchants and the expectations of the town.

Even Cyrene, who had the most backbone of anyone in the village, hands down. In fact, Granella suspected she was the second most feared person in Amphipolis.

Or third, if you counted Dori.

Xena and Gabrielle wouldn't cave to the merchants.. Not only that, Granella had to smile a little, not only that, they'd probably turn the situation around so that the merchants would end up paying the town rather than the opposite.

She had confidence in that, and so did Toris and even Cyrene. If Xena couldn't scare them to death, Gabrielle would argue them into stark raving madness, but either way the result would be the same, and then they could go back to cleaning up and rebuilding.

Getting on with life.

So they had to find the two of them, and get back. Granella nodded silently to herself. And they would. She was sure of it.

**

Pony walked along the ridge, until it sloped down low enough for her to see over it. Barely visible in the starlight she could see a half hidden stream that carried the water from the small falls down to the lake, and a thick stand of bushes that sloped up towards it.

She put her hands on the ridge and boosted herself up onto it, standing and brushing her hands off as she continued on her way. Though it was dark, and they'd traveled all night – still, she wasn't tired enough to go to sleep.

Worry was a part of that, she figured. Somewhere out there, Xena and Gabrielle were under the same stars as she was, and she just had this feeling that where ever they were, it wasn't a very good place. With a sigh, she paused next to the stream and knelt, dipping her hands into the clear, cold water and bringing it to her lips.

Then she stopped, a sound reaching her ears she hadn't expected. She straightened up and listened again, cocking her head to one side and closing her eyes.

All she heard now was normal night sounds. Crickets off in the bushes, the whisper of wind through the trees. The soft trickling roar of the waterfall.

After a long moment, she opened her eyes and frowned, putting her hands on her hips. "I'm not nuts."

"Pon?"

Pony looked around, spotting Granella's head poking over the ridge. "Yeah?"

"You say something?"

"Um.." Pony listened again, but the sound wasn't repeated. "Nah, I was just taking a drink." She trudged back over to the embankment and sat down on it, dangling her feet to one side of Granella.

"You hear any birds?"

"Birds?" Granella frowned. "At night? No.. should I have?"

Pony tapped the side of her head. "Probably just the waterfall then." She said. "Heard Gabrielle once say it sounded like music sometimes."

Granella snorted softly. "She sees stuff in everything." She said. "Must be part of that storytelling thing.. I've seen her sit and watch butterflies for freaking ever, and then start talking about one of them was this color, and one was that color, and why did they fly this way.. whatever."

"Yeah." Pony said, after a moment of silence. "Xena once told me the scariest thing in the world was knowing she had to live up to what Gabrielle saw in her."

"Hm."

"So.. if I didn't actually know big X, I'd kinda have to wonder how much of her rep was her, and how much was Gabrielle's imagination, y'know?"

Granella plucked a bit of river grass, and chewed the end of it. "If you ask Gabrielle." She said, matter-of-factly. "She just writes what she sees."

They both were silent for a while. "So, are they both nuts?" Pony finally said.

"A little." Granella admitted. "But in a good way."

Pony sighed, and leaned on her hands. "Wish we could find em." She said. "Nutty or not, make believe or not, stories and all."

Granella patted her knee. "We'll find em." She said. "For all we know, they could be up on that flat part, looking down at us."

They both looked up in reflex, but the darkness defeated any attempt to view the cliffs. Pony turned back around and hopped off the ridge, landing with a thump. "C'mon." She said. "Let's get some rest before the birds really start singing."

"You really heard a bird?"

"I heard something." Pony walked over and dropped down onto the grass, rolling onto her back and putting her hands behind her head. She closed her eyes and exhaled.

Granella took a spot next to her and did the same.

**

Gabrielle laid her skirt and top out on the rock, and stood behind it so it blocked the wind. Her skin was chilled, and now so was the rest of her from being in the water and she hoped the breeze would dry her clothing in short order.

Now that the excitement was over, her headache was coming back and all the small discomforts were adding up to make her miserable, and there was little indication it was going to get any better any time soon.

At least, not unless Xena came back from her reconnaissance, anyway. Gabrielle sighed and leaned her arm against the rock, rubbing the back of her neck with her other hand and wishing she had some warm tea, at least.

Or her partner, at most.

Xena appeared from around the rock as if by magic, and draped her catskin next to Gabrielle's togs. She casually stepped behind the bard and wrapped her arms around her, resting her chin on Gabrielle's shoulder. "Hey."

"Hey."

"Tired?"

"Tired. Cold. Wet." Gabrielle replied, blissfully appreciating the warm body now pressed against hers. After a moment she exhaled. "Okay, scratch the second."

Xena leaned against the rock and pulled Gabrielle to rest against her, one hand rubbing the bard's back in a rhythmic pattern. "Better?" She asked, her fingers kneading the knots she could feel along her partner's spine.

"Ungh." Gabrielle sighed. "I love you."

Xena smiled, unseen, over her shoulder. "I love you too." She replied. "How about we get away from the water.. maybe we can find some shelter behind those other rocks."

The wind was keeping up its incessant rush over the plateau, and Gabrielle privately doubted they'd find anything much. "Sure." She peered around the rock, finding the herd having moved a little ways off. "What are they doing?"

"Sleeping?" Xena gathered their clothing and nudged the bard. "At least that noise stopped."

"What noise?" Gabrielle winced, as the wind hit them again and the chill cut right through her. "Oh, brr."

"The noise I'm trying to convince myself I didn't hear." Xena detoured over to where they'd left their pack, and found it being examined by one of the big creatures. "Hey."

The animal turned and looked at them as they came up, its snout still wrapped in the pack's straps. It bugled softly and lifted the bag, swinging it towards them.

"Thanks." Gabrielle caught it. "Maybe we can use the skin to make a tent, huh?"

The rest of the herd wandered over, now seeming benignly curious around the two strange creatures they'd apparently accepted. The smaller female who'd been investigating the pack released it and wrapped its snout around Gabrielle's waist instead.

"Uh." The bard glanced down in some surprise. The snout felt prickly against her skin, but the hold was light, and there seemed to be no aggression in the act. She looked up at the animal, to find it watching her with that same intelligent interest she found so intriguing. "Thanks."

"Touchy things." Xena commented. "You must be related."

"Hah, hah." Gabrielle gently unwound herself. She gave the snout a pat, then realized the surrounding animals were effectively blocking the wind. "Too bad we can't just stay here."

"Here?" Xena looked quizzically at her.

Gabrielle rubbed her arms. "It's warmer." She said, in an apologetic tone. "Wind's getting to me, and I've got a darn headache..I think from the chill."

"All right." Xena studied their surroundings, which didn't give much in the way of significant shelter. The plateau was almost flat, with just the lake near one end and a scattering of boulders. They could, she reasoned, go back up into the scrub forest. "Give me a minute. I'll figure something out."

Except there were slugs there. The warrior winced. She spotted a few boulders nearby, and led Gabrielle over to them, finding a side that was mostly out of the wind. "Siddown." She laid their clothes out on top of the boulder while Gabrielle spread the folded skin out on the thick grass.

"Good as it's gonna get." Gabrielle took a seat and waited for Xena to settle next to her. The warrior took the ends of the skin and pulled them up, wrapping them in a slightly soggy bundle. It got warmer immediately and she felt the tension in her body relaxing. "Ahh."

"Warmer?"

Gabrielle nodded. "Xe."

"Mm?"

"I really like these guys." Gabrielle watched as the animals drifted over and took up positions nearby. They cropped the grass, ripping it up and stuffing snoutsful into their mouths, chewing with placid unconcern. "They're grass eaters."

"Mmhm." Xena nodded. "Lucky for the other plant eaters. Can you imagine how many rabbits it'd take to feed one of these things?"

Gabrielle chuckled softly.

"Hard enough keeping you fed."

"Xena." Gabrielle gave her a poke. "I'm serious. There's something special about them."

One of the animals, the biggest one, came over, its huge shadow plunging them into complete darkness as it blocked out the stars. It reached its snout out and idly plucked at the skin, whuffling softly.

"Amazing." Gabrielle whispered. She was about to go on, when she felt Xena take a deep breath, and a moment later she held hers as the warrior began to sing.

It was a low, gentle song, that vibrated the air, and thrummed right through Gabrielle where she was pressed against her partner.

The animal stopped moving, its trunk lightly resting on Gabrielle's arm. The rest of the animals turned their heads towards them, and the baby, who had been lying down, jumped up and ran over, skidding to a halt in front of them.

Gabrielle watched them in fascination, as they seemed mesmerized by Xena's voice.

But then again, who wasn't?

**

Morning brought a rich, golden light and a sweet breeze that smelled of spring. Gabrielle opened her eyes into it and knew a moment of peace as the thick grass rippled around her and a single, lone hawk sailed overhead.

She watched it disappear, and then she turned her head to study Xena's profile. The warrior was lying on half on her side, half on her back, with Gabrielle tucked inside the circle of her arms, apparently content to stay like that until whenever...

Well, whenever. "Morning." Gabrielle cleared her throat of the huskiness of sleep.

"Morning." Xena returned the greeting amiably. "How are you feeling?"

"Feeling?" Gabrielle cocked her head a little to one side.

"You were a little stressed last night."

The bard gazed quietly into the dawn before she flicked her eyes up to her partner's face, and smiled. "There's never been anything in the world wrong with me waking up in your arms couldn't cure."

Xena blinked a few times, her dark lashes fluttering over her pale eyes.

"Except over the top romanticism." Gabrielle amended. "No cure for that. Sorry."

The warrior chuckled softly, leaning forward to give her partner an affectionate kiss on the head.

Gabrielle rested her cheek against Xena's collarbone. "It's true though." She murmured. "All the dinars in the world couldn't buy what this feels like." She rubbed her thumb across one of Xena's ribs. "You know - that's what's so alien about those hooters."

"Uh?" Xena's brows contracted. "What?"

The bard turned, and gestured towards the huge creatures they'd spent the night with. They were browsing nearby, and one was caressing the baby. "Look at them. They're not even remotely like us, Xena, and they know what love is."

"Oh." The warrior grunted. "Yeah, I see what you mean."

"Those hooters... its like they had no emotions." Gabrielle went on. "Nothing except for fear, and.. um.."

"

"Lust." Xena supplied succinctly.

"Yeah."

"We know both of those things." The warrior added. "Don't we?"

Gabrielle was momentarily silent, then she tipped her head back and made eye contact. "Yes." She pronounced delicately. "We most certainly do know those things. But that's not what I meant and you know it." She lifted Xena's hand in hers and kissed the back of it, then turned the unresisting appendage over and kissed the palm. "They don't know what this is."

"Hm." Xena murmured, her face shifting as she thought. "Maybe that's why we couldn't communicate with them." She suggested. "Even the one who could talk.. there was something just not right there."

"She had no emotions."

"Mm."

"I can't even imagine what that would be like." Gabrielle said. "I think the closest I've ever come to that is right after the war. I felt..." She hesitated. "Burned out, I guess."

Xena looked down at her. "That was a pretty intense time for us." She acknowledged. "But I don't think you were ever that burned out. Even I wasn't... that time in Chin."

They both remained silent for a few minutes after that. Then Gabrielle exhaled. "Okay." She shifted, and sat up. "Now that we've had our deep, meaningful talk for the day.. how about breakfast?"

Xena sat up with her, but instead of getting up, she wrapped her arms around the bard and gave her a big hug, pulling her close and kissing her soundly.

The bard squeaked a little in surprise, before she relaxed and fell back against her partner, accepting the smothering hold and the sincerity of the passion beneath it.

They parted, and Gabrielle had to catch her breath. "Whoa."

"Gabrielle, you saved my life, and saved my soul in a place that no one would have blamed you to walk away from." Xena whispered to her, as they sat there nose to nose. "Please don't ever think I regret that."

The bard looked into her eyes, shocked at the sudden, desperate emotion of the moment. She hadn't meant to drag any of that up... Hades, far from it!

But here it was, looking back at her from Xena's brilliant blue eyes, a truth she hadn't even considered wondering about for a very long time. "Xena." She exhaled. "You saved my life, and my soul in that same place." She lifted her hand and touched her partner's cheek. "No regrets. For either of us."

Xena smiled, after a moment. "Okay." She replied. "Just wanted to clear that up."

Gabrielle's eyes dropped, and she let her shoulders relax. "Sheep tails, Xena... it's too early for all this stuff. My head's still inside some dream or something or.."

"Shh." The warrior pulled her close again, and they sat together, just rocking for a few minutes. "I know. We're idiots sometimes."

"Ungh." Gabrielle thumped her head gently against her partner's chest, then merely leaned against it for a bit. After her heartbeat settled down, she straightened up and faced Xena, giving the warrior a tiny, wry shake of her head. "Yeah, we are, aren't we?"

Xena reached up and gently caught her head between both hands. "Now." She patted the bard's cheek. "Let's go find breakfast."

They unwrapped themselves from the skin and stood up, exposing bare skin to the sun which quickly warmed it. "Ah." Gabrielle walked over to the rock surface they'd left their clothes on and touched hers, which was comfortingly dry and warm.

She put on her wraps, and then her half shirt, drawing the laces closed as her still buzzing mind thought about what had just happened. She glanced at Xena as the warrior joined her in dressing, her eyes searching the angular planes of her face. "I don't feel like eating much right now."

The corners of Xena's lips twitched. "Me either."

And then, suddenly, it did become funny, at least in a sad, somewhat wistful way. Gabrielle picked up her wraparound skirt and bumped Xena's hip with hers before she put it on, adjusting the belt as she tied it. "But I guess I'd better, huh?" She asked. "Otherwise I'm going to have to learn to use that staff one handed, cause this thing's falling off me."

Xena reached over and stuck two fingers into the belt and pulled, drawing the leather away from the bard's waist. "Yeah." She agreed. "Guess I'm going fishing." She tied the rough belt Gabrielle had made her around the catskin and ran her hands through her hair. "Before you get transparent."

"Hey." Gabrielle patted her on the side, giving the ribs there a tickle. "Get some fish for you too, huh?" She studied the warrior, reaching up to touch her cheek.

Xena managed a brief grin, and a wave before she turned around and headed for the lake, still barelegged. She waded into the water with a stolid stride, her attention already focused below the surface.

The sun spilled over her, and made her almost glow as she stood there, amidst the sparkling water, and despite the ragged clothing and unkempt hair, the wild beauty showed through without effort.

Gabrielle rested her hand on the rock and watched her for a long moment, before she turned and picked up one boot, starting to tug it on. The leather was stiff from its long soaking, and she had to stamp and work at it to get it to fit, which attracted the attention of the big animals.

The baby came running over to check her out, immediately grabbing her other boot with his snout. "Hey!" Gabrielle hopped after him. "No, honey.. I need that."

The baby bugled happily, scrambling back out of her reach as he waved the boot in the air. His eyes, in the daylight, were a deep hazel and they sparkled with mischief.

"Good grief." Gabrielle was caught halfway between annoyance and laughter. "Now, c'mon, little guy... don't make me chase you, okay?" She knelt, and extended her hand to him. "C'mon, bring it over here."

He stopped and watched her, his snout swinging back and forth, all but saying 'dare ya!' to her.

Gods, Just like Dori. The bard put her hands on her hips and shook her head. The baby shook his head back at her and danced from foot to foot, then scampered a few steps back, enticing her to chase him. "Oh no." Gabrielle told him. "I'm a mother, I'll have you know, and I know better."

The baby bugled, and one of the big animals bugled back with what had to be a note of amusement.

"Oh yeah?" Gabrielle took a seat on the thick grass and pulled her legs up crossed under her. She plucked a few strands of the pale strands and started weaving them together into the beginnings of a basket, keeping her attention strictly on her task and ignoring the baby animal.

The baby bugled and stamped a foot.

Gabrielle kept up her weaving, adding another few strands to the task. She was aware of a soft percussion moving towards her, but she kept her head down.

A faint, warm amusement suddenly washed over her, and she realized after a startled moment that it was coming from Xena and not from the animals. She casually lifted her hand and made a sign, and the warmth intensified, soothing her still slightly rattled insides.

Damn, that had knocked her off balance. Gabrielle frowned, wondering at the sense of fragility she'd felt. After all this time, it surprised her to have the ghost of Lao Ma kick her in the rear at the most unexpected of moments.

Ah well. Gabrielle peeked up, and saw the baby edging closer, dragging her boot by its laces from his snout. Xena had, after all, known how to handle it, even though she hadn't answered quite the question that had sprung up in Gabrielle's mind.

She'd answered a more important one instead.

Gabrielle sighed a little, as a curious snout came creeping through the grass to curl around her nascent basket. "Who's that?" She put a finger on the little nub, and watched it investigate the braiding. "Hey, wanna trade?"

The baby bugled softly.

"Trade ya this for that, what about it, huh?" Gabrielle offered up the grass, and took hold of her boot. After a brief ponder, the baby took the grass and sat down, stuffing it into his mouth and chewing it with a look of smug cheerfulness.

Gabrielle put her boot on and tied it. "There." She reached over and scratched his head. "Now we're both happy." She looked up as the big animal she'd decided was the baby's mother strolled over and took up a position nearby, pulling up the thick grass by the snout full. "Boy." The bard rested her chin on her fist. "I'd love to be able to eat grass sometimes, you know?"

The big animal tossed a bundle her way. It landed near her knee, and Gabrielle picked up a few stalks of it, rolling them between her fingers thoughtfully. The baby got up and came over, reaching for the grass with a little gurgling noise. "Here, you want this?" The bard handed it to him, watching the serious expression on his face as he collected it and stuffed it into his mouth.

It made her smile. "You're so cute." She told him. "My daughter would love you."

The baby looked up and past her, his eyes widening a little, but Gabrielle recognized the presence approaching, and she gave the little one a comforting pat. "Is that your buddy coming?" She turned her head to see Xena strolling up from the lake, two big fish clutched in one hand and a piece of driftwood in the other. "Nice."

Xena smiled, taking a seat on a rock nearby and setting the fish down. She turned her attention to the driftwood, breaking it into smaller pieces with casual strength.

Then her head lifted, and she turned her face into the wind. "Gab?"

Gabrielle got up and went over to her. "What's up?"

"Smell that?"

Gabrielle breathed out, waited, then turned into the wind and inhaled, opening her mouth at the end of the breath and tasting the air as Xena had taught her. "Smoke?" She questioned.

Xena nodded.

"From where?"

The warrior stood up and scanned the space around them. "Let's find out."

**

One Wild Ride

Part 17

Xena turned into the wind, crossing the open plain back towards the scrub forest they'd come through the night before. Gabrielle was right behind her, staff in hand, and they walked together through the thick grass.

She could still smell the smoke, but the shifting wind was making it difficult to track down where it was coming from. The ground started sloping up ahead of her, and she decided to detour a bit, moving around to the far side of the scrub opposite where they'd come down.

There was no real need for Gabrielle to come with her, Xena realized. "Hey." She paused. "If you want to get the fish started..."

"Nope." The bard answered briskly.

"Nope?" Xena looked at her. "Thought you were hungry."

"I am." Gabrielle stepped around her, and circled a big boulder, peering behind it. "But I feel funny eating those fish in front of those big guys."

Xena rolled her eyes. "Gabrielle."

The bard held out both hands. "Can't help it." She tucked her staff under one arm and started to climb up the rocks. "C'mon. If we're not going to find the fire, let's find some berries or something." She disappeared from view, a few loose slate rocks kicking back towards Xena from the direction she'd gone.

"You're gonna end up with raw fish again, I'm telling ya."

"No, I'm not." The bard called back, unseen. "But if I find berries, you can bet you won't be getting any, slowpoke!!"

Xena had to shake her head and chuckle softly, before she hopped up onto the rock, pressing her body up and getting her feet under her as she stood, stepping lightly across the surface of the boulder and peering down at where her partner was cautiously inching up on the other side.

She watched Gabrielle make her way along, the bard's muscular body catching the sunlight as she moved with stolid balance and her own peculiar grace.

The bard had never been... well, unredeemably clumsy, exactly, but when they'd first met, Xena had long despaired of her new, young friend living long enough to grow up the way she fell over just about everything in her path.

**

"Gabrielle!" Xena pushed through the bushes, looking right and left. "Gabrielle!!" She gave the setting sun a cursory glance, then kept going, cocking her head intently to one side to listen for any response. "Gods be damned.. where in Hades is that kid!"

"Here." A soft voice answered her unexpectedly.

Xena stopped and looked around, then she parted the branches of a bush and looked inside. She spotted Gabrielle between the leaves, the girl's face scratched and bleeding. "Hey." She shoved further inside. "What happened to you?"

Gabrielle looked up at her, the customary eager good nature missing. "What usually happens to me." She said. "I was trying to get something from that tree over there and I slipped and fell and.. " She stopped speaking, flexing her hand and wiping a bit of blood off her face. "Just.. go do whatever you were going to do, Xena. Leave me here."

And in that moment, looking back, Xena should have realized her life had changed beyond redemption. She felt a pang in her chest and hesitated, the girl's words echoing her in ears.

Leave her?

Could she leave her? She'd been cursing herself for letting Gabrielle come with her for how many moons now? Wasn't this her chance?

Xena looked into those sad, discouraged green eyes, and damn it, what was it about this kid? Leave her?

Damn it.

Before she could stop herself, she was crouching in the bushes, resting her elbow on her knee as she studied that banged up face. "You can't stay here." She told Gabrielle firmly. "So c'mon."

Gabrielle merely looked back at her with an unhappy expression.

Xena held her hand out. "I never ask twice." She warned.

After a brief hesitation, the girl took her hand. Xena stood up and pulled her from the bushes and into the sunset, the light making her bruises apparent. "Everyone trips once in a while."

"I trip every other minute."

Xena led the way back to their campfire. "Ah, you're just growing."

"Xena, I am grown." Gabrielle sighed. "I'm just a klutz."

That was the truth, and Xena knew it. But for one of the first times in her life, her natural inclination to tell the blunt truth was checked by something new and strange. "No, you're not, you're just.. um.."

Gabrielle tripped over a root, and would have fallen if Xena hadn't had hold of her hand. "Urg!" She made a sound so full of frustration it became something Xena understood completely. "A dork! That's what I am."

Xena slowed as they reached the fire, that new and strange something making her turn and take Gabrielle by the shoulders, caught by the painfully open expression on the girl's face. She realized this was the first time Gabrielle had shown her this vulnerable side, the first time she'd dropped that determinedly upbeat, gung ho attitude that often drove Xena out of her mind.

"I'm no use to you." Gabrielle said, quietly. "All I do is get us in trouble."

That was also true. "Gabrielle." Xena hesitated.

Gabrielle looked away, her posture shifting subtly. Then she looked back at Xena, with no hint of cheerful dissembling in her expression.

Ah. Xena exhaled silently. This was the real Gabrielle. This was the part of her that needed something. That needed Xena. "Tell you what." Xena found herself saying. "You're not a klutz and I'll prove it to ya."

"Y.. you will?" The green eyes widened a little.

"Sure." Xena smiled. "I'll teach you to dance."

After a long stunned moment, those eyes nearly came out of Gabrielle's head. "Wh... Xena, I can't dance!"

"You will when I'm done with ya." Xena stated confidently.

"I... I can't."

"What's the matter, you don't want to dance with me, Gabrielle?" Xena felt the twitch go through the shoulders she still had clasped between her hands. "Hm?"

For a moment, Gabrielle looked everywhere but up at her. "I.. um.. " Gabrielle's voice broke, and she cleared her throat.

"Gabrielle?"

At last the girl raised her head and met Xena's eyes. "I always wanted to learn to dance." She admitted shyly. "You really think it will help?"

"Trust me."

Gabrielle's bright smile returned, lighting up her face. "Thanks, Xena. You're the best."

Insane, was more like it. But what the Hades, you only lived once, right?

**

Xena smiled wryly. The dance lessons certainly had helped, but in truth Gabrielle hadn't really gotten comfortable in her body until she'd learned to fight, a paradox had not then, and wasn't now lost on her loving partner. "Hey!"

Gabrielle stopped and looked up.

Xena spread her hands out, and smiled lazily.

The bard stuck her tongue out and kept climbing, hopping nimbly from one rock to the other as she used her staff to balance. "Wench!"

Xena stepped to the edge of her rock and jumped off, launching herself skyward and tucking her body into a somersault with a half twist that landed her near where Gabrielle was climbing, but a little ahead of her path. "Talk about slowpokes."

She ducked under a tree branch and spotted a half hidden path up around the next set of builders. "There..ow!" Xena whirled just a bit too late to block the swat on the butt from Gabrielle's staff. "You punk."

"Heh." Gabrielle returned the end of her staff to the ground. "Teach you to get saucy with me, WP."

They both chuckled, and as Gabrielle joined Xena at the path fork, their eyes met. Gabrielle smiled, and after a moment, Xena did also. Without a word, they went on, Xena laying a hand briefly on the bard's shoulder and simply clasping it.

Gabrielle squeezed between two boulders and found herself in a flat spot, with a bit of a rise that allowed them to look up between the trees at the upper slope. "See anything?" She asked Xena, as the warrior came up behind her. "I don't. No smoke, nothing... could we have been imagining it?"

"I don't imagine things like that." Xena replied, with a frown. "Damn it, I thought for sure.."

Down the slope, they heard the animals trumpet, loudly. Then the wind shifted, blowing up the slope and Xena cursed. "Damn it!" She turned and headed back the way they'd come. "It's past us!"

"What?" Gabrielle followed her as quickly as she could, hopping from rock to rock as they raced back down the slope and through the scrub. "How could it.. Xena!" Gabrielle skidded to a halt, almost crashing into her partner as the warrior pulled up in front of her.

"Gods." Xena's voice dropped, as her eyes flicked rapidly over the scene in front of them. The animals were clustering nervously near the water, facing a long line of advancing hooters.

Carrying torches.

"What are they doing?" Gabrielle whispered.

Xena's mind took in the line of men, and the flames, and the sticks in their other hands. "Hunting." She answered faintly, as the big animals started to move away from the line of men. "No... no.. don't.. .run.."

"Where do they think they can chase them to, Xe?" Gabrielle started after the warrior as Xena began to scramble through the brush. "There's not that much room over there..."

"Off the cliff." Xena sped up. "That's how they hunted the little ones.. the ones I saw. They ran them off the damn cliff and they all..."

"Died." Gabrielle caught and almost passed her. "My gods Xena! We've got to stop them!"

Xena rapidly sorted through and discarded their options as they ran side by side towards the back of the line. The hooters were advancing rapidly, yelling now and waving the torches as they beat the ground with the sticks.

The animals wheeled and thundered away from them, towards the cliff edge.

Xena and Gabrielle crossed into the grass and bolted for them, racing to catch up to the hooters as the hooters kept pressuring the animals. "Xena!" Gabrielle hollered. "What the Hades are we going to do when we get there?"

Xena thought hard, and suddenly the risk they were taking came home to her with a vengeance. If they intercepted the hooters, then what?

Then they had another target? Would they turn aside from so much meat, for meat of a different kind? "Gabrielle." Xena slid closer. "Run fast, over there. See if you can cut them off.. turn them. Before they get to the edge!"

Gabrielle looked at the far end of the plateau, then back at her partner. "What are you going to do?"

"Draw those bastards off!"

Gabrielle drew in a ragged breath, as she realized they were out of options. Either do what Xena said, and maybe they had a chance..or do nothing. The baby animals squeals cut across the grass and lanced into her ears, and she knew in her heart the greater good was about to kick her right in the butt one more time. "Okay!" She started to head off towards the cliff edge. "But damn it, Xena.. be careful!"

Faced with drawing off what would be two score angry hooters with weapons and torches, Xena found the irony of the request almost funny.

Almost.

"You too!" She yelled at her partner as they parted, sweeping away in opposite directions through the thick grass.

Gabrielle put her anxieties behind her and concentrated on running instead, balling her fists and tucking her staff under her arm as she bolted across the plateau at her top speed. She had to get around the line of hooters, but they were shifted mostly towards the direction Xena went and she only had to head in a shallow arc to get past them.

The animals were speeding up, clearly afraid of the fire. The torches fluttered, and Gabrielle felt a sinking sensation as she realized this new weapon had been given to them by her and Xena, one of those unknowing pieces of bad luck they both seemed to have sometimes.

She drove herself faster, dashing past the last hooter in the line and heading for the animals. She heard the hooter let out a screech as he spotted her, but she kept her head forward and refused to look back.

The animals were moving faster, thundering along at a deceptive pace that ate up the rapidly depleting ground, heading directly for the edge of the plateau and the oblivion beyond it. "Hey!" Gabrielle yelled at the top of her lungs. "Hey!!! Stop!!!"

The sound of their motion masked even her bellowing. Gabrielle realized she'd have to get in front of them to get their attention, and she lengthened her strides, her head tipping back as she ran like she hadn't since she'd won the Games.

She hoped she could stop them.

She hoped Xena....

The biggest animal trumpeted loudly, as the hooters caught up to them, and they felt the heat of the torches on her back legs. The herd moved faster, but the baby was having trouble keeping up and he squealed in terror, his snout waving wildly back and forth.

Gabrielle put on one last burst of speed and got between them, emerging perilously near the edge of the plateau and whirling to face both the oncoming animals and the oncoming hooters.

Not a good place. "Stop!" She waved her arms at the closest animal. "Stop! Stop!!!"

She spotted Xena cutting across the line of attackers with her arms outstretched, the high, clear sound of the warrior's battle yell emerging even through the thunder but she suddenly had the feeling it was all just going to be too late.

The animals wouldn't stop.

The hooters wouldn't stop.

It would all be for nothing.

Gabrielle saw the side of the hooter line waver, as Xena intercepted them, the warrior grabbing a torch from the last hunter and slamming him across the face with it.

She desperately turned towards the closest animal and ran towards it, waving her arms and yelling at the top of her lungs, understanding that if it was all for nothing – well, at least they would give it their all.

**

Stupid bastards. Xena closed in on the line of hooters, grabbing the last one in line and yanking him over backwards. She grabbed the stick from his hand before he could react and whacked him across the head with it, making him slump to the ground in a spray of blood.

He squirmed, but then stilled and she kept going, heading for the next one and wishing in heartfelt curses she had her sword with her. She made a vow with herself to wear the damn thing around her neck after they got home again and never leave it behind, even to go down to pick berries.

“Yeah!” She caught up to the next hooter and he turned, spotting her and letting out a scream. He stopped and leaped towards her, but she swung the club she’d taken from the first and it cracked against the one he was carrying, sending a jarring shock up her arms and into her shoulders.

He tried to swing back at her, but he was unsure of his new weapon, and she was anything but. Xena reversed her swing and swept down, then up, taking the stick from his hands and sending it flying. He screamed at her, and reached with his hands, the tips of his fingers bloodied from her strike. She pulled the stick back up and took a short hold on it, then whipped the weapon around in a tight arc, smacking him across the face with its tip.

It raked his face open. Blood exploded from his nose, and he screamed again.

Xena didn’t pause, now that her adversary was effectively blinded. She smacked him across the head again and went past, catching the last of the line with a sense of ferocious pleasure.

Bastards.

Xena saw the obvious danger when it was far too late for her to do anything about it. In the middle of whacking one of the hooters in the head with his own torch, she saw Gabrielle cut in front of the charging herd and wave her arms, courageously standing between the animals and oblivion.

Her heart almost stopped beating in her chest, as the animals kept moving, closing in on that one, lone figure blocking their path.

In that one moment, Xena was put in a place where everything, every hooter, every animal, every cloud in the sky meant less to her than that one lone figure and abruptly she just wanted to immediately kill everything between them.

No logic. No planning, no nothing. An utter panic swept her and she let out a bellow that even carried over the thundering animals and her hands reached for the nearest hooter to haul him down and out of her way.

The hooter struggled and tangled with her, letting out an excited sound that attracted the attention of the three or four nearest to them. Despite the chaos of the hunt, they turned and spotted Xena and hesitated in their shambling runs, torn between one hunger and another.

Xena shoved him to the ground and jumped over his scrambling body, ducking under a swinging stick as she started for where Gabrielle was standing. Her eyes fixed on the bard, she almost didn’t see the gang of hooters intercepting her until their hands were grasping at her skin.

Impatiently, she wrenched free, but two more were throwing themselves at her knees and the next thing she knew she was on the ground and they were crawling all over her. She lost sight of Gabrielle and her body convulsed as she got her feet under her and shoved skyward, the power of her legs battling with the grip of the hooters.

She got her head up over theirs and looked frantically through the herd, spotting a flash of Gabrielle’s tan skin and a blip of blond hair that disappeared as the dust stirred by the animals covered her.

"Gabrielle!" Xena twisted in mid air, and half flipped, getting clear of the hooters long enough to get her feet on the ground and into motion. She started running, dodging the chasing males as her heart rate skyrocketed and she almost felt lightheaded as a result.

One of the hooters grabbed her, and tackled her to the ground, his greater weight knocking the breath out of her as they rolled together through the grass. Xena tucked herself into a ball and twisted, then lashed out with both feet as the hooter came even with her. The impact knocked her back into the earth, but it also threw the hooter skyward and gave her enough time to backflip up onto her feet and bolt off again.

She hear yelling. She smelled burning grass. If she turned around, she was afraid she'd find out that some of the hooters she'd already fought free of had set the ground on fire, and added another danger she didn't need to worry about at the moment.

A sudden stab of fear in her gut almost made her stumble. She looked ahead , but Gabrielle was no where to be seen and the animals were now almost at the edge of the cliff.

A thought crossed her mind, bleak and chilling, that maybe this time she just wasn't going to be able to stop what was going to happen.

Again.

A ride across the plains of Britain thundered in her memory.

No.

A wash of red cleansed her vision, and the color drained from the landscape as an already narrow focus tightened to one single point as everything else faded out around her.

**

"Stop! Please!!" Gabrielle skidded to a halt. The biggest of the animals, the mother, was racing down on her with no signs of stopping, and all sense of recognition gone from her eyes. She waved her trunk at Gabrielle and trumpeted, as a gust of wind blew smoke over them and stung the bard's eyes.

Gabrielle looked behind her, at the scant space between her and the edge of the cliff. She looked back up at the matriarch, trying to make eye contact but the flapping ears and waving trunk made it impossible. ¶"Please!" She held her hands out. "Stop.. stop! We'll protect you!"

Several of the herd trumpeted loudly, and the wind picked up behind them again, blowing the rich, acrid smoke over the grass. Gabrielle coughed in reflex, tasting failure on the back of her tongue but she started forward towards the matriarch anyway.

Maybe the animal would realize in time. The big one turned it's head away from her though, and urged the herd onward ever faster.

It was one of the most helpless feelings she'd ever had. With a gasp, she turned her attention to the baby instead, as he squirted from between the legs of two of the running beasts and bolted straight for her.

Instinctively, Gabrielle knelt and opened her arms, as the thundering grew around her and she felt the ground start to shake. "Here!" She caught the baby's eye. "Come here!"

She couldn't stop the adults. But maybe, just maybe, she could stop the baby and...

And? Then what? They couldn't raise him. Gabrielle felt the world fade out a little as she realized saving the baby and letting his family run over the cliff would probably be worse than letting him die with them.

It ran to her and as it's snout touched her hand, the herd also reached them and rushed around her in a thick pall of fear and danger. Behind them, the hooters were screaming in triumph, waving the torches she could now smell, excited at the success of their hunt.

Oh gods. Gabrielle sucked in a breath and knew a moment of total soul rending frustration. Then the biggest of the animals reached her and she looked up as she felt it's presence, her eyes widening as the snout curled around her and she was lifted off her feet. "NO!!!!"

The baby squealed, reaching for her, then stumbled forward and was knocked down as the herd rushed past, headed for the edge of the cliff.

"NOOOO!!!" Gabrielle struggled with every ounce of strength she had, twisting her body violently in mid air. The ground whirled and sped around her, and she felt herself getting dizzy, then the breath was knocked out of her as the creature slammed her against it's shoulder. "NOOO!!!" She reached out and grabbed for any handhold, her fingers finding and closing on the big, curved tooth.

The animal shook her head, whipping Gabrielle back and forth. The bard hung on grimly, her shoulders almost coming out of their sockets as the snout tried to pull her free. She got a leg up around the tusk and grabbed the edge of the animals ear, getting her head near the big eye and staring into it.

**

Xena charged forward, heedless of the obstacles in her path as she fought her way forward towards the fast moving herd. She caught the next line of hooters, and now the leaders heard the commotion and turned, spotting her.

"YEAHHH!!!" Xena let out a wild battle yell, challenging them. She turned and whacked at the nearest of them, bashing his head again and again as he rushed her. She bellowed over and over, desperate to draw the attention of the hunters away from their prey.

Away from her life.

Abandoning the herd, the leader turned and headed for her, screaming at the top of his lungs and pointing his torch. Many of the hunters wanted to go on, but the first of them grabbed at the leader and he turned, biting them on the hand and sending blood flying.

There were at least two score of them, and now the tide turned and they headed for Xena, running through the grass and dropping the unfamiliar torches in excitement as her scent reached them in the rising wind.

The grass caught, a smoky blaze that obscured the herd, and washed over the hooters as they turned and gathered into a gang to go after the battling warrior in their midst. The hunt was forgotten and they hooted in growing excitement as they closed around Xena and swallowed her up in their mass.

Xena felt a moment of cold, self knowledge, as she pulled the small skinning knife from her boot lashings.

They would not take her.

Not alive at any rate.

They landed on her and started grabbing, and she started stabbing, and the air was filled with musk and blood and desperation.

**

Gabrielle knew the edge was close. She gripped the tusk and pulled herself forward, getting as close to the animal's face as she could. "Please!" She stared into the big, brown eye. "Please don't die!"

There was no recognition there. Only terror, and anger. Gabrielle thumped her head against the rough skin in desperation. "NOOO!!!" She hollered. "We won't let them hurt you!!!"

The pressure around her waist was almost unbearable, and she felt pain rip through her, making her suck in a breath and gasp, her body curling up helplessly, twisting in the animals' grasp as she cried out in agony.

It was hard to breathe.

She remembered the last time she'd felt like this, and her heart lurched.

A trembling surrounded her, and then a blast of sound, shaking her insides as the band cutting off her breathing felt hot as a firebrand against her skin. She wrenched her eyes open and stared into the animal's eye, finding a fierce focus there that had been missing only a moment before.

The pain made it impossible for her to speak, so she just hung there gasping, as the rush of the wind around her slowed and the thunder slowly faded, though the smell of smoke remained strong.

She heard a hawk's cry and her eyes lifted briefly, to see one circling lazily overhead. Then she let her head drop and her gaze went downward, seeing nothing but air and the ground very far away beneath her.

Then the animal turned away from the brink and she looked back at the herd, who were milling anxiously ahead of a thick pall of smoke, through which she could see dark forms, but only as shadows and moving away.

Away from them. Gabrielle felt the grip on her ease, and she could breathe again. She looked back at the animal's eye. "Thank you." She whispered, her entire body shaking as the animal lowered her to the ground. She held onto the snout as she tried to stand up, but her legs gave out and she ended up on her knees with the thick grass tickling her skin.

The cramps still gripped her, though and she let her eyes close as the animal's snout brushed lightly over her shoulder.

Then a jolt of despair shoved that out of her mind and she stood in pure reflex, setting aside her body's frailty as she sensed Xena's desperation through their link.

Somehow, she found herself running, stumbling through the grass heedless of the animals and the smoke as she answered that call with no further regard for what might have been.

**

There were just too damn many of them. Xena somehow found the strength to keep moving, twisting and stabling viciously as the hard grips ripped the catskin off her and raked gouges into her flesh.

She kept her fingers clenched down hard on the knife, regardless of what it was cutting through. She knew if she lost it, any chance she might have would be lost as well.

If it wasn't already. She felt her boot catch on a rock and used it for leverage, shoving herself away from two of the males that were trying to pin her down. Rough ground scraped against her shoulderblades, but she continued the motion and rolled into a reverse somersault, putting her boots against an outcropping and twisting over onto her stomach.

Three males came at her. She waited for them to commit themselves to a leap, then she shoved away from the ground with a powerful uncoiling of her legs and shot skyward, her heels clearing their heads easily as they fell past her to where she'd been crouched, colliding with each other in a tangle of hairy appendages and frustration.

Xena searched the far side of the plateau as she reached the top of her leap, but the smoke made a mystery of the herd and her partner and she only had time to curse as she half twisted again in mid air and landed in a clear spot.

It was a very momentary respite. A gang of the hooters hurled themselves at her, one carrying a torch. She ducked and turned gracefully, feeling the heat as the fire passed just over her shoulders and then a hotter sensation as blood spurted from the knife she'd slammed into the hooter's gut.

Doubling her hands, she yanked the blade through, feeling bone and sinew parting as she whirled around and just barely missed a club that bounced off her left shoulder instead of her head. Ow. That's gonna be a bruise. With a grunt, she planted her left foot and kicked out with her right, snapping her heel into the hairy chin of the hooter who'd hit her.

His head jerked back and he lost his balance, but another one filled the void and she landed her kick just in time to duck and grab his arm, yanking him around as she threw her body in a circle and throwing him into two of his fellows.

It cleared just enough space for her to get a breath of air, and find a rock to put her back against before they came at her again. She could see a line of fire between them, and the herd, and through the smoke she heard a loud, brassy trumpet.

Then the hooters attacked her in earnest, and she realized their minds had been switched into a killing mode when two of them picked up a boulder and threw it at her, slamming her hard on the side and against the rock at her back.

Stars shot into her vision, and she felt the breath go out of her, as the crowd of them crashed into her and she felt her legs give out under the weight of them. She only had time to get a lungful of air before she was smothered in grunting, fetid bodies.

Gods.

Xena wasn't one to panic under any circumstances, but she was also human and a part of her reached out instinctively for Gabrielle, feeling a gust of fear and anguish coming from her partner in return.

Grimly, she started cutting anything within her reach, wrenching her hands from the gripping fingers that tried to still them.

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The line of fire blocked her path. Gabrielle slowed, looking right and left for a way past it. The lake was her only real option and she headed for it, her heart pounding so hard in her chest it made her lightheaded. She heard a trumpet behind her, and as she got to the lake she glanced back, seeing the herd milling again in fear.

The line of fire, driven by the wind, was sweeping towards them as potent a danger as the hooters were. The herd started moving in the wrong direction again, and Gabrielle almost broke down and cried. "NOO!!" She yelled at the top of her lungs.

The baby turned, and spotted her. He slipped between his mother's legs and bolted for her, rambling haphazardly over the grass with his snout raised high.

The matriarch bellowed, turning back from her retreat. She shifted from leg to leg – raising her snout and letting out a plaintive trumpet. She took a step to follow him, but the fire flared up and she stepped back, clearly terrified of it.

Gabrielle hurt for them. But her heart and soul was being pulled elsewhere, and she was helpless to resist that. She yelled one more time, and the big animal swung back to look at her, their eyes meeting through the smoke.

Well. Maybe there was one chance.

Gabrielle waded into the water, and scooped up handfuls of it, throwing it on the burning grass nearby. A gust of smoke went up, and she shoveled another handful at the blaze as the baby rambled up and splashed into the water next to her. "C'mon." She held her hand out and waited for the snout to tangle with it. "Let's go."

The water wasn't that deep, but they had to circle the boulders and she pushed anxiously forward, fear for her partner now taking over her thoughts once again.

The baby followed her willingly, making tiny bugling noises as they circled the rocks and cleared the line of fire.

Gabrielle could now see the hooters, clustered in a tight pack around something in an evident, vicious attack. After a frozen second, she realized where Xena was, and with a muffled curse she plowed through the shallowing water towing the baby animal behind her.

They emerged and she let go of the snout and started running, balling her fists up and throwing everything she had into crossing the grass as fast as she could. "Xena!"

Dust from the grass rose up all round her, and she sucked in a lungful of it, a cough ripping at her throat as she sped over the ground. The thick strands lashed against her legs, and she felt stings as the edges cut her but it only made her run faster as she felt a deep sense of fear ignite in her guts.

Only one thing could be causing that. Gabrielle felt her own fear redouble and she stifled a cry as she stumbled over a half hidden rock and almost went sprawling. Her body jerked as she desperately tried to keep her balance, and her hand brushed one of the hooter's clubs fallen in the grass.

She clutched it, shoving off from the ground with her other hand and throwing herself back upright. With the club swinging from one fist, she bolted for the melee and as she reached the edge of it, she whipped the club back and started swinging.

The hooter she hit collapsed as she heard a crack from his spine. "Yeahhh!!! Xena!!" Gabrielle let out a bellow as she swung at the next body between her and her soulmate. "Xena!!"

The hooter turned and the blow slid off him. He whirled and swung his own club, his face writhing in anger as he fended off her attack and then, unexpectedly, brought his other arm around holding a jagged stick in it.

He drove it right for her. Gabrielle managed to block it, but misjudged the length of the club she had and overreached, exposing her side to his return swipe. She tried to get back around but in a flickering instant knew she was too late and steeled herself for the pain of the stab.

He cried out, and lunged against her, but the spear shot over her shoulder and then clattered to the grass as the weight of his body sent them both sprawling. Gabrielle smelled the hot copper tang of blood, but as she shoved him off her, she realized it was his and not hers, and her hand touched a familiar if unexpected item sticking out of his chest.

Her eyes barely had time to register the distinctive marks on the feathers, before she heard a yell go up and she struggled to her knees, spotting a dark haired form against the far trees in the posture of an archer.

Blessed Artemis. Gabrielle ducked a club and got up, dodging one of the hooters and swinging her own club at him. Another arrow whipped by her cheek, burying itself in the hooter's chest, and she jumped clear of him in time to see another, equally welcome figure bolting towards the pile, sword drawn and glinting in the sun.

Her breath was taken out of her a moment later as two males took her down, burying her face into the earth as heavy fists pounded her body. She didn't even have time to let out a sound before her lungs were straining, and her head was spinning from the lack of air.

She could taste dirt.

She could taste death.

Far off, she heard the baby animal squealing.

Then it got very dark, and very quiet. She exhaled, glad she could rest, finally. The smell of the earth faded, and for a moment, she swore she could taste peaches.

Then a bolt of fire hit her deep in her guts, and the world exploded back into being around her, chaos and movement and pain in a jumble of sensation as one weight lifted up off her and another hold closed around her body, this time so warm and familiar it brought tears to her eyes as she recognized it.

The sweetness overruled the horror of the moment, and she reconciled herself to the knowledge that if this was the end for them, some gods somewhere had smiled on them and had at least brought them together for it.

The hooters hollered, and closed in on them, their stench flowing over her as she felt Xena close her arms and turn her body, shielding her from them.

In that moment, the only thing she could feel was the depths of their love, and so she closed her eyes and surrendered to that, opening her heart and her soul to whatever happened next.

Then the ground began shaking around her, and she heard chaos and loud sounds, and felt her body pulled over as her shoulders slammed against a rock surface with enough force to stun her once again. She tried to open her eyes, but her face was pressed against warm skin and now her ears picked up a thunder that sounded more like a heartbeat.

Screaming. Wild and inhuman.

The smell of burning flesh.

A thunder of motion, and a loud, brassy fanfare that shattered the air with such force, it made her ears itch fiercely inside and rattled the teeth inside her head. She felt Xena take a sudden breath as the sound rumbled around them, gusts of air hitting her skin that carried the smell of the herd, and grass, and mud, with smoke and blood clinging around the edges.

Then it got quiet again, the thunder fading into the distance with surprising speed. Only this time, the silence was quickly broken by voices, and the crunching of footsteps, and the smell of rain.

Gods.

Gabrielle forced her eyes open again and shifted her head, as the light mist made her blink until she could resolve the dark smudge over her into Xena's familiar features, pale blue eyes staring down at her with a weary exhaustion in them.

Somehow, they both managed to smile. A little. Xena's lashes fluttered briefly shut, then opened, and she licked dry, cracked lips in a shaky motion. "Damn."

"Wow." The bard managed to rasp out. "You scared me, Xena."

The blue eyes blinked again. "I." Xena repeated. "Scared you?"

Gabrielle nodded.

Xena merely looked at her, silently shaking her head. Then she rolled over and pulled Gabrielle into her lap, as the rain poured over them, welcome in its clean chill.

In the distance, Gabrielle could see the herd running, chasing the last of the hooters back towards the scrub forest, and as she turned her head, Pony and Granella dropped down next to them, their faces twisted in both concern and consternation.

She honestly didn't think she'd ever been so glad to see anyone in her life with the exception of Xena a few times. "Hi."

"Gabrielle." Granella gasped out. "What in the temple of Artemis' sacrificial alter is going on here?"

Pony was studying them, wide eyed. "What in Hades' happened to you two?" She blurted out, clearly shaken.

Xena wiped a smear of blood from her nose, then let her hand fall to her thigh, her eyes seemingly fixed on the rust red stain across the back of her knuckles. "Nice timing." She said, after a moment. "You just saved our asses."

Granella and Pony exchanged looks with each other, then stared back at them again.

"And.." Gabrielle added, in a soft, exhausted voice. "There isn't much that hasn't happened to us."

The grass parted, and the baby animal rushed forward, squealing. He reached Gabrielle's side and sat down abruptly, reaching out his snout to her with a snuffling sound.

Granella and Pony looked at each other once more. Pony sat down in the grass and scratched her head, while Granella stared at the baby animal.

Overhead, the thunder rolled, and a crack of lightning lit them in sober silver, as the rain started to drench them in thick, robust drops.

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The rain continued to pour down over them. Granella looked around again, but there was really no shelter nearby so she just sat there quietly, watching Gabrielle as she withstood the downpour with little more than a few blinks of her pale lashes.

Oblivious, almost, like the animal next to her, whose large ears occasionally flapped to shed the rain but otherwise ignored it.

The bard had scratches all over her face, and her muddied, torn traveling clothes did little to disguise the bruises and cuts that liberally covered her tanned skin, but other than that, she appeared relatively unhurt.

Amazing, considering what they'd been through.

Xena and Pony had gone down to retrieve the supplies they'd tossed to one side after hearing the yelling and recognizing the voices, leaving them to wait out the rain in what little lee they could find on the side of the boulders. Granella had been glad enough to stay behind, as her knees were still shaky from the unexpected scene they'd come on and she was happy to take a few minutes to see how her sister in law was really doing.

She suspected it wasn't as good as she appeared.

"So." Granella leaned forward, so the rain would run off her back instead of into her face. "What is that?"

Gabrielle had the nose of the animal in her hand, and it seemed to be playing with her fingers. After a moment of pensive silence, she looked up at Granella. "I don't know." She answered. "We don't... Xena saw something like them once, but not this big."

The baby curled its snout around the bard's wrist and swung it gently, flapping its ears in an amiable way.

"Seems friendly." Granella observed. "But then again, animals have a thing for you guys, I noticed."

Gabrielle winced.

"Um.. I didn't mean it as an insult."

The bard sighed. "No.. I know. But those things attacking us... it's been pretty awful."

"Huh." Granella studied the animal, who seemed very content to sit by Gabrielle's side, occasionally taking a bite of the river grass and chewing it. She turned her eyes back to the bard. "You okay?"

Pale green eyes met hers. "No." But Gabrielle half smiled as she said it. "It's been one long nightmare for us. I'm glad you showed up."

Her sister in law plucked a bit of grass up and twisted it in her fingers. "You know how folks are." She said. "People were worried. I was." Her eyes lifted again. "Tor was.. even though we know usually it's for nothing."

"Not this time." Gabrielle replied simply.

"No."

The bard reached over and scratched the animal's thickly furred head. "These are the first creatures we've met here that we've been able to communicate with."

Granella's eyebrows twitched. "Communicate?" She asked, skeptically.

"Mm." Gabrielle smiled at the little animal, who gazed adoringly up at her. "Isn't that right, sweetie? Your mama understood us, didn't she?"

The animal gurgled a bit.

"What were those other things?" Granella asked. "The things attacking you."

Gabrielle shifted slightly, resting her elbows on her knees. She reached up to push a bit of sodden blond hair back from her eyes with a faintly shaking hand. "We're not sure what they are either." She said. "But it's kind of a long story and I'm not up to telling it right now."

Granella reached over and put a hand on her arm. "No problem." She told her. "Hey, listen.. Dori's doing great. You know Eph brought her up to the village, and she's pretty much taken over the kids group there."

As calculated, the news brought a genuine smile to Gabrielle's face. "She has, huh?" The bard said. "What a little renegade she is. We were wondering what would happen if she went in with that bunch.. they've got some pretty old kids."

"Mm." Granella said. "She's been pretty good. Eph's staying by your place, said Dori wanted it that way."

Gabrielle covered her face with one hand and laughed gently. "My daughter." She sighed. "She's more of an Amazon queen already than I'll ever be."

The stark truth of the statement made Granella blink, but she just patted Gabrielle's arm and made no comment. Instead, she rooted around for something else to distract her sister in law, since she could see how on the edge the woman was, laughter or no. "It's a damn good thing we found you."

"Agreed." Gabrielle remarked, in a soft voice.

"No.. I mean.." Granella cleared her throat, shaking her head to rid her eyes of her drenched hair. "We've got big problems in the village.. we need you back there."

"Really?" The bard asked, after a moment's silence.

"Yeah, we.." Granella stopped and looked over her shoulder as the ground started shaking. "Uh oh." She spotted the herd returning, heading for them with a very purposeful air. "Should we move?"

"Nah." Gabrielle extended her legs, rubbing her thumb over a deep, painful looking bruise just above her kneecap. "What's going on at home?"

Granella watched nervously as the earth started vibrating, tiny pebbles jumping in front of her. "Uh.. well.. the merchants.. I think they're putting pressure on the council to pay them off."

Gabrielle snorted.

"They were pretty insistent.. the council agreed."

"What?"

Granella nodded solemnly. "Wanted everyone to pony up.. even suggested we sell Xena's sword to raise cash." She glanced up, watching as Gabrielle's jaw dropped and her eyes started to come out of her head. "I thought your mother in law was going to stab him with her meat fork."

"Puh." The bard half coughed. "Dear gods.. Xena would... she'd..."

"Relax." Granella patted her again. "We brought it with us."

Gabrielle straightened. "You brought her weapons?"

"Sure." Granella nodded. "I knew she took off... I mean, I saw it happen, Gabrielle. You scared me senseless." She watched the bard's face, not really understanding the shifting emotions there. "So yeah.. we've got that and her leathers down by the... Gab?"

Gabrielle had looked up, with a wry expression. "You have no idea how happy that's going to make her."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

**

"There." Eponin pointed to a flat spot in the trail, where she'd tossed their packs when they'd started running. "That's where I tossed the stuff.. listen, Xena, I'll go grab it, huh? Why don't you hang out here." She eyed her bloodied, hollow eyed companion. "No sense both of us getting.. uh.. muddy."

Xena looked at her for a moment, then she took a seat on a nearby rock and lifted her hand, then let it drop onto her knee. "All yours."

Pony went scuffling off into the brush leaving the warrior to sit quietly in the rain. Somewhat past dissembling, Xena was actually glad to do just that, her body now more than a little on the shaky side since the battle was over and the nightmare had passed for the moment.

She'd strained something, somewhere. Her body felt a bit lopsided and she knew eventually whatever it was would stiffen up and she'd be miserable, but at the moment she honestly didn't really give a damn. It was enough for her to sit and revel quietly in the idle warmth she could sense coming from Gabrielle and understand she'd dodged an arrow one more time.

Too damn close.

Xena rested her forearms on her knees and studied her hands, covered in cuts and scrapes, and one large bruise over her right knuckles. She flexed her fingers and tried to recall how she'd gotten that one, most of the last of the fight a typical blur.

Any time Gabrielle was in danger, things tended to be a blur, she acknowledged. She remembered the hooters piling on, and then she remembered feeling Gabrielle stop breathing, and after that?

Who knew? She thought she remembered screams.. maybe some of them had even been her own. Her throat felt like she'd been doing some of that.

Her jaws ached too.. had she bitten one of them? Experimentally, she felt around the inside of her mouth with her tongue, hoping not to find anything that didn't belong there.

"Xena?"

The warrior lifted her head, to find Pony emerging from the brush carrying a large pack. Her eyes fastened on a familiar hilt emerging from it and her expression brightened noticeably. "That mine?"

Pony stopped and looked at her. "No." She joked wanly. "I had it duplicated cause I worship you so much." She climbed back up onto the path and brought the pack over. "Course it's yours."

Xena took the pack and let it rest on her knees, as she dug out the sword. Wrapping her hand around the hilt she drew it, the shakiness gone as her body recognized the familiar weight. "That." She set the pack down and stood up, reaching out and pulling Pony into a completely unexpected hug. "is awesome."

"Uh." Pony's eyes bugged out, as the breath was squeezed from her. "You're.. uh.. welcome."

Xena released her, then picked the pack up again and slung it over her shoulder. She started up the path with the drawn sword still in her hand, her fingers idly clenching around the hilt and spinning the blade. "Sure coulda used this."

"Well." Eponin caught up to her and walked alongside. "We found ya fast as we could, y'know?"

"Yeah." Xena glanced sideways at her. "Damn glad you found us at all."

Pony pursed her lips and kicked a few rocks out of the way. After a little bit of silence, she glanced back and Xena. "Close, huh?"

Xena nodded somberly.

The rain came down harder, and they both turned their heads to one side, to shield their eyes. "You remember picking that one big thing up and cracking him against that rock?" Pony asked, with a touch of hesitance.

Xena walked a few paces in silence. Then she shook her head. "Focused on something else." She commented briefly.

Pony digested that as they climbed up the last, steep slope onto the plateau. "Yeah." She murmured. "You do get focused."

Xena looked back at her, then extended a hand to offer her a pull up the last crag. Pony accepted the hand, and after they were both standing on the edge of the plateau gazing at the half drowned, half burnt out ruin of it, the weapons master turned to look Xena in the eye. "When we go back there." She said. "Ain't gonna be no more of that taunting crap, Xena."

The warrior raised an eyebrow.

"Sorry it went that way." Pony turned and headed for the rocks sheltering their companions, the heavy rain quickly blurring her figure.

Xena frowned, then half shook her head before she followed. The herd, she noted, had returned and now that they could give the baby back to his mother, they could find themselves shelter and take stock of what they had.

After all. Her fingers tightened on her sword hilt, and she exhaled. Things had gotten better, when it had looked to her like they couldn't possibly get much worse.

She couldn't ask for more, now could she?

**

The rain just kept on falling, and didn't look like it was going to let up any time in the near future. The four sodden women found a thick patch of scrub and managed a crude shelter, which they were sharing more or less equably despite the mud and drizzle.

A fire was impossible, but between the leaves and the hide Xena and Gabrielle had been carrying they'd managed to put up enough protection to make it bearable if not comfortable, and collected enough berries and other scrub food to at least take the edge off.

Not great, but not horrible either. Pony decided, as she took a moment to collect herself and adjust to the sudden change in their circumstances.

They had come to find Xena and Gabrielle, and against what she'd privately felt were impossible odds, they'd found them. Not only that, they'd actually been able to help them out of a pretty bad spot, and she thought they were pretty glad to see them in any case.

She thought things hadn't been real good for them. Not the way Xena looked, and the way Gabrielle was acting.

But hey, now they could get the Hades out, and get back home to kick some village council butt and finally settle into their new digs.

They done good. For once. "So." She finally broke the silence. "You get that off something here?"

Xena cracked a nut in her hand and opened her fingers, offering the contents to Gabrielle. They were sitting side by side on Xena's now discarded catskin, the warrior displaying a stolid, expressionless joy at having her leathers back on. "This?" The warrior indicated skin.

"Yeah."

"Yes." Gabrielle had selected half the nutmeats and was slowly chewing on them. "One of the big cats attacked us when we first got here." She said. "It was pretty scary."

"Yeah.. we got jumped by one too." Granella studied the skin. "But we didn't think about salvaging any of it.. kinda stupid, really."

Gabrielle cleared her throat a little. "Well.. not really. We didn't have anything... we were making do with whatever we could find, trust me." She glanced up at their makeshift roof. "This thing came at us too.. probably being chased by one of those cats."

"Or those damn bastards." Xena commented, cracking another nut.

Granella looked at the hide. "What is that?"

Gabrielle shook her head. "We don't know. That's what's been so frustrating, or one of the things anyway." She was silent for a few moments. "One of the things." She repeated. "All these animals... these things that were so strange to us."

"Huh."

Xena handed over more nutmeats. "I've been over half the earth." She stated. "Never seen half of this stuff before."

"Really?" Granella murmured. "We saw the big cat.. but besides that and those guys attacking you and the big things over there on the plateau we really didn't see that much different." She paused, reviewing what she'd just said. "Oh, well.. now, I guess we did."

Pony snorted.

Gabrielle leaned against Xena's shoulder and let her head rest there as well. "It was just one thing after another."

Granella nodded. "Yeah..I can see that. But..." She raked her fingers through her dark, wet hair. "How can so many things we've never seen be so close to home?"

Xena and Gabrielle exchanged looks. Xena shook her head. "We've been asking ourselves that for days." The warrior replied. "Doesn't make any sense."

"Nope." Pony agreed. "But you know what I always say."

"What?" Gabrielle, without seeming to think about it, reached over and interlaced her fingers with Xena's.

"Huh?"

"What do you always say?" Xena repeated tolerantly.

Pony frowned. "Damned if I remember."

That got a smile from Xena, and a soft chuckle. "Well, anyway, here we are." She said. "We were thinking of going back to where we fell in here, and climbing out."

Granella nodded slowly. "No other way? I guess you guys have looked around, huh?"

"Yeah." Xena said. "Walls are too high.. only place low enough is that waterfall."

"Sounds good." Pony worried a berry off the bunch in her hand and popped it into her mouth. "Start off in the morning.. let's hope this damn rain stops."

They all fell silent for a bit, listening to the rain come down outside the shelter. Thunder rolled overhead as well, and as if in counterpoint, they heard a trumpet from one of the big animals.

After the sound faded, Gabrielle licked her lips and gave Xena's hand a gentle squeeze. The warrior turned her head slightly and looked at her, one brow lifted in mild inquiry.

"I know we all want to get home as soon as we can." Gabrielle said.

"Uh oh." Xena muttered, almost subvocally.

The bard looked back at her. "Xena, we owe those creatures." She said. "We owe them not to have to live under the threat of being slaughtered."

"Gabrielle." The warrior's voice was gentle. "They're prey. It's what nature is."

"No." The bard's voice took on a sterner note. "We taught those.. people.. how to use fire, Xena. That's what those animals were running from. Not the clubs, not the... hooters.. it was the fire." She straightened up. "I saw it. I saw them stop, they were going to run the other way again when the grass caught."

Granella and Pony wisely kept quiet, their eyes flicking from one bruised face to the other.

"Well, most animals are afraid of fire." The warrior allowed. "Sure."

"WE taught the hooters to use it to hunt." Gabrielle pointed at her chest. "We did, Xena.. you and me."

"Mm."

The bard waited, then shifted, apparently assured she'd made her point. "So we have to fix that."

Xena leaned back and extended her legs, wincing as her knee popped into place. "We do."

"Yes."

The warrior crossed her arms. "How do you propose we do that, Gabrielle? We can't take that knowledge back."

Gabrielle gazed quietly out at the rain. "I know that."

The thunder rolled over head. "So." Xena murmured. "Exactly how are we supposed to protect these animals, then?" She exhaled. "We can't blockade them off... maybe we could find a place in the hills there to keep them from this plateau, but..."

"It would be hard." Gabrielle conceded. "Those hooters are really persistent."

"Hooters?" Granella cautiously interjected.

Gabrielle rested her elbows on her knees and leaned forward. "They make this weird noise." She muttered. "So that's what I called them."

"Mm."

A small silence fell. Pony cleared her throat after a bit of it. "Well, if you can't protect the big things, you're gonna have to get rid of the little ones." She stated pragmatically. "Not sure what all the debate's about."

Xena turned her head, and regarded Gabrielle's profile. "Well??"

The bard looked over at her.

"Are you prepared to do that?" Xena asked. "Pony's right. The only way to be absolutely sure is to kill them. You ready for that?"

Pony prudently shut up, her eyes widening. Beside her, Granella sat, frozen.

Gabrielle plucked a bit of grass up that was poking from between the edge of the catskin and her leg. She examined it, her face a contradiction of so many emotions it was impossible to judge what she was thinking.

Or feeling.

Except for Xena, who knew, at least, the second.

"That's not really what you mean, Xena." The bard finally said. "What you really mean is.. am I ready to watch you kill them, because we all know that's what it's going to come down to. Much as I'm in there at your back with my belt knife."

Xena half shrugged.

"I'll help." Pony added, in a small voice.

Gabrielle exhaled slowly and her head lifted. She studied each face in turn, her eyes resting at last on Xena's. "You taught me." She said, seeing the flinch in Xena's eyes. "You taught me to clean up my messes, Xena. This is our mess."

The warrior inclined her head a little in agreement.

Gabrielle glanced down, then back up. "Yes." She pronounced the word carefully. "If that's what it takes to make sure those friends of ours out there.. "She glanced at the plateau. "Don't pay for our mistake, then yes. I'm ready to see all of them die."

Xena turned her gaze to her own hands, clasped lightly now in front of her. She rubbed the edge of her thumb over a scratch on the side of one finger, her face relatively expressionless.

They all waited for a while, as the rain fell, pattering on top of the hide in an almost hypnotic rhythm.

"You know." Granella finally broke the silence. "There's a whole lot of them, and only four of us." She stated. "And I love you all, but I've got two kids and a husband at home, and I'd like to live to see them again."

Three sets of eyes shifted to her face.

"I'm sorry if that sounds selfish." Granella added quietly. "But since we're all dumping our guts here, I thought I'd throw that in."

That seemed to break the tension a little. "That's always the goal." Xena said, in a voice more than a little rough around the edges with exhaustion. "We'll make it home. No one's dying that I don't want dying."

Even Pony's eyes bugged out a little at that.

Gabrielle resumed her leaning, putting her head back down on Xena's shoulder with a more peaceful look on her face, though there was a bone deep weariness in the shadows there as well.

"All right." Xena regarded her soulmate. "Chances are we'd have to battle through the bastards to get out of here anyway." She nodded a little. "Those friends are worth protecting." Her eyes went to Granella. "And so is my family."

Granella blinked, then she looked away, out at the rain.

"Y'know." Pony watched a drizzle of rain trickle between her boots. "We're pretty big talkers for four chicks sitting in puddles with two swords, a bow, and a big stick between us."

The animals trumpeted again, but it was more a lazy, playful sound than one of danger. Gabrielle smiled and relaxed, taking Xena's hand again. "Yeah, we are, aren't we?" She acknowledged the attempt to lighten the mood. "I guess we should figure out how to walk without squishing first, huh?"

Pony grinned wanly at her. "Somethin like that, yeah." She got to her knees, subtly poking Granella in the ribs. "Hey..lemme see if I can make this roof work better." She crept out of the shelter and started tugging on one end, bending a branch over to shed the rain away from them.

Granella scuttled out as well. "I'll give you a hand." She disappeared as well, leaving the two soulmates in rain drenched privacy.

Gabrielle sighed. "Honey, the Amazons are getting sensitive and tactful." She mused. "You know some oracles.. does that mean the world's ending?"

Xena put her arm around Gabrielle's shoulders and pulled her close, kissing the top of her head with a look of deep affection. She hiked her knee up and Gabrielle squirmed around to rest her weight there, so she was facing her partner. "You look like Hades." She commented.

"Feel like it." Gabrielle acknowledged.

Xena reached up and pushed a bit of the bard's hair from her eyes. Then she gently laid her hand across Gabrielle's cheek, and gazed at her. "Not just the scratches, is it?"

A faint, perceptible warmth entered Gabrielle's eyes. "The Amazons aren't the only ones getting sensitive." She took Xena's hand and kissed it. "One of those guys.. the big one.. I was near the edge of the plateau and she picked me up."

"Mm?" Xena watched her intently.

"It..." The bard paused. "It hurt." She touched her stomach. "Like it did, with Menelda."

Xena's expression shifted immediately, gentling. "Sweetheart."

For the first time since the fight started, Gabrielle felt tears well up. "I.. c..couldn't do anything." She stammered softly. "And I was so worried about you after I just.. I forgot. Until now."

Xena hugged her. "Oh, Gabrielle." She stroked the bard's hair. "How do you feel now?"

Gabrielle shrugged mutely.

"Does it still hurt?" Xena pressed her. "Do you have cramps.. did you start bleeding?"

The bard shifted, and pulled her head back, tipping it up to look at her partner. "Um.. it's.. I'm okay now." She answered, in a cautious tone. "No, I didn't start.. anything." She watched Xena's face. "Is that... what does that mean?"

"I don't know." Xena answered her honestly. "Let's wait and see." She added. "Let me know if you start getting cramps.. or .. anything."

Gabrielle put her head back down. "Okay." She felt some measure of comfort. "She was just trying to save me."

"I know." Xena replied, in a tone of multifaceted emotion. "She didn't want to hurt you."

"No." Gabrielle agreed. She was quiet for a bit, appreciating the feel of warm leather against her cheek instead of the tickle of musky fur. "We have to save them, Xe."

"I know." The warrior said, again.

Gabrielle idly traced a pattern over Xena's side. "I'm glad you understand how I feel about them.. I thought maybe you'd think they were just animals."

Xena glanced both ways, then scratched her nose. "Um." She cleared her throat. "To be totally honest with you, my love.. I do think that."

Gabrielle looked up, in surprised hurt.

But there was faint, wry amusement looking back at her. "I was just scared you'd make me take them all home with us, and I can't for the life of me figure out how to get em up that damn cliff."

The bard blinked, then a snort of laughter emerged from her and she fell back against Xena's chest with her shoulders silently shaking. "Xe." She managed to get out after a minute. "Gods, I needed that."

Xena wrapped both arms around her and pulled her tightly close, reveling in the living warmth. "Fair's fair." She whispered into the bard's ear, as Pony and Granella noisily returned. "I needed you."

She heard Gabrielle's breath catch, and she closed her eyes to hide the unshed tears from the other's view and turned her head slightly, as she felt the bard's hand touch her cheek.

Then they both sighed, and relaxed, putting thoughts away for a different time as the darkening skies around them demanded attention.

Tomorrow would bring another day, and they'd both be there to see the dawn. For now, that was enough.

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One Wild Ride

Part 18

Xena rested her hands on her thigh, and looked out at the dawning day. The sun was rising over the plateau, and from her viewpoint on the slope she could see the entirety of it spreading away from her towards the horizon.

The burned areas were easy to spot, but they only marked a thick, jagged black line across the center. The rain had come in time to save most of the grass and the herd was there taking advantage of that in the early light.

It was a peaceful scene. Xena herself felt pretty peaceful, after her first night's real rest since they'd gotten into the valley. She and Pony had split the watch, and they'd both ended up getting a decent amount of sleep out of the bargain.

To top it off, there'd been enough dry wood for a fire, which she could smell behind her as their little camp was stirring in the freshening breeze. That meant they'd be able to get everything dry and have something hot for breakfast in the bargain, even if that was only hot tea.

Terrible, really. Xena mused wryly at herself. The older she got, the more those little inconsequential comforts mattered to her and the more she looked forward to them.

At first she'd dismissed it as a passing phase.. maybe something related to her involvement with Gabrielle but lately she'd been forced to realize the fact that she had someone in her life willing to pamper her really didn't have anything to do with the fact that she savored the pampering.

"Hey." Gabrielle emerged from the bushes nearby. "Guess what I found?" Her skin glistened damply from an early morning wash in the nearby stream and the droplets glittered in the pink light.

Speaking of the little bacchae. "Trouble?" Xena replied lightly, as she turned to face her partner, spreading her arms in jesting question.

"Besides you." The bard displayed what the small basket clasped in her hands contained. "Duck eggs. Fresh ones."

"Ahhh!" Xena made a pleased sound. "My favorite."

Gabrielle grinned. "Gee, really?"

"You spoil me rotten, my bard." Xena draped her arms over her partner's shoulders, gazing at her affectionately. "And I love you for it."

"Only for that?" Gabrielle smiled, though, visibly charmed by the words.

"Well, that and a few other things." The warrior allowed, with a return smile. "How are you feeling?"

"Always glad to know I'm appreciated." The bard exhaled, turning her head to gaze out over the grass. "Nice morning." She commented, glancing back at her partner. "Everything seems okay."

The warrior nodded, her expression shifting to a more serious one. "We'll have to move back towards where those caves were today." She said. "Might want to say your goodbyes to your buddies." Her eyes indicated the herd.

Gabrielle regarded the animals, then shifted her gaze back to her partner. "Y'know.. I bet if you really put your mind to it you could figure out how to get them home with us."

"Gabrielle."

The bard sighed. "I know. But I really like them." She acknowledged. "I'm trying really hard not to give the little baby a name."

Xena produced a sound somewhere between a groan and a chuckle.

Gabrielle chuckled ruefully herself. "Okay, after I cook these up, I'll go down there." She said. "You figure the hooters'll follow us?"

The warrior nodded. "Hope so." She answered briefly. "We'll head back the way they were chasing them, in case they get a bright idea to try that torch idea again."

"Okay." Gabrielle said. "I like that idea." She gave Xena a bump with her shoulder, and moved past, heading back towards their campsite.

Xena watched her disappear, shaking her head a little before she turned and faced the sun again, leaning against the rock and reviewing her strategy. Amazing, really, what a couple of Amazons and sword could do for her outlook.

She was a realist, generally. She knew that going after the hooters was probably not a smart idea, and despite the help and the metal they were still at a serious disadvantage. However, what Gabrielle had said, about cleaning up messes had in fact been drilled into her by Xena, and she felt as strongly about it as the bard did.

She wasn't emotionally invested in the animals, as Gabrielle appeared to be. Nevertheless, she had no desire to see the big, intelligent creatures slaughtered, especially not by a pack of half human barbarians who'd gotten the idea from her.

Just didn't sit right. Besides... Xena's palms itched and she flexed her hands, remembering the grasping, hungry clutches on her skin. She had her own bone to pick with the dirty bastards.

Her nostrils flared, and she turned from the rock, feeling a dark energy flush her skin and chase the morning chill from it. Once, that would have also triggered a feeling of guilt in her, but now – well, she accepted that duality of her nature a lot easier these days.

All part of life, she supposed. With a faint, wry chuckle she headed back towards the camp, following in Gabrielle's footsteps as the rising sun splashed over her back.

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"Hey guys." Gabrielle finished her stroll through the high grass, her fingers trailing over the scorch marks as she ended up next to where the herd was grazing. They had spotted her long before she arrived, of course, and now they moseyed over to her in an unhurried, but purposeful way.

Except, of course, the baby. He let out a squirting little trumpet and rambled right over to her, shoving his snout into her chest as she sat down on a boulder in the center of the grass. She gave him a hug and scratched his ears, feeling a sense of affection for the young animal that warmed her inside and out. "You're so cute."

She wondered, briefly, what would happen to him as he got older. The rest of the herd was female, and they hadn't seen any males around, but that really didn't mean much. She knew of many animal families where the females lived together, and the males just...

Well, visited when required.

Gabrielle eyed the baby thoughtfully. Not really too different from the Amazons, were they? Maybe that's why she felt an affinity to them. "That what it is?" She asked the animal. "Are you guys like my adopted family?"

The baby flapped his small ears at her.

"Should I call you Xenan, then?" The bard asked, with a somewhat sad smile. "Will it be like that for you, when you get bigger? You'll have to leave your family?"

The animal tilted his head at her, as though listening intently. The biggest of the animals, the one Gabrielle had figured to be the baby's mother, wandered over and draped its snout over him, her dark eyes regarding the bard with equal intensity.

"I hope not." Gabrielle let the baby examine her hand, his nub curiously exploring the length of her fingers. "You have a beautiful family."

The big animal bugled softly, raising its snout and wrapping the nub around a bit of Gabrielle's hair to give it an almost playful tug.

"Well, you are." The bard chuckled. "Of all the people we've met in our travels, you're some of the best." She kicked her heels a little, against the rock. "And you know, I'll be telling other people stories about you, when we get home."

The baby wrapped his snout around her wrist and held on, as his mother shifted over, giving her much bigger ears a flap and gently tapping the rock with her hub.

Gabrielle held her breath, almost sensing the communication happening. It was like hearing voices just right out of range, so that you could almost make out the words but not.. quite. "I know that sounds funny." She went on slowly. "I mean, me telling stories about you, but that's what I do, you know."

The big, intelligent brown eye watched her, with a thoughtful expression.

"I'm a bard." Gabrielle said. "That's someone who goes around to different places, and tells people stories about people in other places, and about things that happened, like great feats, and about heroes."

The rest of the herd had closed in, and they were standing by, idly browsing as they listened to her. Gabrielle suddenly felt absolutely sure they were listening, too, and it wasn't just her imagination. "Xena's a hero, did you know that?." She already felt the internal rhythm starting, her words slowly edging into a cadence as her mind shifted into storytelling mode. "A lot of the stories I tell are about the wonderful things she's done to help people, just like she's going to help make you safe, here."

And Xena would, Gabrielle believed that utterly. For all the good reasons, to protect these unique creatures, and for all the bad ones, because Xena hated the hooters and wanted to kill them.

Curious, how she could absorb that now with sober understanding, and no tinge of horror.

The baby sat down and looked up at her expectantly.

"So.. I guess I should tell you a story, huh?" She spoke directly to him. "Since we're going to leave soon, and I won't be seeing you again." Her face creased into a smile as he stuck his tongue out a little, a thick, pinkish gray stub that gave him a comical expression. "How about I tell you a story about how Xena was very brave, and very clever, and she saved a whole lot of people from being hurt?"

Casually, the big animal pulled up a bundle of grass and tossed it at her, landing it on her lap. Gabrielle wondered if it was a commentary on her story idea, then figured it was probably a polite offer of a snack instead. "Well, I can't eat this." She reviewed the grass regretfully. "But I can make something out of it while I tell my story. How about that?"

The animals continued their idle browsing, but she could sense the attention on her, and she sorted the grasses out in her fingers as she sorted Xena's stories in her mind. With those young, trusting eyes on her, she found herself veering away from the darker ones, towards some of their equally exciting, but less violent adventures.

A smile appeared on her face again. "Do you know what a whale is?" She asked the animal. "I bet you don't."

The baby gurgled and tilted his head.

"A whale is a really big fish, I think it's the biggest fish, just like I think you're the biggest animals I've ever seen." Gabrielle told him. "And one time, when Xena and I were on this boat crossing the ocean...oh, I bet you don't know what a boat is, either, huh?"

The bard sorted the grass into a canoe shape. "When we want to cross the water, like that lake over there and it's too deep or too big for us to swim, then we make boats." She explained. "We sit in the boats, and we float on the water." She moved her hands with the grass in them.

The big animal reached over and took the grass, and ate it. She watched Gabrielle with a very amused expression.

"No, really, we do." Gabrielle explained. "Our friends have one, down by the river. We can show it to you before we go. Anyway." She laid her hands on her knees. "You'll just have to take my word for it."

The baby squeezed her wrist and stuck his tongue out at her again. He pulled at her arm a little, with childish impatience.

"Okay, I get the message." Gabrielle paused and took a breath, straightening her shoulders as her mind slipped back to that day on the ocean, when the sun had lit the green waves in a thousand reflections and it had been them on their merchant boat and the whaling skiff, and Xena's tall, wave drenched form standing on the bow, and a huge iron tipped spear and...

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"What's she doing?"

Xena didn't look up from sharpening her sword. "What's it look like?"

Pony was leaning against one of the boulders. "She looks like she's talking to them."

"Okay." Xena paused to scratch the side of her nose. "Probably that's what she's doing then."

"No she's not." Granella finished tying up her pack. "She's telling a story." She said. "Can't you see that? Look at her hands." She pointed. "See? She's doing that little wiggly thing."

"Huh..yeah." Pony grunted. "Lookit that."

Xena paused again, and craned her neck around to look at her soulmate. "What?"

"The thing with her shoulders." Her sister in law placidly responded. "Sort of like she's hearing music or something."

"Oh." Xena turned back around. "That." She smiled, unseen by her companions as she recalled the memory of being newly smitten and mesmerized by that little wiggle once upon a time ago. "Yeah, just leave her alone. Let her finish her story."

Pony came over and sat down next to her. "Why is she telling stories to animals?"

"Why does she tell stories to anything?" The warrior replied. "She gets that stuff roiling up inside and she has to tell someone or she goes nuts." She slid the edge of her blade against the flat of a stone. "I remember the day I first asked her to tell me one, matter of fact."

"Yeah?" Pony said, after a hesitation.

Xena nodded slowly. "Yeah. I'd heard her tell em... in villages, towns, places we went through, but one night we were out in the forest." She paused. "In the cold. So I made a big fire, and after the stars came out I asked her to tell me something.. you know, fill the night and all that.. stuff."

Pony was staring goggle eyed at her. "That's the longest freaking thing I've ever heard you say."

"What?"

"What story did she tell, Xena?" Granella distracted the warrior. "That night?"

Xena pondered a minute, then shook her head. "Not a damn thing." She admitted, frankly. "I freaked her out so badly she ended up stuttering for two days."

Pony started laughing, and after a minute Granella joined her.

"Is it that funny?" Xena wondered aloud. "I felt bad about it." Then, after a moment her face broke into a grin, and she shook her head again. "Couple days later she came up with some crazy tale, had to tell me it while we were trying to climb up a damn hill in the rain."

"Sounds like Gabrielle." Granella chuckled. "I think for her.. those stories are a gift, and nothing makes her happier than giving them to people."

Xena studiously wiped her blade on a bit of her leathers. "That's one of the things I love most about her." She commented casually, then looked up as the silence lengthened. "Am I not allowed to say that?" She looked from one stunned face to another. "I do love her."

Pony's nostrils flared. "Uh..."

"We know that, Xena." Granella finally got her tongue unstuck from her mouth. "You just don't. uh.. usually say.. um.. stuff like that."

No, probably not. Xena stood up and sheathed the sword, seating it with a satisfied thunk. "Yeah, I know." She admitted. "Bad for the image." Her hands came to rest on her hips. "But to Hades with it. After all these years it feels damn good to say it and I don't give a damn what anyone thinks."

Pony and Granella watched her walk off towards the seated bard, their pack slung casually over her shoulder as she made her way through the grass. "Who in Hades was that." Pony finally said. "And what's she done with the real Xena?"

Granella hoisted her own pack to her back and tightened the straps. "I think that is the real Xena." She said. "You know, the one Gabrielle is head over heels in love with and never minds telling everyone on earth about?"

"Huh."

"C'mon." Granella headed off after Xena. "At least we can go hear part of the story. I hate missing anything."

Pony stood quietly for a few moments, before she lifted up her own gear and began walking through the scrub down towards the plateau. Things were getting odder by the minute, and she was beginning to wonder if the valley hadn't worked it's own kind of magic.

On certain people.

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"So, the whale and her baby escaped, and the mean old men in their nasty old boat ended up having to swim home." Gabrielle finished up. "And Xena was the hero of the day."

"And you had to feed me soup for a week from the sore throat I got swimming in that damn cold sea like the fool I was." Xena added, as she took a seat on the rock and wrapped her arms around Gabrielle from behind. "You never tell em that part."

The sudden warmth of the warrior's presence and the casual embrace caught the bard by surprise. "Ah." She collected herself. "Well, that was after."

"Uh huh." Xena produced a droll expression.

"Besides, you're not a fool." Gabrielle covered Xena's hands with her own. "Even the captain thought what you did was wonderful. he gave you that pretty carved fish, remember?"

"I remember." The warrior agreed readily. "But I did it for you, not for him."

"You did it for you." The bard demurred. "Because you wanted to, didn't you?"

Xena chuckled.

Gabrielle turned her head to look at her partner. "You did it for me?"

"I do everything for you." Xena replied. "After all, did I know those whales?" She asked, in a practical tone. "They were perfect strangers." Her eyes shifted to the big animals, who were watching them with bemused eyes. "But I bet you'd get along with them."

The baby reached over and pulled on a bit of her armor. Xena released one hand from around Gabrielle and ran her fingers up the small snout, feeling the tough rings of muscle under the prickly haired skin. "Hey buddy. Whatcha doing?"

Gabrielle had to catch her breath from the sense of well being oozing from her soulmate, warm and real, that surrounded her with tingly effectiveness. She felt her body relaxing into it, as she leaned back, her shoulders coming into contact with Xena's chest.

"Dja give him a name?" The warrior teased.

"No." The bard replied, smiling. "I was considering calling him Xenon, because these guys reminded me of the Amazons."

"HEY!" Pony had come up and heard the last sentence, and now she stood with her hands on her hips staring goggle eyed at her queen. "Scuse ME?"

Xena started laughing, that silent, faint shaking that Gabrielle could feel running through her as she herself turned a darker shade of tan realizing what she'd said. "Um.." She lifted a hand and briefly hid her eyes. "That's not what I meant."

Pony cleared her throat.

"Not visually.. I mean, is what I.." The bard tried again.

Granella now started audibly laughing.

"Oh, damn. Forget it." Gabrielle put her hand down. "Yeah, I did mean you all look like giant hairy animals with big noses. Yeah."

Xena was now laughing so hard she was nearly pulling them both off the rock.

"We're such a bunch of idiots." Gabrielle sighed. "I swear, I wonder why we don't run away and join a traveling circus."

"Speak for yourself, Queen of the giant hairy animals with big noses." Xena chuckled.

"Yeah, so look who I married." Gabrielle shot right back, rolling her head around to look up at her partner.

"Three times." The warrior confirmed, with a charming smirk. "Guess you knew a good thing when you saw it."

A thousand moments of their history suddenly floated around them, dusting the air between them with golden flecks and Gabrielle took a moment to simply let her heart fill with the emotions it evoked in her until her chest ached, and her throat closed with the intensity of it. "Been telling you all along I did." She answered, her voice husky.

The amusement altered in Xena's eyes, and the smirk faded, becoming a gentler smile.

"A thousand times wouldn't be too many." Gabrielle added softly, reaching up to lay a gentle hand along her soulmate's cheek.

They could have been alone in the field, or in the valley, or in the world.

"Ahem." Pony glanced around nervously. "Are you guys okay?"

Gabrielle let her hand drop, and she turned back towards them. "Yeah, we're fine." She answered, in an almost normal voice. "Sorry. This is what my life is like when you all aren't around."

Pony and Granella exchanged somewhat embarrassed looks. "I'm surprised you didn't move to Tibet, in that case." Granella answered gravely. "But that up the mountain thing sure makes more sense now." She knelt down and cautiously put a hand out to pet the baby animal.

"Mm." Gabrielle acknowledged the sentiment, her face shifting into a wry expression. She glanced back at Xena, who was gazing at the baby animal bemusedly. "Have you ever been to Tibet?"

The warrior lifted her eyes, her expression shifting. "Tibet." She spoke the word slowly. "That's where llamas come from."

They both started laughing. "Gods. It figures." Gabrielle shook her head, trying to ignore the confused looks from their two companions. "Okay, well, I guess we'd better get going, huh?" She eased loose from Xena's embrace and knelt, giving the baby animal a hug. "Listen, cutie, you be good, okay?"

The baby wrapped his snout around her neck and stared at her, his eyes wide. He gurgled a little.

Xena slid forward on the rock and put her hand on Gabrielle's back, rubbing it gently as she felt the pang through their connection. She tilted her head back and looked up at the mother animal, who was gazing back at her solemnly. "Been a pleasure."

The big animal reached over and touched Xena's face with her snout, moving across her cheekbone in a gentle motion. The warrior could feel the warm breath moist against her skin as she met the animal's eyes, and once again her inner ear buzzed with something that was almost sound.

In reflex, she lifted her hand and pressed her fingers behind her ear, tilting her head slightly to one side.

The animal's touch halted, then suddenly the nub was exploring the side of her face, touching the fingers she had been rubbing her scalp.

"What's wrong?" Granella asked, softly. "Xena, are you okay?"

Gabrielle, predictably, turned hearing that and looked back at her partner. "Xe?"

The warrior looked back up at the animal, her eardrums still buzzing. "I hear something." She said. "It's.. " Her voice faded a little, her brow creasing. "Just a rumble."

Pony looked quickly around, her arms spreading out. "Earthquake?" She questioned. "I don't hear anything."

"Me either." Granella eyed the warrior nervously.

The sound stopped, and Xena straightened, as the herd shifted around them and came in closer. Then the noise came back, louder and in a different rhythm that almost seemed like harmonics to her sensitive ears. She looked at the ground, kneeling beside Gabrielle and putting her hand flat on it. "Not an earthquake."

The big animal snorted. Gabrielle examined the animal's expression, then she turned towards the warrior. "Xena, is it them?" She pointed at the animals. "Are they.. is that sound coming from them?"

Xena got up and walked right over to the biggest animal, pressing the side of her head against its throat. She stood there for a moment, then she backed off, tipping her chin back to make eye contact. "It is." She confirmed, wonderingly.

"What is it?" Pony asked. "Some kind of warning?"

Xena reached out and touched the animal's throat with her hand. She felt the vibration stop as the sound faded in her ears, then it came back, then it faded again. There was a pattern there, but it wasn't anything she'd ever encountered. "I'm not sure."

"They're talking to each other, Xena." Gabrielle reasoned. "You know they understand us. Makes sense they understand each other, doesn't it?" The big animal rumbled softly, audible to the bard's hearing. "See?"

Was it? Xena listened to the sound, which almost sounded to her like the low rumble of far off crowd voices. Could the creatures be speaking to each other? She looked up at the intelligent eye, watching her with what could only be expectant amusement. Why not?

Why not? "Could be." The warrior said. "They're pretty smart." She had to smile, as the creature snaked its snout around her and gave her a playful swat.

"Wow." Gabrielle gave the baby another hug. "Xena.."

Xena knew what was coming. She could see it in Gabrielle's eyes. "Can we get out and go home, first?"

Caught in mid word, the bard closed her mouth and shook a finger at her.

The warrior shrugged modestly.

"Promise?" Gabrielle caught her gaze and held it.

"Promise." Xena replied at once.

Pony and Granella looked from one woman to the other. "If this is what it's like when no one's around, it's probably a good thing no one's around, cause they'd be calling the mind healers by now." Pony said.

"Tell you what." Granella shook her head.

Gabrielle gave the baby a final hug, this time with a happy smile on her face. She leaned over and put her lips near his ear. "Wait till my daughter meets you."

The baby gurgled, flapping his ears and wagging his tongue.

Xena gave the big animal a slap on the shoulder. "Take it easy." She told her. "We'll take care of those hairy bastards for ya."

The animal lifted its snout and touched the warrior's throat, her dark eye questioning. She moved and touched Xena's lips with the tip of her nub, then touched her throat again.

"Now what?" Pony muttered.

"Dunno. Gabrielle's translating." Granella responded. "Gabrielle?"

The bard stood and went over to her partner. "Um.." She watched the animal patiently repeat her motions. "Xe, I'm not sure what she wants."

Xena heard the sound again, and she put her hand against the big throat, feeling the vibration against her fingers as her mind tried to work out the signals. Imitatively, she made a low humming noise in her own throat, then looked up in surprise as the animal patted her cheek encouragingly.

She hummed again, and got another pat. "Ah." She murmured. "Lemme try this." She took a breath and after a brief hesitation, started singing.

The result was amazing. The herd all reacted, jostling each other and getting as close as they could to Xena, reaching out with their snouts to touch her. With slightly widened eyes, the warrior continued, a low, almost wordless song she'd first heard from her mother's lips when she was very, very young.

The noise returned, this time manifold as all the animals joined in, octaves lower than Xena but keeping the same rhythm.

It was incredible. It made every hair on her body prickle and Xena closed her eyes to simply live the experience and savor the harmony only she could hear.

Gabrielle looked around in wonder, hearing only her soulmate's voice, but sensing some other motion in the air that vibrated soundlessly against her skin. She saw Xena's eyes close, and saw the faint smile and wished fervently she could get inside that dark head and listen in.

The baby curled his snout around her hand and simply held it, his eyes wide and bright as he listened to his family and Xena, until the last of the warrior's low tones faded out, and the music was replaced by the rush of wind through the grasses that sounded loud in the silence.

After a brief pause, Xena opened her eyes. "Thanks." She gave the animal a pat on the shoulder, and turned, enveloping Gabrielle in a brief, wordless hug before she eased past, through the milling bodies and into the open space beyond.

Gabrielle reached out and took the big animal's snout in her hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. "Take care." She said, turning to give the baby one last pat. "You too, cutie."

The baby sat down and bugled at her, a woebegone expression on his face.

Resolutely, the bard turned and followed Xena, emerging into the grass to find the three other women waiting. "Okay, let's go." She picked up her staff and fell into step beside her partner as they headed away from their new friends and back towards the scrub forest.

They'd walked for a few minutes in silence, before Pony finally cleared her throat. "You.. uh... " She glanced behind them. "Gonna tell us what that was all about?"

"No." Xena and Gabrielle answered together, without even exchanging a glance.

They walked a few more steps in silence. "It's... complicated." Gabrielle added, in an apologetic tone. "Really."

A few more steps. "Right." Pony said.

"Okay." Granella chimed in. "But hey. Xena sure has a pretty voice, huh?"

"Sure does." Pony agreed. "Yep, sure does."

As they reached the forest, a chorus of brassy trumpets sounded a farewell. They turned, and Xena and Gabrielle both lifted their arms and waved, before they disappeared into the trees and the sound faded slowly out.

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"What's up with them?" Pony crossed her arms, shaking her head a little as she watched Xena explore a nearby ridge.

"What do you mean??" Granella asked. "What's up with them what?"

The weapons master gave her a look. "You know damn well what I mean."

Granella glanced briefly at the ground, then shrugged. "I don't know.. maybe nothing." She said. "They do act different at home... it's not that weird." After a brief silence, she edged past Pony and headed down the slope towards to join their two companions.

Pony scowled, not really sure just why she was so unsettled. After all, it's not like all that love stuff was something she didn't know about.

It was just so damn weird to hear Xena of all people talking about it.

"You know what just occurred to me?" Granella gingerly picked her way across the loose shale, and sat down next to Gabrielle.

The bard was perched on a boulder lodged into the side of the mountain, and had been kicking her heels against it. Now she paused and looked Granella's way. "What?"

"We're going to double back and head down the slope where Pon and I came up after this, right?"

Gabrielle leaned on her hands, keeping one eye on a restlessly prowling Xena. "Right."

"Back to our canoe."

"Right." The bard repeated, watching her partner spring up and catch hold of a ledge, pulling herself up onto it as bits of rock broke off under her grip. "Yeesh.. Xena!"

"We're not all gonna fit in that boat."

The bard's eyes were glued on the lithe figure now balancing along the razor edge of rock. Her fingertips twitched against the stone surface as a few pebbles slid under Xena's boots.

"Xeeeeeeennnaa..." She muttered softly, under her breath. "Bad girl!"

"Gabrielle?"

"Uh?" Gabrielle turned to look fully at Granella. "I know." She agreed. "So either we ditch the boat, or build another one."

Granella blinked at her. "Build another one?" She repeated. "Gabrielle, do you want to get out of here before you have grandkids?"

The green eyes twinkled. "You've obviously never seen Xena build a boat, have you?"

"Ah."

"Anyway." The bard hopped off the rock and dusted her hands off. "Let me go keep the love of my life over there from knocking herself silly." She made her way along the narrow path to where Xena was balanced, reviewing the steep slope ahead of them. "Xe?"

"Mm?" The warrior looked down at her.

"What are you doing?" Gabrielle put a hand up and casually rested it on Xena's boot. "We know where this leads to already. Those caves."

"Right." Xena agreed. "We know they came up this way. If we don't want them to head back to the plateau, we've gotta block it."

"Ah." Gabrielle looked around them. Towards the top of the path a huge jumble of boulders had made their descent a bit tricky with the slough they'd scattered and now she studied the pile thoughtfully. "You know what?"

"Take too long." The warrior replied absently. "Maybe I could channel that stream down here..."

Pony was leaning against the rock wall listening. At the last suggestion, she opened her eyes wider and her eyebrows lifted.

"What if we got one of those big guys to come and push the rocks down." Gabrielle suggested. "Wouldn't that be easier than rerouting the river?"

"You just want to bring them with us." Xena stepped off the ledge casually, landing just to one side of where the bard was standing and taking a single, small hop. "Let's..."

"Xe." Gabrielle had spotted motion beneath them, and she laid her hand on her partner's arm. "Look." She added unnecessarily, as Xena's sharp eyes caught the movement and tracked it.

Creeping down the path just below them was a hooter. He had a big club in one hand, and what looked like some kind of hook in the other. He was one of the larger specimens, and he had a thick, dark beard to match his hairy body.

Xena leaned back into the slope, one hand gently pressing Gabrielle back as well. Then she reached over her shoulder and drew her sword, twirling it as she stepped back onto the path, heading down.

"Xe." Gabrielle called out, in a low tone.

One hand lifted, and the warrior made a sign, then continued on.

Gabrielle sighed, gave a slight shake of her head and immediately started following, with a surprised Pony and Granella in tow.

"Um." Pony got up close enough to whisper. "Didn't that sign mean stay here?"

"Uh huh." Gabrielle answered, trying her best to be quiet, and not send rocks rattling down after her partner.

"And so we're going after her.. why, now?"

"Well." The bard put her hand against the rock wall to steady herself. "It's like this. Xena tells me to stay put. I don't. Most of the time I get knocked head over tail and.." She paused, sensing a sudden, specific tension from the warrior. "Hold that thought."

"Huh?"

Xena's battle yell erupted, and Gabrielle bolted forward with truly startling rapidity, going from standing still to a full out run in less than a breath. "Sometimes I get away with it because she needs me!" The bard yelled back at them. "C'mon!"

"Crap." Pony took off after her, pulling her sword out. "Damn little bugger..."

Granella took up the rear, feeling an unexpected but definite clenching in her guts as she heard that wild yell let out again and the chilling, distinctive ring of steel hitting bone followed it. She took her dagger out, until she could see if her bow was going to do any good and concentrated on keeping up.

Gabrielle was deceptively fast, and they had to really work at it as they swept around the corner of the path, spotting Xena immediately in the center of a group of hooters, all attacking her with energetic vigor.

The bard didn't slow at all. She bolted for the melee, hauling her staff around and ducking under a tree limb as she gracefully set her balance and whipped the stick in a short arc, taking the feet of one of the hooters out from under him as he was about to hit Xena.

Pony charged the group as well, but circled and attacked from the rear, driving her sword into one of the smaller hooters up to its hilt with a sound of cracking bone. "Yeahhh!!!"

Granella pulled up and removed her bow from her back, stringing it and setting an arrow in place as she searched for a target.

It was hard, since there was so much movement, and she didn't want to risk hitting one of her companions. Xena, especially, shifted so quickly and so unexpectedly every time she lifted her tip and aimed, she lowered it again as the warrior slid into her potential range.

Gabrielle stuck to her partner like a tick, working her staff inside Xena's reach in a synergy that was startling to behold once Granella realized what she was doing. Anyone else, she knew, would have gotten body parts chopped off getting that close to the battling warrior; but Gabrielle slid right through those slices and backchops without Xena disturbing a hair on her blond head.

How in the Hades?

She'd seen Xena fight, of course. She'd even seen Gabrielle fight, and seen her teach some of her staff tricks to the Amazons. But this was one of the rare times she'd seen them fighting together and as she watched Xena seem to sense Gabrielle's staff and duck to one side as it whipped past her into the face of her opponent she got a new appreciation for this facet of their partnership.

Xena spun suddenly, then stabbed backwards with her sword as two of the hooters rushed her back. She gutted one of them, and wrenched her arms to one side, spilling his entrails out as the second slipped in them right into the butt end of Gabrielle's staff.

The sound of his head splitting echoed softly to Granella's watching ears.

Then the attack broke off, and the hooters were running, responding to their hooting cries as the two biggest remaining ones turned tail and escaped. They ran through the trees, with shambling strides that were very deceptive in their speed.

Xena let out her yell after them, walking a few paces, then bounding a few, blood dripping from her sword as she brandished it.

Gabrielle let the end of her staff come to rest on the ground, the wood stained in its own coating of crimson. Her eyes dropped to it, then she slowly turned and knelt next to the hooter she'd killed, folding her hands over the staff and simply looking at the body for a long moment.

"Bastards." The warrior glared after them. "They were setting a trap."

Gabrielle got up and went over to her. The bard's face was quiet, but there was a mature acceptance in her expression that surprised Granella as she ran over to join them. "They sure were.. for us?"

Xena walked over to the half dug pit, and looked in. "Not big enough for one of those guys.' She glanced up to the top of the slope. She wiped her sword off on a patch of scrub grass and sheathed it. "They were working on it when I interrupted their little party."

Gabrielle walked over to look into the pit, crouching down and keeping her balance with her staff. At the bottom, the pit was lined with sharp rocks, their edges facing upwards. "Wow." She murmured. "They sure do learn fast, huh?"

The warrior stared after the vanished hooters. "Yeah." She murmured. "And I don't think I want to give them any more time to learn."

The bard looked up at her. "Change in plans?"

Pony came over, licking a nick in her thumb. "Boy, those things are ugly." She commented. "And they stink."

"Xena, they're not likely to master steelwork any time soon. Are they?" Gabrielle got up and came around to face the warrior. "That gave us the edge this time."

Xena nodded. "This time." She agreed. "But every time we encounter them, they're upping the ante, Gabrielle. We have to go after them, and keep hitting them instead of letting them come after us. They won't be metalsmiths, but.." She glanced at the pit. "I don't want to know what else they'll come up with."

Pony looked from one to the other. "Can I ask what in Artemis' quiver we're talking about here? I thought we were going to block the path, then head home."

Xena and Gabrielle exchanged long, complex looks. "Not exactly." Gabrielle responded, squaring her shoulders as she turned to face them. "What Xena thinks is - if we just try to block the path, they'll find a way around it because they learn incredibly fast. So the idea is, we go after them, and force them away from here until we.."

Xena's hand fell on her shoulder, and the bard stopped talking. "You can go back the way you came if you want." She offered, in a quiet voice.

"Oh, shut up, Xena." Pony gave her an exasperated look. "I just want to know what the Hades is going on, that's all. We're gonna go splice these hairy bastards? Fine! Just tell me!"

There was a bit of silence. "That's what we're going to do." Xena finally said. "Besides, if we block the path up here, those animals won't be able to get down either."

"Right." Gabrielle said. "We don't want that to happen."

"Great. Let's go." Pony tightened the straps on her pack and sheathed her sword. She went past them and started to explore the edge of the forest, watching warily for any motion. After a brief pause, Granella joined her, keeping a troubled silence.

Gabrielle waited for them to move out of hearing range before she exhaled, allowing her head to drop and her eyes to close.

"You okay" Xena asked, after a bit. She reached up and clasped the back of her partner's neck with one hand, easing the stiffness she felt under the tan skin.

"No." Gabrielle answered readily. "Life sucks right now and I want to throw up."

Xena stepped up behind her and circled her with both arms, giving her a gentle hug and a kiss on the top of the head. "Thanks for watching my back." She said, as the bard turned and rested her cheek on Xena's chest, her exhaled warming the skin above the warrior's armor. "You don't know what a difference it is to me having someone I can trust doing that."

Trust. Gabrielle allowed the sound of her partner's heartbeat to chase the echoes of the hooter's head splitting from her hearing. "That's my job." She answered, returning the hug and giving Xena a pat on the side. "C'mon, let's get going. We're freaking them out as it is."

"The hooters?"

"Pony and Gran." The bard collected herself, running her fingers through her hair before she turned and joined Xena as the warrior started after their friends.

Her job. Gabrielle lifted her head and straightened her shoulders. Her life.

That's just how it was.

**

Granella held a springy branch back, clearing the way for Pony to carry an armful of firewood past her. She looked around carefully, before she followed the weapons master, letting the branch come back to cover the path into their campsite.

They were in enemy territory, the different sharp and cold as the lines of Xena's body as the warrior stood watch nearby. "Looks clear." Granella said, as she knelt to help Pony arrange the fire. "Sure we can risk this?"

Xena stood up from her crouching position on the rock and lifted her head, closing her eyes and drinking in the wind as it blew back her dark hair. After a long moment, she shifted her attention back to them. "I think we're okay." She said. "For now, anyway. Long as the wind doesn't shift."

"I think it's worth the risk." Gabrielle appeared from the nearby brush, carrying the grotesque half skull she and Xena had been using. It was full of water, and she knelt near the two other women and nestled it into a hollow in the dirt to hold it upright. "It's getting colder."

Xena sat down on her rock, content to let the breeze carry its messages to her where she was sitting a bodylength over the heads of her companions. It was chilly, and she was glad she'd added the catskin as a cloak to her sturdy leather since she hadn't succeeded in getting Gabrielle to wear it.

She used her peripheral vision to watch her partner, seeing the strain of the long day in the tense lines across the bard's shoulders and in the set of her jaw. As if sensing the attention, Gabrielle turned her head and looked back at her, a faint, wry grin appearing on her face.

Xena returned the grin, then went back to studying their surroundings. They'd taken a fork coming back down the ridge that they'd missed going up, after she'd found a hidden path that stank of the hooters and avoided some of the tougher climbs.

On the way they'd found two sites the hooters used frequently, stone scuffed free of earth, and the remnants of leaf nests and bones marked the spots prominently. One even had a long dead hooter in it, a scrap of dried hide and hair half buried in dirt, cast off with the rest of the campsite's garbage.

Shocking, to Granella and Pony. Gabrielle had merely frowned and shook her head, taking the lead as they continued down in the footsteps of these half human, half animals they barely understood.

It was dangerous, following them. But it was also night time, and they had both weapons and fire. Xena suspected they had turned the hooters attention from the big creatures and she viewed that as both a plus and a minus.

Minus, for the obvious reasons, and a plus, because it meant the creatures were safe and she could use their fixation on them to lead them where she wanted them. Smart as they were, and in their numbers – still, she was Xena and after living as long as she had, and fighting the battles she had, well, damned if they were going to get the better of her again.

Especially now with Pony and Granella with them. Xena didn't mind looking like an idiot occasionally in front of Gabrielle, because the bard knew her through and through, but no one else would she accord that privilege to.

No one.

So when the time had come to make camp themselves, when the growing dusk made it dangerous to keep climbing down, she'd taken especial care in choosing where to stop. Far enough from any signs of the hooters and yet using the same sheltering boulders they did to block the wind. The camp was

surrounded on three sides by stone, and one by thick trees, with an acceptable view of the slope they would head down tomorrow.

She didn't feel safe, exactly. There were touches of musk on the wind and an edgy energy around them that kept a tension in her muscles and her senses on alert. Her fingers twitched, and clenched a little and she only just kept herself from drawing her sword against this ethereal threat she suspected was half imaginary and half instinctual.

The imaginary part didn't bother her. The instinctual part, on the other hand, was triggered by things inside of her that went past conscious thought and she knew she ignored that at her own and everyone else's peril.

Like when she'd been tracking the hooter earlier. One moment, she'd been following him as he crept along, the next, she'd turned and been fighting before her waking mind had even registered the presence of the others behind her.

Ah. Xena half smiled. The look of shock on the first one's face as she'd cut his arm off. It was one thing to swing at something with a stick in her hands, something else quite again to have her hands locked around her sword hilt, her strength and weight behind a razor sharp blade capable of cutting through the trunk of an armored man if she really put her mind to it.

Her second blow had split his skull. The third, a backswing, had plunged into the sternum of one of the bigger ones about to jump on her back. The copper scent of blood had been everywhere, and she'd sensed the panic and fear even before Gabrielle had come charging up to join her.

Ahh. Xena savored the victory.

"Xena?"

The warrior glanced down. "Mm?"

Gabrielle laid both hands on the rock and leaned against it. "I'd like to make some soup."

"Sounds great." Xena replied.

"Yeah, but I know you hate boiled leaves and grass." There was a muted, but perceptible hint of humor in Gabrielle's eyes. "Especially if I have to toss dirt in on top of it."

"Ah." Xena stood, then stepped off the rock and landed lightly. "I get it. You want me to hunt." She lifted the catskin cloak off her shoulders and settled it around Gabrielle's before the bard could protest. "Your goosebumps are giving me goosebumps. Hang on to this for me, huh?"

Unable to refute the observation, Gabrielle gathered the skin along with her dignity around her. "I'd have gone, but you know I'm not the best hunter around, and in the dark... ehh..."

Xena's peripheral vision caught Pony and Granella listening in. "Oh, I dunno, sweetheart." She remarked. "You do lots of things well in the dark."

Gabrielle opened her mouth to answer, then her nostrils flared and she closed her jaw with a click when the words stopped echoing. She took another breath, then released it, ending up biting the very end of her tongue. "Um."

Granella started laughing softly, while Pony merely rolled her eyes. Xena leaned forward and kissed her nonplussed partner on the lips, then ducked past her gracefully and disappeared into the forest's shadows.

"Gods." Gabrielle finally sighed, returning to the fire and removing a few tubers from her pack. She set to work scraping the outsides off, making an effort not to meet the eyes she knew were watching her. "What a punk."

There was a period of silence, into which the crackle of the newly born fire sounded, loud and crisp. The growing glow banished back the gloom of twilight and sent the smell of burning pine through the campsite.

"Hey Gabrielle." Pony suddenly broke the quiet. "Are you really putting sticks in the soup?"

Lost in her own thoughts, Gabrielle's head snapped up, and she met Pony's eyes. "Huh?"

Pony indicated the tuber. "Thought you were joking with the big X."

"Oh." The bard chuckled wanly. "No, this is a.. it's a root." She explained.

"Well, yeah." Pony agreed. "I can see that.. it's why I asked, y'know?" She gamely went on. "I mean, it's not like I'm no expert about cooking or anything, but even our cooks don't put branches in the soup."

"It's not a branch." Gabrielle gathered her wits. "Some plants have these, and if you cook them, you can eat them. They're good." She said. "I like to bake these, sometimes, and put spices on them but we don't really have time for that, and they're okay in soup too."

"Really?" Granella eased closer. "I've never seen those.. not even in Cyrene's kitchen." She took a piece that Gabrielle's knife had carved off and tasted it warily. "Hm."

"There's starch in it." Gabrielle said. "It makes the soup thicker too.. and when you don't have much in there, every bit counts, you know?" She put the cut pieces of tuber in the cookpot that Granella had brought in her kit, and poured the skull full of water over them. "I found them one night when Xena and I were out in the wild and we only had a bunch of leeks, and a handful of grain between us."

"Wow."

"Don't tell me Xena couldn't find anything to catch." Pony said. "No way."

Gabrielle smiled in memory. "Yes way, matter of fact. I don't think she even tried. We'd fought a bunch of raiders from before sunrise until almost dark, and we were both so tired it was all we could do just to make a fire."

"Huh."

Gods, they had been tired. Too tired to argue, too tired to do their usual chores.

Too tired to disassemble, as they sat together, sharing one wooden bowl and two spoons, leaning against each other in a companionable silence so sweet she could hear it still.

Broken finally by Xena's voice, murmuring a gentle thanks.

The brush of lips against her cheek.

"Gabrielle??"

By the sound, she'd been called more than once. "Sorry." The bard tucked her thoughts away. "Just remembering something." She pulled out another root to cut it up. "Anyway, we ended up with all that in a soup."

"Ah." Pony cleared her throat. "Any good?"

Gabrielle felt a smile appear. "Best darn soup I ever made." She said. "So anyway... I'm sure this'll work out.. you guys doing okay?"

Granella laid the last bit of the fire, and then warmed her hands over the crackling tinder Pony had started. "I think we're doing fine." She said, looking up at Gabrielle through the glow. "Are you okay?" She studied the familiar face under it's mop of pale hair seriously. "Those critters looked pretty horrific."

The mist green eyes, hazel in the firelight, took on gentle shadows. "Are you asking me if killing one of them is bothering me?" She said, meeting Granella's glance. "If you are, well... I haven't been blood innocent for a very long time, Gran."

Granella winced, a little. "Well, that's..."

"Hey." Pony had been crouching near the fire. Now she came down to kneel on one knee and rested her elbow on her other, her eyes fixed on her queen. "Gabrielle. Please don't whack me for saying this, okay?"

One pale brow edged up.

"Look, I know you're my queen and all that, but I gotta tell you this." Pony continued, stolidly. "You could kill three hundred people in an afternoon and there'd still be parts of you innocent." She watched Gabrielle's face. "'s'a compliment, y'know?"

Slowly, the still expression relaxed, and Gabrielle smiled, one of her real, sunny smiles that wrinkled up her nose and made her eyes sparkle. "Thank you, Eponin." She replied.

Unaccountably, Pony blushed. "Anytime." She muttered, going back to fiddling with the fire.

Granella sat down next to Gabrielle and cracked a walnut, offering the bard half. "I didn't mean to get you pissed off, Gabrielle."

"You didn't." Gabrielle accepted the nut and nibbled it. "It's just.. sometimes people do treat me like I'm still a kid, and it gets me frustrated sometimes." She admitted. "Yeah, I'm okay. It just never gets any easier, and I don't know if that's a bad thing."

"Bet I know what Xena'd say to that."

"Eh huh." The bard chuckled wryly. "Yeah, I bet I do too." She exhaled, then turned towards her sister in law. "Listen, Xena was serious before. If you guys want out of this, no problem with me, you know?"

The two women just looked at her. "Oh, sure." Pony snorted. "Hey, Eph.. yeah, listen, I'm back. Yeah, we found the two of them but they were going after some huge hairy freaks trying to kill them so we just took off and ran away."

Gabrielle started laughing in pure reflex.

"Have my butt kicked right out of the Amazon Nation for that, for sure." Pony said, indignantly. "Gee thanks, your Maj."

"Yeah, and I won't even go into what Cyrene would say." Granella chimed in. "C'mon, Gabrielle... you can't really be serious even asking us that, can you? Do you really think we'd run off and leave you two here?"

Gabrielle felt Xena returning, the gentle wash of hunting blood lust and satisfied triumph unmistakable. "No." She picked up her knife and wiped the blade off. "I think it's just... we've both gotten other people involved in our problems on more than one occasion and it hurts when those people get hurt."

"Ah." Granella looked up as she heard a soft crackling. "Wh.." She started to get up, but stopped when Gabrielle quickly reached out and took hold of her arm. "Someone's coming."

"Xena." The bard replied in a tone of absolute certainty. "She's got dinner." She reassured Granella, who slowly sat back down. "Honest."

"Yeah?" Pony retied a bootlace. "What color fur does it have?"

A moment later, Xena appeared out of the shadows, moving with a jaunty swagger as she circled the fire and dropped two large rabbits down at Gabrielle's side. "There you go, my love."

Gabrielle looked up in some surprise at the endearment, but Xena merely took a seat next to her on the hide and stretched her long legs out, leaning back on her hands and half closing her eyes.

"Thanks." She took the already dressed carcasses and untied the legs, letting the meat fall into the pot. "Yet another of your many skills."

Xena smirked, giving Pony and Granella a wink.

"I think I like this one second best." Gabrielle continued, stirring her newly becoming soup.

"Second?" The warrior inquired. "What's first?"

The bard gave her a sideways glance. "Making love." She answered matter of factly, nearly making her beloved soulmate's pretty blue eyeballs come right out of her beautifully shaped head. "You really rock at that, Xe."

Xena's jaw literally dropped.

Pony spit a mouthful of water right over the fire, droplets hissing and spattering down into it as Granella slowly collapsed into a laughing ball, covering her mouth with one hand.

"What were you saying before about innocence?" Gabrielle asked Pony, her eyes twinkling. "Hm?"

"Bllruk."

"Anyone want to hear about cooking with Xena's juices?"

"Gabrielle!"

**

Xena sat on her rock, the crystal clarity of the night brushing around her like a living thing. Her ears were cocked, listening to the soft rattling of the wind through the branches, and her nostrils were flared to catch the slightest breeze in order to sort out the rich scent of the earth and the dusty smell of rock from the other, more ethereal hints of the creatures around her.

So far, though, it had been quiet.

Too quiet, really, which had left her with plenty of time on her hands and she found her thoughts focusing again and again on Gabrielle, not anything specific really, just idle daydreams of their life together that made it difficult for her to concentrate.

It was an almost familiar feeling, this faint disconnection at the damndest of times. Xena wasn't sure whether to be frustrated or delirious about it, and so she ended up just drumming her heels against the rock and forcing herself to concentrate on the darkness around them.

From behind her, she heard a faint sound, though, and her attention swiveled from the forest to their campsite. Someone was approaching with caution, but her senses immediately knew it wasn't Gabrielle much to her disappointment.

Crazy, since she'd worked hard to convince the bard to go to sleep and let her keep watch. Xena sighed, recognizing the person approaching as Pony. She turned and let her legs dangle over the rock as the Amazon reached her position, focusing her powerful night vision on the shadowy form. "Hey."

"Hi." Pony leaned against the rock. "Listen.. I can't sleep."

"That my problem?" Xena smiled though, taking the sting from the words.

"No sense both of us being up." Pony replied stolidly. "Gwan and keep her nibs warm."

"She's got a blanket."

Pony put her hand up and touched Xena's boot. "Yeah, I know." She said. "But I bet she'd swap it for ya like nothing, yeah?"

Xena felt a certain tug at the edge of her perceptions, and she hopped down off the rock without further argument. "Watch out for that patch of brush down to the left." She said. "Something's moving in there, not sure what it is."

"Okay." Pony put her back to the rock and focused her attention on the patch.

"Yell if you see anything."

The Amazon looked over at her. "Go to bed, will ya?" She instructed the warrior. "I've been doing this long as you have."

Xena put her hands on her hips and cocked her head to one side.

"Gwan." Pony shooed her off. "Save the 'tude. Ya blew it with all that I love you stuff. Scram." She added. "Besides, I don't wanna hear Gabrielle start up again about your many skills."

The warrior snorted and shook her head, then she turned and left Pony to her watch, letting her hands drop to her sides as she walked back towards the low burning fire that shed only the dimmest of crimson light to break the darkness.

**

The moon had long set, and the quiet of the night was draped over them like a still blanket. Gabrielle was curled up on their hide, her body wrapped in the catskin, but her body refused to relax into sleep and her eyes were somberly searching the stars overhead.

Xena had first watch. They hadn't had a chance to talk since dinner, and even though Gabrielle was absolutely positive her banter hadn't pissed her partner off, there still was that part of her deep inside restlessly wondering.

Damn it. The insecurity bothered her, and she wondered how many years at this rate it would take her to get past it, past that haunting fear that sometime, someday, something she said would trigger that long, cold slide again.

At this stage in her life, that was the biggest nightmare she had left. Gabrielle exhaled, understanding bleakly the likelihood that if it ever did happen again, she'd never survive it. Not sane, at any rate and in all truth, wouldn't death be kinder?

For both of them?

Would she ever get past it? She shifted a little, rolling more onto her back as she followed the familiar patterns in the sky, tracing her eye over the Warrior standing prominently between the trees.

Then her focus dropped, to the shadows around them and her head turned towards one patch of gloom that after a brief moment resolved itself in silver dapples as Xena walked out of it towards her.

It was too dark for her to see her partner's features, but the lines of her body were relaxed, and she dropped down next to Gabrielle onto the skin with a reassuringly casual air. "Hey." The bard murmured in greeting.

"Hey." Xena responded readily, leaning over onto one elbow as her hand came to rest on the fur between them. "Why aren't you sleeping?"

The tension in her guts started to uncoil. "Just thinking." Gabrielle answered. "About stuff."

Xena paused, and after a moment, she reached out and ran her fingers through Gabrielle's hair, giving her nose an affectionate tweak. "You and your thinking."

The tension dissolved completely, and Gabrielle had to swallow a few times, glad of the darkness that hid her expression, and the few, brief tears produced by a haunting she'd thought she'd finally gotten past. Then she felt Xena's fingertips gently wipe the moisture away, and realized the night wasn't nearly dense enough for those sharp blue eyes.

"What's wrong?" Xena asked, stretching out on her side next to where Gabrielle was curled up. "You hurting?" Her voice dropped, taking on a hint of concern as she cupped the bard's cheek in her palm. "Hey."

"Nah." The bard whispered back. "Just being stupid. No biggie."

"Stupid?"

Gabrielle hesitated, then half shook her head. "Ghosts." She said. "My mind playing tricks on me."

"Ah."

"Sometimes I wish my imagination was like.. um.."

"Mine?"

Yeah. "Something like that." Gabrielle wriggled a little closer. "I'm okay, just a little nutty or something."

Unexpectedly, the warrior's hand dropped to rest on Gabrielle's stomach, giving it a light pat. "That's a good sign." She said, with a easy chuckle. "I can just imagine what this kid's gonna be like if it's already making you tell everyone how I treat you in bed."

The gloomy track her thoughts had been on shifted so suddenly it almost made Gabrielle squeak. "Gods." She half covered her face with one hand. "I don't know what got into me tonight." She peeked up at Xena's face, now close enough for her to make out the expression, despite the darkness.

The look of warmly amused affection almost shone with it's own light, at least to her eyes. She knew seeing it that Xena was all the way not mad, since the warrior never produced it when she was even a little irritated and trying to hide it. "Well, I'm not a little innocent anymore, damn it!"

Xena chuckled silently.

"Freaking Amazons!" The bard grumbled. "They don't even curse in front of me, for Zeus' sake. What the heck is that all about? I'm not a little darn kid!"

Xena laughed harder, rolling over onto her stomach and burying her face into the hide to stifle the noise.

"Xena!" Gabrielle hissed. "Cut that out! It's not that funny!"

The warrior pushed herself over onto her back. "If you could see your face when you said that, you'd know why I'm laughing." She informed her partner. "Your real problem is your too damned cute."

"I am not!"

"Hey." Granella's voice floated over from past the fire. "What's going on over there? Or do I want to know?"

"Sorry." Gabrielle called over her shoulder, then turned back to her still snickering soulmate. "I am not!" She repeated, lowering her voice. "So cut that out."

Xena slid closer, putting her head down on the folded bit of hide Gabrielle was using as a pillow, and getting pretty much nose to nose with her. "Listen." She said. "What are you getting mad for? You're adorable, hon. Nothing wrong with that."

"There is if people treat me like a puppy because of it."

"Gabrielle."

The bard sighed. "I'm being a piss-ant, aren't I?"

"Uh huh."

"Sorry." Gabrielle reached out and took hold of one of Xena's hands, folding her fingers around it gently. "And here I was tossing and turning because I was afraid you.." She paused. "Anyway."

"Afraid I was mad?" Xena's voice came from the darkness, with gentle clarity. "About your sudden sexual honesty?"

The bard remained silent for a few moments. "Were you?"

"No." Xena's free hand lifted to stroke Gabrielle's face. "I was surprised." She admitted. "But nothing you can say would get me mad, not now."

"Mm." The bard ran her thumb over Xena's palm. "I've just never said anything like that before, and I wasn't sure if you... if it would get you upset."

"Nah."

Gabrielle stared into the darkness for a long moment. "I always wondered.. if it was something, some one thing I'd said the last time that started everything bad."

Xena went still. "Last t.." She stopped speaking, then exhaled. "It wasn't ever anything you did.. or you said that ever did anything. You know that."

"My head does, sure." The bard admitted, simply.

Xena leaned her forehead against her partner's. "Gabrielle.. what happened to us before.. that's never going to happen again." She heard the audible swallow. "Before.. we were in love with the best of each other." She said. "And now.. we're in love with the worst."

Gabrielle listened intently to the words, letting them soak into her as she tasted the truth of them. "You know something?"

"Hm?"

"You've got a bard's soul inside you somewhere."

Xena chuckled faintly. "I just borrowed yours for a minute." She demurred. "Take it back. Quick."

Gabrielle lifted her hand up and kissed it, pressing her cheek against the backs of Xena's fingers, feeling the absolution of her words cleanse and polish a few tarnished facets of what she saw inside herself in a wholly unexpected way.

Beauty unlooked for. "I can't." She opened her eyes, finding Xena's looking back at her. "That soul's yours forever."

Now it was Xena's turn to fall silent, the faint starlight sparkling briefly as her eyelashes fluttered and Gabrielle felt a warm droplet hit the back of her hand. "Good grief." She whispered. "If we keep this up for nine months they're going to have to sop us up with sea sponge by the time we're done."

"Yeah." The warrior sniffled a little, and cleared her throat. "We'd better try and save it for when we get outta here."

"Okay." Gabrielle felt the long day catch up with her suddenly. She unwrapped the catskin and draped it over the warrior's shoulders as they snuggled together in long familiar comfort. As she put her head down on Xena's chest, she could already feel her perceptions slipping and as that happened, she was foggily aware of something inside her slipping as well, some last shadow lifting under the warmth of Xena's touch.

She tried to think about it, but her dreams took her too quickly, and she let it go for another day.

Far off, the wind brought a cat's yowl to Xena's ears, and she listened for what would come next, her eyes watching the stars wheel over her head in fascination as though for the very first time.

**

One Wild Ride

Part 19

The attack came just before dawn, when the sky was just gray enough to see the swarming silhouettes but not light enough to detail them.

Xena vaulted over the fire at the first sensing of them, all quicksilver motion and dark haired ferocity as she rushed to meet the hooters, with Gabrielle a bare step behind her.

Bard and warrior joined a cursing, struggling Pony with her back pressed against the rock, both hands fending off grasping, hairy fingers. "Son of a bacchae!"

"You called?" Xena neatly chopped off a scattering of miscellaneous digits, then reversed her sword and smashed the nearest hooter in the face with the hilt. "Stupid bastards.. think they'd give up."

"Xena!"

The volume alone warned her. Xena felt time slow down, as she shifted her body and swiveled, allowing her instincts full play to react to whatever it was that caused Gabrielle's warning.

Out of the mist, her eyes picked up the unexpected outline of an arrow shaft, and it was in truth only her reflexes that saved her life. In almost fascination, she watched as her left hand flickered into motion, her fingers closing around the arrow and stopping it just shy of her chest.

Her heart beat on steadily, unfazed, her body accustomed to dealing with this kind of threat even though her mind slid halfway into shock at the hooter's assumption of their weapons with such amazing aptitude.

Only halfway, because as she caught and tossed aside the arrow, another headed her way and the world sped up again as she settled down to the dangerous business of war. "Gabrielle! Geddown!"

"Knew she was going to say that." Gabrielle scuttled behind her partner, acknowledging that undaunted courage didn't preclude not wanting to get nailed with an arrow. "Damn, Xena!"

"Tell me!" Xena slashed at a pair of oncoming hooters, who abruptly dropped to the ground, and then rolled towards them, now visible sticks in their hands stabbing at her legs.

Pointed ends. The warrior jumped and landed on two of them, pinning the erstwhile weapons to the ground while she savagely hacked at the arms holding them, chopping through bone and skin and sending hair flying everywhere.

Gabrielle's staff whisked between her strokes, knocking back a charging hooter, his hands outstretched towards her and his eyes wide. He went down with a grunt and a second later the back end of the bard's weapon caught him above the ear with a loud crack.

"Thanks." Xena ducked under two more sets of grasping arms and gutted the closer owner, twisting her arms sideways and jerking them back just as Gabrielle stepped around her and nailed her other opponent between the eyes with the butt end of her staff.

Fighting in close quarters like this came as second nature to both of them these days, and Xena now had total confidence in her partner's abilities; but that had taken years to work out between them and many near misses and whacks in the head had come between then and now.

Gabrielle was dangerous with that staff. To her enemies, and also, if she was off-target, to anyone in her vicinity who had the misfortune to get in her way. It was only a big stick, true, but swung with the speed Gabrielle could swing it, and with the bard's compact, muscular weight behind the motion it could break bone with ease.

It did now, and the hooter went down with a scream, clutching at his face as blood flew. Xena didn't hesitate to take advantage of his confusion, she brought the hilt of her sword down on the top of his head with all the force of her arms, and had the satisfaction of seeing his head snap to one side, neck broken by the blow.

No time to enjoy it, though, as she had to whirl and team up with Pony to shove back four or five of the brutes who'd surrounded the weapons master.

Pony had a typically Amazon sword handling style, and her weapon was shorter than Xena's was to accommodate her lesser inches and slighter frame. She used the blade as both offense and defense and tended to slash and cut more than Xena did.

Most of that was strength. Xena risked sticking her sword deep into the bodies of her enemies because she knew she had the power to pull it back out again, and not have their collapsing take the weapon out of her hands. She also knew she had the strength to cut right through limbs and if she put her mind to it, ribcages and so her fighting style was markedly different.

Less elegance, more butchery, Melosa had once said about her, and Xena conceded the truth of that, but felt it wasn't a handicap in war when the object was to kill as many people as fast as you could.

Her way of fighting was messier, but people she went after usually went down, and stayed down, unable to hurt her or people she cared about further.

No points for pretty moves. "Yhahh!" The warrior stayed clear of Eponin's fast moving blade and kicked two hooters out of her way, driving her sword sideways from the other direction.

Another arrow whirred into her peripheral vision, and she whipped her blade up to knock it aside, then yanked the sword back as the hooter facing her tried to grab it. It sliced right through his hands, sending blood spurting high in the air.

He stared at the stumps, then his eyes lifted to Xena's face.

"I'm gonna do you a favor." The warrior said, as she locked her arms and spun, her blade hitting him in the side of the neck and continuing through it, removing his head as his eyes bulged, death taking him between one breath and the next.

She kicked his head to one side and squared her shoulders, taking a quick glance behind her to find Gabrielle. "You all right?" She called to the bard, who was standing behind her, staff gripped firmly in both hands.

"Fine." The bard yelled back. "Watch it!" She ducked past Xena and engaged one of the attackers, catching the club he had aimed at her partner with her staff and turning it aside with a neat jerk of her arms. "Stop worrying about me!"

"Oh, sure." Xena reached past her to swipe a pointed stick out of one hairy hand, perilous inches from her partner's navel. "How about I stop breathing for an encore?"

"I saw that coming!"

"Uh huh." The warrior turned back around, as she felt a rushing presence coming at her and only barely had time to lash out with one booted foot to keep two of the hooters from leaping on her.

"Watch your own self!" Gabrielle came to her side, disregarding the danger of the arrows as she took on the right most male while Xena struggled with the leftmost. The biggest of them had engaged the warrior, hooking her arm with his own as he tried to pull her away from the rock and over onto her back.

He outweighed her by a good bit, and if it hadn't been for Xena's wide legged stance and the weight of her hilt as she smashed him in the face she'd have been in trouble. "Bastard!" She cursed at him, as he kept hold of her and they wrestled, his hands fumbling as he tried to take the sword from her.

She yanked her hands back away from him and twisted, making him lose his balance and opening up his ribcage to a sudden, very violent sweep of Gabrielle's staff, which smashed into him with an audible crunch.

He howled.

Xena returned the favor as Gabrielle's opponent leaped at her. She caught him by the back hair and turned, using her weight and his momentum to throw him headfirst into the rock behind them.

"Xena!"

DAMN IT! Xena twirled her sword in her hand as she continued her motion around, dropping to a crouch until she could locate the new threat.

An arrow sped by her, in the other direction, catching a charging hooter in the eye and spinning him backwards just as Pony planted her feet and gutted a second, grunting as the big male smashed against her, dying as his arms paddled weakly at her.

A bark, a roil in the fog, and then they were retreating, running off down the ridge to disappear into the forest leaving their fallen comrades on the ground before the stones.

Granella sent them off in proper style, nailing the last in the group with an arrow in the back, and watching in satisfaction as he pitched forward and landed on his face on the ground, twitching violently.

"Blech." Pony shoved the hairy body away from her and watched in distaste as it slid to the ground. "Man, give me centaurs to fight anyday." She looked up as Granella came around the rocks, lowering her bow as she went over to one of the fallen arrows and picked it up. "Yours?"

Granella held it up for her to see. The Amazon markings near the feathers were plain. "But where'd they get a bow? I've got mine.. you didn't bring yours."

Xena and Gabrielle exchanged looks. "From me." The warrior admitted. "I made one and dropped it days back.. didn't figure they'd know what to do with it."

"Wow." Gabrielle murmured softly. "I guess they figured it out."

"Figured out more than that." Xena leaned back against the rock, her drawn sword resting against her thigh. The length was covered in dark, rich red which nevertheless reflected the early morning light.

"They were going for the blades." Pony agreed, grimly. "First bastard nearly got mine." She winced, examining a bruise along the side of her arm. "What in Hades are these things, Xena?"

Xena exhaled, letting her eyes search the rocky ground now strewn with silent bodies. "Wish I knew." She replied. "I don't recognize half the damn things in this place." Her eyes lifted to the trees. "Bet getting through there now's gonna be a bitch."

Gabrielle went to the closest of the bodies and knelt beside it, laying her staff down as she rested her hands on her knees. His body bore a few scraps of what might have been intended as clothing – strips of bark wrapped around his waist and tied with...

She leaned closer, reaching out to touch the bark and pull it over a little. The strands she'd seen were, indeed, threads from her own skirt, probably taken during one of the scuffles. "Ew."

"What?" Xena had been loitering behind her, and now she knelt beside her partner.

Gabrielle untangled the thread and handed it to her. "Xena, are you sure these things aren't something Ares dreamed up?" She asked, seriously. "They're so focused on... killing things."

Xena moved one of the creature's arms, exposing a piece of rock half buried in the dirt. She picked it up and examined it, shaking her head a little. "They find everything." She handed the rock over to Gabrielle, who turned it over in her fingers.

"What is that?" Granella asked, curiously. "Looks like just a split stone."

"It is." The bard gave it to her. "It's a stone Xena split right after we first got here.. trying to make something to cut with. I remember the fault line there on one end, it reminded me of the river bend near home."

Pony knelt on the other side of Xena. "So.. you gave it to them?"

"They found it." Xena said. "Just like they found the bow I dropped."

"Dropped?"

"They tried to trick us into a trap." Gabrielle explained, sensing the prickling of Xena's temper. "We found a deer.. they'd tied it up. I guess they saw us kill the other one, or something."

Pony looked a little confused. "Wait a minute. You're telling me these creeps were smart enough to trick you guys into falling for something?"

Gabrielle leaned casually against Xena's leg, feeling the sub audible growling. "Not exactly." She said. "We were just walking along and heard the deer. Xena got close to it, but she figured out what they were up to before they could trap us and she started kicking them around."

Pony and Granella exchanged glances. "Oh." Pony muttered. "But.. you're sure they were trying to trap you all?"

"We're sure." Xena replied, in a clipped tone. "Let's get moving. The further we get in daylight, the better. If we have to fight our way down into the valley it's gonna be a long day." She got up and walked towards the nearby stream, sword twitching and twirling in her hand.

"This is really weird." Granella stood also, giving her head a half shake. "I'll grab these. Gods know we're gonna need em." She started picking up the discarded arrows, and then moved to get the ones she'd buried into enemy flesh.

"Weird." Pony agreed. "Guess I'll go wash off too." She started after Xena, leaving Gabrielle kneeling somberly at the side of the fallen hooter.

"Yeah." Gabrielle murmured, under her breath. "Gonna be a long day."

**

They walked into the forest single file, Xena in the lead. Gabrielle was only a step or two behind her, and then Granella and Pony followed, with Pony taking up rear guard as she worked on assembling a serviceable bow.

Gabrielle was of two minds about this. On one hand, it was slightly insulting to insinuate that she and Granella belonged in the middle, protected slots. On the other hand, she wanted to be right near where Xena was and the best place to protect her butt was.. well.. pretty much right at her butt.

So there you go. The bard felt the path ahead of her with her staff as she kept her partner in her peripheral vision, her senses watching intently for the little signals that meant Xena's far more powerful senses detecting something.

Like her head sweeping to one side suddenly, the dark hair brushing across her shoulders as she watched something go by. Or the stiffening of her body, or the twitching of her fingers, all unconscious reactions to something she'd heard or smelled or seen.

Xena wasn't doing any of that right now, so Gabrielle figured they were safe for the moment from attack. The warrior was striding along the downward slope of the path, body bouncing just a little as she took the shock of the hard ground through her bones.

She was wearing her catskin cloak, as the morning had stayed chilly and Gabrielle was carrying their pack on her back with a bit of the deerskin pulled from it to drape over her shoulders. It wasn't really warm, but she was moving and her body was generating enough heat from that so she wasn't uncomfortable.

Of course, she wasn't really comfortable either, but she wasn't complaining. "Xe?" She took a few, quicker steps and came up even with her soulmate. "You know what I think we have to be careful of?"

"Slugs." Xena's motion was only a flicker, as she drew her sword, sliced a slug in half that was about to attach itself to Gabrielle's shoulder, and resheathed the weapon in nothing more than a blink of an eye. "And I think we've got rain coming in again."

"Thanks." Gabrielle glanced at the sky. "Ugh. Yeah."

They walked along together for a few minutes in silence, as Xena picked the best track down. As they got past a steep, rocky piece, she turned her head towards Gabrielle. "What?"

The bard looked up, startled. "What what?" She let her eyes sweep the surrounding trees. "Something wrong?"

"What." Xena enunciated slowly. "Do we have to be careful of?"

Gabrielle stepped around a boulder half sunk in the earth, a frown on her face. "Honey." She put a hand on Xena's back. "You know I love you, but is this any time to be quizzing me?"

Xena chuckled softly, and shook her head. "Never mind." She paused on a small ridge and held her hand up, her eyes detecting a tiny shiver of motion below them. "Hold up."

Gabrielle stepped to one side as Pony and Granella caught up to them, and they all stood in silence, watching Xena study the path ahead.

"Okay." The warrior slowly crouched down, resting her forearms on her knees. "There's a bunch of them, in that hollow down there." She pointed with her hand, all her fingers held close together. "They're under the canopy, near that outcropping."

Pony didn't even attempt it. "Sure." She agreed. "So.. what's the plan?"

Xena glanced at her. "We're going to attack them." She replied. "We'll split in two teams."

"Let me guess." Pony said, in a serious tone. "Me and Gran, you and her nibs."

The warrior's dark brows contracted. "This isn't a joke."

"I'm not laughing." Eponin answered back. "G'wan."

Xena studied her expression for a moment, then shrugged one shoulder. "The path divides just past those trees. You two take the left fork, Gabrielle and I'll take the right." She went on. "When I signal you, start shooting into them. We'll take care of the rest."

Pony absorbed this. "You want us to shoot into them while you're attacking from the other side."

Xena nodded.

"What if we shoot you?" She asked the warrior, in a deadpan tone.

"Gabrielle will come after you and beat you to death." Xena replied, in the same tenor. "Any other questions?"

Granella leaned on her bow a little. "So, what's the goal here?"

Xena hesitated. "To clear the path." She said, after a slight pause. "We're in a bad spot up here.. if they see us, and come after us, we'll be fighting going uphill."

Both Pony and Granella nodded. "Okay, sounds good." Granella said. "You guys be careful, huh?" She started down the path, staying close to the trees and edging forward carefully. Pony picked up a bit of rock and tossed it, then she got up and followed without a further word.

Xena sighed, leaning back and brushing against Gabrielle's leg. "Hades of a time for the shine to come off my reputation, y'know?"

Gabrielle patted her shoulder, and leaned forward to give her a kiss on the top of her head. "C'mon. Let's go keep our end of this thing." She said. "You think they'll run from us, if we attack them?" She held on to the back of Xena's leathers as the warrior stood up to keep her balance.

"I don't know." Her partner answered. "I'm just tired of them always being one step ahead of us." She dusted her hands off. "So, let's see what they do when the boots on the other foot."

Gabrielle followed her down the path. "You do know they don't wear boots, right?"

"Gabrielle."

"Just making that clear." The bard said. "We really should be careful not to show them any more tricks."

Xena got to the split in the path and started to the right, her steps becoming more stealthy. "Shh." She uttered, warningly. "We're upwind, but let's not take chances."

We're taking four scantily armed women up against a tribe of super strong hairy manimals who want to rape and or eat us. Gabrielle mused. "Right." She tucked her staff against her body and concentrated on stepping in Xena's bootprints "By the way." She pulled her partner gently to a halt. "That's what I meant before."

"What?" Xena pushed her up against a tree trunk and stood there, peering past it. Then she looked at Gabrielle. "Meant when?"

Framed in the spattering of sunlight, the shadows seeming to intensify her partner's already intense nature, Gabrielle found herself in a moment's delightful trance. She leaned forward and gently kissed Xena's parted lips. "Never mind."

She slipped past the warrior and took the lead, placing her feet carefully on the dew damp path, not wanting a slip to betray her.

"Never mind?" Xena licked her lips and studied the tree bark. "I think I'm losing my mind." She sighed, giving the rough surface a pat before she turned and caught up to Gabrielle, grabbing her by the back of her Amazon belt and hauling her to a stop, so she could go past and take them down the trail.

**

Granella got down on her belly, squirming carefully across the rocky ground as they got closer to the glade the hooters were gathered in. She had her bow cradled in her elbows, and she paused as they reached an area of shorter brush before she continued on. "What do you think?"

Pony crawled up next to her. "I think they've both gone nutters."

Granella looked at her. "About the track." She pointed towards the brush with her chin. "That's pretty exposed there."

"Oh." Pony put her chin down on a nearby stone and slitted her eyes, surveying the path. "Sa'llright." She decided after a moment, crawling forward and into the cleared area. The grasses just covered her head, and her motion through them stirred their tips only a little.

Granella took a last look around, then followed her, feeling the chill wind send goose bumps down her back as it swept up the slope.

She'd never really been one of the tribe's warmongers. Oh, she'd fought when she had to, and done the training, and carried her share of the load in terms of scouting, but she'd never felt in herself the love of fighting that she knew Eponin did.

Hades, Granella exhaled. She'd never felt the level of enjoyment in fighting that Gabrielle did, for Artemis' sake; and so, when she'd opted out of the Nation and joined the populace of Amphipolis there was a certain, never admitted to relief somewhere inside her that this type of thing had passed her by.

So here she was, creeping through the grass, bow in hand, expected to put it to its most lethal use in what was facing up to be a dangerous fight.

Just went to show you, she supposed, that adventure never came to you on your terms. She slid to one side and took hold of a rock outcropping, pulling herself up even with Pony just shy of a sharp drop off. "We here?"

"We're here." Pony sidled further under the thick green leaves of a wildly overgrown bush and shook the hair from her eyes as she observed the now easily visible hooters below them. "There they are, the little creeps."

Granella set her bow down and lifted herself up a little to see over the ridge. The hooters were clustered in a circle, yanking at something with some excitement. "What have they got there?"

Pony shook her head. "Rabbit? Who knows?" She laid her arrows out methodically, smoothing the feathers with a critical eye. "So." She studied the track across from them. "Think she'd do it?"

"Who?" Granella stuck the points of her arrows lightly in the earth, easing up into a half sitting posture as she carefully parted the leaves and tucked them aside to clear her aim.

"Gabrielle."

The ex-scout pondered the question as she got herself ready. "She might." She finally said. "She likes those other things, and she's pretty pissed off at those guys. "

"I meant, ya think she'd come after my head if I stuck one in Big X?"

Granella turned her head fully and looked at her companion. "Without question." She said. "And if you even think about it, I'll stick one in you." She frowned. "I think you're the one who's gone nutters. They're just acting like normal."

"Normal??"

Granella spotted Xena, emerging without a sound on the outcropping above the hooters. "Sh." She pointed. "Get ready."

Pony rose up next to her and strung her bow, making sure she had enough clearance between them so her bow arm wouldn't hit Granella. "I don't think they're nowhere near normal."

Granella nocked an arrow, perversely glad of the conversation that was taking her mind off what she was doing. "You're just not around them at home like I am." She disagreed. "They're like that a lot there.. it drives people nuts sometimes. They get so wrapped up in each other everything else around them is just like.. 'whatever'."

"I ain't never seen that." Pony disagreed.

"You've never seen them like I have." Granella shook her head. "For sure, not with the tribe. Give me a break, Pony." She saw Gabrielle drop down behind Xena, the bard's face set with resolve. "Get ready." She repeated. "We got the easy part of this."

"Yeah." Pony grumbled. "I should be over there instead of her nibs." She nocked an arrow. "Cept I know for damn sure she can't hit the broad side of a centaur with one of these."

Granella smothered a wry smile, acknowledging the truth of that. Gabrielle's martial skills were really quite profound, with everything except for sharp offensive weapons. Spears, arrows, swords... there was something in Gabrielle's makeup that shied away from using them, and it showed even in the friendly contests she sometimes participated in.

She could throw a rock with stunning accuracy. Shoot an arrow at the same target? Forget it. Everyone took off running when the bard so much as picked a bow up, even Xena appearing nervous though she, at least, had the skill to stop whatever it was from hitting inappropriate things.

So. Granella turned her focus on Xena's partially visible figure, as the warrior worked her way carefully closer to the hooters.

Watching Xena hunt was an ethereal experience, and she was hunting now, every move timed to synch with the waving branches around her as she flowed forward with the natural rhythm of the world. How in the world a six foot tall armored woman could seem invisible was behind her, but in a sense, Xena was.

Your eye went right over her, unless you really fixed your attention hard, and now Granella watched in some fascination as Gabrielle followed, her smaller, lither body even more difficult to discern since her Amazon clothing and tanned skin blended with the brush where Xena's stood out like a bull in a herd of sheep.

Finally, Xena found a position she liked, and stopped, coiling her body to leap. She had one foot on the edge of the rock ledge above the hooters, and the other slightly back to push off and she went still, Gabrielle going equally still behind her.

It wasn't a huge leap to the ledge below, but it was higher than Xena's head.

Did Gabrielle realize that? Granella pulled her arm back, her eyes fixed on the warrior. Sometimes the bard's bravery crossed over reckless, into the area where it overreached her physical capacity.

Did Xena realize that?

"Here we go." Pony got up onto her knees and then put one leg forward, bracing it as she drew her opposite arm back, tensing the bowstring powerfully. "C'mon, Xena. Stop posing."

The warrior lifted a hand and made a sign, and they both released their arrows at the same moment, rearming with serious intent as the shafts bore down on the hooters and entered flesh.

Pony let out a battle yell as she released her second arrow, pulling a third back and sending it flying as the hooters realized they were being attacked and started scrambling frantically around.

Hoots rose, panicked and angry. The crowd of them rushed towards the front of the ledge, and as soon as they did that, Xena leaped into the cleared space behind them, landing without so much as a jar and drawing her sword in an easy motion.

The hooters grabbed anything in their reach and started throwing it at the Amazons, and several started running up towards them. Xena let out a yell of her own and attacked them from behind, as Gabrielle jumped in behind her, landing with something of a greater bounce and far less grace, but keeping her feet and sweeping her staff at the hooter nearest her who had started heading uphill.

Xena hamstringed a shocked hooter, gutted him, then leaped over his fallen body to engage the two behind him. She kept up a ferocious yelling, and the herd of them suddenly panicked and bolted, running away as fast as they could, two of them jumping right off the path and falling down the mountain with screams of their own.

Gabrielle watched them leave, apparently a little non-plussed, having expected a harder battle. She grounded the end of her staff and looked at her partner, lifting her free hand in an eloquent shrug.

Xena walked over to the item the creatures had been mauling over and knelt. After a moment, Gabrielle joined her.

"What is it?" The bard grimaced, rubbing one knee. "Sheesh, Xe.. that was a high jump!"

"Toldja to stay up there." The warrior answered, absently, as she examined the mass of black leather on the ground. "What in the Hades?"

Gabrielle studied it. "Is that armor?" She asked after a moment. "It looks a little familiar."

"Not exactly." Xena spread out the remnants. They formed what might have been a leather vest, finely tooled and intricate. "And it is familiar." She turned and looked at Gabrielle. "It's the one Ares usually wears."

Gabrielle blinked in real surprise, reaching out in reflex to touch the vest. "Wh.." She looked back at Xena. "What's it doing here?" She looked around, apparently expecting the vest's owner to appear. "You haven't felt.. have you?"

"No." Xena replied. "I haven't." With a frown, she folded up the tatters and stood. "But maybe you weren't so far off before and he is involved in this crazy place."

"Yeesh." Gabrielle stood up, working her knee out as she watched Pony and Granella approach. "Like we needed any more complications."

Xena looked at her in mute eloquence.

"Oh, shut up." Gabrielle rolled her eyes and walked past, shaking her head. "IT'S NOT MY FAULT!!!"

The warrior chuckled briefly and followed, but her face held a pensive expression as she rubbed her thumb over the leather bundle in her hands.

**

They made it back to the old woman's cave before nightfall. It wasn't as far as they'd wanted to go, but with the sun setting, Xena held her hand up as they came even with the opening. "Let me check it out. We know they know this place."

"Yeah?" Pony surveyed the opening dubiously. "Why not skip it then?"

Gabrielle leaned against the rock wall as Xena slipped inside the cave. "It's the way out." She wiped a bit of rock dust off her forehead. "Anyway, I could use a break."

"What you said." Granella unapologetically sat down on the path, rubbing the muscles in her legs. "Damn that was steep."

Pony snorted, then followed Xena inside the cave leaving the other two women alone outside. Gabrielle slid down the rock wall and sat down next to Granella, extending both legs out with a sigh. One knee popped slightly and she grimaced, rubbing it. "Ow."

Granella turned her head to one side and observed her sister in law. "Throw something out?"

"Nah." The bard sighed. "I've twisted that one enough times that it reminds me when I do something stupid like jump off a cliff." She rubbed a bit of dried mud off the tan skin on the inside of her knee. A long scar was visible there, running down to her calf. "I should know better than to just hop off ledges after Xena by now."

"You could have asked Xena to take it easier coming up here." Granella commented. "She'd have."

"No." Gabrielle produced a wry grin. "She wouldn't have. She'd have put me over her shoulder and carried me. So you hush, okay?" She folded her hands over her stomach and exhaled, glad of the chance to simply sit and watch the sunset.

They hadn't seen a single sign of the hooters since the fight. That worried all of them, and Xena had seemed tenser and more anxious than usual as she roamed ahead of them scouting out the path. But other than a few scattered animals, they'd had a peaceful climb up the side of the mountain.

Her knee was a little sore, and having to balance against that put the rest of her body under extra strain. But Gabrielle felt her energy returning as she rested and her mind shifted from thoughts of the walk to plans for their camp.

She felt reasonably certain Xena would camp in the cave for the night, regardless of the fact they knew the lower track down through the cavern was pretty much unguardable. At least here they'd have shelter and the narrow crawlspace was small enough for Xena to mount an easy defense with no way for the hooters to attack her in numbers.

"Gab?"

Gabrielle turned, to find Granella offering her a waterskin. "Thanks." She took it with a smile, and sucked a mouthful from it. "Bet you're regretting that old wanderlust, huh?"

"Eh." The other women chuckled wryly. "Hasn't been so bad for us, really." She demurred. "First couple days.. well, and then we fell down the waterfall. That kinda sucked."

"For us too." Gabrielle nodded.

Granella lifted a stone and peered at its speckled surface. "Were you scared?" She asked, after a brief silence. "I was. Man, my heart went right out between my teeth."

The bard opened her hands to cup a splash of sunlight, watching dust particles float in it as it reflected off her skin. "I wasn't.. " She paused. "I mean, yes, of course I was scared when we went over the edge, you know?" She looked at Granella. "I'm scared speechless of heights.. we were falling for what felt like forever."

"Yeah." Granella nodded.

"But.. I..." Gabrielle drew her knee up and leaned her forearm against it. "This won't make much sense, but I wasn't really afraid of what would happen once we finished falling."

The sun began disappearing behind the soaring crevice walls, tinting Gabrielle's face in a rich, golden light as Granella studied it. The lines and planes of adulthood had lengthened the shape of it from what she'd remembered when she'd first met the bard but the primary difference was the expression in her eyes.

Their intensity now matched Xena's. "You mean, you weren't afraid of dying, right." Granella asked.

"Right." Gabrielle agreed. "I've learned over the years there's a lot worse things that can happen to you than that. Besides, with Xena there, I wasn't really worried." Her tone lightened appreciably. "If she'd started swimming us both upstream, wouldn't have surprised me."

Granella shook her head and chuckled. Then she grew quiet. "Well, to be honest, I was afraid of dying." She admitted. "I think I've grown out of being an Amazon, Gabrielle." She paused, and after a period of continuing silence, she looked up to find far more mature understanding than she'd frankly expected. "Does that make any sense to you?"

Gabrielle squirmed a little closer, running her fingers through her hair to remove windblown locks from her eyes. "That you don't want to get hurt, or risk your life? Sure." She replied. "But you know, we don't have a lot of choice about that out here."

"No, I know." The dark haired woman said. "It's just.. bothering me that I've turned into a coward."

The words did something to her, and she felt a cold anger stir with shocking unexpectedness. Gabrielle reached over and whapped her on the top of the head, making Granella jump back in startlement. "What?" She sputtered. "Stuff that!"

"Ow!" Granella scrambled back out of reach. "That hurt!"

"It should have!" Gabrielle retorted. "What makes you think caring about living or dying makes you a coward?"

"That's not what.."

"That's exactly what you said." The bard cut her off.

"Hey!" Pony came back out of the cave. "What the Hades is going on out here?" She put her hands on her hips as Xena emerged behind her. "Hey?"

Granella rubbed her head. "Um.. nothing." She glanced quickly at Gabrielle, who had settled back against the rock with a mildly abashed expression. "Find anything?"

Xena stepped past Pony and extended her hand towards Gabrielle. "Let's go inside. We'll camp here tonight." She said, shortly. "No sign of em."

Gabrielle demurely took her partner's hand and allowed herself to be pulled to her feet. She followed Xena inside and as she expected, the warrior led her over to the ledge near the rear, not around in back where the skeleton was.

Her knees were shaking from the sudden draining of unexpected anger, and she was glad to reach the ledge and lean against it. "Glad we found someplace dry and warm.. I'm sure we could all use it."d

"Uh huh."

She shrugged their pack off her back and started to open it, pausing when she sensed Xena standing next to her in expectant stillness. Instinctively, she looked up, reading the warrior's body posture easily. "Um.. hi."

"Hi." Xena took a seat on the ledge next to where she'd set the pack. "So what's the deal with Pounding Pauline out there?"

Gabrielle glanced furtively at the entrance, which was still conspicuously empty of Amazons. "Gran was just being goofy. I whacked her one."

Xena blinked, her head drawing back in surprise. "You did?"

The bard sat down, her hands cradled around the skull cup. "I did." She admitted. "Not sure where that came from."

Xena studied her partner, a frown crossing her face. "She say something to you?" She guessed. "About me.. about us, or?" Her voice trailed off as she watched Gabrielle shake her head no. "It's not like you to haul off an hit people, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle pondered a moment, then she shrugged. "Long day." She sighed. "Tell you what. I'll see what I can scrounge us up for dinner if you go tell Gran I'm not a nutball."

Blue eyes went a bit rounder. "You want me to explain you to her?"

The bard nodded. "Gwan." She gave her partner a nudge. "Tell her I'm..." She paused.

"Pregnant?" Xena supplied helpfully. "She should understand that. She wasn't exactly even tempered during hers."

No, that was very true, now that Gabrielle recalled. However.. "No.. I.. " The bard set the skull down and picked on up one of Xena's hands instead. The contact made her entire body relax, and she found herself sidetracked momentarily by the strong sensation.

"Gabrielle?"

The shakiness faded, and she felt her equilibrium settle nicely. She brought their joined hands up and kissed Xena's knuckles, catching the faint hint of rock dust and leather on her skin. "Gods, I love you." She exhaled. "Listen, forget I said that. I'll take care of Gran. I don't really want them to know we think I'm pregnant, okay?"

"Uh.. sure."

"Any chance of some fish in that water hole in back?" Gabrielle absently nibbled her partner's skin. "I know it'll beat the nuts I have in my bag."

"See if I can find some."

Gabrielle looked up at that, to see the wry, bemused expression on Xena's face. She was about to speak, when Pony and Gran enter the cave. She squeezed the warrior's hand instead, and got a nod in response, as Xena got up. "Thanks."

Xena ruffled her hair gently. "Okay." She addressed the other two. "I'm gonna see what fish I can catch in the pool back there. Grab some firewood."

"You're gonna fish in the dark?" Pony queried. "Why not wait for us to build a fire, then take a torch? You gotta do things the hard way all the time?"

Xena paused near the entrance to the back passageway and put her hands on her hips. "It's always dark back there. Fish are used to the dark. Put light in, they all leave. I'm not looking to fish for the next ten candlemarks, thanks." With a toss of her head, she disappeared into the shadows.

A small silence fell. Pony looked at the empty spot the warrior had left, then she turned and looked at Gabrielle. "Scuse me." She said. "You both cycling or something?"

The bard propped her elbow on her knee and rested her chin on her fist. "Something." She agreed wryly. "Sorry about that."

Pony shook her head and began gathering some of the scattered sticks on the floor. Granella picked up a few rocks and started making a fire circle, refusing to meet Gabrielle's eyes.

Sheesh. The bard went back to her task, taking out the supplies she had in her pack and sorting them. Gonna be a long night.

"Figures we get stuck in a cave. I hate sleeping on rocks!" Pony groused.

"Aint' that the truth." Granella agreed, in a glum tone.

Really long night. Gabrielle pulled out the tattered wad of leather and stared at it, then silently put it back in the pack. Now they had another mystery to worry them. Was Ares really involved?

Or wasn't he?

**

It was long after dark. The fire had burned down to a friendly orange glow, and the campsite was somberly quiet.

Pony was seated near the entrance to the cave, sword drawn with its hilt resting inside the curl of her fingers as she watched fireflies whisk about outside. She had her back to the rest of the group, but her hearing told her nothing was going on, so she was content to focus on the world outside instead.

If she turned and looked, she knew she'd see Granella curled up on one side of the fire, making herself as comfortable as she could on the rocks and using her pack as a pillow.

Across the fire from her, Gabrielle was also curled up, making herself as comfortable as possible and using Xena as a pillow. Pony shook her head, unable to really believe the two of them were as goopy as they were, even though she'd known them for years.

When had Xena turned into such a softie? Pony peeked over her shoulder, watching the warrior as she watched her partner sleep, the look of adoration in her eyes positively embarrassing. "Sheesh." The weapons master returned her attention to the darkness outside. "What the Hades is up with that?"

"You say something?" Xena's voice projected to her, low and vibrant.

"Me?" Pony made a show of turning around to look. "Naw... you hearing things?"

Blue eyes that were tinted gold in the firelight gazed steadily back at her. "I hear lots of things." The warrior asserted. "Some of them useful, some not."

Pony snorted, and returned her attention to the path outside.

Xena waited to see if more snippy comments would be forthcoming, and then, when they weren't, she settled back against the rocks and draped her arm over Gabrielle's dozing body again. The bard was lying on her side with her head in Xena's lap, her hand curled around the warrior's knee.

Gabrielle wasn't entirely asleep. Slight movements of her hands, and shifts of her body indicated the exhaustion of the long day wasn't quite overcoming the discomfort of the stone she was lying on. She gently ran her fingers through the bard's hair, delicately rubbing Gabrielle's scalp just behind her ears.

"Mm."

Xena felt a light, warm touch of lips against the skin on the inside of her thigh, and knew a moment of quiet thankfulness for this most profound blessing in her life.

"Hey, Xe?" Gabrielle squirmed and rolled over onto her other side, now facing her partner.

"Remember when I told you I thought those hammock things you made us for the trees were a bad idea?"

Xena actually couldn't remember any such thing, but she nodded anyway.

"Bad move on my part." The bard sighed. "These rocks are driving me nuts."

The warrior glanced around the cavern, in all its shadowed mystery from the fire, and regarded the rocks thoughtfully. Hammocks. Gods be damned, why hadn't she thought of that? There were plenty of places to hang the damn things in the places they'd been. "Mm."

"I'd like to be in a hammock right now." Gabrielle said, mournfully. "With you, of course."

"Of course." Xena murmured back. "Y'know, that's a damn good idea, Gabrielle."

The bard immediately clamped both hands down on her partner's knees. "Don't get any funny ideas like you're going to run out into the forest in the middle of the night to find hemp, okay?"

"I wasn't." Xena protested mildly. "Pony already thinks I've gone nuts. Don't want to add fuel to that fire."

Gabrielle rolled onto her back and regarded the craggy ceiling. "I don't think we're going nuts." She said. "I think we're just acting like we always do when we're alone, and they can't deal with that."

Xena considered that, as she slowly riffled through Gabrielle's hair, her fingertips tracing the bard's well shaped skull under its thick covering. "Yeah, I guess." She said, after a short pause. "I just don't feel like acting any other way." She continued, her brows creasing. "Not sure why."

Gabrielle thought she knew. Their travels together after they'd visited Athens had given them so much time alone, that they'd come to a place in their lives where they were both very comfortable in their skins with each other.

So why pretend otherwise when other people were around? Let them think whatever they wanted to think. "Same reason we ended up moving, maybe." She whispered. "I didn't want to have to act like Gabrielle the bard, or Gabrielle the Amazon queen all the time. I just wanted to be me."

Something in the words rang unexpectedly true in Xena's ears. It had to do with the expectations everyone always had of her, and how that had just grated, and grated, and grated on her when they'd come home, until she'd felt like backhanding all those avidly watching faces.

Yeah. "Think you're on to something there." She murmured.

"Wasn't really the growth of the town." Gabrielle said. "It was all those people watching me like I was some three headed goat all the time."

"Yeah." Xena exhaled. "Damn, you're right. I just wanted everyone to leave me the Hades alone."

Gabrielle nodded, little things that had been puzzling her now making a lot more sense. Perhaps this wasn't the time to really be thinking about it, but she'd learned to take her revelations where she found them, and at least, this was something she had a chance of explaining to Cyrene when they got back.

Besides, this was a lot more pleasant than the notion the both of them were just getting to be anti social grumps in their old age, wasn't it? The bard gazed up at her partner's face, outlined in the reddish firelight. "You know something?"

"I know I love you." Xena ran her fingertip along the edge of Gabrielle's sensitive ears, and watched her face twitch in response. "What?"

"All these years I've been telling stories about you... what I really wished was that people could see you like I do." Gabrielle smiled. "I can't help it if it's freaking them out."

The warrior shrugged, and chuckled softly.

They were both briefly silent. Then Gabrielle shifted her focus, lifting her hand and rubbing the backs of her knuckles against Xena's leg. "You going to get some rest?"

Xena shook her head. "I'm watching the back door." She indicated the dark recesses behind them. "Pony's got the front door."

"I could watch for you." Gabrielle felt Xena's hand cover hers, and their fingers laced together. "I'm tired but I'm just not sleepy."

That about described how Xena felt too. Her body was tired, a little, mostly from the tension of watching and listening for the hooters all day. But her mind was going in circles to the point where only the fact that she was providing her partner a pillow was keeping her from pacing.

"Damn I wish we were home in bed." Gabrielle sighed. "And I miss Dori."

"Me too." Xena admitted. "Hope she's not running Eph ragged."

Gabrielle rolled onto her side again, squirming forward so that her forehead was resting against Xena's body. It took the pressure off her shoulder a little and if she ignored the fact that her hip was going to be sore in the morning, it was almost bearable.

Gods, she hated sleeping on rock. The last few years most of her worst nightmares had happened around mountains and there were times she wished they just lived in the flatlands with nothing more picturesque than blackberry bushes to look at.

Xena's hand touched her shoulder. With no more warning than that, Gabrielle immediately rolled over and lifted away from her, ducking her head gracefully as Xena drew her sword in flickering silence.

She got to her feet right behind the warrior, lifting her staff up and taking hold of it as Xena moved towards the back corridor in utter silence. A quick look over her shoulder showed Pony unaware of the movement, and though Gabrielle took a breath to call a warning, something made her close her mouth again and follow Xena instead.

She could hear nothing from the darkness, but she had no doubt her partner had, and now as she walked carefully in the dark haired woman's footsteps, she could see the shifting muscles under her skin as her body prepared to fight.

Easily visible under her leathers, it reminded Gabrielle irresistibly of some prowling, hunting cat as she watched the warrior's spine arch, and her powerful shoulderblades spread under their layers of sinew.

It was automatic. Gabrielle could even sense the dark energy stirring inside her, that seductive tickling her own body tiptoed closer and closer to understanding as time went by. She could feel Xena's breathing deepen, and saw her thigh muscles tense, knees unlocking slightly and then stilling.

She steadied her balance and slid her grip lower on her staff, her eyes shifting to either side of Xena's figure as she searched the shadows ahead of them.

Xena lifted a hand, made a sign.

Gabrielle stepped to her left, and crouched slightly, clearing the warrior's sword arm, the tip of the blade twitching not far from her as Xena held it reversed in her hand.

Now, her ears picked up the faintest of sounds, the barest of rasps, skin against rock as something or someone walked in bare feet towards them.

Xena took another two steps forward, positioning herself on the side of the opening, her body protected by the rock, as she cocked her sword arm, ready to deal with whatever was going to come around the corner at them.

Gabrielle shifted her grip on her staff and waited in silence, readying herself to deal with whatever would happen after Xena handled the initial attack. At least, it sounded like only one of whatever it was.

A flicker of motion in the shadows beyond the rock.

"Hey!" Pony's voice cut the silence like a knife. "What in Hades are you two doing?"

A soft gasp, then the sound of running feet.

"Son of a bacchae." Xena bolted into the darkness, swinging around the rock in the blink of an eye and disappearing. "Stay HERE!"

Gabrielle glanced at Pony. "Bad timing." She called, as she took off after her partner. "Be right back!"

Pony gaped after them, as Granella rolled to her feet in groggy surprise. "Wh.." The weapons master blurted. "Hey!"

Granella raked her hair from her eyes and stared into the dark crevice. "I get it." She rubbed her face. "Now I finally get it. They don't get into trouble."

"What???" Pony yelped.

"They make it." Granella grabbed her bow and quiver. "C'mon.. take that torch there. Let's go."

Cursing, Pony grabbed a wrapped branch and paused to light it, then hurried after Granella into the shadows.

**

The sound of motion drew her quickly on as she rounded the corner and headed down the passageway, the creature she was chasing collided with one of walls in a scrape of skin against stone, and she moved faster, suspecting it was their little friend still hanging around where they'd last seen him.

Stupid bastard.

Xena knew she had only a few heartbeats to catch their silent stalker, before the dark became too dark for her to track efficiently. Not to mention, before Gabrielle would come plowing into her from behind since she could already hear the distinctive footsteps headed in her direction.

She caught a glimpse of a shadow moving in front her and instinctively she lunged for it, letting her body handle the lack of light and the uncertain surroundings as best as it could, her other senses stepping up as she moved through the darkness with easy skill.

Her ears picked up heightened breathing, and the familiar male musk made her nose wrinkle as she closed in on her quarry, her body sliding past rock outcroppings she couldn't see.

Her fingers brushed skin, then a grip fastened on her throat and warrior instincts took over as she found her air cut off. She swung her sword arm around in a tight, fast circle, her wrist rotating her sword from reverse to forward and then underhand as she plunged it into the body of the creature holding her.

She heard a gasp, then a scream of pain, and the grip released as the scent of hot blood exploded into her senses and the creature slumped into her, fingers clawing at her leathers as he sank to his knees.

A torch flared behind her, and she turned her head to see Gabrielle's figure outlined in crimson light, just as her mind brought her around to the realization that the body slumped against hers wasn't misshapen enough.

Wasn't hairy enough.

A vague alarm rang in her skull as she yanked her sword back out and lowered the body to the ground. "Bring that torch!"

Gabrielle was at her side in an instant, her hand falling on Xena's shoulder. "You okay?"

"Fine." Xena knelt as Pony and Granella picked their way over, Pony holding the torch up as it's flickering light cast dancing crazed shadows on the rock walls. "Not sure what I've got here." She turned the slumped form over, just as Gabrielle knelt next to her and gave her a hand. "I don't thin..."

For a moment, there was absolute silence in the passageway, the lick of the torch sounding harsh and loud as it reflected off four very stunned faces.

"Oh my g.." Gabrielle, typically, was the one who found words first. "Xena... wh.."

Xena was staring in profound incomprehension at the burly figure lying half across her thigh, it's muscled, naked body covered in blood. "Ares."

The closed eyes flickered open and found hers, and any doubt was gone. But this was no god. "Figures." The lips shaped the word, then the eyes closed again, and Ares head rocked to one side, his body relaxing into unconsciousness.

There was another moment of utter silence. Then Pony shifted, moving the torch from one hand to the other. "Did.. um.." She muttered. "Did you just kill the God of War, Xena?"

Xena stared down at her blood covered hands, her mind spinning in chaos.

"He's still breathing." Gabrielle's voice almost sounded normal, warm and surreal. "So.. I.. um, guess we'd better get him into the front cave there, so Xena can take care of him." Her hand squeezed Xena's shoulder gently. "Pony, put that torch in the crack there, and get on this side of him."

Xena mentally blessed the bard's presence of mind, as she forced herself to shove aside the shock and concentrate, as Gabrielle was, on the practical. She set her sword aside and wiped her hands on her thighs, feeling the stickiness of the drying blood as she surveyed the damage.

Gods. What was he doing here? What was he doing... mortal? How?

The warrior suddenly felt somewhat lost, and afraid. As much as she claimed to scorn the gods, and her disbelief in them, still.

Still, this was the one god tied more closely to her life than any other. The one god she knew in her heart understood her in ways even Gabrielle didn't.

"Xe? Can you grab his legs there?"

Live in the moment, Xena. The warrior got one arm under the fallen god's knees and braced herself, nodding to Gabrielle as the bard helped the other two lift Ares's upper body. She stood with them, and they struggled back up the path, leaving the torch to flutter emptily over blood stained stone and somber shadows.

**

Gabrielle picked the deer skull up and paused, watching Xena for a moment. The warrior was standing near where they'd lain Ares down, watching with haunted eyes as she flexed her hands almost compulsively. Pony and Granella were standing awkwardly by, not really sure of what they could or should be doing now that the first shock was wearing off.

Well. Gabrielle walked over to her partner. "Here." She offered her the skull. "Why don't you get some water, and I'll get the needles out."

Xena studied the skull, now clasped in her hands. "Yeah." She nodded. "Clean up a little too." She turned and returned to the shadows, pausing only to pick up her sword before she headed back into the corridor and the small, dark rush of water she'd found back there.

Gabrielle knelt next to the still form and lifted up her carriesack, sorting through the contents inside it as she searched for the fishbone needles Xena had fashioned. She looked up as Pony approached, seeing the apprehension on the Amazons' face. "Hey."

"Uh, hey." Pony crouched down next to her. "Is there.. um.. something we can do?" Her eyes flicked to the fallen god.

Gabrielle studied her. "Sure." She took Pony's hand, and pressed it down on the square of cloth covering the gaping gash in Ares side. "Hold that."

"Uh."

"You asked." The bard set the needles aside, and added a coil of gut to them. "Gran, can you build up the fire a little?"

"Sure." Granella replied briskly. "Be right back."

Gabrielle finished her task, and then she regarded the injured god with a tiny shake of her head. Aside from Xena's gut wound, his body was covered in bruises and scrapes, and there was a set of claw rakes across the plane of one cheek. "I don't get this."

Pony goggled at her. "What?"

"Him." She replied briefly. "Mortal."

Pony looked around, then looked back at her. "Like in... why?"

Gabrielle nodded. "Why. How." She exhaled. "Last time it was all.. " Her voice trailed off, as far off memories surfaced. "Hm."

"Last time?"

The bard nodded again. "Poor Xena."

Pony gave up trying to make sense of any of it, and just did what she was told, keeping pressure on the still bleeding sword wound in Ares chest. Xena's sword had passed just under his ribcage most of the way through his body, and she had to wonder if even a god.. or .. a mortal-ish god.. or.. whatever this was could survive it.

She studied Ares face, having seen him close up only once before, during the war. Now, there was far less arrogance there, and far more of something she almost found familiar. Sort of. If she could only..

"All right." Xena returned, dripping wet and carrying her damn skull full of water, splashes of it surging over the edge as the warrior dropped to her knees. "Let's get this over with."

Pony found her eyes drawn to Xena's face, it's angles standing out starkly with her hair plastered back and sparkling with water.

She blinked, and looked down at Ares. Then she looked over at Gabrielle, who lifted her head as though feeling the attention, and met her gaze.

Pony looked away, unable to return the enigmatic intensity. "We gonna need... uh.. anything?"

"No." Xena was busy, focused on her task.

"Thanks, Pony." Gabrielle told her. "I think we do need to keep an eye on that corridor.. no telling what's going to be following him up here."

"Gotcha." Pony stood, gratefully. "I'm on it." She went to get her sword, and then walked back to the rear hallway, drawing it from it's scabbard and letting the blade rest on her shoulder.

"I'll keep an eye up front." Granella said, without prompting, as she finished building up the fire.

"Thanks." Gabrielle repeated, finally turning her full attention to her quiet partner. "Oh, Boo.. we've done it now." She uttered, under her breath.

"Ungh." Xena slowly shook her head, as she threaded a needle and studied the gash she'd put in Ares side. "Know what I just realized?"

Gabrielle sorted through the immensity of the possibilities. "No, what?"

The warrior's hands paused, and she turned her head to look at her partner. "They've got the sword they were looking for."

In reflex, Gabrielle's hand came up to her mouth, as her eyes widened.

Without further word, Xena went back to her task.

Gods.

**

The sun rose over the edge of the trees, splashing a somber coral glow over the side of the mountain path and lending a warm touch as it passed over Xena's outstretched legs.

She turned her hands over and flexed her fingers in the newborn light, rubbing her thumb over the scraped and roughened skin on her fingertips, releasing a relieved sigh that it was finally daylight and the long night was over.

It almost felt like the dawn was rising over a completely different world. Xena watched the stark landscape around her come alive, birds rousing and launching into flight, and insects starting to buzz around a nearby bush.

Her nose picked up the smell of the rocks, and the water far below, and the trees angling down the slope. Then her nostrils twitched as she detected the faintest hint of mint. She closed her eyes and concentrated, and with the mint, she smelled cloth, and leather, and smoke tinged skin and with the scuff of boots on rock, Gabrielle appeared.

"Hi." The bard stopped next to her and slowly lowered herself to the ground, tucking her boots up crossed under her as she handed over a steaming cup of tea. "Thought maybe you could use this."

"Ooohh. Yeah." Xena took the cup and cradled it in both hands, bringing it to her face and inhaling the freshly scented steam deep into her lungs. "Thanks."

Gabrielle rested her elbows on her knees and blinked into the sunlight, feeling the exhaustion lurking at the fringes of her awareness. Xena had finished sewing up the gash she'd put in Ares, but the injured god hadn't regained consciousness, and she found herself wondering what in the world they were going to do now.

"Tired?"

Gabrielle rolled her eyes in her partner's direction. "Very." She replied. "I know you are."

"Mm." Xena slowly sipped the tea.

Gabrielle remained quiet for a few minutes, merely sitting there basking in the sunlight and Xena's presence. The cave behind her had become a place full of unanswered questions and she had no real desire to return to it.

She was still shocked, even now. Shocked to see that familiar, often hated face lying there. Shocked to see the blood, the bruised skin; the unexpected humanity that reminded her unexpectedly of a long forgotten trial of her own life she'd put firmly in the past.

A nudge on her shoulder made her look up, to find Xena extending the cup to her. She took it, finding it still half full before she had to pull it up hastily as the warrior shifted and laid down on her back, putting her head in Gabrielle's lap. "Oh... you okay?"

Xena rested her cheek against Gabrielle's stomach and curled her arm around the bard's waist. "Just needed you."

What a coincidence. Gabrielle set the cup down and laid one arm over Xena's stomach, smoothing her hair back with her other hand. "Tough night."

"Mm." Xena closed her eyes. "I just keep thinking.. what do we do now?"

"Yeah." The bard murmured, engaging herself in savoring the silky feel of Xena's hair against her fingers. "I don't know, Xena. If you don't know, how can any of us know what to do?"

The warrior sighed.

"I mean, it's not like you and I have this book around, you know? The one that tells us what to do when gods fall out of Olympus on us and we meet talking elephants."

One blue eyeball appeared. "We should." Xena remarked, wryly. "Hey.. maybe that'll be our retirement project. Write a know it all scroll."

Gabrielle smiled, running her fingertip down the bridge of Xena's nose, and watching the pale eyes almost cross as they followed her hand. "I'd love that almost as much as I love you."

Xena smiled back, then let her eyes drift closed again.

"Xe?" Gabrielle murmured, after a long silence. She watched one of Xena's eyebrows twitch. "Is he going to be all right?"

The warrior didn't answer for a while, then she made a face, the bridge of her nose wrinkling. "I think so." She allowed. "I was expecting someone shorter."

"Ah." Gabrielle grunted softly.

"Should have known better than to grab me like that."

The bard could hear the defensiveness in the tone. "If he knew it was you, of course he should have." She said. "Sweetheart, it was pitch dark in there. You did what you had to do.. I would have done the same thing."

Xena's nearer eye opened, and she regarded Gabrielle with a mildly droll expression.

"Eh. Okay." Gabrielle conceded. "But I would have smacked him really hard with my staff if he'd grabbed me in the dark, let me tell ya."

"Hmph."

Gabrielle gently stroked Xena's cheekbone. "You really think they have his sword?"

The warrior shrugged one shoulder. "They had his armor, and he sure didn't have it." She replied practically. "Let's just hope it's just a sword to them."

Gabrielle felt a chill run down her back. "You think it's more?"

Xena shrugged one shoulder again.

"It won't.. um.. make one of them the god of War, will it?"

Would it? Xena tried to remember all she'd heard about the powers of Ares infamous sword. It was tied to his godhood, that she knew. Or.. well, it was tied to his being the God of War, at any rate. "I think you already have to be a god before the sword makes you anything special." She answered, after a long, reluctant pause.

"Ah. Yeah, that makes sense." Gabrielle murmured. "Yeah, I remember.. in Athens, when Aphrodite was talking about that bet.. it was just that he'd lose the sword, lose being God of War, not that he'd be a mortal or anything."

"Right."

They were both silent for a bit. "So.. how'd he become mortal?" Gabrielle finally asked.

Xena opened both eyes and looked plaintively at her. "Gabrielle, you have the same damn information I do.. what makes you think I know that if you don't?"

"Because you're Xena, and you know everything." The bard replied, in a placid tone.

"You can just kiss my.."

"Can't. You're lying on it." Gabrielle smiled at her, as she covered the warrior's lips with her hand. "You ready to go inside and see what's going on?" She altered her tone to a more serious one. "We have to figure out what we're going to do now."

Xena sighed, letting her eyes once again close. She didn't want to go back inside the cave, and face both the injured god and the need to decide what to do, even though she knew the bard was right and that they had to.

Maybe if she waited long enough, Pony would decide what to do.

Yeah right. As if.

Gabrielle's fingers ruffled through her hair again, pausing to gently massage her temples. She could hear the bard's stomach grumbling, though, and she could feel the sun inching higher over both of them, so she gathered herself to get up and lifted her head out of Gabrielle's lap, pausing to kiss her on the way up.

"Mm." The bard hiked one knee up and trapped Xena in place with her arm, taking her time about returning the kiss while providing an impromptu backrest for her. "Now that's a good way to start the day off, isn't it?"

"Perfect way." Xena agreed. "But we'd better go get you fed before that noise brings down an avalanche." She nudged her partner in the ribs with her head, and smiled as Gabrielle enfolded her in a warm hug before letting her go.

She got to her feet and pulled the bard up with her, turning to face the entrance to the cave just as Pony emerged from it, rubbing her face with one hand. "Morning." Xena greeted her.

"Ugh." The Amazon groaned. "I'm too freaking old for this all night crap, Xena."

"Yeah." Gabrielle agreed. "Me too."

Xena rolled her eyes and ducked past them. "Give me a break." She disappeared into the darkness inside the cave entrance, leaving Pony facing Gabrielle alone.

Pony glanced after the warrior, then she looked furtively at Gabrielle. "She freaked?"

Gabrielle leaned back against the rock wall, savoring the sunlight now pouring down over her. It had been cold in the cave, despite the fire and her bones had ached from it. "I think..." She glanced at Pony. "I think she's more freaked about what this does for our getting out of here, than anything else."

"No crap?"

"Mm." The bard nodded, as she watched Pony's face, vivid in the sunlight. There were dark circles under her eyes, and the strain was showing too. "We matter. He doesn't."

Pony folded her arms across her chest, and squinted into the dawn. "I can't even think about that being the god of war in there." She admitted. "It's just too weird."

Gabrielle half shrugged, and pushed away from the wall. "Yeah, well.. let's go figure out what we're gonna do with him." She turned, but stopped as Pony put a hand up to still her. "What?"

The weapons master let her hand drop, a little uncertainly. "Just.. how do you deal with that?"

"Deal with what?" The bard was guiltily glad for another few moments of clean air and sunlight. "You mean with Ares?"

Pony shrugged.

Gabrielle shrugged right back. "Not really much of a choice involved, you know?"

"Huh." The Amazon rubbed her face again. "You okay with him?"

"Ares?"

"Yeah."

"Um.. no, actually, I'm not." Gabrielle gazed down at the rock path, drawing a line in the dust with the tip of her boot. "I hate him." She grimaced briefly. "He's done things to us that make me wish Xe's sword had been just a little higher last night."

"Uh."

"You asked." She turned and walked inside, leaving Pony standing there, trading the warmth for the gloom of the cavern. A few steps inside, she paused feeling Xena's eyes on her as she spotted the warrior kneeling next to Ares.

Two pairs of blue eyes were looking back at her. Gabrielle dismissed one, and focused on the other, as she continued her path around the fire to where her partner was, laying a hand on her shoulder as she came even with her. "I'm going to see what I can dig up for us to eat."

Xena nodded. "Gran's fishing in the back." She replied briefly.

Gabrielle finally let her eyes drift over and meet Ares. They were missing their usual brash arrogance, and she could see pain and an unusual emotion reflected there that slipped past her better judgment to touch at the wellspring of compassion never buried too far inside.

It frustrated her. "I'll go find her." She turned her attention back to her soulmate. "Anything else you need?"

A grin shifted Xena's features from tense to charming. "Got everything I need right here." She replied, looking the bard right in the eye. "But if you find blackberries, I won't turn em down."

From the corner of her eye, Gabrielle saw Ares roll his and that made her smile, too. She patted Xena's shoulder and moved past, heading for the back corridor with its lonely skeleton and its mysteries leaving the warrior to dispel some of the newer ones in her own inimitable way.

Maybe she'd help Gran fish. "Gran?" She called out, as she rounded the corner and looked forward, where the torch was fluttering in the dark.

There was no answer.

"Gran?"

**

One Wild Ride

Part 20

Xena went almost a mile down the corridor, following the faintest of tracks in the rock until the signs washed out as a race of water crossed the path. She stood there in the middle of the narrow space, staring off into the darkness and listening with everything she had for any signs she was closing in on the hooters and Gran.

Nothing but the sound of water flowing came back to her. She thrust her hand behind her, with its torch fluttering and shaded her eyes, focusing on the shadows as if willing something to be there.

The shadows flickered mockingly at her. "Son of a bacchae." Xena cursed at them, hearing the faint echo of her voice travel down the pathway. She shifted her grip on her sword and, reluctantly, started back up the corridor.

All her instincts were driving her forward, and every step she took in reverse was an almost incalculable effort. Only the knowledge that people back there were counting on her for protection allowed the retreat at all, and Xena spent most of the time whacking herself in the back of the head for letting it happen in the first place.

How could she have been that oblivious? The warrior walked along in silence, only the sound of the torch riffling and the occasional plink of water dropping off the roof breaking it.

Xena herself made no sound, though she herself could clearly hear her own teeth grinding. It was difficult to say what had hurt more, Ares laughing at her, or the look in Gabrielle's eyes when she'd come bolting back around the corner, finding Granella gone.

Her only consolation was that Pony had been even more mortified than she had, since the Amazon had been inside the cave without a doubt when the kidnapping had taken place. Xena had been outside, but then...

Well, she'd been outside, lazing around in Gabrielle's lap. It just didn't get any worse than that as far as she was concerned, with the possible exception being the fact that it wasn't Gabrielle who'd been taken.

That...

Xena blanked her mind and walked a few minutes in silence, her eyes picking up the faint suggestion of light as she headed for the cavern. Okay. She flexed her hands. Xena, you need a plan. A real plan, to get everyone the Hades out of here and you need one now.

No more, let's wait to see what happens. The warrior squared her shoulders and woke up the battle strategist inside her that had been peacefully sleeping since the War, understanding that the rules

had changed now and the half joking, half serious talk she'd had with Gabrielle about killing the hooters had now taken on a much darker meaning.

Sure, she'd gone along with Gabrielle's insistence that they protect the big animals. She'd liked them, after a fashion and what the bard has said was true, since they'd shown the hooters fire. So she'd agreed to work out a plan to protect them but she'd never really expected to have to make good on her damn suggestion of killing them all.

Now, with Ares, and the possibility his sword was in their hands, and Gran gone...

Xena paused by the pool Gran had been taken from, and sat down on a rock, pondering the reflections on the water's dark surface. She met her own eyes, grimacing a bit at the haggard, disheveled face looking back at her, seeing the disappointment in herself far more clearly than she ever would from anyone else.

She hated failure, any failure, but especially personal failure and letting one of her friends, one of her family be taken from under her nose was about as profound a failure as she could think of off the top of her head.

She exhaled, acknowledging the smack at her pride, and the embarrassment of it all.

There was a gentle scuff of leather on rock, not far off. Xena reluctantly lifted her eyes from her own reflection and found Gabrielle's dim outline leaning against the rock wall nearby. "I'm not in a good mood."

Gabrielle pushed off from the wall and approached her, seating herself on a boulder almost knee to knee with her partner. "Me either."

Xena set the torch into a crack in the rock and dipped her hand into the water, bringing it to her lips and taking a drink from it. She flicked the remainder off her fingertips and then ran them through her hair, pulling it back off her forehead. "Went as far as I could." She said, briefly. "Stream came through and I lost the trail."

"Okay." Gabrielle responded. "So, what do we do?"

Even though she expected the question, it made her head start pounding. Xena rubbed the back of her neck with her damp fingers as she studied the ground between her boots, thinking about how few their options were, and how badly she'd let everyone down.

The warmth of Gabrielle's hand on her knee was almost shocking. Xena wrinkled her nose and glanced at her partner's face, finding a wry sympathy waiting there for her. "Gabrielle, I don't think I should be making the plans here."

"Xena." The bard squeezed her knee. "Save the guilt routine for someone else, okay? Of course you have to make the plans... you think either me or Pony know what to do?"

"Pony probably does." Xena said. "I just feel like such an idiot."

"Why?"

Xena focused on her face, with sudden intentness. "Why?" She repeated, her tone rising.

Gabrielle merely looked at her.

After a moment, the warrior's eyes dropped, and she sighed. "We'll have to go after them." She said. "I'd rather go on the outside, but I'm not sure where that passage ends, and I'm afraid we'll miss em."

The bard nodded. "So.. what do we do with Ares?"

Xena was silent for a few breaths. "What do you want to do with Ares?" She countered. "Leave him here?"

Gabrielle hiked one knee up and rested her elbow on it. "We should." She said. "He's left us in enough bad places before."

Xena pondered that without answering.

"Except of course I can't do that."

The warrior chuckled faintly under her breath. "Neither could I." She admitted. "Especially since it was me that gutted him."

"That's why I can't do that." Gabrielle said. "because of how you'd feel, not because of how I'd feel. He honestly just makes me so angry I can't even think straight."

Xena sighed again, and stood up, reaching over to get her torch. "C'mon." She waited for Gabrielle to get up and walk in front of her. "Let's go play hero." She put her hand on the bard's back, feeling the bone and muscle shift as she started to move.

She left her hand there, and Gabrielle leaned back into the touch, as they both walked along the rock passage towards the light of the cavern. As she walked, she mulled over Gabrielle's words, sensing a strain in them she hadn't heard for a long while.

Her partner was no longer the bright optimist she'd been when they'd met. Xena accepted that, and even accepted the fact that it was partly her own maturing that accounted for some of it, and not all the terrible things they'd been through together.

But even through all that, Gabrielle had managed to keep some core of herself generally positive, seldom falling into the moral depressions that often plagued her soulmate though she was more prone to bouts of self doubt.

Negativity wasn't in her nature, and so – hearing tinges of that in her speech bothered Xena and made her more than a little anxious. "Gab?"

"Yeah?" Gabrielle paused as they were about to enter the cavern, her eyes straying to the skeleton, then back to Xena's face.

What to say? "I'm sorry."

Gabrielle tilted her head a little, a puzzled expression on her face. "For what?" She moved instinctively closer, reaching out to touch Xena's stomach with both hands.

"For not knowing everything." Xena leaned forward and gently kissed her partner on the lips. "Even if I am Xena and I'm supposed to."

Gabrielle's expression shifted into a smile, her eyes lighting from within at the, apparently, well chosen words. "That's okay." She whispered. "I'll kiss your behind anyway later." She bumped Xena lightly with her head, and then turned and continued around the corner, her hand wrapped firmly around her partner's.

Her reputation certainly didn't need everyone seeing her holding hands with her soulmate, but Xena merely shifted her sword to her other shoulder and followed Gabrielle into the light, finding a tense Pony and a once again unconscious god of war waiting for them.

"Well?" Pony asked, as she spotted them. "Tell ya what, Xena. I didn't appreciate being stuck here." She crossed over to them. "That guy gives me the creeps!"

Xena took a breath to start yelling, then released it as her fingers were squeezed firmly before being let go. She brushed past Pony instead, and went over to where Ares was lying, kneeling down next to him and checking the wound she'd sewn shut.

"Pony." Gabrielle caught the weapons master by the arm. "Please don't yell at Xena."

Pony glowered at her.

"That's my job." The bard continued. "Because I love her, and I can do it without getting my butt kicked." She paused. "Get my point?"

"Yeah sure." Pony told her. "Now can we get going after Gran? We're just wasting time here!"

"Pony." The bard's voice dropped in both timbre and volume.

"Well, damn it! We are!" The frustration was very evident in Eponin's voice. "Shoulda gone with her the last time! Now we've got candlemarks old trail to follow, and they coulda already done the gods know what with her!"

"Hey, listen.."

"I'm done listening!" Pony tried to shove past Gabrielle, but the bard grabbed her and hauled her back. "Let me the Hades go, damn it!"

"Pony!" Gabrielle tightened her hold, aware in her peripheral vision of Xena's profound stillness, feeling the prickle of dark energy flow through their link as the warrior's temper rose. "Don't be a jerk! You can't just go charging down there alone!"

"She did!" Pony yelled back. "I'd a kept going! Not come skulking back here like a.." She paused, as Gabrielle's expression altered, and her eyes narrowed. "Oh give me a break! You're not gonna pull that Queen when it's convenient for you act out are you!"

For a moment, Gabrielle almost did what her inner temper was urging her to do. Then she released Pony and stepped back. "Go ahead." She told her briefly. "Do whatever you want. Go get your self killed." Then she turned and went to Xena's side, kneeling down beside her on legs that threatened to collapse otherwise.

Pony stood in shocked stillness for a moment, then she started forward, only to stop again when Xena rose and turned in one graceful motion, putting herself between Gabrielle and the oncoming Amazon.

"One more step, one more word to her, and I'll break you in half." Xena said, after a heartbeat of quiet.

Pony opened her mouth to answer, then paused, seeing something in the cold, blue eyes facing her that made her take a step back instead. She lifted both hands up, palms out. "Gran's in the hands of those bastards! You forgetting that?"

"No." Xena replied. "But all of us running headlong into the trap they've set at the end of that road isn't going to do a damn thing for her, now is it?" She continued in a low, flat tone. "So since we've got time to waste here, apparently, and you just challenged Gabrielle's authority, you wanna get that cleared up?"

She took a step towards Pony, hands flexing.

Pony took another step backwards. "Lay off, Xena." She warned. "This aint' about you, or her. It's about Gran."

"That's right." The warrior continued to advance. "It's about Granella, who needs help, not half assed mindless action."

"So why are we sitting here?" Pony shot right back. "Let's go help her!" She pointed behind Xena. "Or is that god of yours more important than she is to you?"

"Xe?" Gabrielle's voice cut through the tension. "C'mere."

Without a word, the warrior turned and went back to where Gabrielle was kneeling, crouching down next to her as she saw Ares start to stir. She gave her soulmate a look, to find it returned by one equally somber, and fully as troubled. "Damn."

Gabrielle patted her knee. "Tag, I'm it." She whispered, getting up and facing Pony. "Welcome to the world of the greater good." She told the Amazon. "Let me go over the ground rules with you."

"What?"

**

"Keep still." Xena knocked Ares hands aside as she worked on changing the blood soaked bandage around his ribs.

"Ow!" The god growled at her. "Happy now? Know you've been wanting to do that for a long time."

The warrior glanced at him. "Shut up." She advised. "If I'd really wanted to stick you, Ares, you'd be dead, not pissing me off."

"Nice!" Ares rasped. "Bitch."

Xena ignored him, and continued her work, cleaning the long, deep gash. "How'd it happen?" She asked.

"This?" Ares sounded incredulous. "You've lost it, babe. You gutted me like a fish. Forget already?"

"How." The warrior enunciated clearly. "Did you turn mortal this time." She replaced the bandages. "They finally get tired of you up on Olympus? Do one stupid thing too many and piss daddy off? What?"

Ares didn't answer. He turned his head and casually looked around the cavern. "Where's your girlfriends.. ow!"

"Sorry." Xena finished tying the bandages in place. "They're getting ready to move out."

The god looked around again. "So.. they're out.. doing..?"

"What I told them to do."

Ares attention fastened on her at that. "Those hairy bastards have my sword, Xena." He lowered his voice. "That's not good."

The warrior nodded. "I figured they did." She replied. "That why you're mortal?"

Ares looked around again. "As if." He snorted. "You know why I'm mortal, Xena? Let me tell you why I'm mortal, cause you're gonna love this one."

Xena rolled her eyes.

"It's all for you, baby." The god managed a wan smirk. "There I was, hanging out in my pad upstairs, watching you babes get your asses kicked by those monkeys, laughing my butt off."

"Nice."

"Yeah, yeah.. well, so then Dite comes in, pets the dog, pets the dog's other head, sits down, wants me to be 'nice'" Ares grimaced, one hand going to his chest. "Damn you, Xena!" He glared up at the warrior. "Enjoying this?"

Cool, unemotional blue eyes met his. "All the times I hurt because of you.. yeah. I am."

Ares gazed warily at her. "Thought we had all that.. " He made a face. "whiny stuff worked out between us, Xena. Don't backtrack on me now."

Xena looked away, then back at him. "So what happened?" She changed the subject.

The god of war winced, then relaxed a little, as an apparent spasm of pain faded. "My loving sister convinced me that maybe if I was.. "nice"" His lip curled. "For a change, maybe I could get somewhere with you."

"Tell your sister to stop sniffing the ambrosia."

"Yeah, well, I shoulda." Ares released a disgusted sigh. "But you know, she's been right.. like once before so I decided to pop down here, and being my usual magnanimous self, get you all out with a snap."

Xena stared at him. "I don't believe a word of that."

Ares rolled his eyes. "Whatever." He tried to move, then reconsidered and stayed still. "Next thing I knew, I was in some cave, no snap, and it was monkeyville all over."

The warrior's brow creased. "You mean to tell me just being here made you mortal?"

The god shrugged. "I'm here. I'm mortal. It sucks. Next topic?"

Xena got up, walking over to her carrybag and turning her back to give herself some time to think. She slowly pulled out the catskin, looking at it thoughtfully, before she turned and tossed it at him. "Better figure out how you wanna wear that."

Ares regarded the skin distastefully. "What is that?" He sniffed at it. "Ugh! No thanks." He settled back down. "I'm sure you girls won't mind if I stay au natural?" A smirk appeared on his face. "You should be ready for some different scenery anyway."

Xena leaned against the rock ledge and eyed him. "Suit yourself." She shrugged. "But if you're gonna let it all hang out and Gabrielle gets in the mood for some target practice, don't come whining to me." She dusted her hands off. "We're leaving in a quarter candlemark."

Ares folded his hands gingerly over his stomach. "Ah ah ah.. I'm not going anywhere." He shook his head. "Not until you fix this hole, babycakes. So get over here and take care of me."

Xena put her hands on her hips. "Quarter candlemark." She repeated. "We're leaving. You want to stay here by yourself, have at it." She turned and headed for the opening to the cavern, wanting suddenly to be in Gabrielle's presence and out from under that mocking gaze.

"You wouldn't do that to me, Xena."

Xena looked over her shoulders, and managed a vicious smile. "Try me." She disappeared into the sunlight, leaving Ares behind.

He watched the open space briefly, then he looked around and then lifted his hand to examine the catskin again. Gingerly, he sniffed it. "Ugh."

**

Gabrielle searched through the trees moving sideways up the jagged cliff, her eyes looking for something the pine trees just weren't giving her. Pony was climbing doggedly behind her, but neither of them had spoken for a good half candlemark.

Nothing really much else to say, was there? Gabrielle finally spotted what she was looking for and ducked under some low hanging branches to come up against a different kind of tree, one with long, slender upright limbs. "Ah."

Pony came up next to her. "What's that for?"

"Well." Gabrielle removed Xena's stone ax from her belt and studied the branches, selecting a spot on one and starting to hack at it. "Xena's going to make Ares come with us."

"Why?"

The bard looked at her.

"I don't get that whole greater good thing." Pony shrugged. "It's all just bs to me."

Gabrielle went back to her hacking. "Then why don't you just go collect rocks or something and let me do what I need to do." She carefully cut around in a circle, the scent of the fresh, green wood making her nose wrinkle.

"Cause I'm hoping somethin'll start making sense sometime."

Gabrielle finished cutting the branch. She tucked the stone ax back into her belt and wrapped her hands around the limb, twisting it quickly with a powerful jerk. The limb came free from the tree and she backed away from it, taking the limb over to the nearest rock and laying the top end of it down.

"So why's he coming with us?" Pony asked again. "I'd just leave him here."

The bard removed the ax again and started trimming the top of the branch. "Because he needs to get out of here." She said, with a small sigh. "I wouldn't leave my worst enemy in this place, and believe it or not, he's not it."

Pony snorted, and shook her head.

Gabrielle continued her task, feeling the sun warm her back. "Look at it this way, Pony. If we get Ares out of here, he'll owe us a favor." She finished trimming the branch. "You never want to turn one of those down. Believe me, they do come in handy sometimes."

"I don't care about him." The Amazon stated succinctly. "I care about Gran, and I just get the feeling you don't."

"Pony." Gabrielle took a careful breath, feeling her own temper rise, flushing her skin with warmth. "We've been through that."

"Well, y'know.."

The bard picked up the newly shorn branch and simply walked off, leaving Eponin there talking to herself. She figured it probably was better for her to do that, than do what her instincts were urging her to do, a prickly tendency to violence that surprised and somewhat upset her.

That constant feeling of irritation, it reminded her of something. Gabrielle's ears picked up Pony following her, but she set that aside for a moment and concentrated on the sensation instead.

Was it like when they'd fought, the last time? Her brow creased. No, she remembered that mostly as being a time of a long descent into an utter darkness of her soul, a time of tears, not of cursing. No, it was a fainter memory, something far back, something...

Ah. "Duh." Gabrielle stopped in the middle of the path and smacked herself in the head with one hand. "Of course.. now it makes sense."

"What?" Pony had come up behind her. "What was that for?"

The bard turned to gaze at her. "Better me than you?" She commented pointedly. "Listen, we need to find any food we can carry. None of us knows how long that tunnel is, or what we'll find when we get to the other end."

"And?"

Despite her private revelation, Gabrielle couldn't prevent her body from reacting as she came up over her center of gravity and the newly cut stick found its way into both her hands, her fingers sliding down the rough bark. "And you're going to make me prove a point of Xena's I particularly hate, aren't you?"

"I don't want you to prove nothing!" Pony shot back. "I'm just real tired of having to take orders from people who are half nuts and don't know what the Hades is going on!"

"Pony, what the Hades do you want from me?" Gabrielle's voice lifted in anger. "I'm not the one who took her, and I'm not the one who was in the cave sleeping when it happened!"

Pony advanced on her, anger now visible in her face. "Now you listen, I'm not gonna take that, I'm not the one to blame for this, you hear? It's not my fault! You take that..."

She caught motion from the corner of her eye and tried to swing around to meet it, but Xena's hand caught her on the neck before she could move. "Hey!" The word was cut off as the warrior's fingers jabbed, and Pony dropped to the ground, her body twitching.

"Xena!" Gabrielle inhaled in shock.

The warrior stepped neatly around the Amazons paralyzed body and crouched next to her. She rested her hands on her knees and regarded Pony's jerking head. "I've cut off the flow of blood to your brain." She said, after a brief silence. "You have thirty seconds to live."

"Xena." Gabrielle dropped the branch and took hold of her partner's shoulders.

Pony's eyes widened in shock and real fear.

"Now, I'm not gonna let you die, mostly because it would piss off Gabrielle and because I like Ephiny." The warrior continued. "But so help me, Eponin, if you don't get your head out of your ass and cut the crap out, I'll cut your tongue out of your head. You understand me?"

"Grk."

Xena hand moved casually down and released the block.

Eponin drew in a ragged, huge breath and half rolled onto her side. "You..."

"Save it." The warrior cut her off. "Whatever it is, I've been called it before and I'm not impressed."

"Xe." Gabrielle leaned against the warrior's back. "Listen.. I think I figured out what's going on."

Xena straightened in reflex. "Have you?"

The bard leaned closer and lowered her voice. "It's the sword... it's Ares... I mean, it's him not having his sword. Remember?"

Xena peered over her shoulder at her partner. After a moment, she issued a half laugh, and nodded a tiny bit. "Damn, shoulda realized."

"What the Hades.." Pony rasped. "Have you gone nuts?"

Gabrielle knelt down next to her, and reached out, putting a hand on her shoulder. "It's... when theres no God of War.. it affects people. Makes them angry."

"Violent." Xena agreed. Then she paused, and cocked her head to one side. "More violent than usual in some cases."

Pony stared at them.

"I'd forgotten.. what it was like last time." Gabrielle continued, in a gentler voice. "So much has happened to me since then, it took a while to dredge it up."

Xena's eyes shifted and she looked off into the distance, then she looked back at Pony. "You got off lucky." She told her. "Last time Gabrielle beat up an entire tavern."

"I did not."

"Yes you did." Xena contradicted her.

Gabrielle made a face. "I'm not entirely sure that wasn't because I was just so pissed off you were in Callisto's body."

Pony's jaw dropped. "What?"

"Let's save it till later." Xena said. "We've got to get out of here. I've got some nuts I found.. grab everything we can and fill all the waterskins and we'll get moving." She stood up and dusted her hands off, then, after a long pause, she extended one down to Pony.

Pony stared at her. After a few empty seconds, Xena let her hand drop and walked away, shaking her head.

"C'mon." Gabrielle offered her own hand instead. "Fighting with each other gets us nowhere. We've got too much to do."

Slowly, Pony reached up and took her hand, and let the bard pull her up to her feet. She gazed warily at the bard. "My freaking head hurts."

"I know, mine too." Gabrielle picked up the limb and gestured to the path. "But that's why we have to get Ares out of here. It's more than just us, Pony. We'll go after Gran, but this thing's gotten bigger than we are."

Pony walked alongside her. "So.. that's the whole greater good thing?" She asked. "Because everyone else gets all freaked out?"

"Something like that, yes."

They walked up towards the cavern, following Xena's solitary form.

"You really beat up a whole tavern?"

Gabrielle rubbed her temple. "Well, I tried."

Pony walked a few more steps. "Xena was in Callisto's body?"

The bard merely nodded.

"Never heard that story before."

Gabrielle glanced at her. "I guess there're some things I don't like to remember, much."

"Mm." Pony nodded. "Musta sucked."

"It did." The bard answered softly. Then she straightened her shoulders. "But you know.. believe it or not, Ares made it right at the end of that." She said. "Because Xe did him a favor."

"Ooohh." Pony finally nodded, this time more positively. "Okay.. now.. I'm sorta getting a clue here."

A clue. Gabrielle allowed herself a moment to remember that walk on the beach, that shift from disappointment and half hidden grief to joy, and a sense of possibilities reborn there in a hug betraying both of them unexpectedly.

You never could tell about people, could you? Gabrielle turned and faced Pony. "I know you think we're putting Ares over Gran," She said. "But we're not, Pony. You just have to trust Xena, and trust we know what we're doing in all this. We do care."

Pony's eyes dropped, then after a moment, lifted to meet hers again. "Yeah, I know." She muttered. "I just keep thinking about her saying that stuff about not wanting to die here." With a sigh, she eased past Gabrielle and continued walking after Xena, leaving the bard to bring up the rear.

"Yeah." Gabrielle murmured to herself. "I remember that, too." She followed the two others towards the cavern, her brow creased in thought.

Overhead, the clouds started to move in, a rumble in the far distance promising bad weather that, at the very least, they'd be out of.

She hoped.

**

The thing about torchlight, Gabrielle had discovered, was that it didn't really provide enough true light to see by without straining your eyes.

It was giving her a headache. She rubbed the back of her hand over her face and blinked, as a waft of smoke made her eyes water.

"Waste of time if you ask me!" Ares muttered, his hands gripped around the limb Gabrielle had cut earlier. "You don't think monkey boys left anything useful of her, do ya.. hey! Ow!"

"Oh. Sorry." Gabrielle tucked her staff back along her other side. "Guess it's dark in here."

"You did that on purpose!" The god of war accused.

"No she didn't" Xena's voice floated back to them. "I'd be setting bones if she did."

Gabrielle smothered a grim smile, and kept her eyes on the dimly seen ground, putting her boots down with care on the uneven surface. There was a good deal of racing water underfoot, and the rocks were slippery as they sloped downwards.

So easy to slide down into the darkness, wasn't it? "We'll find her, Ares." Gabrielle told him. "They won't kill her."

Ares laughed, the deep sound echoing softly off the rocks. Then he fell silent as the path grew more uneven, his labored breathing audible.

He had lost a lot of blood, Gabrielle knew. Xena's sword thrust had been typically well placed, and only Ares' height had saved him from death at the warrior's hands, that and the close quarters that had prevented Xena from sweeping around fully.

The fact that he had gotten up and was walking was unbelievable. The bard had wondered if he was just going to let them go on with out them, but with a mocking, insolent expression he'd donned Xena's discarded catskin and gone with them, only accepting Gabrielle's present of a walking stick grudgingly.

In public, anyway. Gabrielle could see he'd have been flat on his face without it by now. But she hadn't gotten a thank you for it either.

Pony was up with Xena, finding the best route for them. She wasn't sure exactly what to make of that, whether they didn't think anything would come up behind them, or that they felt she and the injured god of war could handle whatever did.

Gabrielle glanced at the struggling man next to her. Well, that she could handle it, since she doubted Ares would be much help.

"Gabrielle?"

The bard looked up, to see Xena's figure dimly outlined ahead of them. "Here."

"Careful." Xena pointed down. "Crack here, under the water."

"Gotcha." Gabrielle eased closer to Ares and put a hand on his elbow. "Watch out there."

"Get your mitts off me, you punk." Ares growled at her.

Gabrielle didn't let go. "Y'know, Ares... you gotta remember the effect your not having your sword has on people. It makes them really crabby." She guided them both over the gouge in the rocks. "Crabby people get dangerous."

"Oh, I'm scared." Ares rolled his eyes. "Listen, sweetpea, even mortal I can squash you flat as a drunk sailor."

The bard gently cleared her throat. "I wasn't referring to me." She took a firmer hold on him as the ground sloped more steeply, and she felt the strain in her thighs. "Though, I'm really not a total creampuff anymore."

Ares accepted her help as they inched down the rocky slope, heading for a more level area where Xena and Pony were waiting for them. "Yeah." He commented suddenly. "You've given me a thrill or three the last couple'la years."

Gabrielle looked over at him, unsure of exactly what he meant, then as he met her eyes and smirked, she decided she really didn't want to know.

They joined the other two, and came to a halt. "Now what?" Gabrielle asked, as she watched the shadows chasing over her partner's face. "Is this as far as you went before, Xe?"

The warrior nodded. "Problem." She lifted her torch and took a step forward, exposing the passageway beyond. The sound of water had gotten much louder, and as they looked past Xena's tall form, they could see why.

The passage was cover in it, a fast, racing stream that emerged from a crack in the mountain and surged rapidly downhill. "Gotten deeper." Xena commented, sparing Ares a brief look as he hobbled up next to her. "Not going to be a picnic."

Ares cocked his dark head, seeming a trifle puzzled. "When did this happen?" He asked. "Lemme tell ya, beautiful, I didn't swim up for the priviledge of getting gored by you." He clutched his walking stick and peered past the warrior.

"You sure?" Xena asked him.

Ares merely looked at her.

"Just asking." The warrior shrugged. "Gabrielle, let me use your staff a minute." She took the weapon from the bard, handed her the torch in return and walked forward into the stream, cautiously probing ahead of her with its tip. As she got up to her knees in the water, the staff dipped in front of her, and disappeared to half its length.

Xena stopped, and prodded further, then took another few steps, pausing when the water was up to her hips. "Think that's about as high as it's gonna go."

Gabrielle could see the force of the water pushing against her partner, the flow so powerful it was making Xena sway as she stood in it. Knowing how strong Xena was, Gabrielle had serious doubts she'd make out as well.

"Damn." Pony exhaled. "Every damn thing's working against us." She looked up at the dark ceiling. "Probably that rain we heard coming on."

Gabrielle recalled the thunder, and nodded. "Probably." She inched forwards, grimacing at the icy chill of the water as it soaked through the bottoms of her boots. Even when it was up to her ankles, she could feel the strength of it. "Hey, Xe?"

Leaning on the staff, the warrior paused before she turned her head, squinting a little into the torchlight. "Careful." She released one hand off the staff and extended it towards Gabrielle. "There's a d.. yeah."

Gabrielle winced as her boot slipped off the rock and plunged into a hole, jarring her entire body. "Ah." She looked around. "Pony, can you grab this, please?"

Pony stolidly waded in, and took the torch in her free hand, having a matching one in her other. She surveyed the path, giving Xena an sideways look. "That why you stopped, huh?"

Xena ignored the question, pushing back against the current as she went to Gabrielle's side, handing her the staff as she got around behind her and circled her waist with both arms. "Don't worry, I gotcha."

"Xena." The bard cleared her throat delicately. "It's not that dangerous." She muttered.

"So, you want me to let you go?" The warrior murmured back, into her ear.

"Didn't say that."

"Okay." Xena hauled her partner out of the crack in the rock, and backed them both out of the water. "We can make it through that, but we'll have to stick together."

"You can stick to me anytime you like, babe." Ares had found a ledge, and was leaning on it, his hands clasped around the walking stick. "But I'm not going into the splash. I don't do wrinkled tootsies."

A small, awkward silence fell, as everyone looked at Xena. The warrior shrugged. "Good. That improves our chances." She tightened the straps holding her carriesack onto her back. "Gabrielle, you go first. Pony and I'll lock arms and go behind you."

"Right." The bard stood up from where she'd been tightening the laces on her boot and took a firm grip on her staff. "Bye, Ares. Good luck." She squared her shoulders and got ready to re-enter the water, feeling the comforting grip of Xena's fingers on her shoulder.

"Leave him one torch." Xena directed Pony. "You hold the other one."

Pony hesitated, then she turned and trudged over to Ares, holding out one hand with a torch in it. "Here."

Ares merely looked at her, one eyebrow lifting.

Pony stared back at him. Then she turned her head and looked at Xena in question.

"Put it between his legs." The warrior instructed her.

Pony turned back around. "You sure?"

"Sure." Xena said. "There's nothing there that can get damaged."

"Oo." Gabrielle mouthed silently, glad her back was turned. She could well imagine the expression on Ares' face, and took some mild pleasure from the image.

"You're cruising, Xena." Ares warned. "I know you're not going to leave me here."

Pony found a crack to one side and stuck the torch in it, then she turned and made her way back to where Xena and Gabrielle were waiting. She joined Xena and shifted the remaining torch to her right hand, putting her left on Gabrielle's other shoulder. "Ready."

"Let's go." Xena gave the bard a gentle nudge.

"Xena." Ares called out.

The warrior paused, as they entered the water. "We're going, Ares." She stated. "I've got a friend to help. You can come with us, or you can stay here. I don't really give a damn either way."

They moved off into the rush of the water, a sturdy tripod lit by the fluttering torch. Xena took hold of Pony's shoulder with her free hand as they walked into deeper waters, her nostrils flaring as the chill soaked through her leathers.

"That's a lie, Xena!"

Pony leaned forward. "Psst." She hissed at Gabrielle.

"What?" The bard hissed back.

"I thought.. what about all that greater good stuff?"

"Shh." Gabrielle shushed her. "Remember what I said about trusting Xena?"

"Xena!!" The god of war bellowed. "Get back here!!!"

"Good luck, Ares." Xena yelled back. "Watch out for the spiders!"

They walked into the roaring water, its noise effectively drowning out any further sound from behind them. The underground stream was surging against the rock walls, forming whitecaps as it swirled around half hidden rocks and breaks in the stone passageway.

All they could see further down was more water, and more darkness. Xena took a breath, and released it. Was this really a good idea?

Or.. was Ares right?

"Getting really strong here, Xe." Gabrielle warned.

Xena took a firmer hold on the bard's shoulder and pushed the doubts aside for now. If she wanted to follow where Granella had been taken, then they had to risk it.

Didn't she?

Only her sense of the space around her warned her before a powerful hand gripped her on the shoulder, and stick batted her on the butt. "Ares."

"Who'd you think, Zeus?" The god of war retorted. "You're gonna pay for that, Xena. Believe me." He tightened his grip. "I won't forget."

And he probably wouldn't. Xena sighed inwardly. She would likely pay for it, somehow, somewhere, and Gabrielle along with her. But hadn't they had to pay for Ares' caprices many times before, without provocation?

At least she'd gotten a laugh out of it.

The water's roar got louder, and Xena felt a rock being pulled along by the force of it slam her in the back of the knees. "Watch out for.. "

"Ow!"

Xena's reflexes were just barely enough to catch the torch as Pony nearly went headfirst into the stream, saved by Gabrielle's quick grip on her.

"Oh yeah, I feel safe." Ares snorted. "Shoulda brought the Furies with me.. they'd have been more useful than you three."

"Shoulda aimed higher." Xena shot back. "It would have saved us a lot of trouble, and we wouldn't have to be listening to a useless windbag."

Ares stared at her. "Like I said, Xena. I'll remember this."

Xena stared right back at him. "Good."

Gabrielle cleared her throat. "Can we get going, hon? My knees are freezing."

The warrior put her hand back on Gabrielle's shoulder, and gave Pony the torch. "Lead on." She faced the darkness again as they started to move down the channel. "It's gotta get better from here, right?"

No one answered.

**

It hadn't gotten better. Gabrielle had left discomfort in the dust and was now working on true misery, the icy cold water chilling her so badly she could no longer really feel her legs.

Not for the first time in her life with Xena, she wondered exactly how smart it was for her to travel around wearing little more than what most of her village friends thought of as underwraps. Of course, in this case she hadn't had much choice, but she was starting to rethink the idea of wearing something sturdier when she was out in the world with her partner.

Right now, she was wishing for her thick double knitted tunic and her lined cloak. Anything to stop the shivering that had taken over her body, and was giving her painful cramps and a whopper of a headache from her jaws clenching.

With a sigh, she continued on, stolidly poking her staff into the water and leading them on, conscious of Xena's and Pony's hands clasped firmly on her shoulders. Ahead of them, and behind them, was just a big dark mystery.

It was just darkness, and water, and the flicker of the torches. Xena was now on the third one, and they'd all stopped talking to concentrate on saving their strength for moving forward.

Gabrielle felt her staff hit something underwater, and she paused, probing cautiously. "Hang on."

"What is it?" Ares voice was a mixture of exasperation and exhaustion. "We don't have time to fish, blondie...ow!"

"Shut up." Xena's tone was definitely several steps into pissed off. "You got something there, Gab?"

A headache. A backache. Frozen feet. Gabrielle felt several deep shivers run through her, and she clamped her jaw shut so the sound of her teeth chattering wouldn't alert her partner. "Something in the way.. think it's just a rock."

Pony fought her way through the water to the bard's side, crouching down to put her hand, and then her arm into the rushing stream. "Yeah." She edged forward, then climbed up onto the rock, now only up to her ankles in water, but in a far more powerful surge as it coursed over the high point. "Yeah?"

"Let's just get past it." Xena said. "Damn things' got to end sometime."

Ares snorted. "For all you know, it's the Styx and it ends up in Hades' basement" He jibed her.

Pony stepped off the other side, and promptly almost disappeared into the flow. Xena realized what was happening and dove over the rock to grab her by the back of her leathers with one outstretched hand as she landed hard on her belly.

Gabrielle scrambled around the rock, forgetting about her chilled legs as she fought against the current and thrust her staff under Pony's flailing arms, giving her something to hang onto as Xena hauled her backwards.

"Crap!" Pony spluttered. "I freaking hate water!" She reeled backwards and fell onto the rock next to Xena, who still had a grip on her. "Son of a bacchae!"

Ares laughed. Gabrielle whipped her staff around and dug it deep into the water, jerking it up and swamping the god of war with an icy wave. "It's not funny, you stupid bastard!"

"Hey!" Ares rounded on her, only to pull up short as Xena rolled over and got up into his path, the warrior's eyes already sparking dangerously as she reached for her sword. "Oh.. whoa whoa whoa...hold on there, lassie. Put the pigsticker back in the barn."

"Stay away from her." Xena warned. "I'm not in the mood, Ares."

"Bitchy bitchy." Ares leaned on his walking stick, the water just reaching his kneecaps. "Are you ever in the mood, Xena?"

Xena turned her back on him and put her hand on Gabrielle's shoulder. "You okay?"

For a moment, Gabrielle seriously considered lying. Then she saw Xena's expression change and knew it was a lost cause. "I could use a break." She admitted, closing her hands around her staff to stop them from shaking.

"Aww... poor baby." Ares taunted her from behind Xena. "Xena, why do you put up with her, again?"

"Why?" Xena moved closer and put her arms around her partner, immediately feeling the chill of her skin and the shivers running through her body. "Because I love her." She went on, looking down into the bard's eyes as all the irritation in her simply drained away.

"Oh give me a break." Ares went over to the rock and sat down on it, ignoring the layer of water racing over the top as he turned his back on the direction they were traveling. "Remind me again why I bother with you?"

He glanced at Pony, who eased away from him, seating herself on the other side of the impromptu shelf they'd found. The god of war snorted softly. "Artemis really has you bunch whipped, doesn't she?"

The Amazon was now dripping wet, and she stolidly began wringing the water out of her dark hair. She returned the glance. "Huh?"

"Never mind." Ares folded one arm over his injury and grimaced. The bandage covering it was soaked through with blood and he drew his hand away, studying the reddish stain with a puzzled expression.

"C'mon." Xena clambered up onto the rock as well, gently pulling Gabrielle up with her and then enfolding her with her arms again, rubbing her back as the bard leaned gratefully against her. They were all due for a break anyway, she knew – since Pony's lips were blue and Ares looked like he was about to fall over.

The close darkness was getting to her, too. Xena closed her eyes and let her cheek rest against Gabrielle's head, hoping the bard's shivering would abate.

She could feel the warmth of Gabrielle's breathing against the curve of her breast, and after a few minutes of sullen silence around her, the bard's tense muscles relaxed, and she felt lips nuzzling the skin she was leaning against. "Better?"

Gabrielle found herself able to breathe now, without feeling like she was going to bite her lips from shivering. Xena's body, though wet, was warm as always and it felt good to be up out of the water for a few minutes.

"How much longer?" Pony asked, suddenly. "Fore we're out of this damn place?"

Xena stared over Gabrielle's shoulder into the darkness, narrowing her eyes and hoping for even a hint of light in the distance. All she could see was pitch black, broken only by the faint light of the torch on the frothing white water past the rock.

Didn't look good.

"It has to end sometime." Gabrielle commented, projecting her voice around her impromptu hot water bottle. "We've come quite a ways, haven't we Xena?"

Since she had no idea how long the tunnel was, Xena merely grunted. Then she half turned her head toward Ares. "You've been here. How long is it?"

Ares didn't answer.

"C'mon, Ares. It's your fault we're all pissed off so wh..." Xena turned fully, one hand dropping to steady the god as he wavered, then slumped against her leg. "Damn it."

Gabrielle released Xena and ducked around her, grabbing Ares shoulders and easing him down as Xena dropped to one knee next to him. His eyes were closed, and as she laid him down in the sheeting water, his hands fell away from his chest covered in blood. "Oh my gosh, Xena."

Xena got down off the rock, plunging back into water that had risen in the meantime, and was now up to her mid thigh. She unstrapped and handed her pack to Gabrielle, leaning against the stone as the water pressure built up behind her. "Stitches broke open."

"He's lost a lot of blood." Gabrielle cupped a few handfuls of the coursing water, and washed it over Ares chest, the dark liquid swirling away red stained. "Can you restitch that.. gods, Xena.. the skin's ripped clean away."

Pony half turned and hitched her leg up, leaning on it as she peered past Gabrielle's elbow. "Know what?"

"Hm?" Gabrielle glanced at her.

"He's an ass." Pony said, bluntly. "We should leave him here."

Xena removed her bone needles and a thin string of gut. "We can't."

Pony rolled her eyes.

"We really can't." Gabrielle told her. "Like him or not, he does serve a purpose, for all of us." She turned back to her washing task, catching Xena regarding her from the corner of her eye. "I used to think the same way.. hey, get rid of war, who needs it, right?"

"I didn't say that." Pony said. "Sometimes ya gotta."

"Exactly." Xena carefully threaded the needle, then she bent over Ares chest. His breathing seemed labored, and she wondered if the wound wasn't getting infected. "If he's not around, there's no focus for all that 'ya gotta'"

"Here." Gabrielle got up and retrieved the torch from the crag she'd thrust it in. She brought it closer to where Xena was working, lifting it up to shed light on Ares chest. "That looks bad, Xe."

"It is." The warrior replied. "It's bad enough to kill him if it gets nasty. I don't have herbs with me." She studied the wound. "Can't believe he lasted that long with this open like that."

Gabrielle tilted her head and looked down at the unconscious god of war, the pallor of his face evident even in the low light. "Yeah, well." She murmured. "Didn't want to look like a weenie in front of us, I guess."

Xena snorted softly, and shook her head.

"So.. now what are we gonna do with him?" Pony asked. "I ain't carrying him."

Xena patiently sewed the wound back up, after she poured water all in it to clean it out. The edges were swollen, and sure enough her fingertips detected the unhealthy heat of infection around both sides. Part of her knew Pony was right, of course. Ares was a big man, and she doubted all three of them could reasonably carry him and the rest of their gear, and expect to navigate the water.

So, now what?

"Let Xena worry about that, Pony." Gabrielle said. "I'm sure she's got something in mind."

Great. Just great. "First things first." The warrior said. "When I finish this we'll discuss what happens next." Damn it, damn it.

Gabrielle's hand fell on her thigh, giving it a gentle pat. Oh well. Xena sighed silently. She had about fifty stitches to come up with a plan and not look like an idiot.

Plenty of time, wasn't it?

"Water's getting higher, Xena."

Damn it.

**

Xena washed her hands off, carefully cleaning the dried bloodstains from her fingers and watching the water carry the residue away from her. She gotten Ares wound closed again, but he hadn't regained consciousness, and now he'd started to show signs of fever.

Not good. She glanced around her, where the water had risen again to cover the rock by over three hand spans, just barely allowing Ares to lay without being washed off.

She was at a loss, truly. She was almost at that place in her head where she was ready to abandon Ares, despite everything, and get the rest of them out of the corridor and on to finding Gran.

Almost at that place.

"Xe?" Gabrielle waded over to her, arms full of something bulky. "I've got an idea."

Xena shook the water off her hands and turned to face her partner. "Let's hear it." She said, willing to listen to anything at the moment, but not really hoping for much since though she loved Gabrielle dearly, she did tend to come up with some hairbrained schemes sometimes.

"Look." The bard shifted part of her burden to one arm. "How about we take these two sticks, see?"

"Uh huh." Xena crossed her arms over her chest. "Two sticks."

"We put the hide in between them, sort of like a hammock?"

"Hammock?"

"Like this." Gabrielle juggled the two sticks and the hide, producing nothing immediately recognizable. "You know what I mean.. c'mon, Xena!"

Xena's brows creased. "Um.. okay."

Gabrielle gave her a slightly exasperated look. "Are you humoring me?"

The warrior waved both hands, then gave her some assistance in wrangling the hind. "No no.. not at all. G'wan."

The bard managed to wrap a bit of the hide around the two sticks. "Then we put Ares in it, and float him behind us. Sort of like a raft, see and .."

"Oh!"

Gabrielle glanced at her partner. "What?" She answered. "No?"

Xena walked forward, brushed the sticks and the hide out of the way, and kissed her partner soundly on the lips. "Love you." She bumped foreheads with the bard and took the sticks from her. "Pony, give us a hand here."

The bard closed her mouth, her teeth hitting with a tiny click. "Bu.."

"Awesome." Xena turned around and kissed her again. "You're a genius."

Pony had been wrapping one of their two remaining torches, and now she reluctantly put the torch into a crevice and sloshed over to them. "You setting up a tent?"

"Need three sticks for that." Gabrielle said, succinctly. "Let's get him on here, and get moving. I'm so over this place my skins about to wrinkle right off me." She licked her lips, tingling lightly from Xena's kisses, just like her ego was tingling lightly from the compliments.

Xena and Pony held the sticks while she wrapped the skin around them, making a litter, which they eased over to where Ares was lying. The idea had come to her suddenly, as she'd been digging in the pack for some nuts and had to haul the hide up out of her way.

Once she'd thought about it, it all seemed so simple that she wondered why Xena hadn't thought of it first. Gabrielle studied her partner out of the corner of her eye, noting the deep circles and the visible to her exhaustion. Maybe she was tired.

Gods knew, they all were.

"All right." Xena slid around to one side. "Gab, grab that end."

The bard ducked under her arm. "Got it."

The warrior got her hands under Ares shoulders. "Grab his legs. Pony. Lift when I do, and Gab'll slide that under him."

The Amazon hesitated, then she wiped her hands on her thighs and gingerly closed her fingers around the god's ankles. "All right."

They lifted Ares up just enough for Gabrielle to slide the pallet under him, the water half supporting his weight until he was bracketed by the two sticks. Then they let him down and Xena sloshed around to the front of the rock, taking hold of the protruding ends of the sticks. "Right."

Gabrielle tightened their pack, now much lighter without the hide and then started to move up to the front again. "Let's go, Boo."

A faint smile flickered on and just as rapidly off Xena's face. "Stay there." She indicated the middle of the pallet. "I'll go in front now. Just hang on to the pole."

Pony waded over against the current and grabbed the torches, then she returned to the back of the pallet. "Guess I go back here." She handed Gabrielle the lit torch, and tied the two spares on her back. "Least we're moving."

Xena took hold of the two poles and started off, placing her feet carefully to avoid being swept off them by the fast current. It was dark ahead of them, and the water was now creeping up her legs, but she was unspeakably glad to be moving again.

She hadn't really wanted to leave Ares, but the knowledge that Gran was slipping further and further from them, and the dour glares from Pony had been wearing on her unmercifully, making her grudge the careful stitches, and wish again she had better, or at least more choices.

Gabrielle cleared her throat gently. "Anyone want to hear a story?"

"You ever had anyone say no to that?" Xena slogged ahead, keeping the pallet steady as she moved forward, using her finely honed sense of balance to make up for the fact her hands were pretty much tied up behind her.

"Well." Gabrielle was glad she had the pallet to hang on to as the current became faster as they approached a bend in the corridor. "You, actually."

"Me?" Xena couldn't chance turning around, but she edged her body sideways a little, feeling the ground sloping more deeply as she got closer to the turn. "I don't think so."

"You did, when I was going to tell that town about you and that duck and.."

"Gabrrrrrieeelle."

Gabrielle chuckled softly. "I thought it was an adorable story."

"You would."

"Mm." The bard grimaced as the deepening water hit her midsection. "Gods, that's cold." She sucked in a breath. "How much deeper is it going to get, Xe?"

Xena was starting to wonder the same thing. She paused before the bend and cautiously inched her head around the corner, frustrated when all she could see was more frothing white water until it faded into utter darkness.

How much damn rain could there possibly be out there? She pulled the pallet out into the current and around the corner, reassured a little when the depth remained constant. "Looks like that's it for now." She called back. "But be careful.. this deep, one good shove and we'll all end up swimming."

"Hon, just please keep in mind we're shorter than you are, okay?" Gabrielle felt the water creep up her ribcage and hoped it stopped there. The chill was starting to make her cramp up again, and she wished they were moving faster.

"Yeah." Pony spoke up briefly. "I'd like to hear a story."

Gabrielle sorted through a few different ones, and decided on one of her own favorites, a funny tale she hoped would lighten up the mood and provide a distraction for all of them, her included. "Okay." She drew in a breath. "One day, when Xena and I were traveling in the southlands, we came upon a chicken coop."

Xena started chuckling.

Pony gripped the back parts of the sticks and listened in silence, the water just up past her navel. With Xena leading, and Gabrielle talking, she really had little more to do than steer the back of the pallet and hold it back so it didn't slam into Xena's rear end.

She'd gone from being pissed, to being confused, to not knowing what the Hades to think about anything. She'd run out of anger for now, she was tired, she was hungry, she was worried half to death about Gran and it felt good just to mindlessly go along with what was happening and listen to whatever nutso tale Gabrielle was rambling on with.

The bard didn't have it easy. Pony could see the goosebumps on her bare shoulders and the faint tremors in the arm that was holding up the torch. The water was higher up on her than it was on either Xena or herself by a handspan and Pony abruptly felt kind of bad for her.

Felt kind of bad for what she'd been saying to her. Not that she didn't think it was all true – after all, Pony was seldom less than truthful even to herself – but Gabrielle had never been less than kind to her, even during their occasional sparring sessions and despite her initial disdain for the outsider kid she'd first known her as.

She hadn't quite know how to interact with Gabrielle for the longest time. The bard was a warm and friendly person, so different from most of the Amazons – but there was also a definite reserve there, and she knew Gabrielle kept this mask between her and everyone else.

Everyone except for Xena. Maybe it was the fact she was seeing past the mask the last few days that was freaking her out again. She felt like Gabrielle had changed the rules up on her, and wasn't it the suckiest time for that to be happening?

She wished Ephiny was around. Her partner knew how to handle both of these guys a lot better than she did.

"Careful." Xena's voice interrupted the tale.

Pony looked up and past the still, floating body of the god of war to see the warrior's outline in the torchlight. "What's up?"

"Crack up there." Xena paused, releasing one stick and reaching up to shade her eyes from the gods only knew what light. "Might be a little drop."

"I can hear it." Gabrielle spoke up. "Is that light up there?"

Pony strained her eyes. "Where?"

"Let me go check it out." Xena released the front of the pallet. "Just hold here." She waded off into the darkness, as Gabrielle grabbed the pallet tighter to keep it from rushing after her.

"I hate when she does that." The bard sighed, shaking her head. "Be careful!"

Xena raised one hand in lazy answer, and ducked behind a low overhanging rock, peering past it to whatever lay behind.

Then in a flicker of motion, she disappeared.

**

The corridor crooked twice, and then opened up and when it did, Xena found herself abruptly in an alien landscape that widened even her well traveled eyes.

Gabrielle had, somehow, seen the reflection of light and here it was, a chimney in an unlikely place letting in sunlight that reflected over rocks in a thousand shades of algae and the churning water that bubbled over them.

Xena blinked, and rubbed her eyes, squinting against the unexpected but welcome light to see a crazy tumble of half rounded boulders and crags that promised a very dangerous passage.

Well, damn. Xena hesitated, then, unable to resist, she climbed forward into the light, reveling in it's touch on her skin. She knew they'd have to push through the rough spot and leave the chimney behind, but it was gorgeous to see the outside world even for a brief moment.

Very brief. "Gabrielle?" Xena let out a holler. "C'mon.. but easy!"

She could hear splashing coming closer, and she turned to wait for her companions, seating herself on a green stained rock warm with the sun's light. It felt wonderful on her legs, which started to lose their chilled tingling as she drummed her bootheels lightly against the mossy surface.

Gabrielle emerged from around the bend first, and Xena smiled as she watched the bard react to the unexpected sight before her. She lifted one hand to shade her eyes, then squinted as she made out Xena's backlit form. "Whoa!"

"Yeah." Xena agreed. "Too bad we can't enjoy it."

Pony edged out into the light, peering around. "Hey." She pointed. "Let's just go up, yeah?"

Instead of immediately rejecting the idea, Xena leaned back and peered up at the chimney. It was an irregular, twisting column that went up and up. "Can't." She said.

"Too slick?" Pony noted the moss on the inside of the rocks.

"No." Xena tilted her head back down and gazed at her, the backlight framing her head in an almost halo. "They didn't take Gran that way. Or did you forget about that?"

Pony stared at her in silence. Gabrielle wedged the two sticks around the edge of a stone to keep the pallet still and eased past the Amazon, climbing up on the rock next to her partner and laying back on it. She spread her arms to collect the sunlight and groaned softly.

"Anyway." Xena turned and indicated the rock strewn, tumbled water path before them. "That ain't gonna be easy."

"Is our life ever easy?" Gabrielle inquired. "I swear if there was a hard way to walk down a road we'd find it."

Xena draped one arm over her and gave her a pat on the belly. "Let's go." She hopped off the rock and back into the water. "Pony, you got that rope in your sack?"

"Yeah." The Amazon handed it over after a moment of sullen silence.

Xena tied off one end of the rope into a knot the size of her fist, then she wedged the end into a cleft in the rock and started to make her way forward. "I'll find a path." She said. "So we don't go through this blind."

Gabrielle felt a touch guilty watching her go, but not enough to jump back into the freezing water and follow since she knew she wouldn't be much help anyway. She actually suspected her beloved partner had found a very practical way of letting her warm up a little longer.

Which she fully appreciated. "Ugh." She wriggled into a bit more sunlight, finally feeling some sensation coming back into her legs. "Pony, why not come on up here."

"I'm fine."

Yurg. Grumpy Amazon. "Okay."

"You're just gonna feel worse when you get back in here." Pony advised.

Gabrielle remembered her experience on the mountain, when they'd first arrived. "Yeah." She agreed. "You're right, but maybe I'll have a half candlemark before my legs freeze solid again." She let her hand rest on her stomach, her fingers tracing the ridged muscles just under her skin.

She felt the rumble in there, and tried not to think about how long it had been since she'd eaten. It was getting a little old, at least to her, and she was getting pretty annoyed at herself for this weakness that was impeding her contribution to the team.

"Gabrielle?"

The bard rolled her head to one side. "Yeah?" She blinked a few times until Pony's face came into focus, her eyes a little dazzled from the light.

Pony came forward, putting her hands on the rock Gabrielle was sprawled over. "Listen." She studied the rocks' surface, avoiding the bard's eyes. "I got a problem with all this damn water."

Gabrielle scratched her cheek. "We all do, Pony." She replied. "You think I like it? It's creepy and freezing down here. I told Xena I wanted to move to a desert when we get out."

Pony stared at the rock. "No." She shook her head. "I don't mean that.. I.. " She hesitated. "I can't swim."

The bard rolled over on the rock, exposing her back to the sun as she rested her chin on her hand. "Well.. we're not swimming." She said. "I didn't used to really like it myself, but.."

"Gabrielle." The Amazon finally looked up at her. "I'm scared of this shit."

Gabrielle wasn't sure what she was more surprised at, that Pony had admitted her fear, or that she'd cursed at her while doing it. "Oh." She murmured. "Wow.. I didn't know that."

"So if I freak out or something, you'll know why." Pony muttered. "Don't expect you to understand."

Gabrielle snorted. "Please." She pushed herself up to sitting position. "Me, the one who's afraid of getting up on anything higher than a log, who used to get dizzy sitting on Argo?"

Pony merely grunted.

Gabrielle peered into the distance, where she could see Xena's back as the warrior worked out their path. The water was up to her armpits, and it wasn't looking good. "Know what Xena's afraid of?"

"Nothing."

"Wrong."

"Your temper."

Gabrielle had to smile. "Gods, I hope not." She shook her head. "No.. it's this." She pointed at the rocks. "Close in places."

Pony looked around them, then back at her. "You're kidding me."

"No." Gabrielle let her legs dangle over the edge of the rock. "She's always been... but we were up in the northern mountains once and she got buried in a rockslide...she was trapped in there and almost died." Her hands smoothed out the skin over one knee, which was criss-crossed with scars. "Got worse after that, for a while."

Pony studied her face. "Don't think I heard that story either."

"No." Gabrielle felt her eyes fill with tears, even all this time later. "I usually don't tell people what it's like to feel your heart breaking." She paused for a breath. "Kind depresses everyone, y'know?"

Pony lifted her hand and reached out, then paused and pressed her fingers back into the rock, inches from Gabrielle's leg. "I gotta ask you.. is this all worth it?"

Gabrielle seemed to understand the vague question, and she remained silent for a long time before she cocked her head to one side and met Pony's eyes. "Moot point." She answered, in a very quiet voice. "It's what I live for."

Pony shook her head a tiny bit, and took a breath to answer, then subsided when a nearby splash alerted her to Xena's presence. She just shook her head again, then turned and went back to the pallet, which Ares had started to move restlessly around on.

Xena wrapped another loop of the rope up in her hand, and paused near the rock, looking over at Pony, then up at her soulmate. One eyebrow arched sharply in question.

"S'allright." Gabrielle lifted a hand and smoothed the wet bangs off Xena's forehead. "We were just talking. Did you find a path?"

Xena loosened the knot. "We need to tie ourselves together." She replied. "It gets deep past those rocks. Over my head."

Gabrielle managed not to look over at Pony. "Okay." She said. "How can we do that.. how can we swim, and hold on to Ares, at the same time, Xena? Isn't there another way?"

The warrior shook her head. "It's a cavern." She said. "At the very far end.. I think I can see a little light." She put her hand on Gabrielle's leg. "We're almost outta here.. but like always.."

"It gets worse before it gets better." The bard nodded, hitching herself off the rock and grimacing as she landed in the water with a splash. "Oh, sheeps tails. That's cold." She took hold of the rope. "You first.. um.. Pony second? That way I can hang on to the back of the pallet.. since I'll be swimming the longest."

Xena thought about that for a minute, then nodded. "Good idea." She tied one end around her waist and headed for the front of the pallet. "Let's go. I'm over this."

Gabrielle handed Pony a loop, then tied the other end around herself as she circled around behind Ares. She leaned forward to look at the god of war, but after a few restless motions, he seemed to settle again. "Gods, I hope he doesn't wake up in the middle of this, or in a fever, Xe."

Xena put her hands on her hips and glared at her.

"Sorry." The bard cleared her throat, and took hold of the sticks. "Ready, Pon?" She met the Amazon's eyes, as she finished tying herself off and winked.

The hazel eyes gazed back at her. "Sorry I was a bitch before." She said, briefly.

"It's all right." Gabrielle felt the pallet start to move. She removed the torch from the notch in the wall and handed it to Pony, before she resumed hold of the pallet and started forward.

"She's used to it." Xena chimed in from the front. "She's married to the biggest bitch in Greece."

"Honey, you're not a bitch."

"Don't make me prove you wrong, shepherd."

"Gods." Gabrielle felt the water getting deeper, as they wound through the rocks and the current surged past her on both sides. The narrowing of the space made the stream much faster, and she was glad she was in the back because it was near to knocking her off her feet.

They passed slowly out of the light, and back into the darkness, the colorful rocks fading to gray on either side as they rounded a boulder in the middle of the path, and she saw what was before them. "Oh.. bu.."

"Bacchae!" Pony yelled, as they were pulled forward and into a churning whirlpool of water.

"Just keep moving!" Xena yelled back. "I'll get you through!"

The roar of the water filled their ears, but it was unable to drown out the faith that filled Gabrielle's heart. Xena would get them through.

She was sure of it.

**

One Wild Ride

Part 21

Xena felt the water suddenly rush over her as she stepped into the whirlpool, and the suction of it pulled her under. A tumbled moment of disorientation later she broke the surface and sucked in a breath, glad she'd tied the rope tightly around her.

She was too off balance, with her hands behind her to stay upright, however. "I'm gonna let go!" She called back. "Gotta swim!"

She released her grip on the pallet and was immediately sucked under again, as the water pushed her through a gap between two stones and rattled her against both of them like a rubber ball.

Ow. Xena kicked away from the closer rock and got her head above water again, coughing a mouthful from her lungs as she emerged into the half light of the cavern.

"Xena!" Gabrielle's hoarse bellow was equal parts warning and worry.

Predictable as the day is long. The warrior shook the hair from her eyes and started swimming, pulling herself forward with powerful breaststrokes. "Hang on!" She yelled back over the sound of the water. "I'm all right!"

The rope went taut, stopping her progress very briefly before it grudgingly gave way and she felt the strain as she pulled her companions after her. The force of the water wanted to pull them in circles, and she found it hard to move forward, most of her energy going towards staying belly down as the underground river wanted to roll her over.

She let her feet drop briefly, but couldn't touch bottom so she cursed silently and kept on swimming as hard as she could, making scant headway despite going with the current. She glanced behind her, anxious until she spotted both Pony's and Gabrielle's heads above the water, sticking by the pallet as the river shoved them to and fro.

Ares was half underwater, but she really didn't have time to worry about him right now. Xena felt the water pull her sideways, and she fought against the current, ending up going under again as the rope tangled on her leg and stopped her progress.

Damn it. She rolled and freed her boot, then kicked up ward, reaching out as she felt something closing in on her. Her hands struck hard stone, and the next moment she was forced up and out of the water, blown over a slick boulder in a rush of white froth.

Twisting quickly she got her hands on a ridge and managed to stop her progress, pulling herself up onto her knees as the current broke over her chest.

She barely had time to recognize the dark shapes hurtling towards her, and her eyes widened as Pony, Gabrielle and Ares whipped by her on the other side of the rock, moving at a rapid clip downstream.

Her heart started beating double time as she reversed her position, putting her back to the current as she got her boots braced just in time to take the strain as the rope snapped taut and came very close to yanking her right off her perch headfirst.

For a moment, her balance hung on a thin line as she threw her weight backwards and teetered on her heels, the weight on the other end of the rope pulling her inexorably forward.

Then she crouched more deeply and shoved backwards, her thigh muscles standing out in rigid relief. Through the swirling half light, she saw the current grab the pallet and swing both Gabrielle and Pony around vicously as they fought to hang onto it, the extra drag almost pulling her in.

The experience of a thousand battles stood her in good stead, and a cold reason narrowed her choices without effort. "Gabrielle!" Xena yelled at the top of her lungs. "Let him go!"

Pony released the pallet with little hesitation, grabbing the rope instead as Gabrielle swung around, her hands still clamped on the ends of the sticks just long enough for her to turn towards Xena, making eye contact through the swirling surf and half-lit dimness.

An unspoken question and immediate answer floated between them, then Gabrielle uncurled her hands and released the pallet, letting the water take it swirling away into the darkness beyond them.

Xena released a held breath. Then she wrapped her hands around the rope and unlocked her knees, hopping quickly to the next boulder while keeping her weight back on her heels. "Keep feeling for higher ground!" She called to her partner. "I've gotcha!"

Resolutely, Gabrielle turned her head and ignored the press of the water behind her, the rope keeping her steady in the cold water as she felt around with her hands and feet for the ground beneath them.

She knew she'd just done something wrong. Both in a personal sense, and in the bigger picture because she'd dealt with Ares long enough to know their fates were intertwined with his in some dark, yet final way.

If he died, from what she'd just done, nothing good would come from it for herself or for Xena. She didn't know what his family would do, but she knew in her heart they would do something and whatever it was wouldn't be kind.

And yet, knowing that, her gut instincts agreed fully with what Xena had ordered.

She felt a jerk, then a release on the rope and she moved forward in the water a few bodylengths. Despite the shift, she still felt nothing under her and she had to wonder where in the world the path had gone to.

More importantly, how had Gran and her kidnappers gotten down here, and had Ares really seen nothing of this when he'd come up? It seemed so unlikely that it would have come on like this so suddenly...

A bleak thought occurred to her. What if this wasn't they way out?

What if there was another way, a fork, and they'd missed it?

"Gabrielle! I'm jumping in.. hang on!"

From a near stop, she suddenly started moving again as the rope slacked behind her and she had to fight to stop from going face first into the water. Gabrielle threw her hands out instinctively and tried to lean back, keeping her head above the surface as she hurtled into the churning darkness. "Pony!"

"Yeowp!" Pony tumbled past her with a squawk, out of control.

Gabrielle grabbed at her, wrapping her hand into the rope between them and hauling her back as they both twirled around each other as the water swirled into a whirlpool with them in the center. She could just barely see the fear in Pony's face as she linked arms with her and knew a moment of odd pride as she knew she didn't share it. "Gotcha!"

Moments later, something big and heavy slammed into the back of both of them and they were slammed forward for a split second before they were grabbed by the scruffs of their necks and hauled backwards. "Now I gotcha." Xena's voice rose above the water as she took hold of them both. "Everyone hang on."

Gabrielle took hold of her partner's leathers as Pony somewhat warily grabbed Xena's arm. Once in a somewhat circle she realized they stabilized each other and for a brief moment she felt a margin of safety as they bobbed in the current. "Wow."

"Shit." Pony took a ragged breath. "That sucked. Really, really, really sucked."

Xena refrained from adding to the conversational pool and concentrated on searching the darkness ahead of them the best she could. They'd lost the torches at the pool and she only hoped they didn't need them before the water pushed them out into whatever end it eventually came into.

She hoped it was aboveground.

She hoped the water didn't go underground first.. under the rock, in the darkness, where they'd be trapped for who knew how...

Xena slowly let out her breath, refusing to let the old fear take her over. She felt an icy cold block form in her guts, only faintly counteracted by the bit of warmth on her hand where Gabrielle's cheek was pressed.

She knew if she looked up, the bard would be looking back at her despite the water boiling between them and the darkness around, understanding to an almost uncomfortable intimacy how she was feeling. Had it been anyone else, she would have hated that feeling.

"Xe."

Xena looked up. "Yeah?"

"Desert." Gabrielle's tone was wryly humorous. "Please?"

"Sure." The warrior agreed easily. "Until you start bitching about the sand."

The bard stuck out her tongue, and despite its blue tinge, they both smiled. Then Gabrielle shifted her eyes towards Pony. "You okay?"

"I suck." Pony's teeth were chattering. "I can't tell ya how much I suck right now." She glanced down stream. "Where the Hades are we going?"

"Hades." Xena replied dryly. "We figured long as you're on our tour, we might as well do it right."

"Shut up, Xena." Pony snapped at her. "Stop the damn bullshit jokes this ain't funny."

Gabrielle leaned a little more against the hand on her shoulder. The walls were rushing past them at a scary rate, but now it was so dark she could barely see them, in fact, she could barely see anything and her world was narrowing down to the icy touch of the water and the solid warmth of Xena's hold on her.

The only thing missing was fear, and feeling Xena's through their connection Gabrielle found herself glad she had none of her own to worry about for the moment. She brushed her lips against the warrior's knuckles and tightened her grip on the bit of leather she was clutching, simply hoping it would end sometime soon.

"How much longer?" Pony asked, suddenly.

"Don't know." Xena answered. The water had smoothed out, past the rumbling boulders and they were moving fast through a narrow, dark channel that seemed to be pitching downward at the steeper rate. She could hear the water slapping against the rocks on either side of them, but below that, at the very edge of her hearing she became aware of a very soft, low rumble.

"I think we're coming to the end." Gabrielle spoke up.

"Why?" The Amazon asked. "You got some vision super warrior here doesn't?"

"Definitely." Xena didn't even sound angry, just tired.

"I just.. I think we are." The bard replied in a quiet tone. "It feels like we're coming to an end. To the finish." She paused. "I mean, of the tunnel." Her focus turned to Xena. "You know, I think those walls.."

"They are."

"Mm." Gingerly, Gabrielle poked her foot down, hoping to feel bottom. She felt her toe brush against something, but not close enough for them to be able to stop. "You don't think.."

"Can't tell."

Gabrielle sighed again.

"Would you talk like normal people!" Pony snapped. "Artemis' left tit, damn it!"

"Why?" The bard asked, as she took a firmer hold on Xena, and felt the warrior's grip tighten on her. "We're not normal."

"Stupid son of a..."

"DUCK." Xena suddenly bellowed at the top of her lungs. "TAKE A BREATH and HOLD IT!" She grabbed Pony and Gabrielle by the back of the neck again as the tunnel narrowed swiftly into a hold in the rock wall and just like that, in a rush of deathly cold they were underwater and slamming through it.

Narrow.

Too narrow. Xena instinctively grabbed both her companions and pulled them closer as they hurtled feet first through the dark water. The walls on either side scraped her shoulders and she felt the pressure begin to build in her lungs.

Pony started to struggle wildly. Xena hesitated, then shifted her grip and jabbed, sharp and hard at the side of her neck, taking hold of the suddenly limp body and hoping Pony didn't breath in too much water. She felt Gabrielle wind her arms around her and jerk slightly, and then there was really nothing more for her to do but wait.

Hope.

Wonder if this was finally it, for them.

Gabrielle's body began to shake, and Xena ducked her head, pressing her lips against her partner's chilled ones. She felt them part, and she contracted her chest, forcing the little remaining air she had into the bard's mouth.

Only to feel it warm against her tongue as Gabrielle forced it right back at her.

Then just as quickly, darkness exploded into light and for a minute Xena thought they'd died, it was so brilliant around them.

Her senses kicked in, though, and filled with the smell of water and foliage as they spilled out into a thickly grassed marsh full of heat, and mud and sunlight.

They rolled over and over and over, finally separating as the thick grass and the water slowed them, rapidly warming from the icy blast of the cave to sun drenched soggy heat and the pungent scent of algae.

Xena ended up half on her side, the breath knocked out of her as she rubbed the water from her eyes and got quickly to her knees, reaching for Pony's still form. She unblocked the nerves and got quickly out of the way as the Amazon started retching into the grass, her body convulsing hard as her hands grasped the stalks.

Content that she was breathing, the warrior turned to Gabrielle, who had landed sitting up in the marsh, legs splayed and covered in mud and pollywogs. "You okay?"

The bard's chest was still heaving, and she looked up at her partner through wet bangs hanging into her eyes. "Pony all right?" She asked, after a moment.

Xena studied her briefly, then, apparently satisfied with what she saw, she turned back to the weakly writhing Amazon. "Hey."

Pony rolled over onto her back, her arm slapping into the shallow water. She blinked her eyes open into the sun and turned her head slightly, still coughing. "What the crap happened?"

"You passed out." Xena informed her calmly. "Under the water."

Pony looked at her, then she rotated her head round and stared at the gushing torrent coming from the hole in the mountain, the water spreading across the marsh in all directions. "We came outta that?"

"We did." Gabrielle confirmed.

"Godsbedamned good thing I passed out." Pony coughed again. "Crap!"

Xena scanned the area around them, her eyes catching no sign of Ares, or the pallet, or Granella for that matter. The marsh was quiet, save the rush of the water and a few crickets, and even as she watched the flow of the outlet seemed to be lessening. "Figures."

"What?" Gabrielle stirred and rolled onto her side, getting to her hands and knees and half sloshing, half crawling over to where Xena was sitting. She sat down next to the warrior and draped one arm over her thigh, exhaling heavily. "Well, at least we're not sitting on rocks anymore."

Xena nodded mutely. She studied the empty marsh again, then gathered herself to stand up. "Let's get to higher ground." She said. "And see what we can find."

"Sounds good to me." Gabrielle got up and shook her hands rapidly, ridding them of mud and a few other things, then pausing as she felt her knees start to give out and the world start to spin. "Uh.." She reached out blindly and felt Xena's presence envelope her as everything faded out and the cricket's chirp turned into an unpleasant buzz.

"Easy." Xena patted her cheek gently. "Stay with me."

It was so tempting just to give in to the overwhelming urge to close her eyes and let the darkness take her. Gabrielle knew Xena would take care of her, and she'd be in no danger.

"Gab?"

However, she just couldn't take advantage of her partner like that. "Yeah, I'm here." The bard rubbed her eyes and took a deep breath, the dizziness receding as Xena's fingertips traveled lightly up and down her spine. "Sorry."

"For what?" Pony was still seated in the muck, resting her hands on her thighs. "That sucked." She added. "Least you didn't conk out in the middle of it like I did."

"Mm." Gabrielle glanced at Xena, who looked off over her shoulder into the distance. "Well, don't feel bad. That was really stressful." She said. "I guess I just had a delayed reaction.. happens to everybody."

Pony tilted her head and peered up at Xena. "Bet it don't."

Gabrielle smiled in sweet memory. "Bet you're wrong." She stopped there, though, leaving the hint floated neatly above the grass.

"Ugh." The Amazon straightened out one leg, which had a long, red scrape on it. "Least we're outta there."

Gabrielle found herself in heartfelt agreement, as the rough travel was now making itself know forcibly as dozens of scrapes and bruises and a throbbing headache that the watery sun was only making worse. She gave Pony a sympathetic grimace, but held her hand out to the Amazon. "We sure are. Now let's get out of this muck, huh?"

Pony got to her knees, waving off the help and staggered to her feet. She rubbed her neck and coughed. "Bleah." She slowly turned in a circle and looked around. There wasn't much to be seen anywhere but marsh, and in reflex, she looked down at the foot or so of water covering her boots. "So much for a trail."

Xena moved away from the gushing water, stepping carefully through the muck as she searched the area. Her head swept slowly back and forth, but the sodden grass gave up no hints of anything other than frogs and buzzing flies.

No sign of the hooters. No sign of Granella. No sign of Ares, or the pallet. Xena put her hands on her hips, and searched again, hoping to see any hint of debris, but nothing met her eyes more significant than a few waving green leaves she recognized. With a sigh, she waded over to them and knelt down, rooting in the marshy grass with her back turned to her companions.

Pony rubbed the back of her neck, watching Gabrielle from the corner of her eye. "You okay?" She asked, hesitantly. "Ya look kinda wobbly."

Gabrielle located a patch of sunlight and edged over to stand in it, a little disturbed at the lingering shakiness she could feel in her legs. She rubbed her arms with both hands to warm up, and refused to think about how empty her guts felt. "Oh well." She shrugged slightly. "I guess I just.. a reaction to all the action, you know?"

Pony came over to stand next to her, blinking into the sun. "Yeah, I know." She replied briefly. "But you do this stuff all the time and I ain't never seen you turn that shade of pale before."

Ah. "Yeah, I feel kinda.. um.."

"You want some water or something?" Pony's voice took on a hint of alarm.

"No, I'm okay, I just.." Gabrielle half turned as Xena stolidly sloshed up next to her, the warrior's blue eyes fastened knowingly on her face. "Hey, Xe.."

"Here." Xena opened her fist and offered up a handful of brown nuggets.

Gabrielle selected one of the water chestnuts and studied it, allowing Xena to put an arm around her as they started moving through the water. "Thanks" She removed her small knife from her boot and cut a delicate slice from the crunchy vegetable, nibbling on it with a sense of rueful embarrassment.

"Got any more of those?" Pony asked, giving Xena a look. Without comment, the warrior handed some over and they continued on, moving away from the gushing water and across the open space in front of them.

They walked in silence through the marsh. Xena left her arm around Gabrielle more for the contact than for support as the bard seemed steady enough on her feet now, but she was making no effort to move away either.

"Xe." Gabrielle murmured, after a few minutes. "What do you think.."

"I don't know." The warrior cut her off gently.

The bard exhaled unhappily. "This.. is gonna be trouble."

"Yeah."

Gabrielle finished her water chestnuts and put her knife away, dusting her fingers off lightly. "Maybe it's a good thing we're nowhere near home." She stated, in a reflective tone. "Less chance of anyone else getting hurt."

Xena glanced quickly at Pony, then nodded. "Yeah." She repeated the word, with a completely different intonation and meaning.

Gabrielle ran over the moment in her mind, closing her fingers into a light fist and releasing them as she recalled the feeling of the pallet supports leaving her grip. Despite how she felt about Ares, few things had gone against her grain the way doing that had, not only just for moral reasons, but from a bone deep instinct that no matter the cost, the act itself was just wrong.

But what choice had she really had? "I wasn't ready to die for him, Xena."

The warrior laughed shortly, with little humor. "I wasn't ready for any of us to die for him, Gabrielle. Least of all you." She gazed pensively at the grass, the tips becoming drier as they moved slowly away from the rock wall.

Despite the sun, she felt cold of a sudden, and she was glad she had Gabrielle tucked up against her right side sharing admittedly damp body heat with her.

"But hey." Gabrielle's optimism surfaced unexpectedly. "You never know, hon.. maybe that was his best chance too, going down there. We could have really done a good thing there."

"With a sword wound the length of my arm in his chest?" Xena's pragmatism responded. "That I gave him?"

Gabrielle sighed. "How about a story?"

With another wry chuckle, Xena leaned over and gave the bard a kiss on the top of her head. "Too late to worry about it now. Let's find Gran and fix what we can."

The ground started to slope upward, into a grassy plain that stretched to the walls on either side. It was warm with sunlight, and the sound of crickets rose around them as they left the water at last and climbed onto dry land.

It seemed eerily peaceful, especially to Xena who kept expecting hooters or the gods only knew what else to pop up in front of her at every step. After what they'd just been through, it seemed impossible to now be strolling through a quiet afternoon where the most threatening thing she could see was a single bird of prey circling high overhead, wings stretched lazily out to catch the updrafts.

Damn, she wished she had those wings. Xena sighed silently, her head turning right and left as she hoped for any sign of.. well, anything.

"Maybe I'll make up a story about turtles." Gabrielle said. "I remember you showing me a box turtle once, Xena.. but you never did tell me why they call it that." She put her arm around Xena's waist and matched strides as best she could with her. "It wasn't square or anything, so why do they call it that, anyway?"

Xena reached up and rubbed the side of her nose, appreciating her loving partner's intent at least. "Sweetheart.."

"I mean, I understand why they call snapping turtles that." Gabrielle rambled on. "I sure remember that one nearly snapping your nose off, remember that?"

"Gabrielle."

"But I don't get that whole box thing." The bard said, shaping a vaguely circular motion with her free hand. "It was roundish, sorta."

"Gab?"

"Hm." Gabrielle looked up at Xena.

"Shut up, willya?"

Green eyes sparkled gently as Gabrielle smiled at the words. "You know I knew you really loved me the first time you said that to me instead of just ignoring what I was saying." Of course, it hadn't really been the words that time either, she conceded, as she acceded to her partner's request. It had been the tone and the smile, that sweet exasperation Xena used only with those closest to her heart.

Even par with Argo. Ah, what a beautiful moment that had been. Gabrielle felt a silent chuckle shake Xena's body and knew a squeeze of her shoulders with follow, which it promptly did.

So they were in trouble, again. Gabrielle gazed across the grass, savoring its creamy golden contrast to the deep green trees and the blue of the sky. They'd find a way through it, one way or the other.

"C'n I ask a question?" Pony spoke up after a few quiet minutes.

"Sure." Gabrielle looked up from trying to wring the dampness from her skirt.

"If he didn't.. like.. make it." The Amazon responded slowly. "What.. does that mean? What happens now?" She asked. "They draw straws up there? Someone else just steps in.. or.. like what?"

Both Pony and Gabrielle looked over at Xena, who looked right back at them, both eyebrow lifting sharply.

"How should I know?" The warrior asked. "Don't say it." She warned the bard. "I don't have a damn clue what'll happen.. " She paused. "But I don't like the idea of them having that sword."

Serious now, Gabrielle frowned. "You don't think just them having it makes one of them the God of War, do you?" She asked. "You said before they already had to be a god for that to happen."

"We think." Xena clarified. "I think." She said. "But you know the gods, Gabrielle. They make and break rules to suit themselves."

"Mm." The bard nodded. "Well, but so do we, most of the time." She turned to Pony. "Somehow I can't imagine Zeus letting a hooter take over as God of War, Pon."

Pony nibbled on her lower lip, then she shrugged. "Didn't see that much difference, y'know?"

Xena paused, her peripheral vision catching motion at the very edge of the grass and she focused intently on it, the corners of her eyes tensing as she sorted the tiny images into something her mind recognized. "There they go." She felt almost a sense of relief, as a goal presented itself.

"Critters?" Pony seemed relieved as well. "They got Gran?"

Xena blinked, and focused again. "They've got something." She concluded. "Let's go." She tightened the straps on their much battered gear pack, wincing at the clammy chill of it against her shoulders. There'd be little time to dry anything, and she suspected a lot of what she had in there would be ruined, but there wasn't any help for it.

They started off at an angle towards the treeline, only to pull up seconds later as a wavering in the grass right in front of them brought Xena's sword out and Pony a close second.

"Whoa." Ares voice rose weakly from the earth. "Not so fast, chickenshits."

Gabrielle found herself in a moment of total emotional conflict. She stepped up to Xena's side as the warrior brushed the grass aside with one booted foot, exposing the battered figure lying on the ground, just covered in the tatters of the catskin.

The blood had been washed off him, but so had most of the bandage, and the wound she'd made in his chest was oozing several different color fluids. Bruises from the passage through the mountain had been added to the ones he already had, and the god of war didn't look particularly godly, or even manly at the moment. "Ares."

"Say it like ya mean it." Ares rasped. "Thought you were rid of me, eh?." His fever had apparently broken, but there were dark circles under his eyes and he was very pale. "Nice."

"Great." Pony spoke up glumly. "Just what we needed. I was just getting over being a bitch."

Ares stared steadily at Xena, then his eyes shifted to Gabrielle. "I'll remember you did that, kid."

Gabrielle didn't even blink. "So now we both have memories." She replied. "But we all had the same chance in there, Ares."

Unaccountably, Ares smiled at her. Then he focused on Xena again. "Nice try, babycakes. But you got me into this and you're gonna get me out of it."

Xena studied the bedraggled god with a serious expression. "I didn't get you into anything, Ares. You got yourself here. So the deal's the same as last time - keep up, or get lost." She walked around him and headed off in the direction of the now vanished hooters.

"Hey, I'm bleeding here." Ares reminded her. "From your hole, remember?"

Xena paused and looked back at him. "I'm out of bandages, and out of patience. If we find something, I'll see what I can do." She turned her head and kept moving, keeping the edge of the grass in her focus.

After a brief pause, Pony followed her leaving Gabrielle and Ares alone together. The bard and the god eyed each other, then Gabrielle stepped forward and offered him her hand. "We have to go find our friend." She explained quietly. "And your sword. You know how Xena gets when she's on a mission."

Ares looked at her for a very long moment. Then he reached up and took her hand, watching intently as she leaned back and helped him stand up, the muscles standing out on her arms and shoulders. "Know something, blondie?" The god remarked conversationally. "You're getting to be very, very interesting."

Gabrielle released his hand and retrieved the three quarters of a staff left of the pallet, brushing it off and handing it to him. "I'm not trying to be." She said. "I'm just who I am." Her eyes briefly met his, then she turned and began following Xena and Pony.

Ares put most of his weight on the stick and limped slowly forward, obviously in pain. "Question is.. who the blazes are ya?" He muttered, as he followed in her footsteps. "And by the way.. humanity sucks!" He added, in a louder voice.

"Go find some gods to get ya out of here then." Xena called back. "See if they care."

"Bitch." Ares snorted, shaking his head, glancing at Gabrielle who had slowed a little to let him catch up. "What do you see in her, again?"

The turnabout wasn't lost on the bard. "The cornerstone of my life." She answered, with a smile. "The other half of my soul, my best friend..."

Ares rolled his eyes. "Oh, gag me."

"Don't give us any ideas." Gabrielle said. "Want to hear a story about a turtle?" She couldn't pretend even to herself that she wasn't relieved Ares had made it, but she knew it wasn't for the right reasons.

Maybe he knew that too. She could see the smirk lurking there behind those exhausted eyes. Even as a human, there was a sense of old knowledge there and she was struck abruptly with the realization that this adversary of hers might understand her far better than she was comfortable with.

"Turtles. Yeah. Sure."

On the other hand.. Gabrielle guided them both in Xena's footsteps, knowing her partner would have found the easiest path for them. On the other hand, it was just possible she might have more insight into parts of Ares than he ever dreamed. "Okay, no turtles." She agreed. "How about the story of the Trojan War?"

"Now you're talking." Ares struggled to keep up with her. "And if you're a good little girl, I'll tell you the really juicy parts you ain't never heard of."

Oo. Gabrielle couldn't stop her ears from pricking up at that. Temptation, after all, came in all sorts of flavors now didn't it?

Yes, it did, indeed.

**

Night fall found them deep inside the forest, in a quiet dell surrounded on three sides by overgrown trees with interlaced branches that were thick enough to block out almost all the stars overhead. The fourth side was filled by a neatly laid fire, and Pony knelt beside it to light the tinder as the last bit of twilight faded.

Gabrielle was sorting out what gear they had left, her legs sprawled out as she leaned back against a tree trunk, sparing an occasional glance over at Ares, who was seated nearby, slumped against a second trunk with his eyes closed. A bandage of leaves was tied around his chest with a bit of hide, some of the leaves stained a deep rust.

Two dead rabbits, and three fish, likewise, were laying near the fire, waiting for it to catch and provide their first real meal of the day, and Xena was kneeling over them sharpening sticks to use to cook them with.

"Think we'll catch up to them in the morning?" Pony broke the silence. "Maybe we shoulda kept going."

Xena looked up briefly, then returned her attention to what she was doing. "They don't travel at night." She replied, in a flat tone. "Things hunt them."

"And us." Gabrielle spoke up. She was glad enough to be sitting down after being on the move all day, after their adventure in the mountain and she felt an almost affection for the big hunting cats and the huge bears she knew the hooters would be hiding from.

Pony simply nodded, and went back to starting the fire.

Xena finished getting the sticks ready, and started threading chunks of meat and fish on them.

"Xe, you want me to.."

"No.' The warrior wiggled another piece onto a branch.

Gabrielle went peacefully back to her sorting, setting aside the few nuts and by now dried berries she'd found in the bottom of the pack. The hide was already stretched between two of the tree branches, having been beaten free of a degree of it's travel dirt and she'd washed out their skull and had some dried figs soaking in it.

The fire caught, and the glade started to fill with crimson light, spreading a familiar rich scent along with welcome heat Gabrielle could feel against her bare feet. She flexed her toes gratefully and set the last bits of tools and rocks down as she leaned back to watch Xena from across the glade.

The warrior was tense. Gabrielle could see the stiffness in her shoulders, and the faint grimace as she twisted her neck as she worked. They'd really made pretty good time, considering they had Ares to deal with and had to watch out for ambushes, but she knew her partner was really worried about Granella and wanted to find her.

Had it been Xena alone, she'd have kept going. Gabrielle knew that absolutely, and in fact, if it had been just the two of them they still might have, if Xena didn't think it would be too much for Gabrielle to handle.

Or if Gabrielle couldn't have talked her into it. The bard set her things aside and got to her feet, crossing soundlessly over the leaf strewn ground over to where Xena was hunkered. She circled around the warrior and put her hands on her shoulders, beginning a gentle kneading of the tense

muscles there. "Xena, is this the valley we saw from up there?" She glanced up at the looming wall now lost in the darkness.

"One of them." The warrior exhaled, leaning back a trifle into her touch. "That path they're taking.. looks like it leads back to those caves."

"The one with the bear?" Gabrielle put a little more pressure into what she was doing.

"No.. that wasn't.. ah." Xena rocked her head back and forth. "The place with the eyes."

"Eyes?" Pony looked around from where she was holding her hands out to the fire. "What does that mean?" She watched Xena lay her kabobs down and surrender herself to Gabrielle's touch, the bard standing over her with an expression of gentle indulgence on her face. "Whose eyes?"

"We don't know." Gabrielle answered. "Xena, are you sure that's where they're headed?" She glanced down at the dark head bowed in front of her. "They were more scared of those things than we were."

"What things?" Pony asked.

Xena straightened, and tipped her head back to rest against Gabrielle's belly. "It's just past the cleft up above us." She exhaled. "They could be going somewhere else, but something tells me that's where we'll find them."

"Really?"

The warrior nodded. "Yeah."

Pony turned and rested her elbows on her knees. "Why?" She asked. "I figure if I keep asking you'll answer something sometime."

Gabrielle gave her an apologetic look. "Sorry, Pony." She took a breath to continue, then frowned and looked back down at her partner. "Why?"

"Because it's the place I least want to go." Xena responded readily. "And that's just how my life's been going the last week or so." She reached behind her and patted Gabrielle's calf. "Thanks. You want to cook those now? I'll just burn em."

Gabrielle gave her a kiss on the head and then eased around from behind her and took possession of the kabobs. Seating herself on a flat rock to one side of the fire, she carefully sorted them and set them into the structure of the campfire, some closer to the heart and some further away. "We found a cave while we were looking for a way out."

"One of many." Xena muttered.

"Mm.." The bard moved a stick closer, watching it with a knowledgeable eye. "Anyway, we found some really creepy invisible things with floating eyeballs in there and didn't stick around."

Pony merely stared at her.

"You asked." Gabrielle smiled.

"Uh huh." The Amazon watched her curiously. "How do you know how to do that?"

"What?" Gabrielle paused in confusion.

"That." Pony pointed at the kabobs.

Xena had seated herself on the ground, and pulled her boots up under her cross legged. "Self preservation." She said. "She'd have starved a long time ago if she hadn't figured it out." She rested her fist against one hand. "Anyway, their track is heading for that pass, so that's where we'll make for tomorrow."

Gabrielle glanced past her partner's shoulder, as she caught motion from Ares from the corner of her eye. "Xe."

The warrior turned as Ares sat up. "Don't move around."

The god glared at her, his arm clamped over his chest. "Don't you tell me what to do." He snarled. "Thought you were supposed to be this great healer, Xena. I'm not healing."

The warrior got to her feet and dusted her hands off, walking over to crouch down next to Ares, pushing him back down and reaching for the leaf bandage. "Lay still." She removed the leaves and studied the wound, grimacing at the swollen, red edges. "You're not helping."

Gabrielle watched them for a moment, then she went back to her careful turning and arranging of kabobs. "Xena's half right." She commented, more to take Pony's attention off the two at the far end of the campsite than anything. "I'm sure I wouldn't have starved."

"Uh."

"And, I kinda knew how to do this before I met Xena, so it's something that.. Gabrielle edged one kabob over a little. "Something that I brought to our partnership, in a way. Something I could do well."

"Oh." Pony wrapped her arms around her knees. "Some people are like that in the village." She offered. "They kinda come to it early, I guess, and the kitchen bosses catch em and put em to work."

"Mm." The bard nodded slowly. "Well, I like to cook.. but really I was told when I was little that I'd better develop some kind of skill."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." Gabrielle half smiled. "So I'd be worth a bride price, you know?"

Pony blinked. "Oh."

"Yeah." The bard chuckled softly. "I'd have been a good little wife, huh? Demure, obedient..."

Pony burst out laughing, covering her mouth hastily.

Gabrielle glanced over at her, with a wicked grin. "Yup.. Xena picked up a bargain that day, didn't she?"

"What?" Xena turned her head and looked at the bard. "You better not be telling stories about me shopping, Gabrielle T. Bard."

"Pon wanted some lingerie tips.. you've got the nicest I know of, hon." Gabrielle called back. "Boy, you should see her in this little lacy blue number she go."

"GABRIELLE."

Pony had merely covered her ears, and was humming tunelessly.

The bard chuckled again and went back to her cooking. "Anyway." She lowered her voice. "It's nice to be good at something, you know?"

"Yeah." Pony agreed. "You know I'm a leather crafter, right?"

"Eph told me that, yea."

The Amazon was silent for a moment. "She did?" Her voice rose a little in surprise. "Really?"

"She did." Gabrielle confirmed. "She was talking about those bracers you made for her. She really likes them." Her eyes lifted as she studied Pony's face, seeing a startling openness there that charmed her. "We were talking about gifts that meant the most to us."

What had she told Ephiny? What gift could she consider the most valuable? Gabrielle smiled to herself. Eph had expected her to say something incredibly sappy, like Xena's heart. And of course, that was the absolute truth, but she remembered saying something very trivial – was it her flavored quills? Something so completely pointless it meant nothing to anyone but her.

A warmed linen in the chill weather when she got out of the bath? Her scrolls neatly ordered? A cup of hot tea waiting by the bedside when she woke?

The truth was, she cherished every moment she had with her partner now, because she knew exactly what the price of what she had was. "You know, being in love is such a special thing. I'm glad you got to experience that, Pony."

Pony twisted her hands together, looking up after a moment to meet Gabrielle's eyes. "I never figured to understand what you meant by that." She admitted. "I mean, I always knew you had this whole gooshy thing going, y'know?"

"Mm."

Pony nodded slowly. "Y'know, then one day I realized you knew what the Hades you were talking about and I gotta be honest.. that's the first day I really looked at you as my Queen."

Gabrielle slowly turned the kabobs. "Really?"

"Yeah."

The fire crackled and popped, sending sparks flying upward. "Well." The bard sighed. "The day the Amazons accepted Xena as my partner.. was the first day I really thought of myself as your Queen."

Pony considered that in silence for a bit. "Figures."

"Mm."

Across the campfire, Xena emerged from the shadows, her arm around Ares as they moved slowly towards the fire.

"There goes the neighborhood." Pony muttered.

"Mm.☒"

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Gabrielle examined a bit of leaf she'd removed from under her knee. Though it was dead, it fascinated her to see the lacy filigree left once the flesh of the leaf had fallen away. A skeleton of sorts, but far more beautiful than an animal's collection of large bones.

Nature was funny that way. It gloried in the tiniest details, like the wonderful patterns on a bumblebee and the exquisite perfection of a feather – and yet so much of it was senseless like the flooding that had overtaken their home.

The bard carefully folded a bit of bark around the dead leaf and tied the makeshift case up with a scrap of gut. Then she put the whole thing into their carry bag and leaned back on her hands, stretching her legs towards the fire.

She'd finished telling stories a little while ago, and an exhausted silence had fallen over the camp. Ares was huddled close to the fire, Pony was as opposite him as she could get, and she and Xena were sitting next to each other on the side of the fire closest to the opening.

Xena was gazing into the flames, her hands curled around a cup she was slowly sipping from. She was keeping an eye on Ares, but as Gabrielle shifted she turned her attention fully to her partner. "You should get some sleep."

Just the suggestion almost made her close her eyes. "Are you?" Gabrielle countered, studying the tired furrows in her partner's brow.

For an answer, Xena glanced around the camp, then swirled her cup and cocked an eyebrow.

Gabrielle clucked her tongue and shook her head. "What am I going to do with you?"

Xena's lips twitched. "Anything you damn want."

"Would you two cut it out." Ares glowered at them, wrapping his catskin more firmly around his shoulders. "No wonder you turned away from me, Xena. You got caught in goo-ville."

Gabrielle rested her cheek against Xena's shoulder and fought the urge to stick her tongue out at him. "You sound just like your sister when you talk like that."

"Shut up."

"Yeah, he does, doesn't he?" Xena agreed. "Maybe she's rubbing off on him."

"When I get out of here." Ares warned. "I'm gonna turn both of you into chipmunks."

Xena and Gabrielle looked at each other. Gabrielle solemnly reached up and put her fingertip on Xena's nose. "Wiggle for me."

The warrior bit her finger instead, mock shaking her head and making a growling noise.

"I'm gonna throw up." Ares turned away from them and looked back at the fire. "You coulda really been someone, Xena."

Coulda. Xena gazed thoughtfully up at the night sky, and pondered as to whether that was the first time she'd really heard Ares speak about her.. about her potential, in the past tense. Before it had always seemed to her that he'd been trying to turn her, trying to get her away from what he'd considered a useless path.

So, did that mean he'd finally acknowledged the strength of her relationship with Gabrielle, or had he simply given up on her?

Curiously, she wasn't sure exactly which option she considered more appealing. "Ares, I am somebody." She remarked mildly.

The god snorted, and shook his head.

"I like who I am." In a moment of personal revelation, Xena realized how true the words really were, and she wondered how she'd come so full circle in herself without even noticing it. She looked down at Gabrielle, surprised, or perhaps unsurprised to see tears rolling down the bard's face, as she, too, gazed into the fire.

"You're a fool."

"You're the fool, Ares." Xena replied. "For thinking you could give me, or anyone anything worth having."

Ares turned and stared at her, shadows erasing the pain from his face and replacing it with menace.

"What could you offer me?" The warrior asked, unfazed. "Glory? War? Fighting? Blood?" She watched Gabrielle's hand close around hers, the fingers tightening. "It's nothing, Ares. Nothing without family. Friends.. " She rested her cheek against the bard's hair. "Love." She laughed faintly. "I've had both, remember? You haven't. I know, you don't."

Pony was curled up on the ground across the fire from them, and Xena could see her eyes flicking between Ares and her, wide and fascinated.

"You don't know anything." Ares told her. "Life isn't anything without power. You don't have that, you're just so much cattle. That's what you are now, Xena. Just a cow."

Xena thought the words should have stung her more. Certainly, Ares meant them to, this sharp edge lashing at her grounded in his own pain and discomfort. She thought about what he'd said, and nodded a bit as she acknowledged the grain of truth in it.

She was never going to rule the world. Even if she turned away from her family now, gave up all she had, and went with Ares it was too late. She'd seen too much, done too much. Experienced too much.

Grown too much as a person. Xena licked her lips, tasting a hint of the broiled fish Gabrielle had made them. Gotten too old? A faint smile appeared. Maybe. "Power only matters when you've got an eternity to wield it in, Ares." She answered him finally. "When you don't, you find out just how useless it really is."

The god snorted. "Spare me the mortal martyrdom, Xena."

Gabrielle felt her thigh muscles uncoil as she listened to the evenly beating heart under her ear, realizing that Ares taunting wasn't having its intended effect. She could almost feel the steady confidence exuding from Xena, as the warrior's arms curled around her and she was pulled a little closer into the warmth of Xena's embrace.

"What would you know about it, Ares?" Xena asked. "You've never lost anything. Maybe if you had, you'd understand why your way doesn't hold any interest for me anymore."

Ares curled up against the rock he'd been leaning on and pulled the catskin closer. "Shows how little you know about anything, doesn't it." He focused on the fire and turned his back on them, letting the silence lengthen into the darkness.

Gabrielle waited through it, breathing in rhythm with her soulmate quietly before she looked up at the firelit profile above her. After a brief pause, Xena tilted her head and their eyes met and the connection surge between them so strongly it made the hair on the back of her neck stiffen in reflex.

There were times, and this is one of them, that she could sense that other facet of her partner. The thing that was more than human in her, that sense of destiny that sometimes took Gabrielle by surprised and left her wondering if her own life could live up to the potential of her soulmates.

The something that made her ask, every once in a while, 'why me?'

Why me? Why was I in that little clearing on that day all those years ago?

Why was I the one she chose? Why did I choose her?

"Hey." Xena broke her profound musings. "Got any of those herbs left for tea?" She leaned down and gave Gabrielle a kiss on the lips. "On second thought..." She murmured, going back for a second and lingering there as they gently explored each other.

They'd been suffering hardship for so long now, the surge of passion was almost a shock and it took them both somewhat by surprise. Gabrielle felt a shiver work its way down her body and her hands reached for Xena before she remembered they were in front of others.

She felt Xena inhale sharply as her fingertips gently traced the curve of the warrior's breast and an insistent growl started in her own guts as Xena's hand dropped casually to her thigh and the edge of her thumb stroked the inside of it.

They separated a little, and Gabrielle pulled back to see a definite, dark passion gazing at her from the depths of Xena's eyes. "Hon." She exhaled in audible frustration, her eyes flicking to Ares turned back.

Xena smiled, one of her sexy, impudent ones that usually got them both into trouble. Gabrielle captured her hand in her own, and kissed the knuckles of it, then rubbed her cheek against them.

Xena sighed, but she leaned back against the rock and patted her lap, pointing at Gabrielle's head and indicating she should lay down. She draped her arm over the bard as she complied, regretfully putting her libido on hold.

She had no problem necking in front of Ares. But she respected the fact that Gabrielle did, and she knew the bard was exhausted, though...

Damn. Xena could feel her skin tingling, and she couldn't help tracing a lazy circle on Gabrielle's shoulder as the bard settled herself down with a sigh. After a minute, she wriggled backward a little and tucked the back of her head up against Xena's stomach, her hand casually coming to rest on the inside of the warrior's thigh.

Xena threaded her fingers through the bard's hair, tracing the edge of her ear. She could feel the warmth of Gabrielle's breath against her leg, and the energy that was running between them, the warm sensuality overriding their conscious decision effortlessly.

Now that, that had surprised her, frankly. Xena smiled, half closing her eyes as Gabrielle drew a teasing line up the inside of her thigh. She loved Gabrielle with all her heart, but she never expected her village born partner, so innocent in many ways, to be as openly seductive as she was.

"Xe?"

The warrior brushed her knuckles over Gabrielle's cheek. "Mm?"

"You're so not a cow."

Xena laughed softly. "I'm not?" She asked.

"No." Gabrielle leaned over and kissed the slightly dusty skin she was lying over. "You're wild." She curled her arm around the warrior's leg and continued her attentions, placing tiny kisses up her thigh. "Totally undomesticated."

Xena felt her heart rate jump, and she was suddenly a little short of breath. Her eyes flicked to the fire, realizing Ares was now curled against the stone with his head resting on it, and Pony was wrapped up on the other side of the flames. "I am, huh?"

Gabrielle's hand reached the edge of her leathers, and slipped under it. "Yeah."

The touch was getting to her, dark energy rising as her fingers started twitching and she reached for Gabrielle in return, wanting the feel of her warm skin and stifling a gasp as she felt teeth nibbling just on the inside of her knee.

Undomesticated. The warrior almost laughed. Yeah right.

Slave to love, more like it. .

**

Xena was ripped out of sleep mostly by her own conscience, her eyes opening as she gazed somewhat dazedly around at the quiet, dimly lit camp. The air was lightening around them in the secluded dell, and her time sense told her dawn was not far off.

Exhaling, she eased down off her elbow and tried to collect her wits, not even remembering falling asleep. Gabrielle, tucked against her left side, was still deeply so, the bard's slow, even breathing and completely relaxed body oblivious to their surroundings.

Well. Xena rubbed her eyes with one hand. That was good at least. Gabrielle had needed the rest badly and apparently so had she. The warrior glanced around the campsite again with a touch of chagrin, hoping neither of their companions had been aware of the lapse.

Gabrielle shifted slightly, wrapping her arm more firmly around Xena's waist and murmuring softly under her breath. "Love you." The words floated up, just audible to Xena's ears and they immediately melted her heart in a small, surprising wave of joy.

Funny, how that worked. It wasn't as if she didn't know how Gabrielle felt about her, after all, and it wasn't as though Gabrielle didn't regularly tell her she loved her, but somehow these tiny leaks of her unconscious mind affected her differently.

She remembered at the end of their estrangement, during those long uncertain weeks they'd spent working back towards each other, how she'd stayed up at night, listening for those odd, occasional broken whispers.

So often they'd hurt. So often she'd had to listen to the aching heartbreak there was a twin to inside her. But one night, during a rainstorm, something changed.

Xena sat against the wall, her knees drawn up and her forearms resting on them as she watched the fire consume the last batch of wood she'd just put into it.

They were in a sandy cave, protected from the weather she could hear lashing hard outside, and she was able to gather to herself a moment of bleak peace as her eyes strayed to the furs next to her, where Gabrielle was curled up asleep.

Close, but not too close. Side by side, but with just enough distance to clearly mark that there was, in fact, distance between them still.

Gods.

So much strain was etched across the bard's face. It aged her beyond her years and Xena could see the exhaustion even in the dim firelight, more emotional even than physical as being together every minute brought them both a certain level of unending pain.

She looked, pretty much, like how Xena felt, in fact. Tired, and sad, and aching inside – holding on gingerly to the tentatively re-emerging relationship between them, wishing for better, wanting a healing, but bowed under the weight of the dark clouds overhead.

“Xe.”

Gabrielle's whisper caught her ear, and she leaned closer, despite the fear that almost made her cover her ears and turn away. “I'm here.” She whispered back, lifting her hand, then letting it drop back down in a moment of sour uncertainty. “I'm here, Gabrielle.”

The bard remained silent, her fingertips twitching slightly. Xena could see her eyes moving behind her eyelids and realized she really almost didn't want to know what she was dreaming about.

Not if it included her, at any rate. She'd heard enough pained utterings lately to understand that while waking they were making progress, deep inside the both of them things were still very broken.

And damn, that hurt.

Suddenly, Gabrielle shifted, rolling half onto her back and reaching out blindly into the air. Without really thinking, Xena caught her hand and held it, catching her breath as the bard went very still.

She saw Gabrielle swallow, the movement visible against the skin of her throat. “Gab.” She mouthed the word, wanting for the thousandth time for things to be different again.

She was so tired of the pain, for both of them. So tired of the lost possibilities she saw reflected in Gabrielle's eyes whenever they looked at each other.

Then Gabrielle's fingers closed around hers, and the bard's body relaxed, as she pulled Xena's hand closer and her expression lightened. “Good.” She mumbled softly.

And just like that, the cave around her became friendlier, the fire crackled with cheerful warmth, and the rain outside brought back to her memories of a better time.

An immeasurable gift she was only now coming to truly understand and appreciate.

Xena sat in silence, watching Gabrielle sleep for a long time, gaining peace from giving it. Eventually she carefully lay down next to the bard, leaving her hand right where it was, and released a slow breath, blinking as warm tears rolled down her face.

It was just such a relief not to hurt for a little while. She wished it would last just long enough to see the dawn.

Then, after a popping crack from the fire, Gabrielle's eyes opened and she looked around in confusion, finally focusing on their joined hands. After a frozen moment, her eyes lifted slowly, almost fearfully to Xena's and they lay there in silence staring at each other.

The world, so echoingly large around them shrunk to the simple sound of two hearts.

Gabrielle finally smiled. Then she closed her eyes and sighed, tightening her hold on Xena's hand as her body relaxed again into sleep, coming to a crossroads in their life and passing through it with no more fanfare than that.

No more fanfare. No more knot in her throat, no more ball of festering tension in her gut. For this one moment in this one crossroad in their lives she could lay back and savor the warmth curled around her hand and just listen to the rain outside not falling on them.

Xena let her head rest back against the leaves, taking a moment to sort out her thoughts as she cradled Gabrielle against her and she waited for her heartbeat to even out and steady. As she studied the sky above them, watching the first hint of dawn bleaching the solid black and dimming the stars, Gabrielle shifted again and squirmed closer, sliding her knee over Xena's and pinning the warrior firmly to the ground.

Xena eyed the blond head tucked into her shoulder with a look of mild bemusement. She could roll the bard over, of course, but the look of utter, blissful contentment on her face was hard to disturb immediately. She let her fingers tangle idly through the bard's thick, blond hair as her breathing slowed to match her partner's and she felt the tension in her shoulders relax.

If she stayed like this, she suspected she'd drop back off to sleep, a somewhat unnerving side effect of the deepening bond she had with Gabrielle that could now override even her most profound defensive instincts. This was in no way a safe place for her to be unaware, but her partner's sleeping peace was stealing over her and making it hard to even keep her eyes open.

Well, damn. "Gab." Xena ran her fingertips up and down the bard's spine. "Gabrielle?"

Reluctantly, the bard stirred, opening one eye to examine her grumpily. "It's still dark out." She complained. "Sheeps, Xena."

"I know." The warrior agreed. "But I need you to wake up." She told her partner. "Or else find something else to use as a pillow."

Gabrielle's eyes dropped momentarily, then lifted again. "Knocked you out, huh?" Her lips twitched wryly, silently acknowledging the recently developed issue's complication in their lives.

"Mm."

"Well, you needed the rest." The bard gave up her spot, though, easing over onto her side, then sitting up. She felt much better for the night's sleep, so even though she could have easily remained snoozing until dawn, she really didn't mind starting her day now. "And anyway, nothing happened."

"This time." The warrior groused.

"Sorry, hon." Gabrielle watched Xena sit up and rub her eyes with the back of one hand. The warrior had dust smeared across one cheekbone, and her dark hair was in disarray, and when she looked back at her partner there was a wry plaintiveness in her expression that tugged strongly at the bard's caregiving instincts.

She reached over and smoothed the disheveled bangs from Xena's forehead. "Better we get ready to move as soon as it's light anyway, huh?"

"Uh huh." The warrior nodded. "You want to.."

"Yep." Gabrielle stood up and twisted her body right and left, loosening up the stiffness from a night lying on the ground. Well, mostly on the ground. "Be right back." She picked up their deer skull and went to the back of the clearing, where a tiny brook trickled past the trees, heading for the plateau below.

She set the skull down and plunged her hands into the water, flexing her fingers against the chill. "Brr." She steeled herself, then leaned over and splashed the handful into her face, shocking her senses into complete wakefulness as she scrubbed the dust from her skin. "Buuuhhhh..."

Away from the fire, the chill worked its way down her body and made her shiver, but she kept washing, running the water up her arms and giving her hair a quick rinse. It seemed, perhaps, a bit crazy but she did it out of personal preference, and long habit, and she knew Xena would do the same when it came her turn in a little while.

There were some, she knew, who reasoned that traveling was a dirty business, and keeping your body clean when it was just going to get dirty again made no sense. That had a certain logic, but from the very start of their travels Gabrielle had realized that her rough, tough, no nonsense, gruff and dour companion was really quite the princess in terms of disliking being grungy.

It was really kind of funny, in a way. Xena never minded getting dirty, or muddy, or gods knew, bloody – but she really hated staying that way for any length of time and the first thing she always browsed the market for was local kinds of soap and things to apply it with.

Sponges, mostly. Gabrielle sighed, and wished for a sponge herself, as she shook her hands rapidly to rid them of droplets. Then she dipped the skull in and filled it with clean water, rising with it and turning to make her way back to the fire.

Xena was still reclining next to it, her ankles crossed, hands folded on her stomach as she watched Gabrielle return. As the bard approached, she gracefully got to her feet and stretched, then shook the sand off her leathers and met her partner as she neared the fire. “Tea?”

“Yep.” Gabrielle bumped her with one shoulder, then stopped as Xena circled her waist and drew her close for a simple, passionate kiss before she released her and gave her a slap on the behind as she continued past. “Eheh.” She cleared her throat and wrinkled her nose at the sudden flare of passion. “Thanks, Xe.”

“Anytime.” The warrior called over her shoulder as she knelt by the brook.

With a tiny shake of her head, Gabrielle lowered herself to the ground near the fire, setting the skull in an ashy depression to heat the water within it. She heard a sound nearby as she finished her task, and looked up to see Ares stirring, and across the fire, Pony rising and shaking herself. “Good morning.” She called out in a cheerful voice.

Both turned and glared at her. Gabrielle muffled a smile, and dug in her pouch for some herbs to soak for tea, whistling softly under her breath.

**

One Wild Ride

Part 22

Gabrielle huddled down behind a moss covered rock and waited, her hand resting on the furry surface with her fingertips idly rubbing against it. Her attention was focused on the broken ground ahead of them, where Xena and Pony were currently scouting. “Wonder if they found anything?”

Ares was seated with his back against the rock and his long legs extended into the sunlight. “Dead Amazon, maybe?”

The bard sighed. “Next time I’m really going to leave Pony to guard you. You have the suckiest attitude.”

Ares rolled his head to one side and regarded her. “When I get my powers back, I’m gonna turn you into a frog. Then you won’t care about my attitude cause you’ll be too busy croaking.”

Gabrielle scanned the slope in front of them again, searching for any sign of her returning soulmate. “I like frogs.” She resisted the urge to kick him. “Xena does, too.”

“As dinner?”

The bard glanced at him. “Have you always been this big a jerk? How does Aphrodite put up with you?”

“Shut up.”

Gabrielle returned her attention to the scrub, straightening a bit as she spotted motion, in tune with the little surge of connection that correctly identified it as Xena. After a brief pause, the flicker morphed into the warrior’s tall form crossing between two large trees and heading back in her direction.

Alone.

The bard felt her heart rate pick up, as her eyes fastened on Xena, reading the tense body language as the warrior ducked under a pine branch and circled the stone she was hiding behind. "Where's Pony?"

Xena dropped to a crouch next to her, and put a hand on her knee. "Looks like they're using that cave." She said. "We found tracks into it."

An unspoken message floated in the air between them. Gabrielle could hear it in Xena's quiet tone, and feel it in the gentle clasp on her leg. It was hard to remember, really, when she'd realized that Xena's way of preparing her for bad news was that touch, a hand on the shoulder, and later, cupping her cheek; as though her companion, friend, and then lover needed that grounding in a difficult task.

And so now, even without speech, Gabrielle knew what Xena had also found was evidence that Granella had been taken inside the cave. She met the warrior's eyes, then let her own drop to Xena's other hand, which held a scrap of tattered, fawn colored leather stained in spots with a darker, rustier hue.

She reached out and took hold of it, taking it from Xena's fingers and studying it briefly before lifting her head and meeting Xena's gaze. "Pony watching?"

Xena nodded.

Gabrielle nodded back. "Okay, so let's go." She folded the tattered hide and stood, as Xena rose gracefully to stand next to her, one hand still clasped around the bard's shoulder. She took a deep, steadying breath and shifted her mind into that place that tapped into the darker side of her own nature.

The place that knew violence, and understood its purpose. The side of her that was most closely aligned with the fire so visible to her behind Xena's carefully calm expression.

She wasn't an Amazon. Xena had said once she'd never truly be, and she'd been right about that. Gabrielle reached casually over and picked up the three quarter staff Ares had been using as a walking stick. She'd gone past the Amazons, crossing lines through what they were and out the other side, becoming in a sense, what Xena was.

A warrior.

Gabrielle closed her fingers around the staff and sounded the word in her head, finding it as full of light and shadow as she and Xena were. With a faint smile, she tucked the bit of hide into her belt and tucked the staff into the crook of her arm as she put a boot up on the rock and checked to make sure the laces on it were tight.

"Find your other girlfriend?" Ares asked Xena. "Or what's left of her."

Xena didn't react to the jibe. She adjusted the strap on her leathers and shifted her shoulders to settle her sword, barely giving the god a glance. "Stay here." She told him quietly.

"I don't think so." Ares snorted.

"Look." The warrior turned to face him. "That wasn't a request."

The god snorted again. "In case you missed the announcement, you ain't the boss of me, Xena."

"Ares." Xena turned and dropped to one knee beside him with startling suddenness. She grabbed him by the jaw and clamped down. "Just do what I tell you to." Her eyes fastened on his face. "Stay here. Stay out of our way."

Gabrielle half turned to watch, hearing a note in Xena's voice she didn't hear often. She could see Ares expression as he looked at Xena, amusement fading to a dark seriousness as they faced off.

Ares raised his hand and caught Xena's wrist, yanking it. The warrior's shoulder muscles twitched, but she didn't budge. "Let go of me." He rasped, softly.

Xena remained still, her fingers still clamped around his lower jaw. "Stay here." She warned, in an equally soft voice. "Ares, I mean it." She looked him right in the eye, for once feeling no fear of him, only a driving need to take care of a problem that made her twitch with impatience.

Ares studied her in silence, keeping her waiting just long enough for her to come to the edge of her temper before he let his head rest back against the rock. "All right." He answered. "Get lost."

Xena released him and stood, turning her back on him and heading past where Gabrielle was standing. She brushed by the bard without a word, circling the stone and starting across the scrub.

Gabrielle remained still, watching Ares intently until her partner was clear of the stone and she was sure the god was going to stay where he was. Then she hefted the staff and stepped around the rock, turning only at the last moment to follow Xena off into the grass.

They were heading into the wind, but Gabrielle saw Xena's strides shorten as the warrior detected her approach and she lengthened her own to catch up. They walked together side by side through the grass, neither speaking as the time for that seemed to be at an end.

Ares slowly struggled to his knees and turned, leaning against the rock and resting his arms atop it, watching the two women cross the broken ground leading towards the cliff. Despite the size difference, the body posture was identical, right down to the sexy swaggers that brought a wan smirk to the watching god's face.

Past them, he could see the edge of the rocks, and a curve in the cliff they seemed to be heading for, with visible determination. "Huh." He let his chin rest on his forearm. "Who'da figured." After a moment, he turned and sat down again, closing his eyes as a wave of pain washed over him.

It was maddening. His lips twitched into a snarl, before the effort to hold it became too great and he gave it up, crossing his arms and hugging the catskin to his body as a shiver worked through him. "Ugh." He muttered. "Forgot how much I hated mortality."

Last time, though, it hadn't been like this. He hadn't been hurt.

Hadn't faced mortality in quite so mortal a way. Ares opened his eyes and looked across the tiny clearing, acknowledging the growing weakness of his body with a grim understanding at odds with his often mocking attitude.

Dying wasn't in his plans this millennium. He'd seen enough mortals die to know he wanted no part of it – not to mention he remembered clearly watching from afar as Xena had slid down the long, tortured path to Tartarus in the most unappealing way.

He'd despised that weakness. He'd been disgusted at the waste of potential given in the saving of what.. some little ragamuffin nothing? Peh. He'd given up on her, walked away, found something else to occupy his time.

A soft rustle in the brush brought his eyes wide open, but after a moment's searching he found nothing in the area and went back to his dark musing again.

Returning to Tartarus to find Xena gone, that.. had surprised him. Ares snorted softly. Though damn, it shouldn't have, since he'd have gotten out of there in a heartbeat too. But he knew he'd missed an opportunity he'd never get again.

Xena had needed something, bad. He could have given it to her. Instead, she'd turned away from everything he'd ever taught her and gone to the weakling side of her nature instead.

Love.

Bleah. Ares rolled his eyes. Barf. His damn sister had laughed, and laughed and laughed at him, and he'd hated Xena for that. Hated Gabrielle. Hated that smarmy happiness and set about to destroy it any way he could.

Ares reopened his eyes and gazed bleakly at the green, verdant bushes, so full of life. He'd had wins and losses, over the ages. All of them had, a game, really sometimes.

But Xena had been more than a loss. Xena had been a failure.

Xena had beaten him, and that.. Ares only just kept from grinding his teeth together. That only made him more intent on getting her back. He could have accepted a loss. There was no way he'd ever accept being beaten.

Not even by her – this mortal who was as close to whatever he considered his heart as anything else was.

Damn her.

**

They found Pony crouched behind a fallen log, her eyes fixed on the entrance to the cave and her elbows resting on her thighs. Xena dropped down next to her and Gabrielle leaned against the bark, peering past the Amazon. "Looks quiet."

The opening to the cave was empty, though the ground before it was churned up as though something had been digging there. Xena pointed to one side of the entrance, where a pile of debris was laying. "Found the leather there."

Gabrielle nodded. "What else?"

The warrior shook her head. "Scraps."

Pony looked at both of them. "What are we waiting for?" She asked.

Xena was briefly silent, then she reached over her shoulder and drew her sword out. "Nothing." She responded. "Let's go." She stepped up onto the fallen log and walked along it, then dropped off the far end and headed for the cave opening.

Gabrielle scrambled after her, and Pony got hastily to her feet and followed, drawing her own sword out in readiness. "Xena." The bard called softly. "Wait for us."

"Well, c'mon." Xena called back, impatiently.

"Wait, wait wait.. now it's c'mon." Pony muttered under her breath. "Freaking piece of cycling..oof!"

Gabrielle didn't even apologize. She returned her staff to it's normal carry position and watched the entrance intently, wondering if Xena's plan was to simply charge right into it and start swinging.

Wouldn't be the first time. Gabrielle only hoped it wouldn't be the last time either. She took a firmer grip on her makeshift weapon and for a second, almost wished she had something more potent and the skills to do something with it.

Almost.

Xena reached the curve in the rock and paused, putting her free hand on it as she studied the opening. "Okay." She turned to them. "We've got two choices."

In the pause after her words, a thin, wavering scream filled the air, drifting from the cave entrance.

"We have no choices." Gabrielle said, into the momentary shocked silence, before they all simply bolted and ran, picking up speed as they headed for the dark cavern, moving in for once a solid accord.

As they reached the rock wall, a dark, furred figure emerged from the cave, spotting the motion coming towards him and opening his mouth to scream a warning.

Xena had been carrying her sword reversed, and now she whirled it in her hand into fighting position a split second before she swept her arm around in a tight circle, carving a slice across his throat with the tip as he tried to dive out of the way.

Blood flew. The hooter dropped, and Xena hurdled him as he rolled towards her and kept right going into the darkness beyond with Gabrielle and Eponin right on her heels.

**

They stepped into chaos. The darkness blurred with figures, flickering in and out of the light from the opening as the hooters spotted them and charged to attack.

Xena let out a yell and swept her sword around, clearing the space around her as she sensed Gabrielle moving in on her left. She punched an ugly face leering at her from the shadows, turning and wrapping her hand around a wrist and wrenching it backwards as she reversed her sword and slugged her nearest attacker in the head.

She was aware of Gabrielle in that odd, displaced way that had developed between them, not needing to see her to know exactly where she was, her body shifting to one side as the bard's staff came shooting past her, hitting the hooter whose hands were outstretched trying to grab Xena's leathers.

The staff batted him away, and that gave Xena a chance to turn her head and sweep the interior of the cavern, searching for Granella. The light from outside was dappled from the moving bodies, but her vision was up to the challenge and she saw through the shadows, into the back of the cavern where the swirling, grinding mass of hooters made their own grim marker.

Xena went into motion, gathering up every ounce of energy she could as she started through the crowd. "Gabrielle!" She let out a bellow. "In the back!"

"With you!" Gabrielle charged forward at her partner's heels, staying to the left side to give Xena the fullest clearance for her sword arm. She ducked under the arms of a leaping hooter, hauling up short as another flung himself at her and flew past as she wasn't in the place he expected.

She managed to keep her momentum in check until he hit the ground and then she jumped over him, her peripheral vision catching a heavy limb in the hands of one of the creatures heading for Xena's ribs. "Yeahhh!!!" Gabrielle brought the lower end of her staff around to block the branch, grimacing at the shock of the contact.

Xena spun, switching her sword from her right hand to her left as she brought her left arm down hard, chopping the limb wielder on the back of the neck with the blade and sending blood and bone flying everywhere.

Pony surged past them both unexpectedly, both hands gripped around her sword hilt and the blade moving in savage, short arcs as she plowed through the hooters. "Bastards!"

Xena's eyes widened as she saw the six creatures turn and jump at the Amazon. She reversed her course and grabbed her own hilt, locking her arms and starting to yell a warning at Gabrielle, only to see the bard sense her motion and dive for the ground, sweeping her staff in a tight circle as she ended up on her knees.

Xena's sword, sweeping around in a counterpointing circle to the bard's staff, caught three of the hooters at neck level as their feet were taken from under them and their bodies came right into the path of her blade. She powered her way through them, feeling the grinding wrench as her blade severed bone and the hot splash of blood across her thighs.

She whirled and kicked out, her boot catching the last one and flipping his dying body over Gabrielle's still kneeling form as the bard ducked and scrambled to her feet, charging right at Xena with an intent look on her face that made the warrior stop in her tracks, staying still as the tip of the staff nearly grazed her jaw before it stopped short with a sound like a splitting melon. She released her right arm and extended it to catch Gabrielle's lunging form, pulling them both around in a circle as Gabrielle tucked in close to her and she swung her sword left handed and twirled it to back stab the hooter attacking them from behind.

Then they were both bolting across the cavern after Pony, Xena getting a shoulder into one of the hooters and sending him flying as she lifted her sword and started hacking at the hairy backs in the frenzied circle. Pony was already fighting furiously to the right of them, chopping all around her frantically as bodies turned and howls went up.

A bellow rang out from the back of the cavern, and the pile stirred, opening a little as some of the hooters turned to face the sound and became aware of the danger at their backs.

Xena had one fast look at a huge creature, and the flicker of refracted sunlight off something metallic, and the wall of green eyeballs behind him and for a bare instant the world around her halted.

Just stopped, giving her just a second to mentally enunciate a dire curse before everything exploded back into motion and she knew they had to get out of the cave or they'd die in it. "Gabrei.."

"See it." Gabrielle handed her the staff and went for Pony, dodging through the dark, hairy bodies so fast the grasping hands couldn't get a hold on her mostly bare skin.

Xena let out the loudest yell she was capable of and started whacking everything in site, using the staff to hold off the nearest of the creatures with it's end tucked against her ribs as she slashed viciously in a circle around her, her body moving in fast, counterpointed strikes that didn't give her adversaries time to get a grip on her.

The crowd turned and broke apart, moving from their victim and facing her – giving enough of a glimpse of the tattered, ragged form on the floor to kick Xena's already racing warrior instincts into overdrive.

It was times like this, her ability to focus on a goal often brought her through places she otherwise would have died easily in. She dropped the makeshift staff and grabbed her sword two handed, slashing through the chest of the hooter in front of her and shoving him back.

Giving her enough space to take one long step, and then she was crouching, letting the arms rush over her before she exploded upward and was airborne over their heads, twisting and flipping her body as she whirled in mid air, slashing downward to clear space to land.

Blood everywhere. Stink everywhere. Yelling.

She landed on her knees near Granella's limp form and turned, feeling the hot stab of warning in her guts even before she heard Gabrielle's bellow.

Two creatures were falling towards her, with flaming torches in their hands. Instinctively, she put her body between them and Granella, knowing she had a chance maybe to stop one of them. "Damn." She got her sword up in front of her. "That's gonna hurt."

Pony paused in her slashing, hauled half offbalance by Gabrielle's grip on the back of her leathers. She turned just in time to see Xena land next to Granella's body and turn, as the crowd of hooters rushed past her towards the kneeling warrior.

Xena could have gotten out of the way in time, she realized. She could have jumped up past the crowd and escaped.

But she saw the dark haired woman's head lift, saw the comprehension in her eyes as she prepared to fend off the attack to protect Granella instead and suddenly all the crap Gabrielle had been saying to her for the last two days made some whacko kind of sense.

For a second, she saw Xena's eyes shift and focus just behind her. "Crap!" Pony wrenched loose from Gabrielle and barreled through the crowd, keeping her sword behind her as she reached out with one hand to grab the back of one of the attackers and just...

"Pony!" Gabrielle caught her intent and ripped herself free of a pair of clutching hands with some difficulty, following the Amazon into the press of bodies and dodging a rapidly falling stick that bounced off her shoulders just as she caught up to her.

The shove on the hooter had come at the wrong moment. It forced the creature forward and into Xena's sword, twisting it and the warrior out of position as the second hooter dove right at her.

Gabrielle clawed her way forward as the creature grabbed her with it's free hand, and they both lunged towards Xena in a flash of torchlight and burning hair. The bard felt her boots hit solid ground for an instant, and she used all of it, shoving her body sideways with all her strength as she

caught sight of Xena's sword splitting the other hooter in half and whispering by Pony's head so close it shaved a lock of her hair off.

Then she was twisting in mid air, losing track of her balance as she sensed the hard ground coming up and she landed on her back with a painful jar moments before the hooter landed on top of her.

She felt the heat of the torch against her face, and got a hand free to paw at it, managing to get hold of hot bark instead of flames and shove it from her just as the hooter was lifted off her body and flung somewhere. "Xena!"

The warrior's hand grabbed hers and she was being hauled to her feet in a whirl of burning fur and screams and blasts of chill air at her back that made her nape hairs prickle. "What about.."

"Got her! GO!" Xena's voice thundered back. "GO GO GO! RUN!!"

Gabrielle caught sight of something big behind them and she decided to listen for a change, moving with Xena as they headed for the entrance. "Pony!"

"RIGHT FREAKING HERE!" The Amazon bawled. "JUST DON'T LET THOSE DAMN THINGS TOUCH ME!"

"What?" Gabrielle spared a glance, and saw the skeletons reaching for them. "Sheeps. GO!"

Screaming. Gabrielle felt a cold, slimy touch on her back and she decided looking behind her again was a bad idea. She followed Xena as the warriors speed picked up, then winced as something hit the rock to one side of her and shards broke off to sting her skin. "Wh.."

Xena grabbed her and bolted, and Gabrielle realized the warrior didn't have her sword out. She concentrated on just moving and they cleared the cave entrance steps ahead of a screaming mass of wild eyed hooters.

One bellowed.

Xena felt something rip through her hair, but she didn't even pause slightly. She increased her speed and headed for the ridge they'd left Ares on, knowing what she'd see if she looked behind her.

"Xena!" Pony yelled suddenly. "Bastard's got that damn sword!" The Amazon pulled her own from it's sheath. "They're coming after us.. you wanna..."

Face a hooter carrying Ares Sword? "RUN!" Xena directed. "They won't follow us."

"They are!" Pony protested. "We can't get.. Xena! C'mon!"

The almost dead weight on her shoulder was pulling her offbalance, and it was all Xena could do to keep her footing in the broken ground. She kept hold of Gabrielle's belt and grimly kept moving, hoping her instincts were right just this once.

A rock hit her in the back. "Bastards."

Gabrielle ducked a second, but as she turned to see where the missiles were coming from, she saw the hooters dropping back.

There were no skeletons with them. Nor anyone carrying a sword. "They're stopping." She managed to get out. "Thank the gods."

"Don't thank them yet." Xena headed up the slope, grateful she could just keep going. "We've got bigger problems right now."

Gabrielle glanced up at the silent, limp form over Xena's shoulders and caught sight of a pair of dull, staring eyes looking back at her without any recognition in them. She exhaled in shock, and forgot about the horror of the cave in a flickering instant. "Xe."

"Shh." Xena worked on picking her way up the slope, concentrating on keeping her balance. "Later."

Gabrielle turned to Pony instead, but the Amazon was keeping her eyes on the ground, her face set in frozen stillness.

Damn. The bard felt an ache settle into her chest. She'd thought they were pretty much at the bottom of the worst, hadn't she?

Damn.

**

"Just keep moving." Xena was starting to feel the strain across her shoulders as she lead the way through the brush at as fast a clip as she could manage. Behind her, Gabrielle had an arm around Ares and Pony was walking along her other side, shoving branches out of her way with impatient gestures.

They weren't being followed. That much, at least, she was thankful for but she knew she had to find defensible shelter and find it soon so she could take stock of the woman lying almost lifeless over her shoulders and decide what to do next.

The ground in front of them was more of the same. Broken rocks, thrown from the cliffs overhead that made walking a trial and between them, thorny bushes that raked over their legs and made her grimace every other step.

"Are we.." Pony started to ask, then fell silent.

"There's a cave up ahead." Xena answered shortly.

"Not another one like that."

"No." The warrior said.

"Or like the last one with the water."

"No. Just a cave."

Pony nodded, and kept walking. She had her sword drawn and her fingers were clenching and unclenching on the hilt of it, a sentiment Xena fully appreciated as she wished she could do the same.

She knew what this would all boil down to, of course. The big thing with the sword would come after them, and she'd have to stand up to it, and get Ares sword back. Like dozens of other times in her more or less recent path, she'd be called on to do the hero thing and hope against hope that one more time, she'd be up to it.

Xena exhaled, and shook her head to clear the hair from her eyes. They'd been walking for two candlemarks, and the broken ground, combined with carrying Granella was beginning to wear her out a little.

"Xe?"

"Yeah?" Xena didn't turn around, merely calling the greeting back over her shoulder at her partner.

"Can we take a break for a few?"

The warrior looked around, and spotted a thick patch of bushes just to the right of the path she was making. "Okay." She altered her course. "Back behind those."

She led the way around the edge of the scrub and found a thankfully flat bit of ground behind the hedges with a covering of short, almost soft grass. With a soft sigh, she dropped to one knee and gently eased Granella off her shoulders and onto the ground, feeling almost lightheaded as she straightened up and felt her back pop into place.

Granella made almost no reaction, simply curling up into a ball and remaining still after that, staring past Xena's knee as though it wasn't there. She was covered with scratches and bruises, her leathers in mere tatters around her, but the damage appeared more in her mind even than body.

That was out of Xena's realm, really. As a healer, she knew her skills to be more advanced than most, but when it came to the delicate sensibilities of the mind, she had to admit her straightforward often brutal approach didn't do much of any good.

With Gabrielle, well.. her love for the bard gave her an almost unlimited patience to untangle the untidy threads their relationship often got them both into. She understood her partner more deeply than anyone else, and so sometimes that gave her the insight and occasionally the right words to say.

But Granella – though a member of the family, was almost a virtual stranger to her and honestly she had no idea really where to even start, or if the woman would even respond to her if she did.

The warrior sighed, letting her hands rest on her thigh as she sensed a presence behind her and felt the warmth of Gabrielle's hands as they settled onto her shoulders and began a gentle kneading. "They must have.. ah.." She hesitated.

"Yeah." Gabrielle answered, in a quiet tone. "Why don't you get some water and let me sit with her for a bit."

Xena tipped her head back and gazed up at the bard's somber expression, acknowledging once again that their partnership made them far more than the sum of their individual parts. "How's he doing?"

A faint hint of wry amusement entered Gabrielle's eyes. "He stopped bitching at me. So not so good, I think." She admitted. "I figured we could all use a break."

Xena's lips twitched a bit as she studied the mud smudged visage above her. Then she bumped her a tiny bit with her head before she stood, giving Gabrielle a brief hug before she started towards the gushing runoff on the other side of the bushes.

Gabrielle collected herself, before she sat down in the grass next to Granella, pulling her legs up crossed under her. After a short period of silence, she lifted her eyes and looked at her sister in law's face, remembering bleakly her own experiences.

There were really no words that would mean anything, she figured. So she reached out and simply took Granella's hand and held it. She watched the woman's face for any reaction, but the glassy, dull eyes just looked through her, echoing a horror she wished she didn't understand.

Xena sat down next to the rivulet and scooped up some water in their skull, sipping from it one handed as she let her body recover. Ares had collapsed to lean against the base of one of the shrubs, and now he turned his head to look at her with dark circled eyes.

"Shoulda just killed her." The God of War commented. "She's a basket case."

The words were meant to sting, but Xena accepted them at face value, where their veneer of truth lay. "Shut up, Ares." She replied quietly. "What's one more anchor around our necks at this point? "

"You mean me?" Ares pointed at his own chest. "Xena, I'm shattered." He waited for her to answer, but the warrior simply sat there drinking her water, pretending he didn't exist. "So which girlfriend was that?" He asked, prodding for a reaction.

"She's my brother's wife." Xena replied, wiping her lips.

"Kinky."

Xena merely looked at him and shook her head. "I'll see if I can find any herbs to put on that cut. It's going bad."

Ares looked down at the reddened, seeping wound on his chest. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." The warrior stood up, scooping up a full skull of water to take with her. "If I'm lucky, it'll kill you." She walked away, droplets of water scattering the earth around her.

"You don't really mean that, Xena." Ares called after her.

"Keep talking, and I will mean it." The warrior called back, dropping to a crouch next to Gabrielle and offering her the skull. "Here." She held it while Gabrielle drank from it's edge, the bard's cheek brushing her knuckles. "You doing okay?"

Gabrielle made a half scrunched face, but didn't answer. She finished drinking, then she returned her gaze to the silent women curled up in front of her. After a brief moment, she licked her lips, turning her head again to look up at Xena.

The warrior pressed her lips together and shook her head. Then she stood up and went to where Gabrielle had dropped their pack to return the skull to it.

Pony was sitting nearby, her knees pulled up and her arms wrapped around them. "Know something?"

"What?" Xena sat down to reorganize the packs contents, and root for some herbs.

"Life sucks."

Xena paused, and glanced up at her, with a wry expression on her face. "It does, yeah."

Pony scratched her jaw, removing an ant from her skin and flicking it away. "This what it's like for you guys a lot?"

Xena's eyes dropped to the ground, her face going still as she fingered a bit of tattered leaf. Then she lifted her head again. "More than I'd like it to be, yeah."

The Amazon nodded. "This greater good stuff's a crock, y'know?"

That brought a crooked grin to Xena's face. "I used to think it was all about doing good stuff to make up for the bad stuff I did." She remarked. "I never thought there was much about redemption in it.. but the older I get, the more I have to live through the more I realize how much I'm paying for my past."

Pony remained quiet for a few moments. "Because you do this hero crap now?"

Xena tied the pack shut and started to get up. "Yeah." She ran her hands through her hair and looked around. "Tell ya what, it hurts a lot less to be a bad guy." With a sigh, she headed into the scrub, searching the ground intently as she walked.

Pony had no idea what she was looking for, so she decided helping wouldn't be very damn helpful. She turned her attention to where Gabrielle was sitting, still holding onto Granella's hand. That didn't look very helpful either, but when it came to emotions she had no doubt at all Gabrielle knew what she was doing a lot more than anyone else in the camp here did.

So all she could do right now was just sit and rest, and wait for the next bad thing to happen. It wouldn't do any good to ask questions, and it wouldn't do any good to ask what they were going to do next. She knew the answers would either piss her off or not make sense and besides she didn't figure anyone really knew what the Hades was going on any better than she did.

"Pony?"

Gabrielle's voice was, nevertheless, a welcome distraction. Pony looked over at the bard, who had half turned to face her. "Yup?"

"Could you get me some water, and that bit of folded cloth in my bag?" Gabrielle asked. "I'm going to see if I can clean her up a little."

Clean her up a little. Like that would do anything cause they were sitting in the dirt anyway. "Sure." Pony turned and reached for the travel worn pack. "Sure it's worth the time?" She got the damn skull back out and got up to get some water in it.

Gabrielle looked back at the dull eyes and expressionless face. "I think so." She answered softly. "It's always a good thing to be clean.. especially when you feel so dirty inside."

Pony paused in mid step, as something in the tone alerted her to the fact that Gabrielle wasn't just talking to hear herself speak. "Um." Warily, she continued forward and offered the bard the cloth and water. "Yeah, uh.. clean's cool."

"Thanks." Gabrielle sniffled a bit, and wiped the back of her hand across her eyes in a casual way. "I know we can't stick around here long.. want to help with this?"

"Uh." Pony felt a little overwhelmed. "You know, I'm not really too good.."

"Here." Gabrielle took her hand and put the cloth in it. "It'll be good practice for you when you're a mom."

"Urk."

Xena returned from searching with a handful of herbs, sorting them in her hand as she knelt down next to where Ares was half sitting and half lying. "Not sure these'll do much, but they're better than nothing." She set the leaves down on a rock and picked up a loose bit of stone, mashing the foliage lightly to release their oils.

Ares watched her as she worked, studying the angular profile. "So." He said, after a bit. "You really want me to die, Xena?"

The warrior cupped the shredded leaves in her hand and moved closer, easing aside the almost useless bandage and putting the herbs onto the wound. "I want you to stop aggravating me." She said, wincing a little as he did when the juice got into the cut. "So whatever it takes."

"Ow."

"Stings, I know." Xena agreed, almost in an undertone. "Done it to myself a thousand times."

Ares observed the mixture of greenish liquid seeping along with a yellow and red discharge. "If this is what mortality is like you shoulda given it up a long time ago." He remarked in an almost conversational tone. "This sucks."

Xena wiped her hands off and sat down, resting her elbow on her knee and propping her chin on her fist. "Shut up, Ares."

"Here we go with that again." The god closed his eyes. "Maybe dying wouldn't be all that bad at this rate."

Xena sighed, watching as the sunlight slanted across the bushes and made them all a study in light and shadows.

It seemed inordinately appropriate, somehow.

**

"Gran?" Gabrielle leaned forward again, holding Pony's wooden cup in her hands. "Can you drink this, a little?" She watched the dark haired woman's eyes, which slowly tracked to the cup. "Yeah, that's it.. c'mon. It's pretty good water, and I bet you're thirsty."

To one side, she was aware of Xena strapping the pack to her back, and Pony gathering their things. She knew they had to move on, but she was hoping she could get Gran to respond to her a little before they started. "C'mon."

The woman had been unresisting as they'd gotten the worst of the grime cleaned off her, but she had curled back up into a ball when they'd finished and just lay there, rocking a little bit as they watched her. Now, after a faintly hopeful start, she put her head back down on the ground and moved her hand back, curling it's fingers up into a ball.

"Gabrielle?" Xena called over to her. "We need to move."

Gabrielle exhaled. "Okay." She got to her knees, and slowly reached out to Granella. "Gran, we've got to get going now.. take my hand, okay? Walk with me?"

Behind her, she could almost feel Xena's impatience. Gabrielle crouched lower, making eye contact with Granella, and dredging up the emotional energy to try and get through to her. "Gran, I know it's hard where you are right now." She uttered, softly. "But we need to get somewhere safe.. please."

Come with me." She extended her hand a little further, palm up, and gentled her tone even more. "Please?"

Xena waited quietly, scuffing the toe of her boot in the grass a little as she eyed the inexorably sinking sun. She was hoping what Gabrielle was doing would work for a reason besides the obvious, as climbing up the slope with Gran on her shoulders was something she wasn't exactly looking forward to.

Pony was waiting on the far side of the hedges, her eyes fixed outward ostensibly on guard, while Ares was still sitting on the ground, half lying really on one elbow having fallen silent for the last while.

Her instincts were urging her to grab Gabrielle, and get moving. Usually, her instincts were right on target, she felt they probably were this time too but she knew some things were worth risking trouble for and the sense she was getting from Gabrielle made this one of them.

After a long hesitation, and just before her nerves were at the breaking point, Granella unexpectedly reached up and took Gabrielle's hand.

Xena felt the surge of surprise, and spurt of happiness as Gabrielle reacted, this sharing of their emotions no longer strange or unwelcome to her. She didn't even wonder any more where all that came from, she merely accepted it as part of who they were together and acknowledged she'd gotten the better end of the deal.

"Okay, thanks." Gabrielle closed her fingers around Granella's. Her eyes still refused to meet the bard's, but she got a tiny sense that she was getting through to their friend if only just a little. Slowly, she drew their linked hands towards her, pausing when she felt resistance. "Gran? Can you get up and come with me?"

She thought she caught a faint whimper. "It's okay.. I mean, we'll carry you if you can't, but you know... I've spent a little time over Xe's shoulder and I know how uncomfortable it is."

There was no reaction, and the bard sighed softly. She started to reach out again when a raucous hooting almost brought her straight upright, her body reacting to a threat her mind hadn't quite quantified yet. "X.."

Sudden motion cut the word off as she was almost bowled over by Granella going wild in front of her, eyes bulging as she scrambled to her feet and started to bolt. With a yelp, the bard threw herself after her, trying to get a hold of the woman.

Pony saw the motion and turned, heading across the camp to help Gabrielle as Xena pulled her sword from her sheath and crossed her path in a flicker of powerful motion, moving towards the sound with a ringing curse.

Gabrielle took two rapid steps and got an arm around Granella, pulling her to a halt as she dug her boots into the ground and lifted the other woman off the ground. "Gran.. gran! It's okay!" She winced as Granella let out a screech of fear, struggling against her hold as Pony skidded to a halt next to her. "I've got this.. go help Xena!"

Pony gave her queen a respectful look as the bard hauled Granella off her feet again, and turned to head after Xena. "Yes, ma'am." She called back over her shoulder as she drew her sword. "But I got a feeling we're all gonna be... whoa!"

Xena came hurdling back over the hedges, twisting in mid air and landing next to Gabrielle. "Get Ares." She reached over and put the pinch on Granella, catching the woman as she went limp in Gabrielle's arms. "We gotta go."

"Okay." Gabrielle released her hold and headed for the god of war as Xena hoisted Granella up over her shoulders again, the woman's arms dangling limply as she shrugged her into place. On the other side of the hedges she'd spotted a hunting pack of the hooters headed down the ridge, and she knew they simply didn't have the resources to beat them all off.

She started down the ridge, as Pony caught her up and Gabrielle got her arm around a surprisingly silent Ares. "Let's move this way." She uttered softly. "Keep the hedges between us and them."

She led the way, putting her boots carefully on the rocky ground to keep herself from slipping on the loose rocks. Going around this way meant they had to take a longer route to the cave she wanted to shelter the night in, but it gave them the best chance of avoiding the hunters.

They had too many weaknesses to worry about right now. Xena mentally counted how long she'd had Gran out, hoping she could get to the rock wall before she had to release the nerve block or risk long term damage.

They moved from the open scrub into a stand of trees, and she exhaled in mild relief, looking around quickly as she slid through the trees that clustered around them on all sides. The woods around them were quiet, as their passage sent the wild creatures into hiding. Xena thought she spotted eyes watching her from under a fallen log, but the urge to get to shelter kept her from looking any closer as the ground started to slope a little more steeply. "Watch it." She called back softly.

"Oof." Gabrielle grunted. "Darn rocks."

Xena forced her attention forward, trying not to think too much about Gabrielle being pretty much in Ares clutches back there. Given his injury, she didn't think the bard was in any real danger, but... With a shake of her head, the warrior shoved the thought aside and concentrated on picking a path down the slope.

"Xena." Pony caught up with her, boots scuffing in the loose dirt. "Is she okay?" The Amazon indicated the limp bundle over the warrior's shoulders.

"No." Xena replied. "C'mon, Pony. Don't ask stupid questions." She edged sideways past two big trees and continued down the slope. "If we can get to that cave, maybe we can do something for her."

Pony got in front of her and took the lead, her back stiff with anger.

Well. Xena was glad of the silence at least. She kept one ear cocked back to listen for Gabrielle and contented herself with following Pony's experienced track through the loose rubble. She was so worried about so many things it was almost overwhelming her and she hoped they could just get down the hill in one piece without something else happening.

Howls rang in the distance, making her head throb. "Damn it."

"You say something, Xe?"

Xena glanced behind her. "Nothing worth hearing."

Gabrielle glanced at Ares, then looked back at Xena, an exquisitely expressive expression on her face. "Ah. Probably exactly what I was thinking then."

"Mm." Xena returned her attention to the ground in front of her, shaking her head.

"Hey. Slow down." Ares rasped. "What in Hades are you running for? Wanna die faster?"

Gabrielle resisted the urge to slam the god into a tree. "The goal is, not dying, Ares."

He snorted softly. "Why?"

"What do you mean, why?" Gabrielle asked. "Maybe it doesn't mean much to you, but I'm not into dying today. I've got things to do.. and a daughter to raise."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." Ares rolled his eyes. "Well, babycakes, let me tell ya, I don't think your snookums is getting her mummies back this time."

Gabrielle was silent for a few steps. "Are you just trying to piss me off?" She finally asked, as they struggled through a patch of loose rocks. "Is that... entertainment for you?"

Ares shrugged. "Beats spitting on small animals." He muttered. "Besides, you should be used to it. You nearly get her nibs up there killed every other month."

Gabrielle felt a slow burn starting at the back of her neck and working forward. "That's not true."

"Sure it is." The god shrugged. "Every time I turn around she's getting whomped for some stupid thing you did, or some stupid thing you said or... hey!"

Gabrielle had to pull up short to keep from crashing into Xena's suddenly very present form, the warrior's eyes almost giving off sparks as she grabbed Ares by the hair and glared at him. "Oh."

"If you don't shut up..." Xena growled.

"Xe." Gabrielle bumped her with an elbow. "C'mon.. let's get going. He's just talking trash."

"She's knows it's true." Ares managed a wan smile. "Don'tcha love dying for your squeeze here, Xena?"

The warrior released her hold and turned, ignoring him again as she continued through the forest.

Ares chuckled, then stopped as he got an elbow in his ribs. "Stop that, you little runt."

Gabrielle took her arm from around him and released the hand he had over her shoulder, stepping away and moving after Xena. "Carry yourself then, you useless jerk."

"Hey!" The injured god reeled, grabbing hold of a tree as his support vanished. "Get back here!"

Gabrielle kept walking.

"I said get back here you... you..."

The bard caught up to her partner and walked along side her.

"Thought he was just talking trash?" Xena eyed her.

"Grr." Gabrielle muttered something unintelligible under her breath.

Xena released her hold on Granella's leg and gave Gabrielle a quick, one armed hug and a kiss on the head. "Hon, I'd die for you any day of the moon, ya know that?"

The bard exhaled.

"G'wan. Give the old bastard a hand or we'll never get to the damn cave."

"Can I call him an old bastard?" Gabrielle perked up. "Hey, yeah, he is ancient, isn't he?" She dropped back and turned, heading up the slope to where Ares was waiting, leaning against the tree. "Hey Old man."

"What?"

"No wonder no one believes you in any more. You're an old crock."

Ares glared at her as she came even with him. "You little bitch."

Gabrielle gazed at him. "So I guess we're even now, right? Want help or not?" She put her hands on her hips. "Or does it piss you off so much that she's willing to do anything for me, when she won't even give you the time of day?"

Ares lip twitched as he looked her right in the eye. "Careful, mortal."

"Takes one to know one, doesn't it" The bard shot right back. "Now, you want help, or not?"

A loud howl rang out through the trees, wrenching Gabrielle's head around as she crouched a little, her fingers clenching on a non existent staff. "They're getting closer. " She looked back at Ares. "So you want to come with us, or stay here and wait for them?"

His bloodshot eyes watched her face intently. "You'd leave me behind, Gabrielle?" He asked, softly. "Nice... maybe you're not so much a lost cause as I thought you were."

Gabrielle's nostrils flared briefly. "I'd leave you." She replied, in a soft voice. "But not today. C'mon." She stepped forward and grabbed his hand, pulling his arm over her shoulder as he pushed away

from the tree. When she turned and headed down the slope again, she wasn't surprised to see the tall, silent figure standing there, waiting for her. "We're coming."

"Speak for yourself." Ares coughed, stumbling and almost taking them both to the ground.

"You know." Gabrielle hung onto him grimly, waiting for him to catch his balance before she started forward again. "I'm glad you're finally getting to feel when we have to go through."

"I bet you are."

"But I just wish you cared about anyone except yourself enough to know what it was like to lose them." Gabrielle finished, enunciating each word clearly and with conviction. "Because I would love to share that experience with you too."

And for once, Ares didn't answer. He watched the ground ahead of them, and refused to even meet her eyes.

Past the curve of the trees, Gabrielle could see the beginning of the rock wall that led to the cave. With her last words tasting bittersweet on her tongue, she sped up the pace in Xena's footsteps, sensing the approach of what Xena had once called a sea change, when she'd felt it on a journey to some far off place they'd been going together.

It was that moment, when they would ride the surging tides of circumstance and decide on a course that would either bring them home, or bring them into the depths of Hades and to know that moment was coming..

To know that moment was coming was a relief, regardless of what happened after.

**

Xena sat on a rock outside the cave entrance, slowly sharpening her sword as the twilight deepened the shadows around her.

Inside the cave, Gabrielle was fixing up whatever she could scrounge for a meal for them, while Pony sat with Gran in case the suffering woman reacted to some sound and started running again.

Her body felt a little sore, after the long day. Her shoulders were stiff and she could feel the ache as she drew the stone along her blade that meant in a few candlemarks she'd really be hurting.

Ah well. She idly thumped her heels against the stone, taking comfort from the long familiar motions her hands were performing, the tracking of the stone against the steel something she could probably do even in her sleep.

A necessary task, of course; every time she used the weapon the thin edge of it got blunted on whatever it was she was using the sword on, and it had to be patiently worked back into an exquisite sharpness that would amplify her strength and make the cuts and slashes more effective with less effort on her part.

Gabrielle, back in the old days, had once asked her if she just sharpened her sword to intimidate her. To which, Xena had laughed and told her she was being silly, but then had to pause when the bard reminded her she used to work on the blade whether she used it or not.

Obsessive, maybe. Xena remembered those nights, so full of shadows when she'd first changed her ways and been convinced every tree hid an old enemy behind it. Taking care of the sword had been a way for her to ensure she was prepared for anything, hadn't it?

Xena smiled, sweeping her eyes around the barren ground. And maybe it had been a way to keep a distance between her and her new acquaintance. A way of reminding Gabrielle who she was, and a warning – to not get too close to her.

A warning Gabrielle had completely ignored, naturally.

Xena studied the sword, the tang of warm metal making her nose twitch. She pondered a moment what she would have done if Gabrielle had taken her warning, and left her. Gone home to Potadeia, and Perdicus, in those early days before they'd had a chance to really...

"Hey." Gabrielle leaned against her, appearing from the darkness of the cave with surprising stealth. "Whatcha thinking about?"

Xena studied her sharpening stone, then she tilted her head and looked at her partner. "Falling in love with you."

"Oh." Gabrielle sounded a bit surprised. "Okay.. well.. ah.."

"You asked."

"I did." The bard admitted. "But I thought maybe you were thinking about Gran, or how we're going to get out of here, or what I'm making for dinner..."

"Nah." Xena tucked the stone away and sheathed her sword, letting her hands rest on her thighs and flexing them a little. "I needed a break."

Gabrielle slid her hand into the crook of Xena's elbow, her fingertips finding the slow, even heartbeat as they brushed over the blue lines on the inside of her arm. "Soup's almost ready." She rested her cheek against Xena's shoulder.

"Thanks." Xena studied the bard's nearly invisible profile, noting the very evident tension. "Everyone could use it tonight." She leaned over a little, pressing her shoulder against her partner's. "Me, especially."

Gabrielle looked up at her. "Tired?"

The warrior nodded. "Real long day." She said. "In a lotta ways."

"Mm." Gabrielle sighed. "But you know, Xena..."

"We got problems." The warrior acknowledged. "Lots of them."

"Boy, do we." Gabrielle murmured. "Xe, Ares is going down hill, and I don't know what to do with Gran."

"Mm." The warrior agreed. "I saw you trying to talk to her again.. any reaction?"

"Not really, no."

They both stood quietly as the last of the light faded, and the sound of crickets surrounded them. At last, Xena spoke into the darkness, her tone reflective. "All right. This is what we're going to do."

Gabrielle leaned closer, as the warrior's voice took on a decisive tone, though she spoke softly enough that she had to really listen for the words.

"Across the valley here, and up that creek bed is the way we came in." Xena said. "It's flat lands, we can make it across if we get moving at first light tomorrow."

"Mm."

"We get to the wall we fell down, and I'll climb up it Then I'll let a rope down, and pull everyone up after me."

"Okay." The bard was nodding.

"I'll pull Pony up first. Then she can help me haul Gran and Ares up." Xena went on. "Then you come up last, and we keep going from there."

Gabrielle thought about that. "Okay." She said, after a brief pause.

"What?" Xena asked, after a moment. "You don't like that idea?"

The bard slid around and settled herself between Xena's knees, resting her forearms on the warrior's thighs as she looked up at her. "I'm trying to figure out if you're dissing me or complimenting me." She said. "I could help you pull everyone up."

Xena laced her fingers behind Gabrielle's head. "Yeah, you could." She agreed. "You're stronger than Pony is. But I trust you more to make sure they get up safe."

Gabrielle pressed herself against the rock, enjoying the retained heat of the sun against her bare midriff. "What if we get attacked while we're climbing up?"

"That's the other reason." Xena replied, calmly. "You know how to fight them off. Pony doesn't.. she just goes in there hacking."

The bard nodded. "What about our obligation to those other guys?"

Xena gazed steadily at her. "Gabrielle, our obligation is to get Granella and Ares out of here." She said. "That's what matters."

The bard's eyes narrowed a little, and a pucker appeared in the skin between her eyebrows. Then, her shoulders relaxed and she put her head down in Xena's lap, surrender evident in her posture. "Yeah, I know."

The warrior ran her fingers through Gabrielle's hair.

"What about Ares' sword?" The bard asked, breaking the silence.

Xena didn't answer for a few minutes, her eyes searching the darkness around them from long habit. "There's that." She murmured, finally. "But you know something, Gabrielle?"

"What?"

"I um.. " Xena exhaled. "Let me ask you the question. Is my life worth that sword?"

Gabrielle straightened right up so fast she nearly got lightheaded. Her eyes widened and both eyebrows lifted as she released Xena's legs and put her hands on her hips. "Wh..." She stopped, then started again. "What do you mean by that, Xena?"

Xena bumped her heels against the rock lightly. "That big one has the sword." She said. "Only way I'm gonna get it is go up against him and take it."

"Well..."

"I don't know if I can." The warrior finished, cutting her off gently with a faint shrug. "Is risking my life worth it?"

Gabrielle put her hands back on Xena's knees, having to digest something she hadn't expected. "Of course not." She whispered. "No thing is worth you even getting a hangnail, Xena."

Xena let her hands rest on the bard's. "They are... a lot stronger than I am, Gabrielle." She said. "Ares sword can cut through mine like mine through butter... even if he's only figured out what end to hold, I just don't know if I can handle the combination."

Gabrielle shook her head a few times. "I..." She leaned forward and looked up at Xena's face. "No, it's not worth risking a hair on your head, Xena."

The warrior smiled, faintly.

"It's not." The bard shook her head again. "We get so used to always having to.. sacrifice ourselves for other things that sometimes we forget to stop and ask why the Hades we're doing this." She inhaled. "I don't give a damn what happens to his sword."

Xena studied her face. "But you do care about the big animals." Her eyes twinkled, just a trifle.

"Mmph." Gabrielle shrugged one shoulder. "Not a squinch compared to how much I care about you." She squeezed the warrior's knees. "Thank you."

"For?"

"Just thanks." Gabrielle stepped back and tugged gently. "Let's go inside."

Xena eased off the rock, dusting her hands off against her leathers as she took a deep breath of the now night air. It was cool, and full of pine and stone dust, and she felt a sense of deep, somewhat surprising relief as she followed her partner inside the cave.

Funny, how telling Gabrielle how she felt about the sword had been so much harder than admitting it to herself. Xena let her hand trail along the stone wall as she walked. She'd been living up to Gabrielle's expectations for so long, she'd grown almost afraid of disappointing them.

She watched the bard go to the fire and stir the soup. Almost? Xena knew herself to have crossed a path she'd been unconsciously shying from for a very long time, even though she knew very well that she'd never had a much of a shine on her heroism for Gabrielle to lose sight of.

Maybe at the very beginning, there had been. But not for long, and surely not after Dahok. Xena sat down near where Ares was curled up, feeling very tired, and very mortal and for the first time in a while, feeling her age.

Pony got up and came over to her, settling on the rock ledge at her side. "Xena."

"Yeah?" The warrior examined a bruise across one knuckle.

"Lissen." Pony twisted her hands together. "I've been saying a lot of crap that's just been.. um.. crap."

"S'allright." Xena said.

"No.. just listen." The Amazon held a hand up. "I don't understand half the stuff you guys do and I don't really get why you do it, but I know enough to know you don't do it for you, y'know?"

"Mm."

"Most people ain't like that." Pony said, gamely. "Y'know? They just do stuff for themselves."

"Yeah." Xena tasted the irony, as she glanced up to find Gabrielle regarding her with gentle wryness from across the fire. "I know."

"So that's cool, and I'm gonna try not to be a jerk, now." Pony concluded. "So just tell me what to do, okay?"

"Okay." The warrior agreed. "Go over there and get some dinner." She directed. "How's that for a start?"

The Amazon looked at her, then shook her head and got up, trudging over to where Gabrielle was kneeling and crouching next to her.

Xena watched them, then she let her eyes travel around the inside of the cave, taking in Gran's tightly curled form on the far side of the fire, and the haggard, deeply shadowed visage of the God of War near her knee.

She sighed. The best she could hope for tomorrow was to end the day perched on rocks, trying to find a way out of the valley.

The worst she could hope for? Xena looked up again to find Gabrielle in front of her, offering her a spoonful of soup from their grisly and ghoulish skull bowl. "Thanks." She half stood and kissed Gabrielle instead, lacing her fingers behind the bard's neck and ignoring the bowl between them.

There would be no worst.

**

The strident yowl of a hunting cat woke Gabrielle up, her eyes popping open to stare into the darkness, broken only by a faint hint of starlight from the cave mouth and a dim glow from the dying fire. For a moment, she almost panicked, then a large shadow blocked her view of the cave mouth and she relaxed as Xena returned and sat back down next to her. "Sounds close."

"It is." The warrior murmured. "Not hunting us, though. Something else.. something big's out there."

"Uerm."

"Don't even think about it."

Gabrielle rubbed her face with one hand, waiting for her heartbeat to settle. "Wow." She looked around, but most of the interior of the cave was mere shadows. "Did you get any rest?"

"No." Xena's voice sounded muffled.

Gabrielle leaned closer, enough to see that her partner was resting her head in her hands. "Hey." She squirmed over and put her hand on Xena's thigh. "What's wrong?"

Xena didn't answer for a few seconds, then she swallowed audibly. "You didn't put any mushrooms in that damn soup did you?"

The bard exhaled, lowering her head to rest against Xena's leg. "No, I didn't." She said. "You don't have any of those herbs, do you?"

"No." The warrior put a load of misery into a single syllable.

Gabrielle hitched herself up on one elbow and gently patted her partner's leg. "Sorry, honey." She murmured, finding her thoughts focused on herself for the first time in a few days. "Anything I can do?"

"Move."

Gabrielle hastily did, reaching around for the skull with one hand. "Remember what you tell me all the time? Deep breaths, right? And tip your head back."

"Ungh." Xena determinedly swallowed again, refusing to let her body get the better of her. Instead of tipping her head back, though, she eased down onto her side and curled her arm under her head, focusing her thoughts on something other than her twisting guts.

She felt Gabrielle's hand settle on her shoulder, rubbing it gently. After a few moments, the nausea subsided to something just around bearable as long as she didn't move around any, and she exhaled again, licking her lips. "Bleah."

Cautiously, the bard shifted closer. "Here." She carefully eased her hand under her partner's head and lifted it, sliding her leg over and letting Xena rest on that instead. "You'll get a cramp otherwise."

"Mmhph." Xena extended her arm and flexed her hand. "Gods, I hate that."

Gabrielle slowly ran her fingers through Xena's hair, massaging her scalp lightly. "I'm sorry." She murmured. "How about some tea? Should I stir up the fire?"

Xena juggled the potential comfort of the tea with the existing comfort of Gabrielle's presence and shook her head. "Been a lot of activity out there tonight." She whispered.

"Yeah?"

"Hunting, I guess." The warrior shifted back a little, putting the back of her head in contact with Gabrielle's stomach, feeling the warmth penetrate her scalp and relax the tension there. "Lot of animals on the move."

"Were you keeping watch?"

"Mhmm." Xena nodded slightly.

"Only you?"

Uh oh. The warrior smothered a wan grin. She'd considered waking Pony up to take a turn at watch, but she knew the Amazon was as tired as she was, and she hadn't had the heart for it. "I'm getting nice in my old age."

Gabrielle made a sound that was a cross between a giggle and a snort.

"See? No one even respects me anymore." Xena sighed mournfully. "I'm just a has been."

"Oh, my poor little Xena." Gabrielle warbled softly. "What am I going to do with you? I'll have to carry you back home."

"Hey." Pony's voice suddenly cut through the darkness. "Would you two shut up?"

"Sure." Gabrielle didn't miss a beat. "If you'd be so kind as to go outside and keep watch for us, since Xena did it the rest of the night, I'd be glad to be quiet."

Xena took a breath to protest, then found her lips covered by Gabrielle's hand.

There was a sound of rustling around nearby. "She coulda woke me up." Pony grumbled. "Not make it sound like I'm some kinda slacker or something." The Amazon got up and headed for the opening, the soft whisper of steel against leather coming clearly back to them as she eased into the starlight.

Gabrielle removed her hand from Xena's mouth and sighed, wriggling into a more comfortable position and leaning back against the rock wall. "Now, where were we?"

"You were mocking me." Xena murmured, acknowledging to herself how glad she was to remain curled up on the ground.

"I thought I was sympathizing with you." Gabrielle went back to her gentle stroking, tracing the edge of one of her partner's finely shaped ears by touch, her mind's eye easily constructing the image for her despite the darkness.

Xena's hand settled on her leg, bare of it's boot. The warrior's fingers stroked her ankle, then dropped to knead her instep with a casual familiarity that made Gabrielle smile. She exhaled, turning her head to look over at the spot she knew Granella was lying in.

In the faint glow from the fire, she saw the other woman looking back at her, though there wasn't enough light to see any expression on her face. "Hey." She called over, softly. "How are you doing?"

Those eyes just stared at her for a long time, full of shadows and barely seen. Gabrielle felt Xena's hand close on her foot, squeezing in a gesture of comfort, though the warrior remained very still and quiet. "I know you think that's a pretty stupid question."

There was no answer, but a rustle of movement.

"I know you're in a pretty dark place right now." Gabrielle went on, in a soft voice. "I know... how horrible that place can be."

"You don't." Gran's voice came, very unexpectedly back, low and hoarse.

Gabrielle felt her breathing pick up, and Xena shifted her position, turning more onto her stomach and draping her left arm over the bard's lap, mutely giving her support. "Oh, Gran.. I wish I didn't." She whispered into the darkness.

"You don't know anything." Gran whispered back. "You all abandoned me. To Hades with you."

Gabrielle closed her eyes, feeling her own pain, and an echo, deeper and more potent, through the connection she had with Xena. "We didn't abandon you, Gran. We found you as soon as we could."

"You should have killed me."

Gabrielle exhaled slowly, as Xena shifted again, rolling over to face her, but remaining silent.

"Told you." Ares drawled, from his huddle near the fire. "Stupid women... you let all that sentimental crap keep you from doing what needs to be done."

"Shut up." Xena spoke up finally. "Or I'll forget all that sentimental crap and gut you like a fish."

The god laughed shortly, stifling a cough. "We're all gonna die anyway, sweetheart. C'mon and get your jollies now. Put me out of my misery."

Xena looked up at her partner, making out the distinctive profile despite the lack of light. "You know something, Gabrielle?"

"What?" The bard asked, at the end of a long sigh.

"We should stop being heroes." The warrior said. "We should stop risking our lives, and each other just to try and save other people because all we get for it is bullshit."

"Oh, boo hoo." Ares snorted. "You don't do it for anything except making you look good to her, Xena. Don't pull the altruistic act on me. I know better."

Gabrielle looked down into the blue eyes she knew were looking up at her. There was some truth in what the god of war had said, and they both knew that, but then, there was more truth in the two of them than what Ares would ever know so how relative was all that anyway? "Gran.."

"Leave me alone." Gran cut her off. "You're good at that."

Ares snickered softly.

"Xena!" Pony called from outside. "You better come lookit this."

Gabrielle got her feet under her and stood as Xena did and followed the warrior towards the opening to the cave, feeling a little shame at the relief she felt on leaving the barbs and accusations behind as they faced whatever new problem Pony had discovered.

Life was too damn complicated sometimes.

A moment later, all the complications went out the window when she cleared the opening and joined Xena and Pony on the small slope outside the cave, facing the thickly forested valley – a valley now filled with torches and smoke, and flickering light heading directly at them.

Xena exhaled audibly and put her hands on her hips.

"So much for plans, huh?" Gabrielle murmured.

"I don't do all this stuff to make me look good to you." The warrior said, turning and facing her. "I do it because I'm just too damn slow to get out of the way in time." She shook her head and strode back into the cavern, leaving Pony and Gabrielle to watch the approaching lights.

"We're gonna croak, huh?" Pony finally asked, glancing at her.

Gabrielle sighed, and turned to follow Xena, wondering the same thing. "Eventually, Pony. But lets try something else right now."

"Like what?" The Amazon asked, to her retreating back. "Ain't we tried everything already?" When no answer was forthcoming, she threw her hands up and headed inside. "Sheeptits."

**

One Wild Ride

Part 23

"Get up." Xena finished tying the pack to her back as she stepped over Ares' extended legs. "We need to get out of here." She extended a hand down to him. "Let's go."

The god of war looked steadily up at her. "Thanks, but no thanks, babe." He said. "I'll stick around here."

"Ares." Xena reached down to grab the skin covering him, her voice impatient. "I don't have time to.."

Ares caught her wrist. "Xena." He said. "Leave me here."

Something about his tone brought Xena into a crouch next to him, her eyes focusing sharply on his face. "This is no time to be fighting, me, Ares." She glanced past him to see Gabrielle pausing to square her shoulders before she headed over to where Granella was. "Not now."

Ares remained silent for a moment, then he also looked quickly around. "I'm not." He said. "You stuck me good, baby. I'm.." He halted, and shrugged. "Don't see the point in getting up just to have those hairballs burn my tooties, catch my drift?"

"Ares, it's not the .."

"Listen." The god of war's grip on her arm tightened. "You won, Xena. Happy?" He leaned closer to her. "I know what it feels like to hurt so bad you just want it to stop. So do me a favor and get lost, will ya? Then maybe the hairballs will make it stop because I know I can't get any mercy from you."

Xena had to take a breath and stop to think, so many ramifications tumbling up around her it felt like a swarm of honeybees all of a sudden. The pressure of knowing they were running out of time pressed insistently between her shoulderblades and her stomach cramped again, making her grimace.

"Beat it." Ares released her, pushing her hand away from him.

Xena rested her forearm on her knee. "I can't." She said. "I can't leave you here."

Ares rolled his eyes. "Give me a break."

"Ares." Xena hesitated, then she reached out, touching his arm. "I won't leave you here. If we all end up dying, then we do. I won't leave you here for them."

Ares looked at her, his eyes searching her face. "Why?"

The warrior half shrugged. "Just because." She offered her hand to him again. "Stop talking. Let's go, or it'll be a moot point."

The god stared at her for a long moment, his face almost expressionless. "I'd leave you here, y'know." He remarked conversationally. "In a heartbeat."

"I know." Xena extended her arm further. "It doesn't matter."

The sound of the approaching horde echoed thorough the cave, washing over the both of them as they remained facing off. After another pause, though, Ares finally reached up and clasped Xena's forearm, visibly gathering himself. "Xena." He grimaced as she pulled him upright and stood. "We're both going to regret this."

"Probably." She got his arm over her shoulder and half guided, half dragged him towards the entrance to the cave. "Stay by the wall.. just move as fast as you can." She called out to Pony, who had her hand on Granella's shoulder as she stumbled unsteadily ahead of Gabrielle.

The bard turned and looked at her, the expression on her face making Xena wonder what had just transpired on the other side of the cave there was so much pain in those eyes. Gabrielle held up and waited for them, slipping her arm around Ares on the other side. "We can't outrun them, Xe."

"Well, she's finally catching a clue." Ares muttered.

"Yeah." Xena shifted her grip and made contact with her partner's arm, feeling the chilled skin and the rigid tension under it. "But we can't just stand here and wait for em either, can we?"

They emerged into the starlight, turning a sharp right and following the two shadowy figures on the path in front of them. Xena took a quick look over her shoulder, judging the nearest of the hooters a quarter candlemark away but moving fast.

No, they couldn't outrun them. Xena exhaled. Or..well, she and Gabrielle could outrun them, since they already had more than once but with Gran and Ares but with them along, she knew they didn't have long before their chasers caught up with them.

They would fight, of course, when that happened. Xena scanned ahead of them, searching for something, anything to tip the odds a little. She knew that big hooter with Ares sword was back there, and by her measure he'd been twice the size of the bruiser she'd battered back in the first cave.

Could she fight him off? Xena exhaled. The truth was, she didn't want to find out if she didn't have to. Her body was giving her warning signals she knew she couldn't ignore forever and whether it was her sharing some symptoms with Gabrielle or something else going on inside her, she didn't feel anywhere close to invincible.

Gabrielle's fingers closed around her elbow, and Xena looked over at the bard, only to find her looking back with a concerned expression.

Damn it. Was Gabrielle reading her mind? She gave the bard a halfhearted grin, and jerked her head in the direction of the cliff. "Maybe we'll get lucky."

Ares just snorted weakly, his breathing coming labored.

"I always considered myself lucky to have found you." Gabrielle said, returning the grin.

"Don't start that crap." The god of war moaned. "I'm in enough pain already."

"Talking about love hurts you?" The bard asked. "Boy, am I gonna have fun now."

Ares glared at her. "You used to be nice."

"I used to respect you."

The bite in the tone made even Xena's nose twitch, as she glanced across Ares bowed shoulders at Gabrielle. She could feel the simmering anger abruptly through their link, and she squeezed the bard's arm just as Gabrielle had grasped hers earlier.

"You respected me?" Ares's voice rose, ending on a cough. "Not in this lifetime, sweetheart."

Xena glanced behind them. "Less talk, more walk." She urged, barely able to see Pony and Gran ahead of them, and she realized they weren't going to make it to the far wall nearly in time. Instead, she tipped her head back and started scanning the walls, using the scant light to judge the crags over their heads.

"Xe." Gabrielle called her. "They're coming up behind us."

Ah. "There." Xena nudged them to the right. "Over there, hurry." She called out ahead of them. "Pony! To the right!" Her eyes had picked up the faintest hint of a chance, but it was better than the present nothing.

"Wh..." Gabrielle cut off her speech as they stumbled over the rocky ground, and took a firmer hold on both Ares and Xena's arm. She could hear the approach of the hooters behind them and she wondered what Xena had spotted that was any better than the rocks they were climbing past.

Pony and Gran had stopped ahead, and Pony was already drawing her sword from its sheath and heading towards them, her eyes fixed on what was coming up from behind. As they reached the niche Xena had spotted, Gabrielle looked for a place to lean Ares against as she got a grip on her sadly battered three quarter staff and prepared herself to fight.

But instead of doing the same, the warrior went to the edge of the niche and put her boot up on a shelf only she apparently could have seen. "Up." She pointed at a thin, scraggly looking track heading upward, barely wide enough for a boot to stand on. "Move. Fast." She grabbed Pony's arm as she went past and pulled her around, hauling her towards the wall.

"What?" Pony pointed past her. "Xena, we don't have time for that they're on top of us!"

"We've got time." The warrior shot back. "Look! There's a path leading up. If we can make it to that ledge, we've got a chance."

Pony tipped her head back and looked up into the shadows. "What ledge!?"

"MOVE!!" The warrior bellowed at the top of her voice. She shoved Pony towards the wall and turned, grabbing Ares and looking back past Gabrielle. "Hurry!"

Granella shoved past her, and started up, hugging the wall in silence. After a moment, Pony followed, sheathing her sword with a vicious motion and turning her back on Xena. She passed Ares without a glance and started up the wall, clasping the rocks gingerly and placing her boots with care.

Two down. Xena turned to her partner, and put her hands on her shoulders. "Listen."

"Xena..." Gabrielle lowered her voice and got close to her partner's ear. "We can't do this." She spared a glance up the cliff, and the towering height seemed to waver in her view, making her queasy. "I can't."

Xena turned her head and they were eye to eye and nose to nose, breathing the same air. "We have no choice but try it." She uttered. "Please trust me."

Gabrielle looked into those tired, stressed blue eyes for a heartbeat. "Xena I trust you. I just don't trust me." She whispered. "I **can't** climb up there."

The expression on the warrior's face didn't shift an inch, despite the growing sound of the pursuit behind them. "Gab, what are you afraid of?"

"What?"

Xena reached up and touched her partner's face, refusing to let the panic around them steal the moment from her. "What are you afraid will happen if you climb up there?"

Gabrielle blinked. "I'll f..fall."

"And?"

The bard felt a tight pressure in her chest and she knew her hands were shaking. "And I guess I'll die."

Xena looked to the right, where the crowd of hooters were rounding the last bend, and were in moments of spotting them. "If you stay here, we'll both die."

Her partner's body posture shifted, and she looked away, swallowing audibly.

"If you fall, I'll go with you." Xena gently turned her face back. "I'd rather die trying to get home. Wouldn't you?"

Gabrielle took another breath, then she grabbed Xena's arm and started towards the rock wall where Pony was already struggling upward with Gran, and Ares leaned and waited. She was no less afraid of the climb, but after all the years she'd been with Xena, she'd at last grown into the knowledge that life was often full of extremely sucky choices and you just had to do rotten things.

She felt ashamed of her fear, ashamed that Xena had risked those precious moments to gently reason with her, instead of conking her over the head and dragging her up over one shoulder – something she knew the warrior was more than capable of.

They reached Ares and she took his arm. "Okay, up we go."

Ares looked at Xena. "You running from them?" He snickered.

"Yep." Xena grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and shoved him up onto the first uneven level "So were you when I found ya. So move it, or I'll leave you to em."

"Bitch." Ares took hold of the rock wall and struggled upward. "Thought you said you couldn't do it." He mimicked her tone mockingly.

"Changed my mind." Xena glanced behind them. The hooters spotted her and a howl went up, making her reach over and pull her sword from its sheath. "Faster!"

Gabrielle felt her boots slip a little on the rock, and she grabbed a handhold on the wall, letting her staff rattle from her fingertips and roll away. "Damn it." She kept her other hand on Ares, and followed him as they climbed as fast as they could, which wasn't very fast at all.

Xena was climbing backwards, using her boots to kick hard at the irregular ledge they were climbing up, bits and pieces of it breaking off and rolling down the slope towards the onrushing horde. She could smell the burning torches now, and the smell of the hooters wafted up to her, foul and musky.

The thin break in the rock they were climbing up offered only a scant chance, and Xena knew that. But if they were high enough, she also knew the hooters would have a hard time coming up after them, and even so, only one at a time. She braced her back against Gabrielle's and kept moving, shifting her sword in her right hand as the first of the hooters gained the rock wall.

Behind him, the first of the horde was closing in. Xena squinted in the dim light, feeling a brief sense of relief when she didn't spot the big bruiser with Ares sword anywhere in the front.

Then she forgot about him when the second hooter, a shadowy figure near the first, raised his arms in a familiar gesture and she felt her body react, her sword arm coming up and her hand twisting her blade enough to deflect the crude arrow speeding at her.

"Xena!"

"Keep moving." Xena half turned her body, so it protected as much of her partner as possible. "I got this." She deflected another arrow. "Stay close to the wall! Tell them!"

Gabrielle tore her attention from her shaking knees and edged her head past Ares' shoulder. "Pony! Stay near.."

"I heard her." Pony yelled back. "Serves her right for giving them the damn bow!"

Gabrielle exhaled. "Pony?"

"What!"

"Go to Hades." The bard felt her temper's edge fray. "I hope she misses one." She eased her hand forward and grabbed hold of a crack, feeling the harsh rock sting her fingertips as the solid warmth of Xena's shoulder pressed against her.

Pony didn't answer.

Xena saw the first line of hooters start to climb clumsily after them, the first of them tumbling off the ledge after a few feet and rolling down the slope. The arrow shooter dodged him, and let go another shaft, but this one wobbled precariously in flight and fell far short of them.

A hooter scrambled up the narrow path, his hands reaching out for her as he tried to keep his balance. Xena got her weight on her back foot and lashed out with her other, kicking the hooter in the head and throwing him backwards in a violent tumble.

One down. But the rest of the hooters just took this as encouragement and started to swarm up the side of the wall, eyes fixed on them.

Then a loud booming hoot rang out, and Xena's eyes lifted, to see the big bastard coming towards them, Ares sword clutched in both hands. His eyes were fastened on her, and her alone, and she felt a sudden, uneasy energy from him that made her hair prickle.

Her heart started to pound, a soft thunder that was matched unexpectedly by the skies overhead.

"Gabrielle."

"Yeah." The bard's voice was breathy, and had a tremble in it.

"We need to go faster."

"Trying."

"Try harder."

**

"One more step!"

Gabrielle got her fingers around a crack in the rock, her free arm clutched around Ares body as she half shoved, half carried him up onto the ledge just barely before Xena knocked all of them over. "Whoa!" She yelped, keeping her balance and moving as tight against the wall as she could.

The ledge was narrow, barely large enough to hold two of them side by side, but it seemed wide as their cabin after the harrowing quarter candlemark's balance on the thin path. She turned and pressed her back against the rock, reaching out to put her hand against Xena's shoulder.

The muscles under the skin were twitching, and as she watched, Xena's blade flickered out into the darkness and deflected something away, the soft thunk audible over the hiss of the rain.

Thunder rumbled, and lightning framed them in dangerous silver, outlining the swarming, dark figures heading up the wall after them. The rain had done them one favor- the torches had been put out and now the hooters were having to deal with the darkness just like they were.

The darkness was doing her a favor too, since it masked how high they were off the ground. "Xe, now what?" She circled the warrior with one arm and gave her a brief hug from behind, taking care to keep clear of her sword.

She was tired, and her legs were aching so badly she was afraid they were going to cramp up on her. With a sigh, she tipped her head back and opened her mouth, waiting patiently for the rain to fill it as she kept a hand on Xena's shoulder.

"Take a breather." Xena muttered, her eyes darting back and forth as she tried to keep the hooters in her range of vision. The storm was slowing them up, and they were clumsy climbers - four of them had fallen off the path already thought the rest were making their way up wards.

The big one, though, had taken another path. He was climbing up the cliff almost directly under them, scaling the almost sheer wall with energy and some skill. "Second thought, keep moving." She risked turning her head and glancing up ward.

In the darkness and the rain, she only hoped she saw a continuing way up. Xena looked down again, just as the big hooter looked up, and their eyes met.

The hooter bared his teeth in what might have been a smile. Xena deliberately turned her head again and dismissed him, focusing her attention on Gabrielle's tense face instead. "We've got to keep going."

Even in the shadows, the bard's expression was clear. She took a breath to speak, then paused, and simply laid her cheek against Xena's shoulder briefly, before she turned and took hold of Ares arm again.

"Go where?" Pony shoved past Ares to confront her. "Go up and fall off? There's no place to go!"

Xena thought she really should be losing her patience, but instead, she merely felt tired. Before she could throw an answer back, Gabrielle got between the two of them and straightened. "Eponin, there's a path. Even I can see it. Now please just move." The bard said, quietly. "There's no time to fight about it."

The rain came down harder, drenching them, leaving them in shadows broken only by fitful bursts of lightning. "This is nuts." Pony said. "We're gonna croak doing this."

"Probably." Gabrielle reached out and gave her a nudge. "Just go."

"Just go?"

A loud crack resonated overhead, and small bits of rock dropped down around them. Gabrielle gave Pony another shove. "We go down, we die. We stay here, we die, we go up there, maybe we die. Move." Her voice was low, but resigned.

"B.."

"Pony, please." Gabrielle glanced at Ares, but the god of war remained leaning against the rock, his eyes closed. "I know you have no respect for me as a person or your queen right now, but just do it."

She felt a sudden hand on her back, and saw Pony's eyes shift over her shoulder and for once she absolutely didn't mind the intervention.

"Go." Xena's voice echoed from behind her, in a flat, no nonsense tone, accompanied by the rasping sound of her sword being sheathed.

"Or?" Pony asked, putting her hands on her hips.

"Or I'll throw you over to them." The warrior responded.

"You're so full of crap." The Amazon got the words half out of her mouth before she was grabbed by the front of her leathers and her belt and she was being lifted up off the ground and over Xena's head. "AAAUUUU!!"

Gabrielle had stepped out of the way and pressed herself against the rock, her eyes fastened on her soulmate as the lightning flared, and outlined the warrior's powerful body in uncompromising silver. She was aware of Granella standing to her right, but she kept her attention focused, unsure honestly of what Xena was going to do.

Kill Pony? Gabrielle exhaled. What the Hades, right? Maybe it would just save her some trouble.

Pony found herself staring up at the sky, and suddenly the memory of how Xena had killed Arella, there in the village in front of the entire tribe surfaced.

The rain felt icy as it touched her skin, and in pure reflex, she went completely limp and unresisting. "All right!" She yelled. "All right, Xena, by the gods, put me down! Don't kill me!"

Everything went still, then she was moving through the air again, the sky whirling crazily over her head as she was inverted, then her boots hit the ground, and she was shoved roughly towards the rock wall, slamming against it with painful force.

When the stars cleared from her eyes, Xena's hands slammed to either side of her head as the warrior glared at her, a feral expression on her face she hadn't seen for a very long time. "Okay I'm goin."

Xena straightened up, and backed up a step. "Don't push me anymore, Amazon." She growled softly. "Last warning."

Pony stared at her, then shook her head and turned, only to find Granella already climbing away from them, up the cliff face. "Hey! Wait!" She got her foot on the first part of the uneven path, and pulled herself forward. "Gran!"

Xena turned, and briefly found herself nose to nose with Gabrielle. "Damn." She exhaled. "That hurt."

The bard merely leaned against her and exhaled, before she straightened back up and took a moment to wipe the rain from her eyes. "C'mon, Ares." She took hold of his arm, as Xena drew her weapon again and slipped past them, her eyes anxiously searching the darkness below.

The god opened his eyes and looked at her. Then he shifted his attention to Xena, who was standing with her back to them, sword at the ready. "Aint' gonna work, y'know."

Xena deflected another arrow, but this one was so off the mark it hadn't really needed deflecting. The big hooter had paused in his climb, as the thunder rolled over head and the rain battered him, hugging the cliff with both arms outstretched.

Down the path, the other hooters had paused also, the driving rain so thick they could barely be seen. Then a bolt of lightning arced from the sky, and Xena moved quickly, throwing herself against both her partner and Ares as the lightning struck the cliff wall over their heads with a huge, booming roar.

Instantly, they were being pelted with knife sharp bits of stone that tumbled down around them with increasing frequency. "Move." Xena urged them both towards the upper path. "Hurry!" Boulders started dropping around them, crashing against the ledge and breaking parts of it off.

Gabrielle scrambled behind Ares to the edge of the path and got a handhold on the wall, keeping her head down as rocks continued to bounce off her shoulders. She heard Xena cursing behind her, then she felt a powerful surge of fear and she turned her head just in time to see the big hooter come powering over the ledge, his hand outstretched towards Xena's leg.

"YAA!" Xena backed up and pressed her body against the rock as the hooter got to his feet and pulled Ares sword out of a rough tie around his waist. The big sword collected every bit of light around them and flashed, and it was all she could do to bring her own weapon up as he charged towards her.

Gabrielle released Ares, and started to turn, her balance wavering precariously as she tried to shift her feet and reverse their position.

Ares grabbed her arm. "Hold it." He rasped. "Wherea ya goin?"

"Let go of me." Gabrielle grabbed at his fingers.

"Listen!" The god of war tightened his grip. "For once, don't make it worse for her. Stay out of it!"

The ring of steel drew both their eyes, and Gabrielle hesitated, watching Xena struggle under the big hooter's attack. There was barely room for the warrior to fight, and she seemed to be fighting very hard to keep her opponents sword from breaking through her defenses.

"Ares."

"Finally seeing the light?" The god of war asked her, his eyes avidly watching the struggle. "She don't need you, cookie."

"Ares, let go of me." Gabrielle wrenched his fingers from her arm, and started to scramble down the rock path towards the fighters, ducking as a set of boulders rolled over the top of her and headed down the slope. She managed to get back to the ledge just as Xena dodged a clumsy swing and got around to the other side of the small space leaving the big hooter's back to her partner.

Doesn't need me? Gabrielle picked up a rock and hefted it, waiting for an opening. The hooter was chopping at Xena in an almost random manner, but his strength was incredible, and the warrior was having trouble deflecting the strikes. "Xena!" She let fly with her rock, gratified when it hit the hooter in the back, making him jerk around.

Xena took advantage of the distraction and knocked his sword away, swinging a reverse thrust with her own sword that would have cut him up the middle if he hadn't stepped back, seeming to sense the attack.

The rain drove in her face, and Xena could only spare a second to give her head a shake to clear some of the water and hair from her vision. Behind her, she could hear grunts and rattles, and she knew the hooters were coming up the path.

She could hold them off, maybe, but she knew it would do no good to tell Gabrielle to leave. Without the bard, Ares had no chance of making it up the side of the mountain, and without all of them, Pony and Gran probably wouldn't make it either.

So what the Hades was the point?

The hooter came at her again, and she set her feet, leaning forward as she swept her blade up to meet the swing coming down at her head. The impact of the blade against hers was incredible, and it took all the strength she had to keep her legs from buckling, and her arms from giving way to let the sword of war cleave her in half.

Lighting blasted over head, and she caught a break as the hooter flinched, and she was able to deflect his sword to one side, but only briefly as he recovered and yanked his arms around in a sweeping lunge she knew she couldn't meet.

There was barely room to move on the ledge, but she waited until the last minute, then she ducked and threw herself past him, touching down with one hand on the rock and pushing herself up into a rolling motion that got her back to her feet before he could turn to meet her.

She stepped forward and brought her sword around, slicing him across the side as he turned, sending a spray of blood into the air as he let out a bellow.

A rock flew past her shoulder, and hit him in the head, as Xena followed up her advantage and got another hit in, cutting deep into his thigh before he whipped his arms back across his body and clipped her in the shoulder, sending her hard against the rock and thanking all the gods she didn't believe in she wasn't on the other side of him.

He swung at her again, and she managed to catch the much longer sword against hers, near the hilt, the impact nearly breaking her wrists, strong as they were. Then she was up against the hooter, and he was dipping his head, teeth bared, at her throat.

Xena felt her knees start to buckle under the force and she struggled to free her sword, as the hooter's blade came closer and closer to her head, and the teeth closer and closer to her throat.

Through the rain, she caught a brief glimpse of Gabrielle coming towards them, and the hooter realized it as well. He jerked back and swung around, swiping the huge sword right at Gabrielle with a howl of outrage.

Xena released one hand off her sword and reached up for a hand hold, pulling herself up off the ground and getting both boots up as she kicked hard outward, uncoiling her body with all the strength she could muster. She kicked the hooter right in the ribs as he was turning, and she felt bone crack as he staggered to one side, the sword swinging wildly and dangerously close to Gabrielle's head.

The bard ducked, and scooted to Xena's far side, picking up another rock and winding up to throw it.

A hooter scrambled over the ledge, and let out a howl of triumph, as he reached for Gabrielle's arm, and the big hooter lifted the sword of war over his head and rushed at Xena.

The thunder rolled over head, growing louder and louder.

And louder.

**

Xena waited until her opponent was almost on top of her, the stench of him filling her nose as she held her ground to the last moment when his huge blade was heading right for her skull. Then she ducked under his right arm and escaped, hearing the blade hit the rock with a grinding crunch behind her.

In the same motion, she stepped close to Gabrielle, circled her with one arm and pulled her off her feet as she went around the back of the big hooter, the bard's legs swinging out over thin air before she landed her near the path upward. "Stay!"

Gabrielle grabbed hold of the rock as she was released. "I'm going to keep throwing rocks!"

"Fine!" Xena put her shoulder down and body slammed the big hooter, who was trying to yank the sword he's sunk into the rock out of it. She knocked him off balance and into the two just climbing over the edge, knocking them back and sending them sprawling off the ledge to hang precariously.

No time to take advantage of that. Xena found herself diving out of the way as the big hooter recovered, lashing out to kick her, his foot missing her body but hitting her sword arm and smashing it against the ground.

Her lower arm went numb, and she lost her grip on her weapon. With a yowl, he dove on top of it before she could turn over and grab it with her other hand and now she found herself rolling away from him before he could gut her with her own blade.

He got up. She got up, a flash of metal catching her eye as she leaped for the hilt of Ares sword, still embedded in the rock and got hold of it as she swung her legs around to brace to pull it out.

Her fingers closed around the carved hilt.

A sound like that of the sky splitting sounded over head, and a blast of light turned everything around her to silver.

For a moment, she thought she'd been hit by lightning. There was a cracking sound, and a flash, and a jolt up her arm that went right up into her armpit and tightened her chest.

Her vision blurred, and she felt her heart thump an irregular rhythm in her chest and for a moment she couldn't catch her breath.

Then the light faded, and her pulse steadied and the world returned to rain spattered darkness as the pain and the strangeness faded away.

She felt the attack coming behind her, and her body arched as the sword came out of the rock and she flipped backwards, landing and whirling low as the hooter's arms and the her sword whispered over her head so close it tugged strands from it.

"Xena!"

Her reflexes had her moving before she heard her name called and she was leaping through the air and twisting to land on the other side of the hooter, bringing the big sword over in an arc in front of her as her boots scuffed against the rock.

The hooter came at her, but now, somehow, the size didn't matter and her blood was surging and she could smell the fear in the air around her.

She got her other hand around the hilt of the sword of war and stood, the rain slacking enough for her to get a clear view of things around her as she stepped forward and swung at the hooter, blades clashing as she powered through the attack and sent his hands flying apart, her sword deflecting the one in his grip and giving her an opening wide enough for her to simply drive forward, throwing all her body weight into a savage lunge that put the point of the sword right through his chest.

Blood gushed out, splashing over her hands and her face as her forward motion drove her into him, knocking him back into the rock as the blade dropped from his hands and he slid to one side, his fingers scrabbling at the big blade protruding from his chest.

Xena breathed in the scent of hot copper, tasting a drop of it on her lips as she watched the hooter die, his eyes rolling up into his head, only the last of many who had fallen to her lethal skills.

What had she been afraid of?

Thunder rolled again, and a flash of lighting lit up the ledge as she pulled the sword out of him, letting him slump to the ground as she took a step back and half turned, sensing motion to her right.

Hooters were swarming over the ledge. Xena took another step back and felt a warm pressure on her arm, turning her head to find Gabrielle shoulder to shoulder with her, the bard's hands clenched around the hilt of Xena's sword. "What do you think you're doing with that?"

"Whatever I can." The bard replied. "You okay?"

Xena glanced at her. "I'm fine. Why?"

Gabrielle smiled grimly, and shifted her grip on the sword.

They faced the wall of hooters heading their way and Xena realized there were too many of them to fight off. They'd be overwhelmed by sheer numbers in a second, and probably shoved right off the cliff. "Hey Gab?"

"Yeah?"

"Want to start climbing up there and let me fight em off?"

"No."

"Figured you'd say that." Xena took a step forward and got ready, raising the sword of war and letting out the loudest, meanest yell she could come up with to counter the wild hoots ringing against the stone.

Six of them got footholds on the rock and started for them, two holding spears and a third a fistful of arrows. As they approached, thunder rolled overhead again, and kept rolling so violently it was shaking the ground Xena was standing on.

The warrior winced, and took a step towards the hooters, turning sideways to get as much power into a swing as she could. There wasn't room for Gabrielle to fight next to her, but from the corner of her eye, she saw her blade raise up as the bard held it like a dagger in front of her, having the sense to keep it close to her body in a defensive posture.

Lightning flashed, and behind the six hooters she could see dozens more, pouring up the mountain now with confidence, climbing towards them.

Fast learners. Xena cursed under her breath. "Stay close to me."

"Don't worry."

The sound got louder, and the echoes had started pounding against her skull, when a deeper rumble her subconscious remembered all too well cut through the noise and sent her spinning instantly towards Gabrielle, grabbing her partner and slamming both of them against the rock wall.

"Blefh!" Gabrielle coughed. "W.."

Xena threw her arm over Gabrielle's head and covered as much of her as she could as what seemed like half the mountain came down the slope, rocks smacking her in the back as they rolled down over the ledge. She felt rock chips sting the backs of her legs and she edged closer, as the screams of the hooters rose over the thunder.

Gabrielle remained stock still, realizing she was in the safest place on the mountain, that the hooters were being crushed under tons of rock, and that she was being protected from the rain. It was such a sudden change from the deadly terror of the moment before that her head hurt thinking about it, so she just allowed herself go blank instead, letting the sound of Xena's heartbeat overwhelm the chaos around them.

In a few minutes, it was over. The thunder subsided, and slowly, the rattle and rumble of rocks died away leaving only the sound of rain spattering against the rock.

Gabrielle took a slow, deep breath and started to shift her position.

"Don't move." Xena whispered.

The bard froze. "Are they still there?"

"No." Her partner muttered. "But neither is the ledge. I'm holding on by my toes."

"Urk." Gabrielle pressed herself further back into the rock and grabbed the front of her Xena's leathers. "What happened?"

"No idea." Xena very gingerly extended her leg and got a foothold on the path. "Just hold still." She reached out with her free hand and curled her fingers around a bit of rock, sliding her boot forward a little and then shifting her weight to that foot as she pulled herself up onto the path.

Only then, did she turn her head and look down.

The ledge was gone, save the sliver Gabrielle was standing on. Below them, hundreds of boulders and bits of rock were piled, barely seen in the rain and the darkness. The warrior exhaled slowly, before she wedged Ares sword behind her sheath, and held her hand out to Gabrielle. "Hand that over."

The bard handed the sword over, and watched as she sheathed it. Glad to have both hands free, she quickly fastened her fingers to the rocks behind her, and cautiously looked down.

Darkness. Shadows. The rattle of pebbles falling.

Then, from above them she heard a different sound. "Xena..!" She cocked her head and listened. "Is that... are th.. it's those big animals, isn't it?"

Faint bugles echoed out, tinged with triumph and unmistakable.

"I hear it." The warrior edged over, and held a hand out. "C'mon."

The bard took her hand and cautiously sidled over to join her. "What happened to.."

Xena glanced over her shoulder. "Rocks buried em." She moved away from the ledge, keeping a wary eye out for loose rocks. "Guess they were just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

A high, warbling bugle echoed softly from above.

Gabrielle joined her on the path, and they worked their way back up to where Ares was still leaning, apparently content to wait. "Where are they?" She peered around, but the rain, and the darkness defeated her vision. "Do you see them?"

Xena tipped her head back and searched the walls around them. Lightning flared, and she thought she saw a trunk waving over the top of the ridge above them, but she knew that wasn't possible.

A soft trumpet drifted down.

Was it?

The sound faded, and they were left in darkness, with only the rain coming down around them. "I don't.. I don't know what happened." She finally said, as they came up to where the god of war was waiting. Ahead of them – no sign of Pony or Gran.

Going down was no longer an option. She licked her lips, and tasted blood again. Turning her face to the sky, she let the rain wash her skin, catching a few drops on her tongue and savoring the sweetness of it. At least they were only fighting the mountain now.

Ares lifted his head as they reached him, and his eyes found hers and even in the darkness, she could see him smile.

"Nice." The god of war rasped. "That was almost worth croaking for."

Xena looked away. "Let's get moving." She prodded him. "Before we push our luck."

Ares just laughed.

**

The rain slacked off a little, becoming a chill mist rather than a pounding deluge as they stood quietly, gathering themselves to move on. Gabrielle studied the distinctive outline of the sword of war nestled over Xena's shoulder, before she turned and searched the slopes, hoping to see a glimpse of their furry friends.

Her knees were shaking, and she felt very cold inside. After a brief hesitation, she leaned against Xena's shoulder and collected what warmth she could from the warrior's rain spattered skin.

She could feel the faint tremors still running through Xena's body, and after a second, the warrior half turned and put both arms around her, seeming to want the contact as much as she did.

And why not? Gabrielle craved the certainty of what she and Xena shared in this wild, wide ocean of uncertainty they found themselves in. She no longer wondered what they were going to do next – she only wanted Xena to be there next to her.

Amphipolis seemed very far away now, she felt a dull fog separating her from her family, and from her daughter, waiting there at home, wondering...

Gabrielle drew a steadying breath, and lifted her head to look up at Xena. "We ready to go?"

Tired blue eyes peered out from between sodden bangs. "No place to go but up."

The bard nodded.

"Bout time." Ares commented dryly. "Gonna get past me and lead the way, sweetheart?"

"No." Xena prodded him in the back. "Move. Gabrielle stays with me."

Ares rolled his eyes, but gathered himself up and started to pull himself along the rock wall with uncertain steps. "Nice of ya to grab my sticker back, Xena. Wanna hand it over?"

"No." The warrior replied. "You'll get it when I'm good and ready to give it to you."

Gabrielle's eyebrows lifted sharply, to no real effect since she was shuffling along behind Xena and the warrior couldn't see her face.

"Not nice, Xena." Ares warned. "That's my property on your back. I don't take kindly to mortals putting their mitts on it."

"Then you wont' mind not having it." Xena said. "Since your mortal, and you've got nothing to carry it with besides maybe shoving it.."

"Ah ah ah.!" The god of war cut her off. "Be nice."

"Kiss my ass."

Ares paused and half turned. "Now we're talking!"

Xena gave him an impatient shove. "Don't even think about it."

"C'mon Xena." Ares wasn't deterred. "You're not gonna tell me you're satisfied with one little bedwarmer.. I know you better than that."

The warrior pondered in silence for a brief time, then she chuckled. "I'm totally satisfied."

"Bull." The god of war snorted. "Why I could..."

"No ya couldn't." Xena focused her senses ahead of them, her ears picking up a soft scuffing, and a rattle of falling pebbles. "Not for more than two minutes, anyway."

"Hey!"

The sounds got louder, and Xena's attitude shifted from darkly mocking to alert. "Hold it. "

"What?" Ares stopped moving.

Xena managed to work her way around him and took the lead, putting the god of war between her and Gabrielle. She edged around a heavy boulder then pulled up short as she came face to face with Pony coming back the other direction.

They stared at each other momentarily, then Pony looked away. "I was.. I heard stuff." She muttered. "Thought I could help."

"We took care of it." Xena replied, briefly.

Pony looked back at her, then her eyes lifted as she spotted the dual hilts over Xena's shoulder. She stared at the sword of war, then she looked Xena's face for a long moment. "Yeah." She shifted and started moving back in the direction she came. "That 'splains a lot."

Xena wished she didn't know what Pony was talking about. She stared briefly at her hands pressed against the rock, misty rain drenching the surface of her skin as the first light of the coming dawn put faint shadows between her knuckles.

Her palms still tingled from the touch of that hilt.

"Xe." Gabrielle called over. "Everything okay?"

Ah well. First things first, which was getting the Hades up the damn wall. "Yeah." She turned to get back around Ares, only to find the god smirking at her, blocking the path. "Don't be a jerk."

"Why not?" Ares asked. "Gotta get some fun outta this before I drop dead."

Xena stared at him.

Ares smiled grimly back at her, lifting away a bit of the tattered catskin, revealing the wound that now spread half across his chest, red and swollen, and seeping ugly yellow pus. He returned the skin to its place and resumed his hold on the rock. "Suffering every minute for you, babycakes. Give me a nice view to make up for it. I love your butt in those leathers."

Her face twitched in response. "Gabrielle – take a step back." She crouched, then leaped up, catching a tiny shelf over Ares head with her fingertips and swinging herself up and over the obstacle to land neatly next to the bard.

Ares returned his head forward from its uptilted position. "That wasn't bad either." He rallied, undaunted.

"Jackass." The warrior muttered, under her breath.

"Urg." Gabrielle had her eyes closed, and her body pressed close to the rock.

"You can open em now." Xena patted her on the back comfortingly. "I made it."

A green orb cautiously appeared, then both eyes opened and Gabrielle released her breath. "Good grief, Xe. Was it worth the risk? What if you slipped?" She put out a hand in reflex and touched the warrior's arm.

Xena could feel the fear in her, and the coming dawn revealed the tension that marked her partner's face. "Of course you're worth the risk." She replied casually. "What kind of dumb question is that?"

That produced a wry smile in return, but the warrior could see the shivers racking the bard's body, and wished she could do more. "Least the sun's coming up."

"Oh." Gabrielle murmured. "Yay. I was so looking forward to seeing how high up we are."

Whoops. "C'mon." Xena sighed. "Just keep looking at the wall."

"Okay." The bard answered, in a small voice. She kept both hands on the rock and stayed as close to it as possible, the rough surface scraping along her midriff. A cold, wet wind blew at her back, and made her all the more aware of how much open space there was behind her, and as the light slowly grew she felt a sense of terror growing with it in her guts.

She could hear birds waking up, and taking flight, and she tried to block out the knowledge that they should be over her head, not even with her shoulderblades.

Or worse.

A thousand scenarios of falling began to play in her mind, shortening her breathing until a warm, steadying hand settled on the back of her neck and she felt Xena's close presence next to her.

"Thanks."

"I'm here, Gab." Xena's voice was low and intimate. "We're gonna make home."

A hawk let out a cry behind her, as Gabrielle briefly opened her eyes and looked at the rock before her nose. It was weathered, and gray, and between the cracks tiny bits of lichen clung, stubbornly surviving despite the winds and the hard surface they rested on.

She could smell the lichen. They had a green, somewhat musky scent that reminded her of their dell back in Amphipolis and the long afternoons she'd spent there loving Xena and watching the sunlight trickle over the both of them.

She thought about the many places she'd been with Xena. Hot places, and cold, friendly and war torn. Beautiful, wild places, and the biggest cities in the land. "Xe?"

"Mm?"

"I am home." Gabrielle said. "So let's just work on making it back to Dori."

Xena's fingers squeezed the back of her neck gently. "Gotcha."

She just had time to settle herself down, when a hoarse scream broke the air. Gabrielle inhaled sharply. "Is that Gran??"

Xena cocked her head. "Pony!" She yelled.

"SHIT!" The Amazon hollered back. "XENA!!!"

Xena prodded Ares in the back. "Move faster."

The god of war didn't. "Aren'cha gonna fly over me again and go save the day?" He suggested. "Big old hero deal? G'wan."

The warrior reviewed the rock wall over their heads, then she pushed him again. "No." She said. "So get moving, or I'll tie a rope around your ugly neck and drag you along for the ride."

Ares turned and looked at her, the mocking attitude evaporating. "Watch it, Xena." He warned, softly. "We're not always gonna be in this pit, and we both know dying ain't the end of everything."

Yes. Xena did know that. "I'll take my chances." She gave him another, harder shove. "Hang on, Pony – we're comin!"

A scuffle of rock warned her, then Pony skidded into view around the next bend of rock. Her face was dead white, visible in the growing dawn and her eyes were nearly half out of her head. "Something's got hold of Gran."

"Again?" Ares replied in a bored tone. "I don't see the attraction there at all."

"What is it?" Gabrielle asked.

"Whothehadesknows?" Pony yelled. "Long thing, came outta the rock! Willya come on already!"

Gabrielle put her hand on Xena's back, when she realized the warrior wasn't going anywhere. "Xe, go." She urged softly. "Please."

"How?" Xena whispered back. "Fly?" She drew her own sword out and started poking Ares in the butt with it. "Get moving, Ares!"

"Ow!"

"MOVE!"

**

They came around the last bend and saw Granella on the ground, her body pulled taut against the rock wall by a long, snakelike object. She was struggling against it, yanking at the moving band, but it was resisting her efforts. "Augh!"

Xena unsheathed her sword as they came to the marginally wider section of the ledge and slipped past Ares. "Hold still!" She twirled her sword in her hand and passed the backpedaling Pony, intent on the thick rope holding Gran to the wall. "I'm gonna cut it off!"

Gran kept struggling, letting out a guttural scream, as Pony darted in and started to yank at the coil holding her. "She can't breathe!"

Xena took aim, and dove for her knees, raising her sword over her head and hoping her aim was as accurate as she remembered.

Ares seemed glad enough to find a slight cut in and slump down onto it, resting his head against the harsh granite wall. He glanced up as Gabrielle came up next to him, and stuck his boots out into her path with a malicious smile. "Dare ya."

Gabrielle halted and stared at him.

"Gwan. Go scream for your girlfriend." Ares taunted her.

Instead, the bard looked past him, shading her eyes from the rising sun as she tried to see what was going on. "Xena! Stop!"

The warrior's head turned. "What?" She paused in mid motion, though, the note in her partner's voice sounding a warning her senses obeyed without question.

"Don't do it!" Gabrielle insisted, focusing her attention back on Ares.

The god of war, his eyebrows nearly into his hairline, drew his boots in and gestured her forward with an exaggeratedly courtly gesture. "Hey. Didn't think ya had it in ya. But after what she said, don't blame ya, either, cupcake."

Gabrielle bolted past him and got to Xena's side just as Pony reacted to what she'd said and dove at her, tackling her in a furious flurry of angry blows.

Xena twisted in mid air and got an arm around Pony's middle, hauling her up and off Gabrielle as though she were a sack of wheat. She kept her momentum going as the bard rolled under them both, coming up onto her knees and reaching for the vine around Granella's body.

"Gran!" Gabrielle tried to grab the flailing arms. "Stop! Stop it!"

"You bitch!" Granella glared wildly at her, turning her grasping to punches instead, as she tried to hit Gabrielle.

"What in Hades is wrong with you!" Pony grappled with Xena furiously. "Lemme go! She's getting killed there! You want her to die? That it? So no one knows what you didn't do??"

Xena body slammed her to the ground and dropped over her, using her size advantage to pin the Amazon firmly to the ground. She had no real idea what was going on behind her, and the dust they were kicking up kept her from seeing what Gabrielle was doing. "Gab!"

Gabrielle blocked the fists flying at her. "Gran! Just stop! Please!"

"Bitch!"

The bard gave up and dove into the fray, turning her shoulders so the blows fell on her back as she grabbed hold of the vine, reaching along it with frantic fingers. She could feel nails scraping her skin along her spine, and the sharp pain as Granella punched her.

Her fingers squeezed around Granella's side, scraping against the rock as she pulled her sister in law towards her with all her strength. "Gran!"

Fingers tangled in her hair and pulled hard. Gabrielle tightened the muscles around her neck and just kept digging with her hand, jamming it between Granella and the rock painfully. She managed to reach her objective just as her neck muscles gave out and her head snapped backwards, her fingers touching the very end of the vine and taking hold of it. "Augh!"

The cry of pain, she knew, would bring Xena around to her aid. She only hoped the warrior would temper her reaction and she wouldn't end up covered in blood. "Cmon.. c'mon.. " She whispered, squeezing with her fingertips as she sensed motion behind her and the wave of dark energy, and heard the bellow of rage coming from Xena's throat.

A squeeze back, then suddenly, everything was in motion as the vine uncoiled and snaked back towards her, wrapping itself around her own body as she twisted loose from Granella's grip only to be caught in the vine's as she rolled over and looked for her partner. "Xe!"

Xena was at her side in an instant, cursing and reaching for the vine. Gabrielle grabbed her hands and held them, repeating the warrior's name over again until the blue eyes met hers and everything went still. "It's okay."

Xena gazed steadily at her, chest heaving. "It's okay?" She echoed, her voice rising.

"It's okay." Gabrielle said again, releasing one hand so she could pat the vine with her other one. "Look.. it's okay. It's our friends." She relaxed against the rock, breathing hard herself as the cool stone stung the scratches on her back.

Xena's eyes slowly went to the muscular stripe wound around her partner's body, and her mind sorted out the rings, and the hair, and she exhaled loudly. "Gods be damned."

Gabrielle rolled onto her back, now that she was assured her partner wasn't going to do anything rash, and peered inside the crack the trunk had issued from. In the faint light, she could see a big brown eye peering back at her with bemusement. "Hi."

Xena rocked back onto her heels and turned her head to stare at their companions. Granella was pressed against the rock wall nearby, holding the back of her hand to her mouth, a drizzle of blood staining the skin of her knuckles. Eponin was flat on her back, one hand resting on her stomach, the other hand covering her eyes.

A very awkward silence fell, broken briefly by a desultory clapping from Ares. Xena swiveled and rested her hands on her thigh once he stopped. "I really don't care what you both think right now." She stated, in a calm voice. "But let me tell you, the next time someone lays a finger on her.." She pointed at Gabrielle.

"Why not just kill us now?" Granella cut her off.

"What makes you think I want to?" The warrior replied. "What the Hades is going on here? You got grabbed, and I'm sorry for that, Granella, but I didn't cause that."

The other woman glowered at her. "You didn't do anything about it."

"I didn't?" Xena pointed at her own chest. "Who went into the cave after you? We did." She indicated Gabrielle and herself.

"After you saved him!" Pony pointed at Ares, who smiled viciously at them. "The bastard!"

"Hey!" The god of war barked hoarsely. "Watch it, mongrel."

"Look." Xena's voice rose. "This is pointless!"

"No." Granella shot right back. "You listen.. I trusted you! I trusted you to keep me safe, because that's what you do, Xena! I trusted you and you.."

"Damn it!"

Gabrielle leaned against the rock wall, feeling it all sliding out of control around her. She fingered the trunk that was now exploring her torso curiously, wondering if this was the mama animal and if it was, if the baby was with her. "Hey." She murmured into the dark crack, reaching her hand inside to stroke the animal's trunk. "What are you doing in there, huh?"

A soft bugle answered her. The opening was about as wide as her thigh, and extended up a little taller than her head. Granella must have leaned there a moment to rest, and the rest....

"Okay." Xena said. "Let's save all this until we're out of here. We don't have time to fight."

Gabrielle watched as the animal plucked at her belly, patting it with the nub at it's end. "I bet you're the mama, huh?" She said. "Are you seeing a baby in there?" Her fingers touched the nub. "You think my baby's gonna make it?"

She only became aware of the silence after she felt Xena's hand wrap around her ankle. She looked up to find all three women looking at her. "You know." She said, after a brief pause. "I don't want anyone here to die."

"Gabrielle." Xena's voice dropped.

"I want us all to get out of here, and get back to our families." The bard watched Granella's face, seeing the horror, and still the anger in her eyes. "So like Xena said.. can we put a hold on the blame until then?"

Granella just looked away, wiping the blood from her mouth with an impatient gesture. Pony looked at the ground, then shook her head in silence.

Xena came over and crouched next to her partner, putting a hand on her shoulder, and squeezing it. "We need to keep moving."

"I know." Gabrielle took Xena's fingers, and brushed them against the nub, which nibbled the warrior's skin. "How did they get in there, Xena? Inside the mountain?"

Xena peered inside the crack, her eyes picking out details lost to her partner. "It's a big cave." She said. "Probably lets out near plateau.. we're on the other side of the wall from it." The scent that came from the crack held the smell of the animals, and water, and at the far edges, dirt.

The bard looked down at the trunk in her lap. "I don't think she meant to scare anyone."

"Sure." Pony muttered.

Instead of anger, Gabrielle could only feel sadness. All the aggressiveness she'd been filled with for days had drained away, and she couldn't prevent memories from surfacing of another time, and another long period of anger, and...

Xena's lips pressed against the side of her head, and she set aside the images.

The trunk curled around her wrist and squeezed. Gabrielle wrapped her hands around it and squeezed back. Could the animal feel her pain? She looked up at her partner, who gently held a hand out to her. "They saved our lives back there, Xena."

"I know."

Gabrielle gave the trunk a last pat. "Goodbye again, my friend." She leaned near the crack and peered inside. "Take care of yourself, okay?"

The big eye gazed at her, and the trunk curled around her arm, pulling her closer.

"I have to go." The bard gently unwrapped the snout. "Be good."

She stood and took a step back, hearing a soft trumpet inside the rock as the snout snaked out and reached for her again. There was a note of urgency, she thought, but she backed away again, coming to rest against Xena's body as she gazed unhappily at the opening. "Xe, she's trying to tell us something."

Privately, the warrior agreed. However. "C'mon." She clasped Gabrielle's shoulder. "We don't have time to figure it out." She glanced over at the rest of their party, as the animal trumpeted loudly again, waving its snout at them. "Let's go."

"You go first." Granella told her. "I'm not going to be one to meet any more of your.. friends."

Xena exhaled. "All right." She turned and examined the path, reaching out to touch the rock wall.

Gabrielle took hold of her arm. "Xena.. " She watched the snout thrash about urgently. "We're missing something here." Her voice roughened a little. "It's almost like she's trying to stop us.. she must know something, and I think.."

The warrior encircled her with one long arm. "Sweetheart, I believe that." She whispered. "But we've got to get out of here."

"I know, but.."

"No, Gabrielle.." Xena's voice took on its own urgency. "We have to get Ares out of this valley."

Gabrielle blinked a few times, aware of the motion of their companions moving towards them, conscious that the privacy of Xena's embrace would last only a few moments longer. "What? I.. of course we do b.."

"Gabrielle." Xena lifted her other hand and cupped the bard's cheek. "We have to."

Their eyes met. "Have to." Gabrielle repeated softly. "Something you know.. or.."

Xena released her cheek and touched her own chest. "Something I feel. In here." She uttered back. "I just..." The warrior hesitated. "I don't think I can ignore it."

"Oh, Xena." The bard glanced around, then back at her. "But what if..." Her gaze lifted to the hilt of the sword of war, looming over Xena's shoulder. "Gods."

It all came down on her in a rush, the sudden realization of what had happened when Xena's hand touched that hilt, and what might happen if Ares didn't survive.

And Xena did.

Gabrielle felt so sick suddenly, she thought she was going to throw up. Death hadn't yet been able to separate them, but, she knew with a stark knowledge, immortality would.

Would that be Xena's fate, to take Ares place? The bard stared past her partner, finding Ares looking back at her, with a twisted smile, sunken eyes bleakly knowing.

Gods.

Xena cupped her cheek again. "Trust me." Blue eyes met hers, and they both acknowledged silently the history between them. "Trust me."

Gabrielle released a slow breath, remembering very clearly one of those things. "Okay." She murmured. "I'm with you." She turned and started back to where Ares was still slouching, her mind whirling with new, and unpleasant possibilities.

Pony and Gran could be the least of their problems.

**

Late afternoon sun draped over Gabrielle's back as she stood, leaning against the wall as they paused to rest a bit. The warmth felt good, as the wind had dropped a little and she rested her head against the stone wishing she could just go to sleep in it.

"Wait here." Xena patted her arm. "I'm gonna check up ahead.. maybe there's a spot we can sit down a minute."

"Xena." Gabrielle laid her cheek against the granite. "I'll be fine. Don't worry about me."

"Gabrielle, would you do something for me?"

The bard gazed at her. "Sure. Anything."

"Shut up." Xena leaned over and gave her a kiss on the lips. "Be right back." She disappeared around the next corner of the path and left Gabrielle to decide if she wanted to turn and face her companions or merely ignore them.

There was a lot to be said for the latter. Ares was right next to her, and the other two a little distance from him and none of them were really giving out any vibes that made her want to talk to them.

Gabrielle knew she had a reputation for being a friendly, talkative, good hearted person. She also knew that by and large, that wasn't too far off the mark, really, though she certainly had her pissy moments and bouts of ill temper.

And usually, they were with Xena, not with other people because at this stage in their lives together, Xena was the only person who she trusted utterly with the ugliest side of herself. For everyone else, she had a reputation to maintain and she did her best to do just that - and she knew if she turned around and started talking to her companions she's blow her reputation right on out of the water.

What good would that do, really?

Sometimes she the thought, of the two of them, that Xena really had it easier. She could just be Xena, and be cranky, or gruff, or rude and people just took it for granted because she was who she was.

When Gabrielle was rude to someone, she had a half dozen people searching her out to find out what was the matter, and could they help, and should they go get Xena.

Sheesh.

But then, she remembered, there was the council, and the day they'd turned her away, dismissing her influence like...

Well....

"Gods be damned!" Gabrielle walked in and slammed the door to the cabin, glad Dori was with her cousins so she could vent her aggravation in private. "What in Hades is wrong with people?" She asked the wall.

The cabin remained, naturally, silent, and she pulled off her gauntlets and tossed them over onto her writing table, stripping out of her cloak and dropping that over the chair as well.

She sat down and rested her elbows on her knees, feeling the frustration tying her up in knots. It wasn't even anything really that momentous, just the town council, telling her off.

Gabrielle was self-aware enough to know it was her ego more than anything. She'd given what she thought was good service to the town, done what she could and all that, but now she found out that what she'd thought was gratefully accepted advice was really...

Well, they'd told her they really just let her talk to make Xena happy.

The bard swallowed, caught between tears and a deep embarrassment. Was that really what everyone did? Humor her, just to keep on her partner's good side? Were all the plaudits, and the accolades just like those of the town's?

Fake?

"Damn it." Gabrielle whispered. "Damn it, all I wanted from life was just a..."

Her vision was filled, suddenly, with a deep red blob, which resolved into a pretty rose being twirled gently between Xena's fingers. "Oh."

"Here." Xena offered her the flower.

The bard took it, the gentle fragrance filling her nose. "What's this for?"

Xena sat down on the floor next to her, and laced her fingers together. "Tor told me what happened with the council."

For a moment, Gabrielle thought about just pretending, brushing it off as she knew her partner would have done in her place. But then, a certain weight lifted off her when she remembered this was the one person in her life she didn't have to do that with. "That hurt." She muttered, softly.

"Yeah." Xena wrapped her arm around the bard's leg and patted her foot. "I know."

Gabrielle stared at the ground. "You think that's true for everyone, Xena?" She turned her head and looked at the warrior. "Everyone just tells me how great I am because of you?"

Xena sat there for a bit, her brow contracted. Then she cleared her throat gently. "It could be that some people might do that."

It was like being hit in the head. Gabrielle felt tears start to sting her eyes, and she bit the inside of her lip.

"Some people might say they're listening to you, or trusting you just because they want to get on my good side, sure." Xena went on. "But I trust you with my life because you've earned it, and I listen to you because you're damned right most of the time."

Gabrielle's nostrils flared a little, and her skin prickled as the words penetrated her dismay. She peeked over at Xena's face, finding an expression of wry love there waiting for her and she felt an overwhelming surge of deep emotion that brought more tears, but for a completely different reason.

"For what that's worth." The warrior added. "Gotta make points with myself, right?"

The bard had to smile. She set the rose down on her writing table and turned, slipping off the chair and onto her knees on the floor before Xena's seated form. "Thanks." She rested her hands on the warrior's shoulders and touched her forehead to Xena's. "What would I do without you?"

"Get your kudos honestly?" Xena demurred, with a smile of her own.

"Xe."

The warrior kissed her. "Now you gotta do me a favor."

Gabrielle exhaled, closing her eyes. "Anything."

"Tell me which jackass said that to you so I can go kick his ass and reinforce your theory."

Through her tears, Gabrielle started laughing, and they both tumbled together on the floor in a tangle of limbs and giggles.

"To Hades with all of em."

"Hey." Ares prodded her.

Reluctantly, Gabrielle lifted her cheek off the rock and turned her head to look at him. "Yes?"

"Big bitch stick you again?"

Gabrielle stared at him, her eyes blinking several times. "Huh?"

Ares rolled his eyes. "You're pregnant?"

Even the question felt invasive. The bard considered not answering, but she suspected the god of war would simply continue to ask if she didn't. "Maybe."

"Maybe?" Ares queried.

The bard half shrugged. "Maybe." She repeated. "I guess time will tell." She paused. "Wait... shouldn't you know?"

"Me???" The dark haired man snorted. "Trust me, babe.. I never stuck around any female long enough to be able to tell one way or the other."

Gabrielle scratched the bridge of her nose. "I meant, because you're a god." She said. "Not because you screwed a lot of people." She glanced past him, to find Pony listening to her, while Gran huddled in a ball on the ground.

Ares let his head rest against the rock as he gazed at her. His eyes were deeply sunken, and it was all he was able to do to keep up with even the slow pace they were keeping. "Know how I found out the first time?"

Gabrielle shook her head.

"Dite punched me." Ares related. "After you took the header and she popped you out."

The bard's eyes warmed. "Good for her."

"Nice."

"Sorry." Gabrielle said. "Am I supposed to be grateful to you for asking me to do that?" She asked.

"Saved your honeybun's buns, didn't it?" The god replied. "Trust me, Dite wouldn't have yanked her chain out of the barbeque pit."

Gabrielle studied his face. "I don't know about that." She murmured. "But I wonder if you'd asked Xena, if she'd have thanked you that day for saving her life."

Ares snorted, and looked away.

"You're really lucky Aphrodite did what she did, Ares." The bard went on. "Because if I had died... I would have found my way up to Olympus and you'd have paid for what you put her through."

The god of war slowly turned his head and looked at her, both eyebrows hiking. "You've got a really screwed up idea of mortality, doncha?"

Gabrielle half smiled. "That's what happens when you live with Xena, I guess." She sensed the warrior coming back and turned her head to watch the path, her eyes focusing on her partner's face as it emerged.

Uh oh. To anyone else, the warrior appeared her usual stoic self, but Gabrielle knew in an instant they were in real trouble.

Okay, they were in more trouble than they had been a moment before, which wasn't really saying much to be honest. Gabrielle took her courage in her hands and pushed away from the wall, straightening and turning her body to face her partner. "Hey."

"Hey." Xena turned and leaned against the wall, bending her knees a bit so her face was hidden from view of their companions. She tilted her head and looked at Gabrielle, letting the mask slip briefly, an expression of bewildered frustration on her face. "Got a problem up ahead."

Gabrielle eased closer. "Path get tough?" She asked, softly. "We're doing okay, I think."

Xena gazed at her in somber silence.

"I don't think I like that look." The bard murmured. "How bad is it?"

The warrior composed herself, and straightened up. "Okay, listen up." She said, briefly. "Looks like we're gonna have to..." Uncharacteristically, Xena hesitated. "We've pretty much run out of options here." She looked at the eyes focused on her, aware of the responsibility on her shoulders.

Responsibility she had just betrayed. "The path's out ahead." She explained. "Just around that bend." With a jerk of her head, she indicated the curve.

"What?" Pony asked. "What'ddaya mean?"

Gabrielle nodded a little, to herself. "For how far, Xena. Can we.."

"Out. Gone." Xena put her hand on Gabrielle's shoulder. "We can't go back." She said. "And there's only one way out ahead of us, and that's up."

"What?" Pony said again. "What do you mean.. we've been going up, Xena!" She turned and gestured behind them. "You losing it?"

Xena visibly squared her shoulders and tipped her head back, looking straight up at the rock wall that ended in a squared off edge, with blue sky and white clouds above it. "Up." She indicated the wall. "It's the only way out."

Everyone stared at her in silence, even Ares.

After a moment, Gabrielle slumped against Xena, covering her eyes with one hand. "Gods."

Ares slowly slid down the wall, ending up sitting with his legs splayed out and his face a stark white. "Y'aint getting no help from me, babe. Sorry."

"Shit." Pony put her hand to her head. "You totally damned screwed us over, Xena."

The warrior exhaled, and glanced back at Gabrielle, who had lifted her head and was looking right back at her. "Sorry." She muttered, under her breath. "Guess I really messed up this time."

"Maybe some people think that." The bard took her hand. "But I know whose hands to put my life in." She watched a faint smile appear. "So to Hades with all the rest of them."

Xena absorbed the sentiment, as it buffered her from the glares of the others, and she studied the stark, rock wall.

Only way out.

Damn.

**

One Wild Ride

Part 24

Xena stood a little apart from the rest of them, sorting through the bits and pieces of bone and scrap she'd taken from their carrybag. To her right, the path ended in a somberly spectacular fashion, plunging down into a ravine.

To her left, the wall they'd been walking against went straight up, the granite providing scant handholds even to her eyes. It would be difficult for her to climb it, to have the others do it seemed so unlikely Xena just kept shaking her head every so often in reaction to it.

Gabrielle had her back against the wall, as far away from the edge of the path as she could get. She had her legs crossed under her, and she was leaning her elbows on her knees, her eyes studying the dusty surface in silence.

Xena watched her from the corner of her eye, understanding the faint lip motions as her partner tried to talk herself into the challenge before them. The other women were simply giving her disgusted looks. Ares was propped up against the wall with his eyes closed.

Only Gabrielle was totally focused on the goal along with her.

Of course. Xena fitted a piece of the antler she'd saved into her hand, curling her fingers around it. She'd spent many long candlemarks, sevendays, and moons teaching the bard that kind of focus and finally now, here, when she'd just completely screwed everything up she was reaping the benefits.

Ironic. The warrior picked up her selections and walked over to Gabrielle, taking a seat next to her. "Hey."

Gabrielle turned her head a bit, her green eyes peeking out from shaggy bangs. "Hey."

"Okay, listen." Xena took her hand, and fitted a piece of antler to it, curling her fingers around the irregular surface. It resulted in a downward facing bit of bone protruding from Gabrielle's palm. "We tie this in place."

"Okay." The bard answered softly. "Is that to help me climb?"

"Uh huh."

Gabrielle closed her fingers around the bone, raising her hand a little and miming a downward action. "I don't know.. when I watched you climb the last time near the cabin you used your fingers. Isn't that better?"

Xena extended her hand out, and flexed it. "I can hold my body up by my fingertips." She replied. "You can't."

"Mm." The bard murmured. "What's this for?" She indicated the bit of antler extending down her wrist.

"I'm going to tie it tight here." Xena circled her wrist with two fingers. "Give you more support." She studied the bard with a sigh. "You're going to get scraped up like Hades, though."

Gabrielle nodded. "If that's the worst that happens to me I'll take it." She replied, giving Xena an honest look. "I'll just do the best I can, Xe."

"I know you will." Xena said. "I'm counting on you."

Gabrielle's head lifted at that, and she shifted, hiking her knee up and pressing her back to the rock. She studied Xena's face for a long moment, her own expression somber. "You're counting on me." She repeated.

Xena nodded. "I can't do this alone." She said. "You're the only one I can trust, Gabrielle. I know you're scared." She put a hand on the bard's knee. "But I also know if anyone can do this, you can."

Gabrielle got a sense, now, of just how heavy the expectations of a loved one could really be. So often she was in the opposite position, depending on Xena to come through and fix whatever their problem is that finding herself in that blast of torchlight was both unexpected and uncomfortable.

She didn't want to climb the wall. She didn't really think she was capable of it physically, no matter what Xena tacked to her hands and not even considering the fact that she was so afraid of heights even climbing trees freaked her out.

But, Gabrielle swallowed, feeling the dryness in her throat. What choice did she have, really? Either she did what Xena asked, or they stayed on the mountain and slowly died, after the little food and water they had ran out. "Xe." She finally sighed.

"Yeah?" Xena was watching her, with shadowed eyes.

"When we get home." The bard drew in a breath. "I want you to promise me we'll spend at least one whole day in bed, and you'll sing to me whenever I ask you to."

Xena shifted her hand from the bard's knee to her cheek. "Promise."

"Okay." Gabrielle extended both legs out and let her hands rest on them. "Strap me up, then. Let's go do this." She said, tilting her head to look Xena right in the eye. "I'm ready."

Xena felt a mixture of pride, regret, and a touch of something close to shame as she looked back at Gabrielle. She patted the bard gently on the cheek as she gathered herself to stand. "That was the easy part." She said, in a wry tone. "Wish me luck with everyone else."

Gabrielle managed a wry smile back, and she gave Xena a gentle slap on the leg as the warrior stood and straightened her shoulders, turning to face their companions. She waited for her partner to move towards the others, before she stood up herself and faced the wall.

She laid her hand on the surface, curling her fingers around a crack in it. Experimentally, she tried pulling herself up, but released her hold almost immediately as the sharp granite cut into her skin. "Ow."

Okay, so that proved that. Gabrielle then wedged her antler aid into the same crack, and tightened her grip on the bone, pulling herself upward. With the rounded edges, she was able to hold on and lifted her body up off the ground a little, her toes just brushing the stone.

After a moment, she let herself down, removing the bone from the crack and looking at it. Xena had carefully scraped it smooth, and in the absence of any other comforts at the moment she took some in her partner's ingenuity.

"You're out of your mind!"

Gabrielle sighed, and studied the rock as she heard the loud angry voices echo off it. She felt impatience rise, and with a sudden decision she turned and headed for where Xena was facing off against Pony, stepping neatly over Ares legs as though he god of war wasn't even there.

"I'm not saying there's another way!" Pony added, pointing upward. "I'm saying you're nuts! We can't just climb up that like some damn pack of rat eared squirrels!" The Amazon seemed more exasperated than truly angry. "Gods be damned, Xena.. things ain't just gonna happen because you say so!"

"Guys." Gabrielle stepped past her partner and stopped in front of her, at the end of her wits, her patience, and her sense of humor. "Let's just make sure we all understand what's at stake here."

"Oh, shut up." Granella gave her a disgusted look. "You're just going to repeat what Xena said. Like you'd ever disagree with her."

"You're wrong." The bard shot right back. "I disagree with Xena all the time. I used to just do it on general principals, but over the years I learned that butting heads with her when she's right is not

only POINTLESS..” Gabrielle’s voice rose to it’s most powerful level. “It’s USELESS, because we’ve only got one option here!”

Pony glared at her. “Thanks to her!”

“Okay, yeah.” Gabrielle said. “It’s Xena’s fault we’re here. Are you happy now?”

“That’s not the ..”

“Pony, it is the point!” The bard stepped closer, putting as much passion in her voice as she could, remembering that part of her as though it had been slumbering for along while. “The point is, we’re going to die here if we don’t try to get out. Blaming someone.. Xena.. for being here doesn’t change that, does it?”

“No.” Pony said, after a moment.

“Okay.” The bard said, lowering her volume. “So we’re here. We have no way out but what Xena’s suggesting. Xena’s the only one I know of who’s actually climbed up a cliff like that. Doesn’t it make sense to just listen to her, and do what she says, and maybe.. maybe we’ll have a chance to get home?”

“Well..” Pony hesitated.

“What other choice do we have?” Gabrielle asked, gently. “Do you really think I want to do this? You think I want to try climbing up that, when just getting up on Argo makes my legs shake?” She turned and looked up at the cliff. “I’m so scared of that, my entire body’s hurting, but you know what, Pony.. I have to get a handle on that because I understand we have no choice here.”

Xena had taken a step to one side, and she was leaning against the rock, gazing out at the erstwhile peaceful scene around them as she let Gabrielle do the talking. The bard had, she reasoned, a fifty fifty chance of doing her thing, given the attitudes of the people with them, balanced with the absolute truth of what she was saying.

She wasn’t really sure how much of the anger was frustration, how much was residual from the Sword, and how much was.. well, was what the other women really felt about them. She knew Granella had been through a horrific experience and that she was still mostly in shock over it.

But Pony? Xena’s brow creased. Despite the competitive action that often went on between them, she never suspected Pony hated her, or disliked Gabrielle as much as she seemed to be indicating.

Maybe it was the sword. Xena shifted her shoulders, feeling a minor ache through her neck from having to carry the double weight. Or maybe that’s just how she really felt, and the usual way she treated them was just an act.

“Gabrielle, you’re not getting it.” Granella’s voice was chilly. “I’m not climbing that damn thing.”

Xena took a breath to get into the argument, then stopped when Gabrielle spoke instead.

“Okay.” The bard said. “Then you’re staying here. Pony, you staying too, or you coming with us?”

“Bullpoop.. you’re not going to just leave her here.” Pony protested. “I’m not. That’s’ for damn sure!”

“Okay.” Gabrielle put her hands on her hips, her patience at an end and her decisions made. “We’ll leave whatever supplies we have with you.”

Pony looked at her. “You’d leave us here?”

Without any hesitation, Gabrielle nodded. “Yes.” She studied them both. “I’m going with Xena.”

“Big surprise.” Granella looked away.

“You’re just going to fall off and croak.” Pony told her. “Gabrielle, wouldja look at that thing?”

The bard looked up at the wall, then back at her. “That’s the only way out of here.” She told her, quietly. “So that’s where we’re going.” After a brief hesitation, she moved closer to Pony, gentling her voice even further. “If we have even one chance, I’m going to take it. I want to get home. Don’t you?”

The Amazon's hazel eyes shifted a little, flickering past Gabrielle to take in Xena's waiting form, then moving back to the bard's face. "I..."

"I don't." Granella spoke up. Her eyes were still outstaring at the empty space beyond the ledge.

"You don't want to go home?" Gabrielle asked, after a brief silence. "Gran, I.."

"No."

Pony looked at Granella, then she looked back at Gabrielle, visibly caught in the middle of something she had no real grasp of. "I won't leave a sister." The Amazon finally said, but in a subdued voice. "So I guess I'm stayin."

She walked over and sat down next to Granella.

Gabrielle was left to stare silently at them, aware of the equally silent blue eyes watching her from behind. After an uncomfortable pause, she let her hands fall. "All right." She finally said. "Well, good luck." She waited, but the two women didn't answer, or turn to look back at her, and she eventually gave up and started to turn away herself.

Xena was there. Not only was she standing there, but she had her arms open, and her expression also, and Gabrielle knowingly took a step away from one world, and a step willingly into a more lonely path as she slid into Xena's embrace and returned it.

"Did the best you could, my love." Xena whispered into her ear.

"Ungh."

Xena hugged her. "Let's go get this done." She said. "We're running out of time."

They turned and walked over to Ares, as the sun started to slant across the rock, staining it.

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"Here." Gabrielle knelt beside where Pony was seated, and handed over what was left of their supplies. She glanced up at the sky. "I think the weather's settled down."

Pony looked at her, and for a moment, their eyes met.

The Amazon looked away first. "Good luck." She muttered, almost under her breath.

"Thanks." Gabrielle responded. "You too." She hesitated, then she started to stand, pausing when Pony reached out and caught her hand. "What?"

Pony half turned and peered up. "If you get out.. tell Eph.. everything." She paused. "Like.. everything. Okay?"

The bard cocked her head slightly to one side. Then she nodded faintly. "I will." She gently disengaged her arm from Pony's fingers, and stood fully, turning to head back to where Xena was working with the lengths of rope they had left.

The sun was out, and it warmed the side of the mountain. Gabrielle leaned her body against the stone and closed her eyes, soaking in every moment of it she could.

There were, she knew, so few moments of peace left to her.

When it came time to start climbing, Xena was beginning to doubt how far they were going to get. Ares was only marginally coherent, the wound in his chest beginning to seep an ugly, festering yellow. She had tied one end of their rope to herself, then fashioned a rough cradle for the god of war.

He hadn't liked it. Xena hadn't cared. She tied off the end of the rope around Gabrielle, passing the length of it through two loops on Ares' harness so that she, and the bard, were connected together and the god could move between the two of them.

It was uncomfortable and dangerous. Xena understood that, but with the resources she had at her disposal it was simply the best she could do. She peered up at the wall, checking for the nth time if she could find even a marginally better way up.

After a moment, she sighed and shook her head, knowing in her heart that the task might be too much even for her alone, without Gabrielle and Ares to worry about.

However. Her eyes shifted past the silent god of war to where Gabrielle was standing, her head a little down, waiting. "Ready?"

Gabrielle fingered the rough, twisted hemp around her middle and nodded. "Ready." She murmured in response, knowing there was no other real answer regardless of the truth of it. She faced the rock and exhaled, letting her arms drop to her thighs and flexing her fingers.

Behind them, she was very aware of the pair of eyes on her back, but there were far more important things for her to focus on at the moment. "What do I do first?" She asked, clearing her throat of its sudden huskiness.

"Just hang on.. I'll show you." Xena finished checking the ropes. "Ares, we're not dragging your ass all the way. Work for it."

The god laughed faintly, as he looked at her. "Why?"

"Why?"

Ares leaned his head against the rock, barely able to stand. "Woman's right." He told her. "Doesn't make sense to work so damned hard at croaking, Xena."

"Ares." Xena put hand on one of his shoulders. "If we can get you up there.. out of this damn valley.. you might get your godhood back."

Ares merely blinked at her. "Xena, if my three headed dog could fly, you might get a ride outta here."

The warrior glanced past him, then focused on his face again. "You don't want to get out of here? C'mon, Ares... I don't buy you dying a mortal death here.. not your style."

Ares swallowed, then looked sharply at her. "You got the sticker." He jerked his head towards the sword looming over Xena's shoulder. "Get yourself outta here."

"No way."

The god of war's eyebrows lifted. "Don't get sentimental on me, Xena. Not your style." He taunted her, but his heart wasn't really in it and that was clear. After a moment, he glanced up, then back at her. "I ain't making it up there."

"We'll get you up there." Xena told him. "This the way you want to go, Ares? Giving up? Just dying here on this damn ledge when you had a chance to live, and get out and win?" She leaned closer to him. "Give me a break!"

Ares gazed quietly at her. "Maybe I did win." He let his eyes flick to the sword hilt, and a faint smile tugged at his lips. "G'wan, Xena." His expression sobered. "Go. Get out, take the blond kid with you." He watched Xena's face. "You can get outta here. I'll just pull you both down."

Pale blue eyes met his. Then slowly, they lifted and went past him. "We all get out, or none of us does." Xena said, flatly. "So cut the self sacrificing horse crap, Ares."

She turned away and faced the cliff, reaching up to get her first handhold. "Gabrielle and I are gonna start climbing, Ares. If you decide not to, remember where I tied those ropes between your legs." She lifted herself up, finding good footing before she turned to look over at Gabrielle.

The bard was, in a hesitant way, copying her and had one hand curled around a bit of jutting rock and the other wedged in a crack. As Xena watched, she flexed her shoulders and pulled herself up, hastily getting her boots into place a tiny ledge.

The strength was there, no question. Xena only hoped the will behind it would live up to the need.

She could see Gabrielle's whole body vibrating, and she could feel, through the link they had between them, the fear inside her. "Atta girl." She called over. "Just take it easy."

Gabrielle looked over at her, the terror evident. "I'm chilling." She managed a faint, flickering smile.

Xena gave her a brief, understanding grin, before she glanced down. "Let's go, Ares."

"Look, I toldja.."

"Ares." The warrior cut him off. "Be a man."

"For a change." Gabrielle added, under her breath.

Ares turned his head and looked at her. "How would you know? You've never known any."

Xena jerked the ropes, almost pulling him offbalance. "C'mon."

With a long, unfathomable stare, the god of war let her wait for it, before he finally caught hold of a bit of rock and struggled upward.

Xena waited to see if he was going to back down, then she focused her attention to the wall again when it was apparent he wasn't. She felt over her head for another handhold and cautiously put her weight on it, then moved her boot up to a crag before she lifted herself all the way up. "Gabrielle?"

"Here."

"Right hand, over your head."

The bard reached up to curl trembling fingers around a hold. "Got it."

"Put your foot up on that slanted part."

"Definitely gonna croak at this rate." Ares snorted, leaning his head against the stone. "Shoulda told you to leave the little blond rat behind."

"You'd know all about rats." Gabrielle managed to get out from between gritted teeth.

"Be a woman." The god of war mimicked, in a high voice. "For a change."

"How would you know?" Xena gave the ropes a jerk. "You wouldn't know one if you bit one."

"That an invitation?" Ares inched up, scraping his chest against the rock and stifling a gasp. He started to slip back, his fingers raking against the stone. "Augh!"

Xena reached over and grabbed him on the arm, steadying him until he got his bearings back. "Less talk more action, okay?"

Ares peered up at her. "Look who's talking." He managed a grimace that might have been an attempt at a smile.

The warrior released him. She glanced over to see Gabrielle inching up another step, and she searched above her for her next handhold.

No one ever said life was easy. Xena got her fingertips into a crack and hauled herself upward. No one ever promised a free ride, a free meal, or an easy death. She knew that better than almost anyone. She lifted her other hand up and got it around a protruding knob, flexing her fingers cautiously before she trusted it to bear her weight.

She knew she had to be careful. She'd tied them together the way she had for a reason – if Ares slipped down, she and Gabrielle could hold him up.

If Gabrielle slipped.. well, maybe Ares would help her, and maybe not, but Xena had convinced herself she could hold all three of them up if she had to.

But if she fell? The warrior released one hand and wiped the sweat from her palm, rubbing her fingers against the rock to add some dust to her skin. If she fell, they were all going to take a lethal header and she was damned if she was going to be responsible for that today.

She heard Gabrielle's gasp, just as she felt the jolt through their link and she looked quickly up, seeing the arch of muscles under skin as the bard froze in place. "Gabrielle!"

"S..." Gabrielle licked her lips, staring straight ahead of her. "There's a big spider here, Xe."

"Eat it." Ares clawed his way up, breathing hard. "Keep your mouth shut for a while."

Xena moved up a little. "What does it look like?"

"It's black." The bard said. "And it's got a lot of hair on it, and a yellow spot."

"Squash it." Ares said.

"Don't touch it." Xena countermanded him. "Stay still, Gabrielle. Don't move."

"Okay." The bard remained in place, her eyes only widening as the spider emerged from the hole in the wall and waved its two front legs at her. "Easy, okay?" She forced her body to stay very still, resisting the urge to jerk back.

To one side, she heard the gentle whisper of steel against leather. "Xena?"

"Don't move, hon." The warrior murmured, curling the fingers of her free hand into a faint crack, as she drew her sword out with her other.

"Here, spidey spidey." Ares turned his head to one side and blew on the spider. "G'wan.. bite her!"

"Ares!" Xena lifted herself up and over him, one arm sweeping out as she clung to the rock with amazing strength. "You pig!"

Ares sneered at her, and blew at the spider again, then gasped as his face was smacked against the rock.

The spider reared back as the air hit it, and then darted forward onto Gabrielle's hand. It raised its legs up and exposed two curved, black fangs, a droplet falling from one of them onto the back of her knuckles.

Gabrielle closed her eyes and turned her head and simply trusted Xena as she pressed her body against the rock and felt the blast of air as the warrior struck.

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Xena had, perhaps, the span of a finger in which to kill the spider without cutting Gabrielle's hand off. She was already in mid motion before she saw the droplets, as the sword was already sweeping towards her partner's body.

She shoved her body out away from the rock, tightening her fingers as they held her to the mountain as she arced herself over Ares and frantically looked for an angle that would get her to where she needed to be..

She saw the fangs dart downward, and she was out of time. With a curse she released the sword from her hand and let it fly off, slapping her fingers across the back of Gabrielle's knuckles just at the spider's needle sharp teeth touched the skin.

She felt the squirming, and the hairiness of it, and then it was gone as her arm finished sweeping across, batting the insect to bounce off Ares face before it tumbled down below them, her eyes losing it to sweep back up as a flash of light distracted her.

As though in slow motion, she watched Gabrielle suddenly release one hand off the mountain and reach out to grab the hilt of her sword as it tumbled past her, half turning to follow its motion before she realized herself what she was doing and turned sheet white.

Xena grabbed her arm as she saw her knees unlock. "Gabrielle!"

"Hey. I like spiders." Ares was splatted against the rock under Xena's weight. "Best thing that happened t.. ooof!"

"Hang on." Xena could feel her own grip slipping. "Gab, drop the damn sword!"

The bard slammed against the rock wall with a gasp, her breath coming rapid and hard, the sword trapped between her body and the stone. "Gods."

"You sure ask a lot for someone who disses me so much." Ares remarked. "Hey, Warrior Moose. Get off me."

"Shut up." Xena tightened her grip, getting a better hold on the wall before she returned a hand to Gabrielle's back. "You all right?"

One green eye opened and looked at her, no commentary required. The warrior immediately shoved herself further over, getting a good hold on Gabrielle's belt and holding her up. "Easy."

"Xena! You're killin me!" Ares growled, his fingers slipping on the rock.

"Shut up or I will." The warrior snapped back at him.

Gabrielle pressed against the sun warmed stone, feeling her entire body shaking. Her knees were barely holding her, and she knew if Xena hadn't had her by the back of the belt she'd have fallen off the...

The whirl of the open space she'd just seen made her stomach rise, and she felt like she couldn't breathe fast enough. After a moment, she felt motion around her and then the sun was blocked as Xena was suddenly crouched over her, holding on by who knew what.

"Xena!" Ares bellowed. "Damn it, that rope's pulling.. ow!"

"Gab?" Xena gently put her hand on the sword trapped between the bard's chest and the mountain. "Let me get this." She curled her toes into the tiny cracks she'd found to hold them before she started to pull. "Sweetheart?"

"Oh.. gag." Ares moaned.

Gabrielle felt her partner's body press against her, Xena's deep breath warming her back as the warrior remove the sword and it calmed her a little, feeling the steel ease past her shoulder. She blinked a few times, feeling the sting of tears, and she turned her head, to find Xena's cheek near hers. "Don't think I can go more." She whispered.

Xena sheathed her sword with an equal whisper. "I think you're wrong."

"Xe."

"Gabrielle, I need you to do this." The warrior murmured right into her ear. "I want us to get out of here... please?"

Xena asked for so little, in their lives together. Gabrielle knew. But when she did ask, it was never trivial and this time was no exception.

How could she say no? How in the world could she tell Xena she didn't think she.. they.. were important enough for her to keep going?

Of course, she couldn't. Truth be damned. "Gimme a minute to get my breath back." Gabrielle stammered softly, inhaling sharply as Xena's lips nibbled her neck. "That's not helping." The lips paused. "But don't stop."

"Augh" The god of war let out a groan.

Xena shifted, then she caught Gabrielle's earlobe lightly between her teeth and bit down just enough to catch the sharp inhale. "Okay?" She uttered. "Before I cut off the flow of blood to his other brain?"

Gabrielle had to laugh, and the fear inside her retreated grudgingly before that. She didn't really know what was going to happen next, but at least for the moment her knees had steadied, and she no longer felt like she was going to drop right off the mountain. "Yeah." She nodded, briefly. "I'm okay."

"Sure?"

Gabrielle nodded again, then almost wished she hadn't when the warmth behind her disappeared, replaced by the heat of the sun which was far less comforting. She waited for her breathing to finally steady out, before she turned her head to see Xena back on the other side of Ares, half a body length above them.

The sun was outlining her in gold, and clinging there to the rock, head up, body perfectly balanced it was like she was looking at an exquisitely carved statue, cast for the ages.

"Augh." Ares turned his head and spat, nearly hitting her. He glared at Gabrielle from red-rimmed eyes, and curled his lip. "Done whining?"

Gabrielle gazed at him briefly in silence, then without a word she released one hand off the rock and punched him right in the nose.

"Hey!" The god of war rocked back, nearly losing his grip. "You little bitch!"

"You wanted that spider to bite me." Gabrielle felt an almost welcome rush of anger replacing her fear. "I'm not a bitch.. you're a jerk!" She pulled her fist back again, gratified to see Ares move out of her range, glaring at her impotently. "You better move!"

"You better not do that again, you..."

Gabrielle made like she was going to spit at him, and watched him shy off. "Not only that, you're a sissy." She pronounced. "You're not hardly worth anyone worshiping as a god of war, you know that?"

"Hey!"

"She's right." Xena eased up to another hold. "Up there, Gabrielle. See the ledge? You can get your hand on that and we'll pull this useless bag of nothing up with us."

"Watch it, wenches." Ares warned. "When we get up there, I'm gonna turn you both into pigs." He paused. "Not that you'll realize the difference."

"Oink this." Gabrielle got her fingers into the crack and climbed up even with her partner. "Okay." She looked sideways at Xena, and got a wink back, which made her smile again.

So strange. Here she was, feeling good about doing something violent. Even given how much she'd changed over the years, that was something she wasn't used to. Her hand tingled where she'd hit Ares, and she flexed the fingers of it before she continued her climb upward.

Jerk. Gabrielle focused on staying angry. If she'd been bitten, then what? From Xena's reaction she'd gathered the spider was poisonous, and so if had happened, then..

Well, then she'd probably be dying right about now. Gabrielle studied the wall in irritation, then she spotted a shadow near one hand and reached up to find a crack there. It was too narrow really to get her hand in, but she used the antler dangling from her wrist and jammed it in there, using it to climb up a little further.

After she did it, she stared at the tool, then down at where her boots were firmly wedged in place, as though she'd been doing this insanity all her life. Her brow furrowed, then she glanced over at Xena in question. "Did I do that right?"

"Good girl." The pride in the warrior's eyes was unmistakable. "Knew you could."

Gabrielle's lips twitched into a hesitant grin, and she thought suddenly about that wild, rainy day when Xena had come to the village, and stopped an arrow from splitting her in half. She imagined the warrior, facing that cliff, and treating it like just another obstacle to get over, climbing up it without anyone there to admire her courage, or wonder at her skill.

Just doing what she had to do, like they were doing right now. It wasn't what they wanted to do, wasn't what they'd chosen.. Gabrielle wasn't even sure if it was the right thing, in the long run for any of them.

But she understood that Xena believed with all her heart that they had to get up that cliff, and so.. Gabrielle found another grip up over her head and took hold of it more confidently. And so, they'd climb. She pulled herself up, grateful for all the sparring that had built powerful muscles in her arms and shoulders and made her body capable of handling her own weight like she was.

She tightened her grip and felt cautiously with her boots for a hold, catching one on her left foot, but finding nothing but bare rock under her right. She put pressure on her one foothold, and straightened her leg, then found a tiny shelf for her right foot ready to hand.

Hm. The bard got lost, a little, in her own climbing world as she worked out what to do next. It really was a little like one of Xena's thought puzzles in a way, where she had options available to her and it was a matter of selecting the right ones at the right time.

She reached over and curled her fingers into a crack, letting the bone aid fall down around her wrist again, and pulled a bit sideways, feeling a tension come into the rope around her waist. Pausing, she looked over at Ares, who was nearly a body length beneath her, struggling to move upward. "Could you get a move on?"

The god glared up at her. "Want me to put a move on you?"

"No." The bard said. "You're ugly and your mother dresses you funny." She rubbed her nose against a bit of rock outcropping, scratching an itch. "And if you turn me into a pig when we get out the first thing I'm going to do is poop on you."

Ares glare modified into a stare. "You're nuts." He muttered, managing to haul himself up almost to her waist level. "Happy? Now move it."

Gabrielle was glad enough to go back to her puzzle, the anger and even the fear beginning to slowly be taken over by a curious euphoria as they moved very slowly upward.

The feeling of shock was over. Her body had stopped shaking, and every successful move she made, she felt better and better about what they were doing.

They were going to make it. Gabrielle glanced over at Xena, who was half a body again ahead of her, eyes moving ceaselessly as she selected their path up the wall. As though feeling the attention, the warrior turned her head and smiled, making the bard smile back.

They were going to make it. After everything they'd faced so far, nothing was going to stop them. Gabrielle's heart lifted.

Nothing.

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The sun was painting the rock wall red as Xena paused, tipping her head back and viewing the jut of rock sticking out over them.

From the angle she was currently at, it was impossible for her to tell if the protruding shelf were a roadblock, or perhaps a chance for them to take a break.

Xena felt the ache in her fingers, and hoped for the latter. She looked over at Gabrielle, who had her cheek pressed against the rock, her eyes unfocused as she waited for Xena to move forward. The bard looked tired, as anyone would be, but Xena no longer felt the surging terror between them anymore.

It was possible, she conceded, that there was a point where you were just too tired to be afraid. Xena had been there, a time or two in her life, when the world narrowed to some very black and white basics and personal emotions drifted away.

Ares was just clinging there next to her, eyes shut tight. Xena suspected he was past the point of caring and she just hoped he'd hang in there so she and Gabrielle didn't end up having to drag him up with them. "Okay."

Gabrielle's eyes focused on her hearing the word. "Okay?"

"I'm going to see what's up there." Xena pointed over her head. "Just relax for a minute." She acknowledged the wry look with one of her own, then she carefully released each hand and wiped the sweat off it, before she cautiously found a handhold and edged up.

As she closed in on the protrusion, she realized there was no way up and around it except from the front. She paused under it, looking both ways. A crevice was visible to her left, but it was more than two bodylengths away and she'd have to untie herself from the others to do that.

Not an option. Xena steeled herself and took a few deep breaths, trying to gather as much energy as she could. "Gabrielle!"

"Yeah?"

"I'm going to.."

"I know what you're going to do. Don't miss!" The bard yelled back, her voice loud and stronger than Xena had expected.

"Right." Xena took another breath, then she crouched, readying herself for a long moment before she leaped out into space, arching slightly backwards to clear the protrusion as she threw her hands over it, hoping like Hades she had something to grab onto.

Her fingers touched stone, then she curled them over as the edge cut into her palm, scraping it. She tightened her hands, and felt her legs swing free, only her grip holding her up in the cool air. If she looked down, she knew she'd see nothing but pebbles and death below her, in a gathering twilight that probably had Pony and Gran already in semi darkness.

She'd also see Gabrielle watching her.

Xena swung herself back and forth, gathering up momentum for a minute before she bucked her body into a jackknife as she pulled upward, using the motion to swing her chest and shoulders up and get her head over the ledge.

Yes! The warrior smoothly continued the hurdle, pressing herself up and onto the now visible space that was roomier than she'd dared hope. She rolled onto her side and flexed her hands, wincing as she brushed slivers of granite from her palms.

After a moment to catch her breath, she reviewed her unexpected sanctuary, a cool breeze lifting the hair from her face as she took in the space with a prickle of delighted surprise.

Roomy enough for her to sit with her back to the rock wall stretching upward, and extend her legs fully, and still not reach the edge. "Damn." She turned around and let her legs dangle over, sorting out her rope. "Bout time I caught a break."

"Xe?"

"I'm fine!" Xena called back. "Got a spot we can rest in."

There was a long silence. Then – "You're not expecting me to do what you just did, right?"

Almost giddy with relief, Xena came close to laughing. "No." She called back. "You steady enough to untie?"

Another long silence. "Okay."

Xena slowly pulled in the rope, feeling it catch, and move reluctantly as she yanked it through the cradle around Ares. "I'm gonna let it back down.. tie yourself again." She crawled over and poked her head out into the open air, dropping the end of the rope back down to her partner. "I'm going to pull you up first.. then we'll pull Ares up."

Ares looked up at her.

Xena almost felt a sympathy for him. "Sorry, big boy." She watched Gabrielle very carefully tie the rope back around her waist, using only one hand. When the bard was done, Xena wrapped the other

end over her shoulder and back around her side, tucking her boots up under the ledge to brace herself. "Start climbing."

Gabrielle gamely did just that, using her bone rigs to slowly creep up the rock. Her face was a study in concentration, the setting sun backlighting her in an almost halo like glow.

As she climbed, Xena drew in the rope, pulling it over her shoulder to steady the bard. Soon enough, though, she reached the spot where Xena had abandoned the wall, and looked up. "Now what?"

Xena gazed into her eyes. "Now, you just let go." She said. "I'll pull you up.. you grab my boots, and you'll be up here next to me before you know it."

Gabrielle blinked. Then she blinked again. Then, very unexpectedly, she did exactly what Xena told her to do, and simply released her hands, leaning back away from the wall suspended by the rope around her waist.

Xena's face twitched, as she took the sudden pressure on her shoulder, locking her legs into place so the bard's weight didn't pull her off the ledge. Leaning back herself, she started hauling, shifting the rope over her shoulder and around her side in small bursts, until she felt a touch on her ankles.

It occurred to her, suddenly, that thought she was a good deal larger and definitely stronger than Gabrielle, the effort of pulling her over the ledge and pretty much into her lap could actually be fatal to both of them.

Oh well. "Ready?" Xena felt the grip on her legs tighten. "One, two.." She pulled hard on the rope and kicked her legs out at the same time, sending Gabrielle hurtling upward.

As the bard cleared the ledge and released her hold on Xena's legs, the warrior grabbed her and pulled her forward, knocking herself backwards, and ending up flat on her back with Gabrielle sprawled over her. "See? Nothing to it."

The bard's arms closed around her in a hug, and Xena could feel the shivering in them. She wrapped her arms around her partner in return and ignored the feel of two swords digging into her back as they both took a time out.

Gabrielle lay there motionless for a brief period, then she sat up, easing herself off her partner as she scooted over to the wall and put her back to it. "You're not going to do that with him. Are you?"

Xena shook her head.

"Good." The bard dusted her hands off, the bone climbing anchors dangling from their gut stays. She leaned back and watched her partner lower the rope again, glad enough to simply sit. Reaching the bottom of the ledge had taken everything she'd had left, and in total honesty it had been relief when Xena had told her to let go.

She hadn't really thought about falling, or about how far they were up – all she'd wanted was what she had right now – a place where she could sit her butt down and let her muscles relax and just absorb the setting sun on her skin.

Gabrielle tipped her head up and looked at the wall above her head, awash in sunset. The surface looked smooth, and chillingly void of easy handholds, though there was a crevice to one side that offered a potential help.

Then above that.. she exhaled. Above that, she could see the edge of the cliff, their goal that was now half again what it was when they started.

Half again. Gabrielle wiped her face with one hand, waiting for Xena to work out what to do next. Then, when they had Ares up on the ledge, then what? With a sigh, the bard removed a bit of walnut from the pouch strapped around her waist, all she'd taken from the valley with her. She nibbled it, steeling herself to the fact that they had very little other than a few nuts, and some water until they got out. "Know what?"

"What?" Xena turned her head, then looked down again. "C'mon, tie it, Ares." She leaned over and moved the rope closer.

After a brief pause, Ares released one hand off the mountain and took the rope, then he started working it around his body and through the loops Xena had tied around him.

"No, just around you!" Xena yelled.

Ares looked up at her, then leaned back just enough for her to see the injury across his chest.

"Okay." The warrior half waved. "Sorry."

With a faint shake of his head, Ares went back to working the rope into place.

Xena sighed, then she turned her head to look at Gabrielle. "What?"

Gabrielle let her hands rest on her thighs. "When we get out of here I'm going to go find the biggest fish I can, even if it's big as I am, and cook it for us." She told her partner. "And you're going to get me drunk."

Xena chuckled softly. "That sounds great."

"Are you hungry?"

"Oh yeah." The warrior watched as Ares finished tying off the rope. "Hungry, tired, thirsty, pissed off... I'm not enjoying life right now. You?"

"Well." Gabrielle folded her hands across her lap. "You know what I always say." She looked fondly at her partner. "You and I are here, alive, so how bad could it really be?"

Xena leaned her elbows on her knees and looked off across the narrow valley to the wall beyond, and the sun setting behind it as an unexpected stinging in her eyes made her blink. "Yeah." She cleared her throat. "You gotta point there."

"Hey!" Ares called up.

Xena exhaled and returned her attention to their injured companion. "Okay, now get ready to come up." She called down.

The god of war merely nodded, eschewing his previous sarcasm. He was very visibly at the end of his strength, and Xena knew they'd have a struggle on their hands when they got him to the ledge.

"We ready?" Gabrielle asked. "I'd kinda like to get this part over with." She got up and dusted her hands off. "Remind me never to complain about sitting on hard rock floors, okay?"

"Me either." Xena half turned and handed back the end of the rope. "Run it around that crag there." She instructed. "We'll haul him up like one of my mother's oat sacks." She got up, bracing her boot near the very edge under the rope to keep it from rubbing and took the free end from Gabrielle.

The bard took hold of it herself closer to the wall, and they both started to pull, shoulders moving in smooth synchronization.

Overhead, behind the sunset, a distant rumble of thunder sounded.

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The rain started just after the sun set, and put to rest any thoughts on Xena's part to continue climbing in the dark. The need to move forward was pressing incessantly on her, driven by her instincts and the increasingly feeble condition of Ares – but falling off the cliff wouldn't do anything to help the situation so she resolved to take the opportunity to at least get some rest.

There was no shelter. Xena had her back to the cliff wall, one arm around Gabrielle and the other half shading her face from the worst of the weather. Ares was lying next to her, facing the wall and curled onto his side as the rain pelted his back.

At least the weather had taken care of her worst fear – their limited drinking water. She licked the drops off her lips, and rested her cheek against Gabrielle’s damp hair as the bard huddled against her quietly, eyes blinking occasionally to shed the rain.

“Know what this reminds me of?” Xena asked, after they’d both been quiet for far too long.

“Nuh uh.” Gabrielle murmured, shaking her head. “What?”

“Remember that night I fell off Argo?”

Gabrielle was briefly silent, then she chuckled. “Do I remember that.. oh, all the gods in Olympus do I remember that night.” She said. “I was so totally, completely freaked out because I made Argo trip..”

“You bit your tongue.” Xena agreed. “I thought Argo kicked you in the mouth and I freaked out.”

“And it was raining.” The bard recalled.

“And it was raining.” Xena agreed. “And I caught my boot in her stirrup when I was falling and ended up falling on my head in that pile of cow dung.”

“Unnnnghh.” Gabrielle moaned softly. “What a night.”

“Mm.” Xena remembered the stench, and the misery of it all, and the giddy laughter they’d shared. “I realized that night you were actually a friend, y’know.”

“I know.” The bard smiled. “It was one of the best nights of my life.” She said. “Even though I couldn’t say anything without sounding like an idiot.”

“Even though I was covered in cow crap.” The warrior smiled as well. “It had been so damn long since I’d been able to just be stupid and not have anyone judge me on it. I felt.. I felt like ten years came off me that night.”

Gabrielle held her hand out and caught the rain in it. “I’d never heard you giggle before.” She remarked. “It was so amazing.. and you let me sleep in your lap.. I thought I was in Elysia.”

“Me too.”

“If I wasn’t already dying, you’d be killing me.” Ares grumbled. “Would you two shut up?”

Xena chuckled. “Revenge is damn sweet.” She waggled her drenched feet. “My mother always told me that.”

“Especially when it’s served cold and rainy?” Gabrielle snickered. “One of the things you learn when you’re mortal, Ares, is take your fun where you find it, because it might be your last laugh.”

Ares made a rude noise.

Gabrielle shifted a little, laying her arm over Xena’s stomach and snuggling closer. “The other thing you learn is how to savor sweet moments, because you really do never know which’ll be the last one.” She watched Xena’s hand move, and the warrior’s fingers interlaced with hers.

“Give me a break.” The god of war moaned.

The rain came down harder, the sound providing them with almost a curtain of privacy. Xena released her hand to wipe the droplets off Gabrielle’s face, tracing the rounded cheekbones and reserving a moment to simply love the bard.

Gabrielle felt it. She turned and looked up at Xena the emotion so raw in her eyes it needed no light for the warrior to see it. Her hair was plastered to her head, and between the flashes of lightning raindrops trickled down her face.

Or maybe they were tears, but not sad ones. Xena thought about what their lives had been like so far, so full of pain, so full of hardship and yet so full of moments like this one that she wouldn’t have traded for all the dry comfort on earth.

This, she acknowledged, was a taste of immortality, because what she felt for Gabrielle transcended anything physical and even when they both died, she knew in her heart that part of them, part of this, would remain forever.

"Hey, Xena?" Gabrielle drew one leg up, her knee blocking some of the rain. "How about a story?"

"Once upon a time." Xena responded amiably. "There was a little duck."

Gabrielle started chuckling. "I meant.. do you want me to tell one." She clarified. "Because honey, I have heard that duck story, and it's just not the time or the place for it."

Xena chuckled wickedly. "Spoilsport."

"Troublemaker."

Ares rolled over onto his back and stared up into the rain as it pelted him, the droplets bouncing off his body. "You both suck." He said. "You're making me want to throw up."

"Good." Gabrielle picked up Xena's hand and started to place kisses across the palm. "You know, I really can't believe you and Aphrodite are actually related to each other."

Ares snorted softly. "Me either."

"Think she's watching us?" Xena enjoyed the warmth of Gabrielle's breath against her fingers. "Like you were?"

The god was briefly silent. "Maybe." He finally half shrugged. "She gets in moods."

Gabrielle peered over at him. "Do you watch us a lot?"

Ares angled his head so he could watch her. "Why? You want a critique?"

"No." The bard replied mildly. "I know how good I am."

Above her, Xena's eyes popped wide open, and she glanced down at her partner.

"I was just wondering, because it seems like you've got nothing better to do than hang out and watch our lives." The bard went on. "Is immortality that dull?"

It was dark, and it was raining, and they were in an impossible situation. Maybe all of those things, along with his injury, finally weighed in on him. "Sometimes." Ares admitted. "Just so many wars, so many people to kill, y'know? Gets a little boring sometimes."

What was it like, Gabrielle suddenly wondered, to know you had to live on without end? She was always so often on the other side of that question it never occurred to her what living forever would mean. "You ever get tired of it?"

Ares opened his mouth and collected some rain in it. "Sometimes." He answered after a few minutes. "Sometimes you mortals don't know how lucky you really are." He stared up into the storm. "If this wasn't so damn painful and such a pain in the ass, I might've enjoyed it."

"Really?" Gabrielle cupped a handful of rain again and sipped it.

"Different." Ares explained, briefly. "Lot of things happened.. yeah." He sniffed reflectively. "Got stabbed.. got half drowned, got blown through a waterfall.. had my nuts pulled half off.. been more fun than kicking my dog, gotta tell ya."

"Do you?" Xena asked. "Kick the dog?"

Ares tilted his head back and gazed up at her. "What do you think?"

Xena pursed her lips. "I don't think you do." She decided. "I think under all the asshole is a square inch of decency somewhere."

"Kiss my ass, Xena."

"Bleh." The warrior stuck her tongue out.

Gabrielle shaded her eyes from the rain with one hand. "Is your dog related to Cerberus, Ares?"

The god nodded. "Yeah." He answered. "One of his whelps by my sister's mutt. He's alright, if you like slobber." His eyes shifted to her face. "And I know you do, cause that mutt of yours drools like a fish."

"I didn't know Aphrodite had a dog." Gabrielle said. "I like our wolf. He's loyal, and he's very protective of Dori."

"Yeah." Ares said, briefly. "Thanks for naming him for me. Yuk hyuk."

"Well." The bard put her head back down on Xena's shoulder. "He's crazy about Xena, too." She muffled a snicker as she felt Xena begin to silently laugh. "And he's a sissy. He's afraid of his own shadow."

Ares gave her a look. "You really do suck sometimes."

"Sometimes." Xena agreed. "But she's good at it."

Ares rolled his eyes. "The seventh level of Hades is so pleasant compared to being here with the two of you, y'know that?"

The rain was chilling now, and Gabrielle was privately ready to agree with her erstwhile nemesis. "We ready for that story yet, or do you want to trade insults some more?" She felt Xena's arms slide around her, and the warmth was gratifying beyond words. "Mm."

"I've heard your stories. They suck." Ares said. "They're all about her. Or about my brother. Or about my sister..."

"How about one about you?" The bard asked, after he paused.

Ares slowly rolled his eyes around to study her. "You don't know any stories about me, blondie."

"Mm.. " Gabrielle mused. "But I'm a bard. I can make one up. Want me to?" She asked. "Want to see how I see you?"

Xena watched them both in some mild fascination. She knew well the power of Gabrielle's stories, and how she felt when the bard told one about her. Would Ares dare it? "C'mon, Ares. Only chance your'e gonna get for this. Live a little."

The god of war hesitated, then he shrugged with an almost overly casual air. "Why not?" He said. "You've already called me everything in the book.. sure. G'wan."

Gabrielle's gaze unfocused, as she stared off into the rain and delved inside herself in this the most special aspect of her gift. Retelling a story – well, that took some work, and she was reasonably skilled at it, or so she thought.

Creating new stories, especially when she was really creating something at a time like this, in a place like they were – that was another level again. "Okay." She said, after a few silent minutes. "Here we go... *in the time of the gods youth, when the world was wild, and men were yet unborn....*"

Ares rolled over onto his side, and pillowed his head on his arm, his eyes never leaving her face.

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It finally stopped raining not long before dawn. Xena sensed the silence and it woke her, eyes fluttering open as the peace extended itself across the huge space before them.

Nothing was moving. No bats crossed the empty sky, no birds were yet awake. The wind had died down, and if she hadn't been sitting on granite she'd have felt like she was floating in a gray, formless cloud.

Eerie, and yet as though time had taken a pause on her behalf.

Her back felt stiff, but she'd gotten some sleep, and more than anything she was looking forward to dawn so they could finish what they'd started and get the Hades out of the valley. She wanted that so bad she could taste it, the worry of them not making it gnawing at her guts in an unceasing fashion.

A warm breath against her skin made her look down at Gabrielle, but the bard was still fast asleep huddled against her. Drenched and bedraggled, her partner reminded her irresistibly of the rumped kid she'd first known and Xena quietly placed a kiss on the damp hair, smiling faintly as she felt Gabrielle's hands tighten a little.

Well, at least one of them had been halfway comfortable.

Ares was sprawled next to her, his head pillowed on his arms, almost indistinguishable in the dim light from the waning stars, the sky otherwise dark and moonless.

Sitting there wasn't too comfortable. Her butt was asleep, for example. But Xena had learned over the years to get rest whenever she could so she closed her eyes again, and tried to let the world drift away from her.

"Hey Xena."

Then again. Xena opened one eye and peered down at Ares. "What?"

"Are we dead, yet?"

"No." The warrior replied. "What makes you think we were?"

Ares mulled the question over for a while. "That whole.. sleeping thing.. wake up, not wake up.. kinda whacked, y'know?"

"Mm." It was Xena's turn to ponder. "Gods don't sleep?"

"Nu uh."

"Really?"

"Yeah." Ares said. "Maybe that's why.. " He paused. "We depend in you mortals for so much entertainment."

Xena frowned a bit into the darkness as the silence lengthened between them. Finally, she cleared her throat gently. "Know what?"

"What?"

"You should get married."

Silence. Then.. "What???"

Xena shifted a little, then settled back with a sigh. "You should get married. I used to go looking for trouble, mostly because I was bored out of my mind. Now I don't."

Ares made a sound halfway between a snort of disbelief and a laugh. "You gotta be kidding me." The god of war said. "You really expect me to believe that?"

"I don't." Xena protested, with a shrug. "I can't help it a damn flood washed me down the river."

The god of war snorted again. "See? You're so stupid, you don't even know it. The river didn't wash you down anywhere.. you went to grab the kid. If you'd a let her go, you'd be back home kicking back right now."

Xena exhaled, shaking her head. "You just don't get it, do you?"

"It's the truth, Xena."

"Yeah?" The warrior's voice dropped. "Tell me Ares.. was I kicking back after you made Gabrielle take a header into that lava?"

Ares didn't answer.

"I know you were there. I could feel you. Was I laughing?" Xena's tone took on a hard edge now. "Could you feel what I felt? Did you hear me screaming?"

Ares remained silent.

"You. Don't. Get. It." Xena went on, after a pause. "You keep thinking this is some kind of phase I'm in that I'll get over. Forget it, Ares. This isn't a phase. This is my life's choice."

The stars were fading slowly out overhead, as the sky prepared itself for dawn. Ares had half rolled over onto his back and was looking up, his profile only barely visible. "What makes you think you get a choice?"

Xena smiled into the darkness. "Because I'm mortal."

"Aren't we proud of that." Ares voice was sarcastic. "Think you're going to like getting old, Xena? Losing those looks? That sword? How's it feel to know you're going downhill?"

Xena let her head rest against the rock and thought about that. She knew it was true, but somewhere along the line in her life she'd somehow lost her fear of it. "I like change." The warrior eventually answered. "And on the bright side, maybe you'll finally leave me alone, and I can just kick back and chill out."

Ares snorted under his breath.

Xena felt a feather light touch on the curve of her breast, and she glanced down to see Gabrielle's lips pressed there. "What do you think?"

The bard looked up at her. "What do I think?" She replied, her voice husky from sleep. "I think I'm going to revel in very single moment of our lives together. That's what I think."

Ares groaned.

"Every moment?" Xena asked. "Even this one?"

"Even this one." The bard agreed. "Especially this one." She kissed Xena's breast again.

Ah. Xena's nose wrinkled as she produced a grin. Nothing like getting the juices flowing to warm you up on a cold, damp, rock ledge in the middle of nowhere. She shifted and pulled Gabrielle up a little, kissing her on the lips to continue the process.

She could feel the slight roughness from the wind as her tongue explored the bard's mouth, and she wished they were anywhere but where they were when her body responded and wanted to go much further.

Tweaking Ares was one thing. Giving him a front row seat knowingly was another completely. Reluctantly, Xena lifted her head and exchanged wry looks with her partner, who poked the very tip of her tongue out in response. "All right." She said. "I'll give you this moment."

"Heh." Gabrielle nuzzled her a little more, then, with a reluctant sigh, she eased away from her bedraggled leather pillow and drew her legs up under her. She rested her elbows on her knees and scrubbed her face with her hands, wishing for a number of things she had no chance of getting.

Food, hot water, Dori. Just to name a few. Gabrielle felt a sudden ache in her heart at the thought of her daughter, though she knew the toddler was probably being well taken care of by any number of her family.

Wasn't she? The bard frowned. After all, she'd found out now how Pony and Gran really felt, what if Eph... No. Gabrielle pushed the thought aside. Even if Ephiny decided one morning she hated them, she knew the regent would take care of Dori because it was her duty to take care of her. There were many things she could doubt but Ephiny's steadfast devotion to the tribe wasn't among them. "Rats."

"Hmm?" Xena leaned over towards her. "What is it?"

"What isn't it?" The bard sighed. "I'm getting close to that point where I start freaking out about everything I'm thinking." She admitted. "Just warning you."

Xena patted her on the back.

Ah well. Gabrielle slowly pushed herself upright, then she climbed to her feet to stretch her body out, staying close to the wall. She put her hands against the rock and pressed against it, feeling her back pop into place with a grudging sound. "Ugh."

Xena was glad enough to get up and join her, leaning back and crossing her legs at the ankles as she let the blood flow back into her thighs. "Sleep okay?"

"I slept." The bard turned around and leaned next to her. "And as much as I'm adoring every second of my life with you, honey, I'd like to be enjoying it someplace else. When can we start?"

Xena turned and looked up at the wall, now that the coming dawn was giving her just enough light to see it. The stone was dark with moisture, and she realized the rising sun would be hitting the opposite valley wall with complete unhelpfulness. "Crap."

"What?" Gabrielle turned and leaned next to her, also looking up. "It's pretty steep." She acknowledged. "Is that a problem?"

"Not as much of a problem as this is." Xena lifted her hands off the rock and turned them over, the palms glistening with moisture in the low light.

"Oh." Gabrielle looked at her own hands. "Well, crap. You're right."

Ares had managed to get himself upright, and he pulled himself over to the wall and leaned against it, breathing hard. The front of his half torn catskin was covered in blood and pus, though the rain had washed off most of the wound itself. "Doesn't matter." He said. "I ain't going nowhere anyway."

"Don't be a jackass, Ares." Xena muttered. "We don't have time for it."

The god of war stared silently at his upturned hands, resting on his legs. "I'm not." He answered, after a moment. "Not that I don't wanna be."

Xena turned and looked at him, the dawn light showing the hollowed eyes and the ragged breathing. "Ah." She murmured, remembering suddenly looking at herself in a mirror a long time ago and seeing the same signs, aware of an anxious Gabrielle watching her.

The memory rippled away as a very different Gabrielle slipped past her to kneel by Ares side, mature compassion erasing the frightened post adolescent she had been. "C'mon, Ares. I don't believe you can't make it up there. We're almost to the top."

"Shut up." Ares gazed at her. "I'm dying, you idiot."

To her credit, Gabrielle didn't so much as flinch. "I know." She replied with quiet honesty. "But you're not dead yet, so you have to keep trying." Her hand lifted and curled around his arm. "Because it's so easy for us to die, we kind of learn to hold on tight to life, you know?"

"Why?" The god asked.

"What?" Gabrielle said. "What do you mean, why?"

"You come into the world screaming, you live, you get old and lose your teeth, and then you croak anyway." Ares stated, in an almost mild tone. "So, what's the point? Croak!"

Gabrielle sighed. "Xena's right." She said. "You really just don't get it."

Ares shook her hand off. "No." He said. "You two don't get it. Mortals don't get it. Your lives are all meaningless.. got that? They don't matter!"

"They do to us." Gabrielle put her hand back on his arm. "And they do to you too, Ares. Don't sit there and tell me you don't care about us. Or Xena, anyway." She stared into his eyes. "All the times you asked me to give my life for hers, don't tell me that, because if her life didn't matter, why bother?"

The blue eyes looked right back into hers. "It doesn't matter." Ares said. "I just hate losing. Especially to little nothings like you."

Ahh. Gabrielle sat down next to him. There was truth there, she knew. "Well." She cleared her throat, very aware of Xena's silent presence at her back. "The problem is, Ares.. I hate losing too." Her eyes shifted back to his face. "Especially to conniving, hypocritical bastards like you."

"Nice."

Gabrielle shrugged. "So.. whatever it takes for us to get out of here, we'll do it. If we have to drag you with us by a rope around your ankles, then okay."

"Hey." Ares gave her a mocking look. "Just leave me here. What's stopping you?"

The bard leaned towards him, no trace of humor in her face. "Because I won't.. we won't lose to you, Ares."

"Lose to me? I'm the one who's dying here, remember?"

"Exactly." Gabrielle kept her eyes glued to his. "Xena touched that sword. We all know what's going to happen if she gets out of here, and you don't."

With the faintest of smiles, he looked at her, then glanced up at Xena. "Figured it out, huh? I always said you were smart. Too bad you don't prove it most of the time." He looked back at Gabrielle. "Dying's gonna be worth it, you know that, Gabrielle? Because I'm gonna win in the end of this." He put his hands behind his head.

"No you won't." Xena spoke up for the first time.

"Won't I?" The god of war managed a smile. "Bet I do."

"Bet you don't." The warrior stared across the valley, then looked down at him. "Either we all get out... or none of us will, Ares."

"Give me a break." Ares scoffed, weakly.

Xena crouched down next to Gabrielle, leaning one arm on her shoulder for balance. "Believe it." She said. "I'm not taking your place, Ares. We'll all die here first."

All trace of humor vanished. "And leave the world to death and destruction?" Ares asked, softly. "No greater good, Xena?"

"No."

His eyes shifted to Gabrielle's face. "Gonna let all those people die, Gabrielle?"

"Yes." Gabrielle replied. "You won't win." She said. "Not this time."

Ares settled back against the rock. "Tough crowd." He remarked. "Guess we'll see who dies first, huh?"

"Guess we will." Xena stood and regarded the rock wall again, as a sense of driving inevitability took hold of her. "Gab, get your antlers on."

"You got it." The bard started to stand, but turned as she felt Ares grab her wrist. She looked back at him and they stared at each other in silence for a very long moment. Then she removed his fingers from her wrists, and turned away, heading for the small pile of things they had left to them.

Dawn spread across the far side of the valley, lighting the rock wall in pinks and golds. But their wall remained in shadows, both seen and unseen.

**

One Wild Ride

Part 25

Xena pressed her forehead against the rock as the rain lashed at her back, wondering briefly if there was something more than nature conspiring against them. She could feel the strain of Ares almost

dead weight pulling against the rope she now had looped over one shoulder, and her fingers felt cramped as she tenaciously tried to hang on to the slick rock.

Across from her, and a little below, she could see Gabrielle's jaw, rigid with muscle as the bard clung to the stone and slowly, carefully worked her free hand upwards to search for another hold.

The utter determination in her face was almost heartbreaking. Xena could see the scrapes on her skin, seeping blood quickly washed clean by the rain and her entire body was tense with the strain it was taking to keep herself, and her portion of Ares bodyweight up.

Xena took a breath, and almost.. almost released her hand off the wall to pull her sword and cut Ares free. As though sensing that, Gabrielle glanced over at her, eyes blinking hard to clear the rain from them.

"You okay?" The bard yelled over, watching her.

Resisting the urge, Xena nodded briefly, and then turned her attention back to the cliff wall. She wrapped her fingers around another tiny hold and set herself, then she pulled steadily upward, grimacing as the rock cut into her skin.

Ares was out cold. Xena found another hold and took advantage of it, feeling the rope burn against her shoulder. Or he was dead. It was impossible for her to tell at this point, since he was hanging limp below them and there wasn't any place to stop and find out.

She'd stopped looking up. The top of the ridge never looked like it was getting any closer and she needed all her energy to just keep moving.

Just keep moving. Xena focused on the rock, and her breathing, as she scabbled with her boots for a crack, a crevice, anything as her fingers cramped and she almost...

"Xena!"

Ah. A boot caught, and she gratefully eased her weight onto it. "I'm all right! You?"

"I suck!"

A pained smile crossed her face. In the back of her mind, where she kept shoving it was the knowledge that what they were doing might not even be worth it, at this point, and she suspected Gabrielle knew that as well as she did.

"Know what?" The bard yelled, hoarsely.

"What?" Xena wearily inched herself up a bit more.

"Whatever we did to deserve this..."

"Gabrielle."

"We didn't deserve it."

No, for once in her life, Xena truly believed that. There had been many times she'd deserved everything she'd gotten, but damn it all to Hades, this wasn't one of them.

She paused, as she felt a vibration under her fingers. "Hold up!" The warrior pressed her body against the rock, putting her ear to it to listen intently. She looked through the now driving rain at Gabrielle, who had stopped and was watching her again.

No more. Xena could read it in those exhausted, expressive green eyes. She felt the rumble under her body again, then she almost jerked right off the cliff when a loud, thundering crack sounded right over them and she felt movement where there should be none against her skin.

Time was up.

Now, all there was, was all she was and all she could do was what she was capable of. Xena released her hold and shoved herself outward, reaching out to grab Gabrielle's arm as the mountain started coming down around them.

She shifted her grip and latched on to Gabrielle's belt with one hand, shoving and clawing her way up the shifting stone with furious energy. "Keep moving!"

"B." Gabrielle cut off her speech and just did it. She reached for handholds as the handholds fell away from her finger tips. The rock moved, but it stayed in place long enough for her to scramble upward along side Xena, as debris started to come down on both of them.

"Go go go go go." Xena bellowed in her ear, as they both moved in unison, boots scrabbling against the falling rocks. She got hold of a widening crack and pulled them both up over it, painfully aware of the drag against her back that was Ares limp body.

Cut him loose?

No time. Gabrielle managed to clamp on to a jutting boulder and they were over it, rocks slamming into them from above as she felt something big approaching fast, the bard's hand suddenly thrusting her against the rock with shocking force as a rock the size of Argo broke away just above them and tumbled free.

It should have hit them. Xena felt it impact her shoulder and she instinctively shifted side ways and pushed backwards as it rolled across her to fall free, leaving a depression more than big enough for her to jump into.

Gabrielle got in next to her and they both ducked, as a rain of stone slid down the mountain, Xena grabbing hold of her partner and yanking her into space as it rattled down under them and fell past. She got a hand on another handhold and pulled up ward, then another, then another, and her feet were sliding and sliding and barely able to keep her moving upward.

Another crack of lightning, this one so close every hair on her head stood up and she smelled the burning scent of brimstone as Gabrielle suddenly yelled at the top of her voice and the next thing Xena knew the bard was on top of her and they were both thrown against the rocks with stunning force.

She could taste blood in her mouth, and her shoulder ached where the rope was cutting into it and if she'd been able to grab her sword at that moment...

Gabrielle yelled again, this time in terror.

Xena responded without thinking. She pulled them both to one side as a rush of granite slid past her, slamming into her thighs as she crouched and uncoiled her legs, sending both of them impossibly upward.

Her hand reached up, fingers flexing as she reached for something, anything, hoping for the slightest bit of firm stone to hold onto.

Something struck her hand and she clenched hold of it, almost releasing in shock when her skin touched something that wasn't rock.

Something round. Something rough. Something that put welcome splinters into the palm of her hand. With the last bit of strength she had, Xena hauled upward, feeling dirt and rocks thundering down on them with a scent of rain, and rock, and with shocking suddenness –

Earth. She tasted dirt. It leant a wild surge to her muscles and as the rock face broke away under her she made one last lunge upward, everything falling down around her and under her as she half climbed half ran across the lip of the cliff into a maelstrom of wind that very nearly blew her backwards.

Her feet started to slip out from under her, as Ares weight dragged them both backwards, but she got her balance and lunged forward, hearing a hoarse yell come from her throat in pure animal frustration.

Damn it! She threw herself into the wind, daring it to deny her.

And there was nothing but air in front of her hands as the rain drove full force against her body. She pulled Gabrielle up and they crawled forward against the momentum of the avalanche, boots sliding over stone that became, at last, something other than that.

She stumbled forward, and crashed to her knees as Gabrielle fell next to her and she half turned to reach for the ropes only to find Ares still form half a body length behind them, covered in blood and dust.

Motionless.

Then lightning struck the ground past her boots, and blinded her. She threw her arm up in front of her eyes as the flash faded, blinking painfully as the sound of thunder was replaced by the sound of rain all around her, striking the thick earth churned up by the storm.

As she watched, the edge of the cliff slid away from them, disappearing in a crash of falling stone that rapidly faded into the continued rolling of thunder.

The new precipice started barely a handspan beyond Ares feet, a mute line drawn that separated them from oblivion by the narrowest of margins.

Shocking. Xena drew in a shaky breath.

Far off, she heard the booming roar as the avalanche hit the bottom of the valley, as Gabrielle sprawled across her legs, shaking like a leaf.

For a long moment, all she could do was sit there and shake, every muscle in her body turned to jelly as her chest heaved, sucking in air that was equal parts water, her heart hammering so hard in her chest it made it's own thunder in her ears.

She looked up at the sky, then around her, hardly believing she could finally see a horizon that had no mountain walls in it. Impossible to think they'd actually made it.

Her eyes went to the god of war, lying utterly still there in the rain. She watched his back for a long moment, and saw no movement, and her heart slowly sank.

Then her eyes dropped to Gabrielle's huddled form, and she put painful and shaking arms around the bard, hugging her in simple, mindless relief.

For a moment, at least, she just wanted to sit here, and hope they didn't get hit by lightning. Anything beyond that...

Life could wait a while.

Breathing hurt. Gabrielle found herself in a place where she was too tired to even cry, her body shaking so hard from the exertion she was banging her head against Xena's ribcage. All she could feel around her was chaos, the rain and the thunder rattling against her skin

Her overstressed muscles ached, sharp daggers of pain lancing through her that made it far easier to remain very still, her ear pressed against Xena's side as she felt the warrior's heartbeat thundering against it. The landslide had happened so fast, she hadn't even had time to be afraid, not of that at any rate.

A moment of terror, yes, when she'd seen the boulder heading for Xena, fear of losing her soulmate sending her into a surge of reaction that hadn't left any room for anything else.

Now, she closed her eyes and breathed in lungfuls of air that smelled like rain and dirt, impossibly glad to feel mud against her fingers, soft and cold and welcome after the harsh stone she'd grown to hate.

She felt Xena take a deep breath, and reluctantly, she released her tight hold, rolling half over to lay on her back across Xena's thighs.

Rain hit her in the face, and she shaded her eyes with one hand so she could look up at the warrior, outlined against the storm tossed sky. Xena's face was drawn and exhausted, more so than Gabrielle could ever remember seeing her even in the worst of times. "Xe?"

Blue eyes searched her face. "Ares." The warrior said, briefly. "I don't think he made it."

Slowly, Gabrielle rolled over onto her side and blinked, staring through the thick rain to the still, sodden figure. "Oh.. " She exhaled. "Oh, no." She let her head rest against Xena's knee. "Now what?"

Now what? Good question. Xena looked down at her hands, resting on Gabrielle's body, washed clean of the mud and dust. At the edge of her senses, she could feel the sword of war behind her, an almost tingle that made the center of her shoulderblades itch.

They had all made it out. But now, what good did that do if Ares hadn't survived?

Had he won, at last?

Xena flexed her hand, drawing it up so she could look at the callused palm, scraped and reddened from the climb and covered with deep scratches and cuts. After a moment's thought, she reached over her shoulder and firmly clasped the Sword, drawing it out and feeling the bone deep tingle that reached down into her guts and set them burning.

This was a part of her. She knew it. She closed her eyes and let herself feel the power of it, acknowledging the synergy of her soul that had, in it's depths, a home for this thing, and this feeling, and the promise behind it.

Yes. Xena's eyes opened, her lashes fluttering to rid themselves of the droplets of rain. This was, in fact, part of who she was.

Then she took a deep breath and with a twist of her shoulders, and a wrench of her seated body, she threw the Sword of War from her and over the newly cragged precipice, sending it back into the valley with a moment of darkly savage joy.

As the sparkling sword disappeared into the mist, Gabrielle turned to look at her, eyes widening, as a blast of lightening send them sprawling to the ground, blinded and deafened.

But ultimately triumphant.

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The thunder diminished.

The rain abated, slowing rapidly from a stinging patter to a gentle mist, and then into nothing, even the sound of it drifting into a moist, expectant silence.

When the light faded enough for her to open her eyes, Xena did so very slowly. The scent of danger and hot steel was pungent around her and as the spots cleared her vision she wasn't shocked to find Ares standing over her, his sword firmly in his hand and the point right at her throat.

She blinked and looked up at him and for the first time in a long time saw the god and not the man, cold cruelty in the almost unfamiliar expression.

And yet. The blade touched her skin, pricking it as they stared at each other in silence.

He was back in his dark leathers, and despite the apparent danger Xena could only feel a sense of profound relief, broken as Gabrielle gasped and lunged over her, knocking Ares sword aside as she sprawled protectively over Xena's body in a rush of warm panic.

It knocked the wind out of her and exposed Gabrielle's unprotected back to the blade now sweeping back towards them and without really thinking about it Xena clasped the bard to her and rolled to her right, curling her body around Gabrielle's protectively.

Ares snorted softly. "Two of a kind."

Xena remained still, just watching him. He let the point of the sword drop to the ground and rested his hands on the hilts, and after a moment, she relaxed and eased off Gabrielle. "Thanks." She slowly sat up and braced her arms behind her, with the bard still sprawled in her lap. "Nicest thing you ever said to me."

"Ungh." Gabrielle lifted a hand to rake the hair from her eyes. "What she said."

Surprisingly, Ares came over and sat down next to them, placing his sword across his knees and resting his elbows on it. He folded his hands together and regarded them quietly.

Around them, a thick forest clustered, branches whispering in the light wind that brushed over the ground they sat on, bring the smell of pine, and a hint of change with it. It was almost as though the earth were holding its breath, waiting along with them for who knew what?

"Glad you made it." Xena finally said, as the silence lengthened past her tolerance.

"Bet you are." Ares responded, but curling around the smart remark was a wry humor that surprised them both. "But who says we did?"

Gabrielle sat up, then thought better of it and dropped back down onto her side, resting her head on Xena's thigh. "I'm done." She admitted. "And we must be on the way to Elysia, Xena. Ares said something nice to us." She curled her fingers around Xena's leg and sighed.

"Don't think so." Xena turned her hands over and looked at them. "I hurt too much to be dead." She stated, after a brief silence.

"Ungh." Gabrielle closed her eyes. "Take your word for it."

Ares shifted a little. "Yeah, I noticed that."

They sat there looking at each other for a while. "So.. you died?" Gabrielle finally asked.

The god of war nodded.

Gabrielle felt as though a heavy brick had fallen on her. "After that sideways crevice." She murmured. "Was it then?"

Ares studied her briefly. "Yeah." He sniffed, and half shrugged. "One minute I was hanging there, next minute, everything just stopped working. Freaky."

Xena well remembered that moment of release. "So how was it?"

"Sucked." Ares responded succinctly.

Coming into the reality of Tartarus – yeah, that had sucked. Xena recalled. Even though she'd expected it, the pain and the shock of the torment had been overwhelming.

Was that why she'd sought out a return? All along she'd always clung to the notion it had been Gabrielle's need for her that drove her fight back to life, but wasn't that just an excuse? Really? "Yeah." She studied the ground between her knees, very aware of the green eyes looking up at her curiously. "It sucks."

Ares turned his sword over, his head tilted to one side as he looked at the blade. "Sure find out fast who your friends are, that's a fact."

Xena set aside the bleak memories for some marginally better ones. "Yeah, I um... " She cleared her throat a little. "I got past the shock of it all and first thing I realized was.. oh boy, did I ever make a mistake." Her eyes dropped to Gabrielle's face, seeing the ghosts clearly reflected in her expression. "Screwed that one up big time."

The bard was so exhausted, all she could do was look back at her partner with loving, if mute, agreement. Every bone in her body ached and just lying still on the churned and muddy earth was an unspeakable pleasure.

She knew what they were going through now was important, but it was only in a far off way and all the ability to worry about what happened next had drained from her completely.

She was here.

Xena was here.

Life was going on.

"Well." Ares sighed. "There I was, dead." He shook his head a little. "Way unexpected, you know? Gods don't die much, you'd think it'd cause a stir someplace. Right?"

"Sure." Xena said.

"Nobody gave a damn." Ares shrugged again, and looked off into the distance. "Even my sister said it was a good thing."

Xena realized at that moment it was still in her to feel emotionally shocked at something, which was a surprise. She thought she'd seen it all, and even though she had experienced the depths of cruelty – this surprised her.

Gabrielle rolled over and sat up, pressing close to her partner. "I can't believe that."

"Believe it." Ares tried for a mocking tone, but didn't quite achieve it. "Yeah, well. I shoulda figured. Bunch of jerks anyway."

The bard looked up at Xena, the warrior's profile sharply outlined against the gray sky. No matter how angry she'd been at Ares, no matter what he'd done to her, or them, or tried to – she didn't have it in her to not feel bad for him.

As much problems as she'd had with her own family, she'd never felt indifference from them. Was that worse than hatred? Gabrielle thought so. Even in their anger, she and Xena were always passionate in their feelings and she knew she would always want that over a turned back.

Poor Ares.

"Sorry, Ares." Xena finally said, after a long pause. "Been there. It's not much fun." She added. "But for what it's worth, I'm glad we got you out of there, anyway."

Ares studied her in thoughtful silence. "You gave a damn." He remarked. "Surprise surprise."

Xena nodded slowly, after a moment's pause.

"So did you." The god of war turned his attention to Gabrielle. "Now that was freaky." He pulled up a blade of grass, studied it, and after a moment, put it in his mouth.

"Was it?" Gabrielle managed a wan smile. "Ares, despite everything that's happened between us, you're a part of our lives. We know that."

Ares chewed thoughtfully on the grass as he gazed past them, for once most of the arrogance gone from his expression.

Xena shifted and moved closer to him, leaning on one arm and letting the other rest on her knee. After a moment, she reached out and touched his leg instead. "She's right." The warrior said. "Much as we bang heads, I didn't want to see you die in there, Ares. You've got a place in the world that means something."

Ares eyed her. "You coulda had that place." He said, in a mild tone.

"I know." Xena's tone was equally gentle.

"You could have had it all." The god of war responded. "I used to think you said that BS just to piss me off, but you really didn't mean it. I knew you'd take it if you could. I knew that, Xena." Ares leaned forward. "I felt it.. I was as sure of it as I was sure of..." He paused, then exhaled a little. "Totally sucks being wrong, you know that?"

"I know." The warrior repeated, knowing all too well what he meant. "But you're not totally wrong, Ares. I do want it."

Ares blinked. So did Gabrielle, who turned her head and looked up at her partner in true surprise.

Xena shrugged. "I just want something else a lot more." She flexed her hands, and looked around. "We've got to go get some help.. get Pony and Gran out of there."

"Hey." Ares cleared his throat.

Jarred by the sudden change of subject, Gabrielle half turned and regarded the sharp, new edge of the cliff. "Hope they were out of the way when that fell.. Xena, maybe we can.."

"HEY!" The god of war barked sharply, regaining their attention immediately. "If you two would shut up long enough, I'd show you where your nasty little friends ended up." He pointed over his own shoulder at the grass just behind them. "Why you'd want em back I've got no idea."

Gabrielle looked past him to see two huddled forms in the grass, exhaling against the knots in her gut from a flurry of mixed emotions. "You brought them up here?"

"No." Ares got up, brushing the dirt off his leathers. "They flew on their own." He waited for them to stand up. "So you owe me one."

Xena put her hands on her hips. "Let's just say we're even, huh?" She reminded him. "We did drag your ass up here." She reached out unexpectedly and patted him on the side. "But thanks. I appreciate it."

Ares' lips quirked. "Likewise." He took a step back, and gave himself a shake. "Mortality. Peh. Keep it."

"We will. Thanks."

Gabrielle stepped close to Xena and wound an arm around her waist, getting the expected draping of the warrior's own arm over her shoulder. As the god of war turned and raised his hands, Pony stirred in the grass and rolled over.

Ares paused, and waited, lowering his arms to cross them over his chest instead. "Might as well get a little more fun out of this." He chuckled.

The bard sighed. "Some things never change." She steeled herself for the confrontation, remembering the last words the Amazon had said to her, and knowing that despite everything else, the fact that she'd abandoned the two of them would never be forgotten.

By anyone.

Xena took a deep breath. Gabrielle could feel the tension in her rising, as they watched the Amazon lift her head and look around; prepared for the anger and accusations she knew would follow.

Their eyes met.

Pony blinked. "Holy crap." She blurted. "We found you!" She turned and shook Granella, who was groggily coming to next to her. "Gran.. hey look!"

Granella sat up and rubbed her eyes, looking around in bewilderment. "From a river to this?" She looked up and spotted Xena and Gabrielle. "Hey!" A smile appeared. "We came out looking for you guys, and b..." Her eyes shifted, and apparently she saw Ares for the first time. "Uh."

Pony's eyes widened, as the god became visible to her as well. "Oh." She looked back at Xena and Gabrielle. "It's been one of those days, huh?"

Xena licked her lips. "Yeah." She managed to get out. "One of those days."

Gabrielle felt incredibly offbalance. She found herself speechless, so she let Xena do the talking and turned her eyes to Ares instead.

The god of war was watching her, a faint smile on his face.

"That was you?" Gabrielle mouthed. "You made them forget?"

Ares shrugged, as modestly as he was capable of.

The bard released her partner and walked over to him, pausing only when they were face to face, within inches of each other.

Ares raised his eyebrows at her. "What?"

Without further hesitation, Gabrielle stepped forward and put her arms around him, giving him a hug. Then she released him, took one look at the widening eyes, and shifted her hold to around his neck, pulling him down to kiss him squarely on the lips.

"Blf.."

Gabrielle eased back and looked him in the eye. "Now, we owe you one." She whispered. "Thank you, Ares." She let him go and took a step back, clasping his hands before she released them and let her hands drop to her sides.

Xena put her hands on Gabrielle's bare shoulders and watched in bemusement as Ares tried to recover his composure with a marked lack of success. She had to smile when he finally just pointed at Gabrielle and looked at her, his jaw still hanging open a little.

Xena shrugged, as modestly as she was capable of.

With a shake of his head, Ares snapped his fingers and was gone, leaving a gray, cloudy spot in the air that filled with a moist wind.

Gabrielle turned, and fit herself into Xena's embrace, burying her face into the warrior's shoulder in a moment of perfect and utter relief. The longest day of her life had finally ended, on a rainy afternoon under a storm tossed sky that couldn't have been sunnier.

By the gods.

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"Ow." Gabrielle grimaced and turned her head, as Xena spread some pungent green substance over the scrapes that liberally covered her body. "Can't I just keep bleeding a little instead?"

"No."

"Hey, Gabrielle?" Granella was crouched over a small fire. "I'm just going to grill these, okay?" She poked two sticks through one of the fish Xena had just pulled from the small river they were stopped by.

"If you'd cut em up and given them to me raw, that'd be okay too." Gabrielle responded. "I'll be over here chewing on Xena's leathers."

The humor felt forced and ghoulish to her, but the emotional overload had pushed her to her limits and she really didn't know how else to react. The memories of the valley were so fresh, she found herself retreating back into a mirror of Xena's matter of fact manner and she wondered if her partner realized it.

"Gabrielle."

The bard looked up. "I want a stuffed animal to hug." She uttered. "Let me know when it's okay to freak out, will you?"

Xena gazed at her battered friend with wry understanding. "Just put it aside, hon." She pushed the thick, shaggy hair out of Gabrielle's eyes. "Don't think about it. We'll deal with it later." It was already fading aside for her, the relief at being out of the valley and on the way home overriding anything that had happened to them earlier.

Gabrielle was watching her. "Boy, I wish I were you sometimes." She said. "How far are we from home?"

Pony came over and crouched next to them, opening both hands. "Found these." She offered up the nuts and berries. "Figured I should grab something.. since we got a free ride and you all didn't."

Free ride. Gabrielle exhaled slowly. "Thanks." She said, her eyes searching Pony's face for any hint of the angry bitterness she'd seen there so recently.

The hazel eyes looked back at her with only curiosity, their usual stolid warmth firmly in place. "No offense, your Maj, but you look like Hades." She remarked.

Just put it aside.

Easier said, you know? "I bet I do." Gabrielle responded. "I feel like I fell off a cliff instead of climbed up one." She shifted her boot, moving her leg into the sunlight that had finally, fitfully emerged from behind the clouds.

"We're about a day's walk." Xena took the nuts from Pony and sat down next to her partner, gazing at the reddened scrapes and bruises on her own legs. "If we push it."

The sun broadened it's reach, and Gabrielle found herself bathed in it, the friendly warmth chasing the damp chill from her skin as she lay there sprawled on the soft earth. "You want to get moving after we finish here?"

It felt so wonderful. She flexed her aching hands, and gingerly spread her arms out to take advantage of the golden heat.

A fingertip tapped her lip, and she opened her mouth, her nose already identifying the item being placed inside. She rolled the berry around on her tongue before she bit into it, the tart sweetness exploding across her senses with shocking pungence.

Amazing. Gabrielle opened her eyes and looked around, finding a smile forming when Xena dangled a bunch of the fruits at her with a knowing grin. "Wow." She licked her lips. "Those are incredible."

Xena leaned back against the thick grassy tussock next to her and worried another berry off the bunch, offering it to her in silence. The dark circles around the bard's eyes, and the painfully strained lines of her face would, she knew, be erased in time but there was a wounding in the depths of her that Xena knew would take very gentle handling.

The Xena Gabrielle had first known would have never had the patience to deal with that. Luckily for them both, she was no longer that person. "No, I don't want to get moving." She flicked bit of mud off her kneecap. "We'll camp here, and get going at dawn." Her eyes shifted to Pony and Gran. "If that's all right with everyone."

Both women blinked at her, jaws dropping a little in surprise. "Uh." Pony's nostrils flared. "Fine with me." She looked quickly over at Gran, who lifted one hand off her fish rods and waved it.

"More than fine with me.. long as you guys are here, and safe.. I'm cool with it." The dark haired woman stated. "No problem."

Gabrielle took a handful of the berries and leaned back again. She desperately wanted to get home, but she knew both she and Xena were at the end of their physical ropes. A big part of her wanted to push on anyway reasoning that if they could make it up the cliff, what was a little night walking?

"Gab." Xena lowered her voice, and leaned closer. "I know you don't want to stick around here."

"Shh. Stop reading my mind in front of other people." The bard whispered back, in a resigned tone. "They're going to think we're weird." She paused thoughtfully. "Well, weirder than they already think we are, anyway."

One of the warrior's dark brows etched up sharply.

"Sorry." Gabrielle reached over and took Xena's hand, feeling the roughness of the scrapes against her fingertips as she squeezed it. "I'm just so tired my head's going in every direction."

"Uh huh." The warrior looked both ways, then exhaled. "I'm beat, too." She admitted. "I can't walk all night. I'm gonna end up plowing into a tree." She edged forward and let her head rest against the grass. "Maybe we should have asked him to send us home."

Gabrielle gazed up through the pattern of the leaves, watching a squirrel dart among the branches. "Maybe he would have." She agreed, after a short pause. "I think he might have... if we asked."

"Mm."

The bard found her thoughts turning from the horror, to a more familiar worry. "I miss Dori."

"Me too." Xena replied in a soft tone.

"Wonder what trouble she's gotten into this time?" Gabrielle mused. "So many opportunities for mischief, so little time..." She fell silent, and they watched the sunbeams together, deep in thought.

"Gabrielle?" Xena spoke up, after a while.

"Mm?"

"We made it out of there." Xena watched their two companions fuss over the fire, feeling a sense of surrealness over the scene. "I didn't think we would." The sunlight shifted a little, speckling over her chest and she could feel it warming her leathers.

Gabrielle watched the squirrel scamper upward. "I never felt that way." She finally said. "I always felt like we were going to make it; I just wondered what kind of price we were going to pay doing it."

Xena flexed her hand, wincing at the deep cuts in the palm. "Yeah."

"I didn't mean that kind of price." The bard mused. "We always pay that way, Xena. I've never seen two people get more beat up by life than we do."

"Ugh." Xena exhaled. "Ain't that the truth." She stretched her booted legs out fully. "Maybe that's the price we pay for us."

The squirrel bolted down the tree and ran across the leafy ground, hopping over Xena's boots and climbing over Gabrielle's leg in a flurry of pinprick toenails and lashing tail before it jumped on a rock and disappeared past her.

The bard watched it in bemusement. "Cheap enough then, I guess."

"Mm."

They reclined in silence together for a little while, as the fragrant smoke from the fire trickled out through the leaves carrying the smell of grilling fish with it.

It was all so impossibly normal. Xena turned her head to look at her partner, to find Gabrielle already looking back at her. The warrior sighed, and folded her hands over her stomach. "Change of plans." She raised her voice. "We'll head out after we finish that."

Pony looked up from the fire, a surprised look on her face. "You sure?" She asked, hesitantly. "You guys look kinda mashed."

"We'll be okay." Gabrielle wiggled her feet. "We just wanna get home. I miss my kid, and the rest of my family."

Gran looked up at that, and smiled, with total understanding. "Right there with you, sis." She chuckled. "I can't imagine what Toris has let those punks get into, and they're total innocents compared to yours." She turned the fish. "Though I doubt they got into much trouble in a day."

Xena and Gabrielle exchanged glances. "Well.." The bard murmured.

"Hers can." Pony gave her Queen a humorous look. "But she's actually been pretty cool with Eph."

The bard smiled back, and then relaxed once more, happy with the change of plans even though she knew it was going to make them both miserable before the night was over. As much as she wanted to

rest, she felt in her guts a powerful urge to be moving and over the years she'd come to realize that instinct wasn't often wrong.

Xena had it. She couldn't explain it sometimes, any more than Gabrielle could, but when she ignored it she was unhappy and when they both ignored it, usually disaster happened. Frankly, she was tired of disaster happening for this moon, so the sacrifice would be worth it.

Or at least, she hoped it would. She closed her eyes as the sun splashed over her face and felt Xena's hand settle casually on her arm, the idle stroking of her thumb against the bard's skin a comfort all out of proportion to the action.

The closeness brought her its own kind of peace, and she spent a moment thinking about what they'd just been through and how easy it would have been for them to turn on each other and let the frustration get the better of them.

She'd felt anger, definitely, but it had all turned outward from her, from them, and now that she thought about it – the same thing had happened last time Ares lost his sword. She'd been angry at everything, everyone... except for Xena.

At the time, she'd thought it had to do with the whole body switching thing, and how her emotions hadn't really known what to do with all that so she'd channeled her frustrations elsewhere. But in the valley, it would have been natural to start fighting with Xena and she just hadn't.

At the beginning, a little. But then they'd.. Gabrielle's hand dropped to her stomach, remembering for the first time in a while about her suspicions. Gods, they'd lost track of that, hadn't they?

"You okay?" Xena nudged her shoulder.

"Yeah." Gabrielle responded. "Just thinking." She glanced to her right and watched Xena's profile, the muscles twitching gently around her eyes as she followed the flight of some bird overhead. "Xe?"

"Mm?"

"Do you really want to be the Goddess of War?"

"Sure." Xena replied easily. "I also want to be the Queen of Greece, and have someone make me baklava all day, but I'm not gonna hold my breath waiting for any of that to happen when I've got you instead." She waited a moment, then glanced over at Gabrielle.

The bard was watching her quietly, her face half hidden in shadows.

"I'm a warrior." Xena said, in a more serious tone. "Of course that appealed to me. I won't lie to you and say I wasn't tempted."

Gabrielle reached up and removed a twig from Xena's hair. "I felt it." She said, briefly.

"But you heard Ares." The warrior continued. "What does that get you, in the long run, Gabrielle? Ultimate Power? Or ultimate loneliness and boredom?" A shrug. "I'd rather have what we have, even though I know it can't last forever."

"Maybe it can." The bard said. "Last forever," She mimicked the warrior's shrug. "You never know."

"You never know." Xena agreed, with a smile.

Gabrielle rolled over and settled on her side, tucking one hand around her partner's arm and enfolding her fingers with the other. "I love you." She remarked. "And I think every day I realize more and more why."

Xena's eyebrows lifted a little. "Gonna share?"

"No." The bard's eyes twinkled. "I'll let you figure it out yourself." She shifted her head into a more comfortable position and relaxed again as the sun peeked through the trees and splashed them both with golden brilliance.

She never even realized it when sleep took her, the hazy warmth fading into a sun drenched dream with deceptive ease.

**

Xena was perfectly balanced on that point between waking and sleeping, when she could sense the comfort of oblivion on one side and yet, was still aware of her surroundings on the other. It was a twilight kind of feeling, neither one thing or the other, and she was having to fight hard to keep from going over that edge into the comfort of joining Gabrielle in her dreams.

She had an excuse, and she knew it, and she also knew that the other two women would not grudge it to her, at least in this time and place. But ... Resolutely, Xena opened her eyes and started counting leaves again.

Pony came over and knelt next to Xena, keeping her voice low. "She okay?" She indicated the bard with a motion of her head. "You can see through her, practically."

True. Though she was used to dealing with the enigma that was their relationship with the Amazons, Xena had to admit she faced some of the same uneasy discomfort she knew Gabrielle was feeling in knowing what happened between them and Pony.

At least, with her, though, grumpy behavior was expected. "Yeah." She answered, briefly, glancing down at her sleeping soulmate, who was now wrapped around her with one arm curled around Xena's waist. "Just tired right now. That last climb was tough."

"I can't believe she did that." Pony's voice was, in fact, amazed. "Man, she's so not into heights."

"Yeah." Xena felt a moment of wry pride. "She's got guts, no doubt about it."

"Mm." Pony fell momentarily silent. "You guys look pretty banged up." She commented. "What in Hades did you find down there?"

"Trouble." Xena answered. "Just a lot of trouble. We..." She hesitated, at something of a loss to know what to say, how much to tell them. "We were lucky to get out."

"Wow." Pony shook her head. "No offense, but glad we missed it." She looked over her shoulder. "Food's done.. think she wants any?"

Xena could see the faint motion of Gabrielle's eyes under their lids and suspected the bard was dreaming. She didn't like to wake her up if she was, unless she thought it was a bad one as the bard tended to be dazed and out of it otherwise. "Yeah.. gimme a few minutes. You guys go ahead."

She waited for Pony to retreat back to the fire, before she returned her attention to Gabrielle's face, not really wanting to disturb the peace she found there. After a minute, though, the bard's eyes drifted open and she looked up. "Hi." Xena said. "Nice nap?"

"Ugh." Gabrielle let her head drop back down on Xena's shoulder. "Boy, was that a mistake."

Xena rubbed the back of her neck, easing the tension she felt under the skin. Gabrielle was funny about naps. Sometimes they worked for her, sometimes they didn't. Xena supposed this was one of the didn'ts. "Sorry about that. Though you could use a snooze."

"Why did you let me do something that stupid?" Gabrielle mumbled. "I feel like Argo is sitting on my head." She grimaced at the pounding headache.

"I wish Argo was sitting on your head." The warrior replied. "Then we'd get a ride home. C'mon." She rubbed a little more briskly, working her way down Gabrielle's back. "Let's get this over with."

"Bleah." The bard moaned. "When we get home, nothing better get between me and our bed."

Xena smiled briefly, and hoped it would all be just that simple.

Their lives were so seldom that.

**

Morning found them climbing down a rough, rocky path that nevertheless was very welcome. Gabrielle had recognized the landmarks of the slopes above their new cabin, and her heart lightened with almost every step she took downwards.

She'd gone past exhausted, somewhere in the darkness, pushed through the need for sleep in much the way she supposed Xena did, when she had to and now she was more or less in just a place where she could keep moving for as long as she needed to.

She just hoped she didn't need to for very much longer.

Xena was in the lead, and Pony and Gran were following them. Gabrielle could hear the two women speaking every now and again, and the normality of the conversation pricked at her senses and worried her a little.

What would happen, for example, when they found out they'd been gone a lot longer than they thought? What would happen if she, or Xena slipped and started talking about things as though they'd been there?

What if, given the tendency for the worst to happen in their lives sometime, what if Gran's experience in the valley led to a child?

Gods. Gabrielle felt her headache start up again. What would she say if that happened? How would she tell Gran what happened, since she knew in her heart that would fall to her and not to Xena.

She was the storyteller in the family. She was the one who remembered, and wrote down, and kept track, and told the stories of their lives so that people would learn the lessons of them.

What story would this make?

"Hey, Gabrielle?" Gran took a few longer steps and caught up with her. "Can I asked you a question?"

Gods. "Sure." Gabrielle ran one hand through her hair, sorting it and tucking it's unruliness behind her ears. "I gotta get this trimmed. I feel like one of those ponies down in town."

Gran chuckled easily, a light sound that echoed weirdly in her ears. "Bet you'll be glad to get home, huh?"

Easy enough to answer that one. "Oh, you bet." The bard sighed, happy to keep the conversation on lighter subjects. "I want a bath, and a mug of hot tea, and my pillow like you wouldn't believe."

"Must have been really rough.. you've lost a lot of weight." Gran said. "I can pretty much count every rib you have."

"Yeah." Gabrielle glanced down at herself. "Xena too." She studied her partner's shoulderblades, which were clearly visible under her skin.

"Yeah." Granella went quiet for a moment. "How'd that happen so fast?"

Gabrielle thought about the question, more worried about why it was being asked than what she was going to answer. "Well." She exhaled. "We did a lot of fighting.. a lot of running.. a lot of swimming..and I had to climb a cliff on not much more than a handful of berries and some water. Kinda gets you, y'know?"

"Hm.. yeah, I guess." Her sister in law sounded a little doubtful.

Gabrielle tried another tack. "Not to mention what went on in there... some guys were chasing us.. and we found these strange big animals, and then..."

"Gab?" Gran lowered her voice. "We had Xena's armor and her sword." She said. "How'd she get it?"

Uh oh. The bard had forgotten completely about that. "Well, uhm...It's complicated." She hesitated. "You know, anything that Ares is involved in.."

"Oh, right." Gran hit herself in the head. "He must have gotten them from us... what was that all about, anyway? And that kiss? His eyes nearly came out of his head."

"Yeah." Gabrielle knew she was too tired to really think straight. "He did us a favor." She finally said. "It's just... I can't really explain it."

Surprisingly, Gran merely nodded. "He's a strange one." She glanced up. "No offense." Then she peered past Xena's stolidly walking form. "Hey, is that your famous tree?"

Gabrielle had never been so glad to see a piece of foliage in her entire life, even given that this particular piece held a special place in her heart. "Yep, it sure is." She smiled. "Means we're almost home."

Home. Gabrielle would have been glad if home had been, as it once had been, Cyrene's barn. She just wanted a nice quiet place to sit down, and a warm shirt to put on. That wasn't really too much to ask, was it?

"I'll be glad to see it." Gran said. "I forgot how much I hated camping. Not to mention being wet."

Gabrielle chuckled wearily. "I say that every time I go out in the wild, and I forget it as soon as I get home."

They walked along together in silence for a few paces. "I always got the feeling you liked being out there." Gran offered, after a moment. "That you never really.. " She paused. "Amphipolis was just sort of a convenience for you."

Gabrielle found an echo in the question of some of the resentment she'd heard in the valley and acknowledged privately there was, as in most things, a kernel of truth in what Gran had said. She looked down at her scuffed and muddied boots, frowning a little.

"Sorry." Gran said, after an awkward pause. "Bad time to be asking, I guess."

"No." Gabrielle sighed. "It's true." She looked at Granella. "I'm a wanderer at heart. I can't deny that. There's a part of me that will never be happy living there."

Granella looked back at her in some surprise.

"Kinda sucks for Xena." The bard half shrugged. "Because she would be. But that's how life is sometimes, you know?"

"Mm." Gran murmured, after a moment, a thoughtful look on her face. "I didn't...well... yeah. I guess it does." She watched Gabrielle from the corner of her eye for a few moments. "I thought it was the other way around, honestly."

The corners of Gabrielle's mouth twitched. "Most people do." She said. "Sometimes people don't realize how much of ourselves we've sacrificed to be together."

Now it was Granella's turn to frown, and fall silent, and the soft music of the forest surrounded them with a sense of finality, broken only by their soft footfalls, and Pony's tuneless whistling.

They followed Xena single file into a thin, rocky path that bore evidence of recent usage, making no effort to disguise their passage as they made their way down the final slope above the cabin.

The woods came alive around them with figures, completely unexpectedly, fierce forms with glinting arrows and loud voices.

"Hold it Don't move or I'll have twenty points in you!" A bellow sounded, from just to their right behind a thick shielding of branches.

They all stopped dead in their tracks. It was, perhaps unsurprisingly, Gabrielle that recovered first. "Eph?" She called out. "It's us!"

Xena decided to leave her sword sheathed for the moment, and give her partner a chance to keep them from being expediently spitted. She had no doubt she was up to a fight tired or not, but stopping twenty arrows in her current condition was asking a bit much.

A pause. "Gabrielle?" Ephiny's voice sounded hoarse.

"It's me. It's us." Gabrielle reassured her. "What's going on?"

"Eph?" Pony added her own voice. "If you have them stick me I ain't never getting over it!"

The leaves parted, revealing a haggard looking, sword wielding Amazon regent, who took one look at them and moaned in relief. "Thank all the gods and Artemis' left breastplate. I've never been so glad to see anyone in my life!"

"Ah." Gabrielle rubbed the back of her neck. "Hoboy."

"Oh oh." Xena uttered, under her breath, as Ephiny came forward and gave Gabrielle a big hug. "I don't like the sound of that."

"Ungh." Pony came up next to her. "Me either."

"Boo!" Dori suddenly appeared from between two of the now visible Amazons, making a dash for her parents. "Told them! Told them it was you!"

Xena dropped gladly to her knees, ignoring the painful poking of rocks and twigs as she opened her arms and her daughter bolted into them with a squeal of delight. She wrapped her in a hug and stood, as Gabrielle watched them from over the curve of Ephiny's shoulder. "Hey, shortie.. you knew it was us, huh?"

"Yes!" Dori gave her a kiss on the cheek. Something tied to her hair swung and nearly bopped Xena in the nose. "Told them."

The warrior pulled her head back a little so her eyes could focus, and recognized the object as an Amazon feather, fastened in proper regulation style in Dori's dark locks.

Uh oh. Her eyes flicked to Gabrielle's. "Looks like everyone's got a story to tell."

"This ain't gonna be pretty." Pony muttered, under her breath. "I can just feel it."

**

"It happened by accident." Ephiny said. "Like most things around us, I guess." She sighed. "Dori was bringing presents to grandma every day.. you know, sticks and chicken heads and whatnot.. only this time she decided to bring some of her pretty rocks."

"Ah." Xena murmured. "Yeah."

"You knew about those, right?" Ephiny paused, eyeing her uncertainly. "I mean, you knew what they were."

Xena nodded, but didn't elaborate any further.

"Anyway, they spilled out in the Inn, and once those bastards saw them..."

"It really was terrible." Solari chimed in. "I mean, you know like most people suck, but that really sucked." She rubbed the back of her knuckle against her nose. "They started accusing you guys of everything."

"No one really knew.. anyway." Ephiny said. "It was bad down there before – those merchants were getting ugly and the council.. well, they were turning on your mom and all."

Xena's eyes took on a significant glint. "Bastards."

"But when they saw that.. like forget it." Solari said, half turning to look at Pony. "We were seriously missing you."

Pony sat up and her ears visibly pricked, though her expression remained stoic.

"Yeah." Ephiny agreed.

Gabrielle sat on their couch, Dori on her lap as she listened to Ephiny's tale in silence. She had her arms wrapped around her daughter, and the taste of their trail bars in her mouth, her eyes flicking now and again over to where Xena was listening as well.

She'd gotten out of her battered traveling clothes and into a soft, clean shirt, and there was a steaming cup of hot tea next to her elbow, but it was half forgotten as she absorbed the situation they now found themselves in.

A mess. As usual. She heard Xena sigh, and she shifted her position a little, so she could better watch her soulmate's profile.

Here, in the warm light from the fireplace and the nearby window, she could see more clearly how drawn her partner's face looked, and how distinct the circles were under her eyes. She had her elbows braced on her knees and her chin propped on her folded hands and despite the steady concentration in her expression, Xena looked as tired as Gabrielle had ever seen her.

She could only imagine what she'd see in her own reflection. Being in their own so recently finished cabin only made things worse, because the comforts she'd been craving were so close, and yet – for now – impossible to indulge in.

Fruit bats. Gabrielle sighed, and hugged Dori a little, reveling in the feel of the small yet powerful body wrapped in her arms. "Honey, were you good?" She whispered in one ear. "Did you behave for auntie Ephiny?"

"Yes." Dori whispered back. "Eff gimme this." She held up the feather. "Said I was good like mama."

Ehrm. Gabrielle acknowledged the possible meanings of that weren't all wonderful, but gave her child another hug anyway. "Good girl."

"Mama owie?" Dori turned her full attention to her mother, dismissing the chattering Amazons.

"No." Gabrielle was glad enough to leave the listening to her partner for a moment. "Just tired, sweetie.. mama had a really big adventure and I had to climb out of the mountain with your Boo."

Dori's eyes widened. "Mama!" She warbled. "You climbed the moutain?"

"Yeah." Gabrielle reveled in a moment of very private self pride. "I did. But it was really scary."

"Go mama!"

Tired as she was, the bard felt a grin forming.

"Gabrielle." Xena put a hand on her knee, startling her with the sudden warm touch.

"Uh?" The bard looked back at her. "Sorry." She gave Xena a wry look. "Lost you a minute there – what was that?" She wasn't sure what her face was showing, but the warrior shifted her hand and cupped her cheek instead, a comfort she wanted to just lean into and just not stop. "You want me to go talk to them?"

"I'm not sure talk's gonna do much." Ephiny looked at her sympathetically. "The bastards have been crawling up the damn hill at us.. I'm afraid they're going to set fire to the woods next. We've just been lucky it's been so damn wet." She glanced at her partner. "Thank Artemis and all the gods you were only gone a few days.. much longer and we'd have had some real trouble."

Gabrielle froze, and looked at Xena, who looked right back at her with widening blue eyes.

"Yeah, well.. you can thank the gods for that one." Pony agreed. "I was falling my ass down a waterfall one minute, next thing I knew I was asleep on the grass on the top of the mountain, courtesy of the God of War."

Ephiny's jaw dropped. "You're joking."

"Nope." Gran shook her head. "Me too." She pointed to Xena and Gabrielle. "But they didn't get so lucky, as you can see."

"Xe." Gabrielle barely mouthed the word, then closed her lips as the warrior's thumb shifted to cover them.

"Later." Xena uttered. "I'm not sure what's going on."

Now wasn't that an accurate statement? Gabrielle exhaled. "Okay."

"Yeah, we had quite a time." Xena spoke up more loudly, turning to face the Amazons. "But we've got other things to deal with right now. How many of them are there?"

Ephiny shook her head. "Hard to say." She admitted. "I'm worried about the folks down in town.. it's just.. Xena, it was like when they saw those gems, those merchants went nuts!"

"Nuts." Xena studied her folded hands. "What about the militia?"

The Amazons were silent. Xena looked up after a minute, and met Ephiny's eyes, her own brows lifting. "Those men died for us." She stated simply. "None of them that were left were cowards."

Gabrielle simply wrapped her arms around Dori and listened, unable to process the confusion she was feeling. A couple of days. A couple of days! The bard looked over at her partner, and wondered what the real truth of it was.

Had it all be a trick?

Or a nightmare? Gabrielle flexed her hands and felt the stinging soreness of them. No, damn it, some of it was real enough, that was for sure. That climb was real, and her body's aching was real, and the hollow look to Xena's face was very real.

Maybe everyone else had been dreaming. Who could tell? Regardless of how stressful it had been to her and Xena, better that it had not been real for Pony and Gran.

Right?

"No one said they were." Ephiny said, holding her hand up. "We don't really know what's going on down there.. but you know, Xena.. money has a way of twisting people. Even the most loyal of them" She jerked her chin at the pile of stones on the mantel. "And that's a lot of money."

Xena got up and walked over to the clothing press against the wall, opening it, and taking out the distinctive shape of her armor with a soft clash of metal.

"We know." Gabrielle took up the conversational ball. "We've known this mountain had gems in it.. and more.. for a while now. That's why.. " She glanced at Xena's silent back. "Well, that's one reason we wanted you all to move here."

"You knew." Ephiny murmured.

"We knew." The bard confirmed. "But you know, home has a lot of different meanings to both of us, and we decided to try and defend the home we first knew when we came here."

"Wow." The Amazon regent rubbed her forehead. "That's... Gabrielle, you're making decisions for a lot of people down there, y'know?"

A shrug. "That's what Queens do, don't they?" Gabrielle asked, with a faint smile. "You have to have the big picture, and our big picture doesn't include Amphipolis being destroyed and this mountain being torn to the ground all for pretty colored rocks."

Ephiny considered that, and finally, she rocked her head to either side. "I know what you mean, Gabrielle, but damn." She said. "This could be huge."

"Well." The bard leaned back, pulling Dori to her. "Most of what we're a part of is."

Xena fastened her shoulder armor, buckling the worn straps under her arms. She turned and sat down on the press, picking up her knee guards and setting one into place.

"Is that why you moved up here?" Ephiny split her time between watching Xena and addressing Gabrielle. "You could have said something."

Could they have? Gabrielle sighed. For her, and for Xena, Dori's pretty rocks had been just that. They'd sat down together and talked about it and realized that cliché or not – they really didn't need anything but each other and their child.

Really. Oh sure, they could go somewhere, and buy a villa near Athens... have nice clothes and fancy jewelry. But that meant giving up the lives they had, and damn it, neither of them wanted to do that. Was it selfishness, or foresight?

Depended on your point of view, I guess.

Gabrielle felt Xena's eyes on her, and she looked past Ephiny to see the Destroyer of Nations standing up, swinging a cloak around her shoulders and tacking it into place. 'Xena.'

The Amazons all turned, as the warrior sheathed her sword and set it into its clips. "Gabrielle." Xena answered, rolling the r's a little as she always did. "Grab your staff, and let's get this over and done with.." She seated her chakram at her hip. "I want a bubble bath."

The incongruity was charming, even to Gabrielle's exhausted mind. "Okay honey." She reluctantly set Dori on her feet and stood. "Want me to brush your hair out? If you're going to go kick everyone's ass, you should at least look pretty doing it."

"What are we doing?" Ephiny asked scrambling hastily to her feet. Pony joined her, watching Xena warily. "Should we go get armed?"

"You're not doing anything." Xena said, as Gabrielle crossed behind her and retrieved one of her staffs, tucked into a little alcove near the door. "Me and Gabrielle are going to go down to the village, and set those people straight."

Ephiny blinked. "Xena, no offense, but there are a lot of guys down there. The last batch they sent up the hill were mercenaries."

"I don't care." Xena dusted her hands off. "This is my town. My mountain, and my home. They want anything on it, they're gonna have to take it from me." She put her hand on Gabrielle's back. "C'mon. Hopefully I won't have to kill too many people."

The reality of the violence suddenly became apparent in the room as everyone realized Xena meant exactly what she'd just said.

That something had changed, and this was no longer the militia captain and the defender of Amphipolis talking, but a more ancient incarnation of who Xena was stepping forward once again into the sunlight.

"You can come with us if you want." Xena finished. "Just stay out of the way."

Gabrielle tightened her boot lacings and straightened, holding her hand out as Dori pattered after them. "C'mon Dori."

"Gabrielle.. leave her here." Granella spoke up. "What are you thinking?"

The bard looked at her. "I'm thinking she's our daughter." She said. "And if she doesn't know who we are, no one does." She hefted her staff in her other hand and followed Xena out the door, hoping only that whatever happened, happened quickly.

It was time.

**

It felt good to have her staff in her hand again. Gabrielle lifted the familiar weight and used the end of the big stick to steady her path as she led Dori down the worn rocks. "Careful there, Dori."

"Mama." Dori pattered along the stones with supreme unconcern. "Missed you." She hopped down onto a bit of mossy granite, following along after Xena's grim strides. "Missed you and Boo."

"We missed you too, honey." Her mother assured her. "But it wouldn't have been fun for you, this time. Your Boo and I had to do a lot of crazy things."

"No fun?"

"No fun." Gabrielle confirmed. "It wasn't like the last time, when we had lots of fun, didn't we?"

"Yes." Dori stopped to pick up something. "Mama, they tried to take Boo's rocks." She turned and frowned at the bard. "H'com they did that?"

"Oh, I guess they thought they were so pretty, they wanted to have them." Gabrielle dodged a low hanging branch. "But our friends wouldn't let them. Wasn't that nice?"

"Eff mad." Dori remarked. "Boom, boom boom."

"Well, Ephiny really loves us, and wants to take care of us and our stuff, especially when we're not here. That was really nice of her, wasn't it?"

Her daughter booted a bit of stick out of her way, and watched as it clattered down the path, skipping along until it bounced past Xena, who reached down and swept it out of the air without so much as missing a stride. "Bad mens." She decided. "No like."

"Well... I'm sure we won't like them either..." Gabrielle caught up to her and put a hand on her back. "Xena, slow down a little, woudlja? They've been stewing all this time..they'll wait a candlemark more."

The warrior sighed aggrievedly, but slowed her steps until they caught up to her. "Stupid bastards."

Gabrielle fully agreed. "What are we going to do?" She asked. "Are you just going to.."

"Yeah." Xena replied. "I'm just going to."

"Mm."

They walked through the thickly leafed mountainside for a while in silence, their steps slowing as they reached the intersection to the Amazon's valley. Waiting at the cross in the path was a cluster of mostly bare bodies, watching them approach.

Warriors, and armed. How Ephiny had sent word so fast, and they'd gotten ready so fast, was anyone's guess. But she had, and they had, and now twenty of them were there, blending into the foliage and presenting a suitably fierce appearance.

Amazons. Gabrielle's sometimes troublesome, sometimes indispensable other family – had Pony's attitude in the valley reflected how the tribe really felt?

Xena and Gabrielle stopped, then exchanged glances. After a moment, Xena nudged her partner, and Gabrielle released Dori's hand and walked over to the waiting Amazons. "Hi."

Xena closed her eyes momentarily and lifted her hand to cover a smile. Some things just never really did change, even after all the things they'd been through.

"My queen." Solari stepped forward and saluted the bard.

"Solari." Gabrielle responded agreeably. "What brings you guys out in all the froo froo?"

Oh boy. Xena took a seat on a nearby rock and picked Dori up, putting her on her lap. "So, what have you been up to, shortie?"

"Did lots of fun things, Boo." Dori swung her booted feet. "Got to play with Auntie Eff's peoples."

Xena touched the feather in her hair. "Where did this come from?"

"Eff."

"Uh huh." The warrior murmured. "For what?"

Dori blinked at her, big green eyes reflecting the spots of sunlight. "Some of the peoples were being mean, Boo. Tried to take the ball away. I gots them not."

Xena nodded soberly. "Did you yell at them?"

"Yes."

The warrior nodded again. "Did they listen to you?"

Dori shook her head, and poked her lip out.

"Did you have to go boom?"

Dori nodded.

"Is that why Ephiny gave you the feather? Because you went boom?" Xena's voice dropped a little, still gentle, but with a hint of gathering steel.

"Eff says go like mama first." Dori told her. "Yak yak yak.. but then, go boom when peoples don't listen." She fingered her feather. "Boo no like?"

Xena sighed. "Well, as long as you yelled first." She stood and lifted Dori, giving her a hug. "I like the feather, shortie. Just remember what Ephiny said. You talk first, okay?"

"Otay." Dori agreed cheerfully. "But Boo, peoples no listen."

The warrior sighed again. "Yeah, I know." She gave Dori a kiss on her head. "But you always have to try talking to them first, Dori. Promise me you will, huh?"

Dori put her arms around Xena's neck and hugged her. "Yak yak." She said. "Go mama."

"You got it." Xena hugged her back. They walked over to where Gabrielle was standing, and listened as the bard talked to her people.

"Solari, we didn't ask Ephiny to do that." Gabrielle was saying. "We said she could come along if she wanted but..."

"Uh.. Gabrielle?" Solari waved a hand at her. "I know you don't spend a lot of time with us, but..."

Gabrielle looked away, as the words echoed the sentiments she'd heard in the valley.

"We don't really need anyone to force us to kick butts, yeah?" Solari finished. "It kinda comes with the package." She indicated herself, then turned to the others. "We've been waiting for you to get back... Eph didn't really want to jump down your town's throats, you know? Not without you being here and all that."

"Yeah." One of Solari's companions said. "We're really glad you're back."

"Why?" Gabrielle looked at her.

The woman's jaw dropped a little. "Your majesty?"

"Why are you glad I'm back?" The bard asked, in a gentle tone. "What do I do for you guys? I'm never here, I never find you better hunting areas, I never give you anything. Why are you glad?"

Xena's nostrils flared and her body stiffened in a bone deep reaction. She put a hand on Gabrielle's shoulder, but stopped at the slight lifting of her partner's hand, fingers spread.

A deep crease appeared in Solari's forehead. "Did we do something to piss you off?" She blurted. "Cause I don't know what you're talking about, your Maj." She said. "You feeling okay?"

Gabrielle gazed steadily at her. "I asked a simple question." Rotten timing, she knew, but sometimes there was just a time and place for something, and this seemed to be it. "Be honest."

Solari's eyes dropped to the ground, then she turned and looked at her companions for a long moment, before she returned her attention to Gabrielle. She sidled a step closer. "Okay." She said. "Look, it's like this."

The bard cocked her head to one side, and waited.

"Weird shit happens to you guys." Solari told her, bluntly. "Like, really weird shit, okay? Gods, monsters, weird people, creatures, chicks with glowing eyes, spirit winds, ghosts, people dying and coming back... you guys attract strange, y'know?"

Thrown totally off track, Gabrielle could only nod mutely. Xena reached up and scratched her ear.

"So, like.. when you're around, it happens to us too." The Amazon said. "So it's cool you're not around all the time, okay?"

Gabrielle stared at her, then she looked at the other Amazons. They all nodded rapidly.

"I mean it's okay you moved us up here." Solari clarified hastily. "It's really cool now that it stopped raining, and there's like, a lot to love. But it would be cool to have some time to enjoy it, yeah?"

Gabrielle studied them with a grave expression. Then she put a hand out and clasped Solari's arm. "Okay. Let's go then. We'd love the backup. Right Xe?"

"Right." Xena answered without hesitation.

The bard felt a strange sense of wry relief. "Then we'll go back up to our place, and you won't see us for a couple sevendays. Promise."

Solari gazed at her warily. "You're not pissed off? You asked, y'know?"

"I'm not pissed off, and I did ask." Gabrielle, finally, smiled. "Thanks for letting me know. I didn't really ask for the position.. but I try to do the best I can with it."

Solari tightened her sword and dusted her hands off. "Yeah, well.." She motioned the rest of the squad forward. "People who want that stuff usually shouldn't get it. At least with you in charge, we know we ain't gonna have to go get shot at cause it's that time of the month, yknow?"

"Mm." Gabrielle pondered the question of whether she'd send the Amazons to war in the throes of a pre cycle depression, and decided it wasn't really likely, at least at this stage in her life. She glanced over at Xena.

"Yes." The warrior skirted a tree and started down the path again. "But I didn't enjoy it."

"Ah."

They hadn't gone along for another several hundred bodylengths, when Xena paused and held up a hand. "Shh." She turned her head into the wind and tensed her ears, cupping the air to gather in the small, discordant sound that had alerted her.

There it was. The sound of wood against steel, and the thunder of hooves. "C'mon." The warrior started a fast ramble down the rocks. "We got trouble."

"See what I mean?" Solari sighed, and drew her sword, racing after Xena. "It ain't even been a candlemark, has it?"

Gabrielle grabbed Dori's hand and followed, shaking her head. "Learn something new every darn day around here, no doubt about it."

**

One Wild Ride

Part 26 (Conclusion)

Cyrene shoved the big kitchen worktable against the door, her boots scrabbling against the floor as Eustace threw her weight against the wood next to her. "Son of a bacchae!" The innkeeper bellowed. "By all the gods.. they've gone insane!"

"Ma'am!" The big cook panted. "We're going to die! They'll kill us!"

Cyrene allowed for that possibility as she whirled, hearing the chaos in the outer room as her eyes searched for something to use as a weapon.

She was no warrior. She'd be the first to admit that, but she'd given birth to arguably one of the greatest of them and some of that had come from her. Not the skill, no, but the will for it. "Stupid sons of.." She snatched her biggest butcher knife from the wall and turned, glaring at the door which shook under the weight of heavy fists.

Insanity.

"You've got em in there, Cyrene! We know it! We want em!" A loud, male voice yelled.

"Gods." Cyrene wiped the sweat off her brow. "it's madness." She lifted her voice. "I've got nothing in here but a blade for your trouble, Alric! Get your scrabble out of here!"

The door shuddered under the pounding.

Cyrene checked the heavy brace holding shut the outer door to the kitchen, and frantically sorted through her options.

After a moment she realized she had so few the exercise wasn't worth the energy, and she looked around for a place to make a last stand instead.

How had it come to this? "Stase, get over there against the wall." She ordered, picking up a heavy cast iron skillet, and handing it to her long time cook. "Hold that. If the bastards get in here, just start swinging at anything that moves."

Eustace blinked unhappily at her.

"Except me." Cyrene clarified, putting her back to the big hearth and taking a two handed grip on her cleaver. The sounds outside were getting louder, and she could hear the sharp whacks of an ax against wood and smell the scent of burning.

"Oh, ma'am." Eustace half sighed, half sobbed. "I'm glad at least the little one's safe."

Safe. Cyrene felt an ache in her chest. For now. She had no illusions that the Amazons, hardy thought they were, could stop the flood of mercenaries now arriving in the town. Two score more of them had arrived today, and now that the militia had been run out of the region, they had nothing left to stand up to them with .

Unreasoning. Mindless. Just the insane need for the jewels that little Dori had unthinkingly shown in the inn, proud as always of her pretty rocks.

Balanced on edge, the merchants fuming over their losses, it was just enough to send them into a downward spiral of singleminded desire and the suddenness of it all had taken them by total surprise.

"Ma'am?"

Cyrene turned. "Yes?"

The cook shifted the skillet from one hand to the other, and wiped her palm on her skirt. "Thank you."

"For what?" The innkeeper asked, sharply.

"You've been real good to me." Eustace replied. "So however this ends, I'm all right with that."

Cyrene looked at her. "Well." She tightened her grip, as the door started to bow inward. "Thanks, but I'm not." She turned her attention back to the sounds. "And so help me, when those little bastards come in here, I'm going to remind them who's mother I am!"

The door cracked inwards, and she heard a yell of triumph from outside, as the table she'd slid against it rolled back, it's legs scraping against the floor.

Eustace's eyes widened, and she stared at the door. Cyrene made herself ready, thinking a thousand things, and wishing she could say a few goodbyes not the least of which was to her husband.

"Argh!" A hole opened as the door split, and a arm appeared, holding a mace. Without really thinking about it, Cyrene rushed forward and chopped at it, whacking her cleaver into the man's wrist and twisting as the blade entered bone.

A scream. Hoarse yells from outside, indistinguishable. Loud bangs. Another loud scream.

She wasn't sure if it was Eustace or the man. "Bastard!" Cyrene yelled, at the top of her lungs. "Take that!" She chopped again, and the hand with the mace fell off, as the arm jerked backwards, and disappeared.

"Why, you bitch!"

"Bust up my place, will ya?" Cyrene felt a sense of rage taking over the fear, and she yanked at the table. "I'll come out there and chop you all to bits you two faced pieces of horse dung!" She pulled at the door, hauling it open in a rush of mindless fury.

One man was kneeling on the floor holding his arm, spurting blood. The rest of the inn, shockingly, was empty, and the front door was wide open, sounds of hoofbeats, and movement flooding in.

Outside, she could see many bodies, moving fast. She ran for the door, the cleaver still in her hand, and stopped when she reached it and stared into the town square, filled now with armed, leather clad bodies.

Dirty.

Stinking. More of the mercenaries. Cyrene felt a sense of despair take her, as she watched the merchant leader scramble up the short slope that lead to the path to Xena's home, and hold his hands up.

The mercenaries shook their weapons at him.

"Let's go! Now we'll get what we want!" The merchant yelled. "We'll run right over those damn women!"

"Yeah!"

Cyrene stared at them. There had to be at least a hundred mercenaries, and as she looked around, she saw her fellow townsfolk hiding themselves behind doors, behind windows – refusing to meet her eyes as she half turned and knew herself to be alone.

No one would stop them.

Cyrene turned back again, and watched all the merchants cluster behind the mercenaries, the musk of greed making her nose wrinkle as she gripped the railing of the inn porch in frustration, knowing she had no chance of stopping them either.

"Let's go!" The man turned and started up the path, the crowd surging eagerly behind him, almost running him down when he stopped abruptly only a few steps later.

Men pushed and shoved forward, yelling angrily, brandishing weapons as they shoved the merchant forward, despite his suddenly thrown out arms and hoarse shout of warning, a scuffle of impatient bodies and chaos that abruptly went very, very still. "Whoa whoa whoa.. something's comin!"

The leaves rustled, and branches shifted, as though the wind were moving them deferentially from the path, and motion became evident against their pattern in shifts of dark leather and tan skin.

Xena stepped out of the shadows and into the dappled sunlight, gold reflections glinting off the sword clasped lightly in one hand, blade held in ready position. She stopped on a small rise just in front of them and waited, her eyes slowly moving over the shoving mass of men.

Cyrene felt the cleaver drop from her now shaking fingers, and she blinked away a few tears, her body sagging against the railing in a rush of relief. "Whichever one of you was watching over her.. thank you." She whispered, almost hearing a soft, deep chuckle she might have once known. "Even you."

The chuckle sounded softly again, then faded into the wind.

Xena stood her ground, her fingers shifting restlessly on the hilt of her sword. "What is this?" She barked out the question. "Where in the Hades do you think you're going?"

The merchant took courage from the numbers behind him and stepped forward. "You can't stop us, Xena. We're gonna get those jewels, so just move out of the way, and you won't get hurt."

Xena put her free hand on her hip and looked at him. "*I* won't get hurt?"

Behind her, Gabrielle appeared, alone. She walked forward and stood just behind Xena, her staff balanced in both hands and her feet spread at shoulder width in a ready stance. "*We* won't get hurt?" She amended loudly. "Boy, are you going down the wrong path, buddy."

"That's right. Now c'mon!" He waved the mob of merchants and mercenaries forward, and started towards her himself, a look of almost manic determination on his face. "We've waited long enough!"

The branches moved again and the Amazons appeared, blocking the path and raising bows.

"That won't stop us either!" The merchant yelled. "I'll have them! I'll have those stones!" He rushed at Xena, an ax in his hands as he lifted his arms to swing at her. "I'll have them, Xena! You've been keeping them from us, from the town.. they're ours! They're mine!"

Xena hardly seemed to move. She tossed her sword from her right hand to her left, and shifted as he reached her, backhanding her weapon past the clumsy ax as she kicked it from his hands and her stroke took his head off with no more effort than swatting a fly might have.

Her second kick tossed his body back at the mercenaries, blood spurting from the neck as the arms twitched and jerked, and the head rolled crazily back down the slope.

The mob pulled up short, stumbling and jumping out of the way of the bloody mess tumbling through them.

"They're not." Xena said, after a moment of shocked silence. She hopped off the rock she was standing on and stalked forward towards them. "They're mine." She pointed at her chest with her thumb. She reached the first of the mercenaries, without hesitating a beat and gutted him before he could bolt out of the way.

She kicked the body off her sword and swung it, the red blade glistening in the sun. "Everybody clear on that?"

The mob stirred uneasily, fear rising. "Xena, you can't.." One of the merchants yelled.

"I CAN." Xena bellowed back without restraint. She leaped over two of the stumbling mercenaries and landed near him, putting the point of her sword in his face. "This is MY place, not yours."

The merchant was braver than he was smart. "I'll... " His voice cracked, but he kept on. "I'll have the law on you!"

Xena pressed her sword point against his throat. "I am the law here." She said, quietly, into a suddenly windswept silence. "That mountain's mine. What's in it's mine."

The man took a step back. Xena stepped with him. She stared through him, then swept her eyes around the mob. "How soon you forget."

Gabrielle stood ready, her heart balanced between despair and elation, between the promise of darkness and the certainty of the light.

Between the truth of what was, and the wistful wish of what might have been.

It's all right be bad, Xena. Her youthful earnestness floated in her mind's eye. *So long as you're bad in a good cause.* "Maybe I was a prophet, and just never knew it." She murmured softly, then half turned her head. "Solari, get ready."

"More than." Solari stepped up next to her, bow cocked, head up, shoulders back. "More than ready, my queen."

"Xena's right." Gabrielle pulled a breath in, deep into her gut and let her voice carry, the mature, rounded tones breaking through the rustling of weapons. "This is our place, and we're ready to die to keep it that way. Are you?" Behind her, in the tree just over her shoulder, she knew Dori was perched, watching. "Because I guarantee more of you will die than we will."

"Bu.." The merchant stared at his dead companion. He looked back up at Xena.

Xena stared levelly at him. "My home." She said. "My mountain. My town." With a flickering motion, she sliced through the skin of his throat and sent him reeling backwards. "Mine." She took a step towards the mob, the wind riffling through her dark hair, and exposing the starkly planed cheekbones.

"Take aim." Gabrielle ordered quietly, both hands on her staff as she grounded it between her boots.

The Amazons raised their bows and nocked arrows, muscular arms drawing gut strings back in a whisper of stolid finality.

One of the mercenaries let out a yell. "They're just women! Kill em!" A surge of motion started, as the fighters scrambled forward.

"Fire." Gabrielle said, never stirring as shafts sped from all around her forward, ending in searing thunks as they entered the bodies of the men coming towards them. "Ready."

The surge forward stopped, and became a ramble backwards, as Xena leaped in the direction of the attack and let out a battle yell, and the Amazons started forward, echoing the cry as Gabrielle jumped and landed near her partner, her staff coming up as she prepared to defend Xena's flank.

The mercenaries held their nerve for one more moment, then the first men broke, and turned, and ran, shoving the merchants to the ground in their haste and it became a swarm of sweating, blood spattered leather and musky stench ringing to the sound of fierce cries that echoed, and echoed and echoed.

And then it was quiet, as Xena, Gabrielle, and the Amazons reached the edge of the path and came into view of the village, the mob dissolving before them and scattering down the road towards the river.

The destruction made them stop dead in their tracks, eyes moving over the burned buildings, and the broken fences. Smoke trailed faintly up from a pile of debris that might have been a wagon, and after a shocked moment, Gabrielle let her staff end fall to the ground and exhaled.

"Mama!" Dori wriggled between the Amazons and squeezed between her mother and her Boo, her eyes widening as she grabbed hold of Gabrielle's leg and stared into the destruction. "Oh!"

Xena let her stained blade rest against her shoulder armor. "I should have killed them all." She remarked, in an almost ordinary tone. "Bastards."

Gabrielle reached down and took Dori's hand. "All right." She said. "Let's go. We've got work to do."

"Bastards." Xena repeated, in an undertone.

**

Sad destruction. Gabrielle felt the bulk of Cyrene's inn, thankfully whole, behind her as she faced the central square and the ruins of her home. Though they'd assured themselves off the innkeeper's safety, she had yet to talk to Cyrene beyond an initial heartfelt bear hug.

The stable stood with doors open, a hollow darkness inside and a huge rent in one wall that showed empty stalls and a spill of hay to her shocked eyes.

Thank the gods, they'd left Argo and her son on the plateau above their new cabin. If Xena had come back and found evil done to them the bard doubted any of the merchants would have left the town in one piece, and she was almost in a place where she could understand that.

The sturdy wooden railings were in pieces, scattered on the ground. The well built shops that shared the square with Cyrene's inn were smouldering, empty windows and broken walls making her heart ache.

Why? Because the merchants up here, the ones that lived in the town and were part of it – hadn't suffered the flood as they had?

Revenge. Jealousy. Petty spitefulness, driving them to take away from someone what they had taken away from them.

Peh. The bard felt depressed, with the reality of all the destruction in front of her and the knowledge that, at some level, they'd be blamed for it. Especially since the inn had been left intact, and so, she'd noted, had the cabin they'd first lived in.

Why? Gabrielle gazed down at her scratched and bruised hands, aching quietly on the wood they were resting on. Had Xena's reputation, even now, kept them whole when all the rest were razed? Perhaps the merchants, if not the mercenaries, had realized at some gut level that no matter the riches, no matter the reward – it was no trade off for being gutted on the end of Xena's sword if she sought vengeance for the destruction of what was hers.

Maybe they hadn't forgotten quite as much as her partner had accused them of, after all.

Easier to take frustration out on simple villagers, and fellow merchants, wasn't it? Easier to rationalize that they were just making things equal, in a twisted way having suffered so much loss and then to have been faced with the sudden vision of impossible wealth before them...

Dori's pretty rocks. Gabrielle sighed. "I should have let her collect lizards instead. Worst that would have got me was a nibble now and then." She'd known Xena's dream of keeping it all a secret was an unlikely wish – in fact, they had argued about it not a sevenday before the flood.

Pragmatic as her partner was, there was still a slice of her that had a blind spot when it came to getting what she wanted. Xena often felt that if she simply willed it hard enough, that's the way things were going to be.

She had, Gabrielle had to admit, a decent track record of that. But in this case, the bard's heart and her knowledge of people told her that it was only a matter of time.

Well. Here they were. She felt sad at the thought, and wondered what would happen now – since she knew word would leak out and then what? How long could Xena's reputation scare people off – and what if they weren't around?

Gabrielle sighed. "Damn it."

Around the central well, some of the villagers had collected, looking around in dismay as they clustered together, shaking their heads as they peered down the path. One looked up and saw her, and for a long moment Gabrielle thought the woman was going to turn away.

She was human. The idea hurt. But the woman's face tensed into a smile, and she lifted a hand in a weary wave, nudging her companion and indicating the bard's presence. The man pushed away from the well and came over to the inn steps, his eyes warming as he neared her.

"Hello, Bren." Gabrielle greeted him quietly.

"Gabrielle." The village blacksmith stopped by the porch, wiping his hands on his trousers before he extended an arm to her. "Glad to see you safe."

The bard smiled, and clasped his arm. "I'm glad we made it back.. but I.." She glanced past him, and just shook her head. "Damn. It hurts to see this."

The blacksmith reached over with his other hand and patted her shoulder. "A mess, surely, lass." He agreed. "But it's over now and I'm glad you're back. We've seen worse, and likely will again."

It gave her a brief pang in her chest, the raw truth of his words that no platitudes could soften. Life was, she knew better than most, really rotten at times and only occasionally did really great things happen to balance that off. "It's a mess." She murmured. "But we'll make it right again." Her eyes met his. "You can count on it"

"Aye." Bren released her arm. "Xena made it clear of that. No mistaking." He turned and went back to the well, pausing to talk to the people around it, most of whom glanced over his shoulder to where the bard was quietly standing and waved in greeting.

Well. Gabrielle leaned on the inn's porch railing, watching as the group turned to the task of pulling up water, her shoulders twitching in sympathy at the sight. She turned at the creak of footsteps behind her, only to be gently enveloped in Cyrene's arms as her mother in law hugged her. "Oh, mom." A gasp escaped her.

"Gabrielle." Cyrene released her and held her at arm's distance. "It's like waking from a night mare to see you both." She studied the bard's face. "Thank the gods you're safe."

"Same for you." Gabrielle managed a smile, before she turned to look out over the town. "Wish we'd made it back earlier." She watched two men carry a bucket from the well to dump it's contents into the still smouldering ruins. "Damn."

Cyrene leaned next to her. "Yeah."

The bard slowly shook her head. "Why?" She asked. "There's no sense to this."

The innkeeper sighed. "It was too much." She said. "The flood, the losses... they weren't getting what they wanted out of us, and then.. Maybe it was desperation. Maybe we should have helped them.. given them.. I don't know."

Gabrielle pondered quietly. "You had nothing to give them, Cyrene. What were you going to do.. sell the crops?" She said. "What they were looking for wasn't here."

Cyrene exhaled. "We could have scraped up something." She said. "I have a few coins put by."

The bard gazed out over the village. "It wouldn't have been enough." She told her mother in law. "They lost everything down there, in the flood."

"Mm."

"But they're still bastards and I'm glad we stopped them." Gabrielle continued, in a firmer tone. "And I'm glad you didn't get hurt." She turned to face Cyrene. "We can rebuild houses. We can't replace people."

Cyrene smiled at her. "Some are more replaceable than others." She remarked dryly. "Sorry, Gabrielle. I know you don't feel this way, but some here got what they deserved."

The bard blinked at her.

"They were ready to throw me to the wolves." The innkeeper said. "Only ones who stood by me were your Amazons, and a few neighbors." She nodded slowly. "So the Hades with them. I learned a lesson this past time, let me tell you." Her eyes dropped briefly, then returned to the bard's face. "I lost sight of who my family really is."

Gabrielle felt the breath come out of her, as the words penetrated. She reached out and took the innkeeper's hands. "We were all kind of mad at each other before we.."

"Before you nearly gave your life up for us, again?" Cyrene squeezed her fingers. "The sheep weren't worth that, daughter. Nor the hucksters running after them."

Gabrielle's lips tensed into a faint smile. "We didn't mean get you angry, mom."

"I know." The innkeeper said. "I didn't mean to keep harping on you either."

They looked at each other, and then, without really any warning, Cyrene released her hands and enveloped her in a hug again instead. The bard returned it, feeling her heart ease a little as she felt Cyrene pat her back.

"By the gods, Gabrielle.. you feel like nothing but bones!?" The innkeeper exclaimed, as she separated from her and took a good look at the bard. "What have you been doing?"

How to answer that? The bard exhaled silently. "Well.. we had a lot of ..it was tough.. we traveled a lot and.. there was some fighting but..." She hesitated. "Mom.. this is going to be a crazy question.. but how long have we been gone?"

Cyrene released her and stepped back, cocking her head slightly. "Well." She frowned. "A seven day, just." She said. "Seemed like a lifetime but really..."

A seven day. Gabrielle felt a sense of shock, even though she'd expected to hear something like it. "Ah." She murmured, leaning back against the porch railing. "Felt like a lot l.. like a lifetime."

"I know." Cyrene mistook her reaction. "Seems so short a time for all this to have happened... and I admit, it came so fast.. I mean, I knew they were angry, but..."

A seven day. Gabrielle half shook her head. "What.. um.." She put her thoughts aside. "What happened to the militia, mom? Eph said they were run off? I can't believe that." She shifted the conversation to a different topic hastily.

"Well." Cyrene hesitated.

"Mama." Dori emerged from the inn and came over to them. "Peoples did bad things."

The bard looked down at her. "I know, honey." She said, with a sigh. "C'mere. " She picked Dori up and hugged her, pitifully glad of the scent of clean, sun warmed fabric and the feel of her daughter's arms around her as she got a hug back. "People did. But we stopped them, and now everyone can have fun again, right?"

Dori put her head on her mother's shoulder. "Love mama." She replied briefly. "No more bad peoples."

"The militia didn't run off." Cyrene quietly put a hand on Gabrielle's arm. "The council disbanded them."

Gabrielle stared at her. The innkeeper shrugged slightly.

"Xena wasn't here. What can I tell you?" Cyrene sighed. "And then after the mercenaries came in, it was too late. The soldiers.. Xena's boys, had gone off in disgust and all were left were farmers and plowmen who needed a leader."

The bard slowly shook her head. "Well, you've got one now." She said.

"Got two." Cyrene replied, patting her shoulder.

"Mm." Gabrielle mused thoughtfully. "We'll see."

**

Xena stood at the edge of the river and looked over it. On the far side, past the ford and the still swollen waters lay the remnants of what had been the lower town and was no longer.

The buildings, the market, the homes... piles of thatch rubble and broken bits of wood, mostly washed away in the flood that had tumbled the debris from the edge of the river down across the plateau as far as her eye could see.

The warrior sighed, letting sore hands rest on her thighs as the cool spring breeze tickled across her skin. Footsteps scuffed behind her, and she half turned to find Johan at her back, the retired merchant's face a study in craggy, pensive acceptance. "Johan."

"Ah, Xena." The man came over and clasped her shoulder with one hand, a mixture of respect and familiarity he'd earned. "You're a sight for sore eyes, for sure." He shook his head. "Another day, and we'll all have been washed down the river, I'm thinking."

Xena thought about that moment, when she and Gabrielle had decided in what they thought was mere caprice, to push on through the night and get home. "Yeah." She turned and gave Johan a hug. "Thanks for watching after mom."

Johan snorted softly. "Xena, I'd do anything for the woman, but she watches after herself a sight better than I ever could and you know it." He returned the hug, giving her a pat on the side. "Twas frustration sending them in there today, since your feathered friends up the line was keeping em from what they wanted."

Amazons. Xena exhaled. Defending her home out of a sense of... loyalty?

Friendship?

The warrior acknowledged privately that she, too, had some reassessment to do in how she looked at things and people. Pony and Gran's truthful reaction to them had been disturbing, and uncomfortable but really, when she looked hard at how she treated them...

Justified? "Well." The warrior sighed again, and looked across the river. "Got a lot of cleaning up to do, I guess." She murmured. "Though I'm not sure how many of them'll be back."

Johan studied the scene, his thumbs hooked into his belt. "Don't think they will, Xena." He said. "I think we had our moment, and it's gone now. Unless them bastards bring back Athen's army, that is."

Xena went to the edge of the river, to the ford she'd been crossing since she was barely old enough to walk. Losing the growth of the lower town meant going backwards for Amphipolis but wasn't that exactly what she'd wanted?

"Not that I think you'd mind it." Johan said, in an almost apologetic tone.

"No." Xena replied honestly. "But I wouldn't have willed it this way."

Johan was silent for a bit as they stood there together. In the far distance, the hunting party of Amazons were returning, their wiry, muscular figures outlined in the late afternoon's sun. As they came closer, their good mood was evident and they lifted hands in greeting when they spotted the two of them watching. "Likely lasses." Johan commented.

"Don't let them hear you say that." Xena warned, with a wry expression.

Johan chuckled and slapped her on the back, then he turned and started back up towards the inn, past the wrecks of wagons, and the debris, and the destruction.

Xena decided to wait for the Amazons, and so she sat herself down on an upturned barrel and hitched one booted foot up onto her knee, glad enough of the chance to rest a few minutes. Now that all the challenges were momentarily at least put to the side, she allowed herself to feel as exhausted as she was, and spared a mournful, wishful thought for the warmth of a bath and the softness of her own bed.

She turned her hands over and looked at the palms, so crossed with gouges and scrapes it was hard to see skin between them. It hurt to flex her fingers, but she did it anyway, studying the bruise that covered most of the base of her right hand.

There was a dark smudge on the skin, and on the pad below the base of her fingers, and again on the first and second joints as though she'd taken hold of a hot coal and it had left its mark on her. A faint, wry smile appeared on her face as she realized the cause.

Then a splash made her look up, as Solari led the Amazons back across the river, holding her bow up over her head as the water came up to her neck at the ford. The squad of warriors followed her, and in a minute or two they were sloshing ashore and heading her way.

Solari stopped in front of her, and shook herself. "Typical men." She remarked. "Kick them in the crotch and they run like washerwomen."

The mixed metaphors made Xena's nose wrinkle. "Thanks." She answered. "How many got off?"

"About half." Solari responded readily. "We kept shooting them from behind."

The warrior nodded, after a moment. "Good." She said. "Maybe that's enough to keep them running." Killing all of them would have been one solution, she knew – but she'd also been doing this long enough to know the value of the tall tales men told when explaining why they ran from women.

By the time they finished, Xena figured she'd be twenty body lengths tall and have fangs the size of Argo's left foreleg.

"And convince em not to come back?" Solari grinned, then her expression shifted. "Word'll get out. Maybe it'll bring your soldier boys back." Her tone was offhand, but there was a touch of spice to it, that Xena's newly sensitive ears heard.

The warrior shrugged. "If they do, they do." She said. "But I figure we've got enough Amazons to handle anything that comes back this way."

Solari stopped in mid motion and looked at her, then glanced over her shoulder to where the rest of the Amazons were waiting and listening. After a second, she looked back at Xena. "Say what?"

The pale blue eyes blinked mildly at her. "Got water in your ears?" She asked. "Or did I pick up an accent or something?"

Solari grinned. "Nope." Her shoulders straightened. "Y'know, that's the nicest damn thing you ever said to us, Xena. Very cool." She half turned to her companions. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." Several of them replied, nodding. "Feels more like the war. Not like we're an afterthought." The short woman closest to Xena said. "Those guys ran off sure fast enough.. but we didn't."

"No." Xena folded her hands together. "Amazons never run."

They all straightened at that, and unconscious motion she caught from the corner of her eye. It made her smile, a little. "You know, I once told Melosa I'd rather fight a Cyclops than an Amazon. She laughed."

Solari cocked her head, and then, warily, lifted her hand up and put it's palm brazenly on Xena's forehead. "You need a drink?"

"Yeah." Xena had to chuckle at the reaction. "I probably do. Been a long damn day."

"Been a long damn seven days with you two gone." Solari agreed. She shook the water off her hands and looked back up towards the inn. "Wanna?"

Seven days? Even though she'd half expected it, it still surprised her. Xena collected herself with an effort and stood, her mind whirling. "Yeah, sure." She gestured towards the path. "Let's go." She flexed her hands and followed the Amazons, as they dripped muddy river water onto the already churned up ground before them.

Seven days?

**

Gabrielle sat in a chair near the wall, watching the residents of the town slowly file in. She had Dori sitting in her lap, and she was leaning back against the wall, an empty mug in front of her. Dori had a hunk of bread in her hands, and she was methodically ripping it to pieces and alternately eating and tossing it around.

The bard felt a sense of disconnection, from the exhaustion she knew was almost conquering her. The sounds around her were just so much buzzing, and now that she'd eaten some of the bread and cheese Cyrene had scavenged from the larder it was getting harder and harder to keep her head up.

"Mama." Dori offered her a bit of bread. "You want?"

"Sure." Gabrielle opened her mouth and waited for her daughter to deposit the offering. She chewed it and swallowed without really tasting it, and wished she had another mug of ale to wash it down with. But Cyrene had been pulled aside by some of the town elders in the corner, and she felt bringing attention to herself was probably not the best idea at the moment. "Thank you, sweetie."

"Good you back." Dori remarked. "You go Boo too long, you have fun?"

"Not really, honey." Gabrielle admitted. "Boo and I had a very tough time, and we had to do a lot of bad things."

"No fun?" Dori looked up.

"Well." The bard studied the round, innocent face. "We had some fun. I met some new friends, and I know you'd love them if you met them. Boo sang to them. Wasn't that nice of her?"

Dori grinned. "Love Boo."

"Yeah, me too." Gabrielle smiled back at her. "Boo made all the bad men run away, didn't she?"

"Mama too."

"Mama too." The bard agreed.

"Go mama." Dori leaned back against her and squiggled contentedly. "Eff an dose others we go to the mountain place and have fun." She related. "Gots lots of fishies."

"Would you get me lots of fishes, Dor?" The bard asked. "I'd like that."

"Yes." Her precocious offspring replied in a positive tone. "Let's get Boo, and go get fishies, mama." She ordered. "Go now."

And, as if by some magic, the door opened and through the fog that surrounded her, Gabrielle felt the emotional equivalent of a fierce, fresh breeze and she looked up to find Xena in the opening, the setting sun outlining her body and yet doing nothing to blunt the force of those bright blue eyes watching her.

The low murmur faded. The crowd turned, as they felt the warrior's presence. "Xena." One of the elders said her name, in a quiet tone.

The warrior closed the door, and her features became vivid in the light of the candles within. "Yes." She put her hands on her hips and waited.

The elder glanced at Cyrene, then faced her daughter. "Where do we go from here now?"

Xena looked around, finding every eye on her. "Thought you all would want us out of here." She said.

The elder looked tired, and sounded it. "I thought I knew what we all wanted." He replied. "I thought we all did, we saw all the opportunity coming to us and I thought, yes. It's time."

Cyrene sighed, and looked away.

"But we lost control of ourselves." The elder concluded, in a soft tone.

Xena walked over to where Gabrielle was sitting and joined her, holding out her arms as Dori scrambled over and leaped into them. "Hey, shortie." She gave her daughter a hug. "I missed ya." She let one hand rest on the chair arm and felt Gabrielle's fingers curl over hers immediately. "Are you keeping your mama company for me?"

"Mama's toast." Gabrielle uttered.

Xena nodded. "Tell you what." She addressed the still waiting crowd. "Everyone go get a good night's sleep somewhere. We'll talk tomorrow."

She sensed relief in the atmosphere, as the villagers dispersed into smaller groups and turned away from them. She waited a moment, then she turned back to her partner and knew the danger, for the moment, was on hold. "Ready to head home?"

Gabrielle's head was resting against the wall, and there was a quiet sadness about her that made Xena reach out instinctively and touch her cheek. "You okay?"

The bard's pale lashes fluttered a few times. "Yeah, I'm... um." She hesitated, then lowered her voice. "I'm bleeding."

Xena eyed her quickly. "W.. did someone here.." She leaned forward. "Where.." Her words cut off when she caught Gabrielle's expression, and she paused, her heart sinking. "Oh."

Gabrielle held her eyes for a moment, then glanced away, with a slight shrug. Then she looked back at the warrior, seeing a disappointment there that fully matched her own. "Hey." She squeezed Xena's hand. "After everything that happened... Xena, if that's the worst thing that came out of that valley, I'll take it. I mean that, with all my heart."

And Xena knew she did mean it. "Cmon." She stood, cradling Dori against her with one arm and offered the bard a hand up. "Let's go home."

Gabrielle leaned against her and closed her eyes. "I never left home." She said. "But I'll take a bath and a bed and you and be very, very grateful right now."

They walked slowly to the door, aware of the eyes that followed them curiously as they left the inn, and headed into the russet glow beyond.

**

Gabrielle sat in the chair behind her writing desk, her elbows resting on her knees as she gazed slowly around the inside of their cabin.

Still unfinished, still a little strange in her eyes, but so very welcome nonetheless. She remained still, reveling in the feel of clean skin and warm clothes, and the soft fur rug under her bare feet, the heat of the fire in the fireplace gently toasting her skin and the scent of fresh raspberry tea drifting by.

The window showed the fading purple of twilight and if she looked out from where she was sitting, she could just see a sprinkling of stars between the leaves blinking placidly down at her.

It was a little hard to believe she was here, after what they'd just gone through and Gabrielle found herself more than content to simply sit and enjoy the peace. She picked up her mug and sipped the tea inside, rolling the sweet, honey laced warmth around the inside of her mouth before she swallowed it.

Life could be savored again.

"Ugh." Xena emerged from the bathing room draped in a square of linen, Dori pattering along cheerfully wet and naked behind her. "C'mere, ya little frog. Let me dry you off."

"Toss it here." Gabrielle set her cup down and caught the towel, just as Dori reached her. "Look at you, Dori. You're all wet."

"Yes." Dori allowed herself to be tousled dry. "Good, mama!"

Gabrielle pulled Dori closer and gave her a kiss on her damp head. "Go over and let Boo put a shirt on you, okay?"

"Otay." Dori scooted over to the clothing press, where Xena had just finished draping her own long form with a mostly threadbare shift. "Boo, you got the red one?"

"Sure." Xena provided the requested item, a little rough linen shirt in a rust color that she got over Dori's head and pulled down over her body. "That what you want?"

Dori looked up at her, and grinned wholeheartedly. "Want Boo!"

Xena picked her up and cradled her in her arms. "You got me." She said, walking over to the low slung couch and dropping into it. "Now what?" She asked the child. "You going to tell us what you did while we were gone?"

Dori kicked her bare feet out. "Draw a pitcher." She decided, squirming off Xena's lap and heading for her toy box. "Boo, boo boo.."

Xena leaned her head back and looked over at Gabrielle. She patted the couch. "Nice of those guys to bring our stuff up."

"It was." The bard agreed softly. "I thanked Eph so many times I think she thought I had a fever. She kept asking where your herb box was."

"Ah. Yeah." Xena studied the weary lines on her partner's face. "I complimented the Amazons. They probably think I'm drunk." She tapped the edge of the couch, and when Gabrielle looked up, she crooked a finger at her. "C'mere."

Gabrielle got up slowly, taking her cup with her as she circled the couch and settled down at Xena's side, leaning against her with a long, heartfelt sigh. "Damn I'm tired."

Xena wiggled her toes, blinking a little. "Me too." She agreed. "I'm so damn tired I can't even think straight." She rested her head against Gabrielle's and they sat together in silence, watching Dori sprawled on the floor, making marks on a piece of tattered parchment with a stick of charcoal from the fire.

"Didn't she just take a bath?" Gabrielle asked mournfully, as the black soot traveled further up her child's arms.

"Mm." Xena nodded.

"She's so much like you." The bard said, then fell silent again.

Xena could feel the pain in her. She slipped her arm around Gabrielle's shoulders and reached over to cup the side of her head with her other hand, cradling the bard against her as gently as she could. There was no resistance at all to her, Gabrielle went with the motion and put both arms around her, burying her face against Xena's chest.

Words were meaningless, and so Xena didn't bother with them. She used touch instead, a soft, gentle massage along the back of Gabrielle's neck and steady kisses across the top of her head, saying with every motion, every breath, every beat of her heart how much she loved her.

She felt Gabrielle take a breath in, and release it, then she felt the pressure of the bard's lips against her skin as she shifted and snuggled closer, sliding one leg up over Xena's as she relaxed again.

"Know something." Gabrielle murmured, her breath warm against Xena's neck. "I'm too tired to even cry."

"So don't." Xena rocked her a little.

Gabrielle could feel some of the ache fading away, and she had the sensation that Xena was cradling her soul in ethereal security in the palms of her hands. It was an odd feeling, but she knew it was as real as the heartbeat under her cheek and she set herself free to float in it.

Life happened. If you were lucky, you had someone to share the beauty of that, and the ugliness of it and by that gauge Gabrielle knew herself to be a very lucky woman. She gave Xena a hug, and breathed in the scent of her clean shift and the spicy soap they'd both sorely missed in the valley.

Maybe what she'd felt, what they'd sensed in the valley was as much of a dream as everything else seemed to have turned out to be. Gabrielle was willing to go that route, willing to give up the pain of what might have been to focus instead of what was, and what could become now that their world had shifted to yet another path.

"Gabrielle?"

"Mm?"

"It'll happen."

The bard turned her head and shifted so she could look up at Xena, studying the angular planes now outlined in the gentle glow of their fire. She could see the warrior's eyes looking back at her and the weariness she was feeling was reflected in them, full measure. "Was it all a dream, Xe?"

The warrior thought in silence briefly, then shook her head.

"If we were only gone a sevenday..."

"They think." Xena interrupted her. "I know what happened to us. If anyone was dreaming, it was everyone else."

Gabrielle blinked a few times. "That's really arrogant, you know?"

"Yeah." Xena agreed. "But I am that." She paused. "Sometimes."

The bard's face moved into a faint smile. "Sometimes." She agreed. "But you know, I think I like that about you."

One of the dark brows lifted.

"You are who you are, Xena." Gabrielle said. "Just like you told me, I am who I am."

Xena leaned over and kissed her on the lips, her eyes fluttering closed as the contact lengthened and their mingled breathing shortened. She paused and lifted her head a little, touching the tip of her nose to the bard's. "I love who you are."

Gabrielle's eyes opened, revealing shadowed green eyes. "Likewise."

Considering who she was, Xena accepted that as the profound compliment it was. She kissed Gabrielle again, and smiled, as the bard hugged her, the sadness she'd felt through their link easing and fading away. It relieved her, and that in turn apparently relieved Gabrielle because they both melted into a comfortable snuggle bordering on the verge of sleep.

"Mama, look." Dori came over, dragging her parchment behind her. She tugged on Gabrielle's shift and held it up. "See?"

Ah well. Gabrielle turned and peered at the parchment. Then she slowly reversed her position and tilted her head to look at the item upside down. "Oh." She murmured. "Xe, look!"

Xena took the parchment and turned it right side up, tilting it towards the fire to let the light show its details. There was a round blob in the middle, with what looked like a snake emerging from it, and short lines around it all. "Gorgeous."

"You like? A minal came and scared Guff." Dori told her. "Make friends and then go play. Fun!"

Gabrielle squirmed upright again and looked at the parchment. "What kind of animal, Dor? Was it a pig?" She guessed. "Oh, Xe.. don't tell me mom's wild pigs are getting up here. They scare the poo out of me."

Dori clapped her hands together, which were now covered in charcoal. She held them up for Xena's inspection, then reached for her mother. "Mmmmamama..."

"Bah bah... whoa." Gabrielle managed to disentangle her hands from Xena's shirt fast enough to catch her child's black smudged ones before they could mark her. "Hold on there young lady." She struggled to sit up. "Ugh."

"Hang on." Xena squirmed around and got an arm under her, lifting her to a sitting position. "There."

"Thanks." The bard sighed. "Boy, I'm stiffening up." She got to her feet and started to walk towards the bathing room with Dori. "C'mon, punkie. Let's get you clean again."

Dori giggled and danced around, both hands being held firmly over her head. "Mama... go fly!"

"Oh no." Gabrielle's voice drifted back. "No flying tonight, Doriana."

Xena sat quietly for a moment, then she got up and followed her family into the back room. She went over to where Gabrielle was kneeling next to the bath, scrubbing Dori's hands and dropped to her knees behind the bard, sliding her arms around her and taking the soap from her fingers.

"What are you doing?"

"Helping." Xena splashed water over all of them.

"Xena!"

The warrior chuckled. "Sorry."

"Wench." Gabrielle rested her forearms on the tub and resigned herself to watching, finding it hard to even keep her eyes open. "But thanks."

She didn't remember Xena finishing, or the warrior drying Dori's hands. The next thing she knew, the world was turning upside down and air was rushing past her head, a disorienting motion that made her yelp in surprise. "Yow!"

"Easy." Xena cradled her and stood. "Bedtime, my love."

Unexpectedly, Gabrielle's eyes stung with tears and she blinked, lifting a hand to clear them. "I am tired.. I think I'm losing my mind." She muttered, a little embarrassed as Xena carried her back into the main room of the cabin. "You can let me down. Xe."

"I will." The warrior agreed, going over to the bed and doing just that. She glanced across the room to where Dori was already tucked in her own bed, and then she leaned over and blew the candle out.

Only the fire lit the cabin, a low, murmuring crackle that sounded loud as the night noises faded in from the window. Xena listened for a moment, then she swung her legs up and lay down, releasing a heartfelt sigh as the softness of the mattress enfolded her.

"Say that again." Gabrielle snuggled up along one side and put her head on Xena's shoulder. "Boy this feels good."

Xena let out a small groan of agreement. She slowly let her body relax, hardly daring to believe they were finally here, and the long nightmare was over. She felt Gabrielle's body losing tension next to her, and she let her fingers start a slow tracing along the bard's back.

It had been an impossibly long day, at the end of an impossibly long.. Xena blinked into the darkness. Impossibly long whatever. She felt her eyes close, and a sense of dislocation came over her with surprising suddenness, the exhaustion finally claiming her a few heartbeats before Gabrielle.

A sweet hint of jasmine floated in on the breeze, the rustling leaves and the sound of a solitary nightbird singing all that broke the peace.

For a change.

**

It was late the next morning when Gabrielle's eyes slowly opened, and she drew in a breath of the fresh spring air coming in the window. She flexed her fingers against the soft bedding and rolled over, appreciating the utter luxury of waking at her own pace in her own bed.

Only thing missing was her partner. Gabrielle rolled her head around and peered at the quiet emptiness of the cabin, spotting the warrior's shift draped over a nearby chair, and noting the distinct lack of rambunctious little girls that meant her soulmate had considerably taken her daughter off to give Gabrielle a chance to sleep in.

"Mm." The bard let her eyes close again, as she slowly stretched out her body, easing the stiffness from a long night's stillness after far too much use. The worst ache was in her shoulders and she winced as she spread her arms out to either side, pushing cautiously through the tightness. "Whoa."

"Groo?" A clatter of toenails sounded and then Ares stood up on his hind legs, peering at her.

"Hey, boy." Gabrielle held a hand to his mouth, smiling as he licked her fingers. She scratched the underside of his jaw and exhaled. "How are you doing, huh? We missed you in that ratty place, let me tell you."

"Agroo." Ares chewed her fingers contentedly, until Gabrielle removed her hand from his mouth and slowly sat up, biting her lip as she swung her legs over the side of the bed and stood. "Oh, sheep tails."

Ares hopped off the bed and trotted around to meet her as she limped over to the fireplace, suppressing a grin when she saw their travel worn water pot already near its warmer, her cup sitting patiently nearby. "Thanks, Xena."

Ares sat down and watched her, his bushy tail slowly brushing back and forth on the floor.

She set the water to heat and took a seat near the neatly made fire, holding her hands out to absorb the welcome warmth. "Boy, am I glad to be home." She told the wolf. "I know I go on and on about how I love to travel, Ares, but you know what?"

"Agrroo?"

"I think I want to stay home now." Gabrielle sighed, resting her elbows on her knees. "I think it's time to do a little traditional family life thing, you know?"

Ares pink tongue lolled from one side of his mouth, almost as though he was laughing at her.

"Yeah, right." The bard had to smile. "Here I am talking to a wolf named for the God of War while I wait for my child of two mothers and my legendary partner the ex Destroyer of Nations to get back to start this traditional family thing." She sat back in the leather seat of the fireside chair and extended her bare legs, wiggling her toes. "Sometimes, Ares, I really wonder what it would be like to be the boring old shepherd's wife I was always afraid I'd become."

Ares licked his chops. Gabrielle chuckled wryly to herself and looked around the cabin with a faintly pensive expression. Even the scattering of Dori's toys in the corner was a welcome sight and she felt a new appreciation for the material things in her life.

Shallow, maybe. The bard acknowledged. She let her hand rest on the arm of the comfortable chair she was sitting in, its back and seat made from supple, soft leather. After so many days of sitting on the hard ground, it felt impossibly decadent.

Gabrielle drummed her fingertips light on the arm. "Decadence is good." She decided. "You know all that self sacrificing poor and holy stuff? Pooh."

"Groo."

"Groo." She rested her elbow on the chair arm and propped her head up with her hand, as the fingers of her other played with the hem of her shift as she let herself get lost in thought for brief time.

Then the sound of the water rattling in the pot made her stir, and she lifted it off the fire just as a knock came at the door.

Gabrielle looked quickly at Ares, but aside from swinging his big head around, he remained where he was, tongue lolling. "Cmon in."

The door opened, and Ephiny's curly head appeared. "You up?"

"Just." Gabrielle poured the water over a cupful of already prepared herbs. "Come on in and join me."

Ephiny readily entered, letting the door swing shut behind her as she crossed the cabin and took the chair across from her friend and queen. "Y'know, I used to kid you about all the plush stuff in your place, but you know something?"

"What?" Gabrielle set another cup down, glancing at her visitor as she dipped tea herbs from the clay jar on the hearth.

"It's real easy to get used to it." Ephiny crossed her ankles. "How you feeling?"

Gabrielle handed her a steaming cup, then picked up her own and sipped from it. After a moment, she licked her lips, catching a hint of a unfamiliar taste in the herbs. "A little stiff." She admitted, suspecting it wouldn't be for long. "Still tired. But all in all, I've had way worse mornings. You?"

"All in all, I've had way worse mornings." Ephiny produced a grin. "You're back, Big X's back, jackasses are gone.. and it's not even raining. I like it." She set the cup down and laced her fingers behind her head, her expression going more serious. "Lot of things changed down below. Those bastards wrecked what little was left across the river."

"I know." Gabrielle leaned back. "Some of the people there.. they were good people, Eph."

The regent nodded.

"One of them.. gods, I'd forgotten about this but just before we left Xena got some cakes from one of them that I about died for." Faint memories flooded into her mind's eye. "They weren't all bad."

"Just like all the nobs up at the upper town weren't that good." Ephiny remarked, in a practical tone. "I have to admit I enjoyed being an Amazon bitch to them while you were gone."

Mild, green eyes studied her. "Amazon bitch?" Gabrielle's eyebrows lifted.

"Yeah." Ephiny said, after a brief silence. "Bitch to them, bitch to Cyrene... they were all on my last nerve so I told em." She gazed into the cup she'd picked up off the table. "I was pissed off at how they take you guys for granted."

The bard's eyebrows lowered, then contracted. "Huh?"

Ephiny looked up at her. "Then I realized.. so do we.."

Gabrielle blinked, struck speechless.

"Maybe it's bad time." Ephiny lifted one hand. "I just wanted to get this out before we just went on with those busy lives of ours." She watched Gabrielle's face. "Because it hit me really hard, here you were swept down a damn river to who knows what end saving people's asses, and all I heard was bitching."

Gabrielle slid down a little, feeling the herbs Xena had left in her cup kicking in and relaxing her muscles. "I guess..." She started, then paused. "You know something, I don't even think about why I do the stuff we do anymore. There used to be a reason.. I mean, the right thing to do, or Xena's redemption.. " She half shrugged. "Or whatever."

"Made a good story." Ephiny suggested.

The bard nodded. "But I realized... when we were fighting so hard in that damn valley, that I do what I do now just because it's become a part of who I am."

The regent nodded somberly. "I was talking to someone yesterday, and they were saying something about.. well, anyway, we got around to talking about you and I realized the only time we.. the tribe I mean, thinks about you is when we need something."

Gabrielle looked at the floor. "And the same for me."

Ephiny shook her head. "That's not true, Gabrielle. You never come to us for anything. The one time you needed our help we couldn't give it to you." She said. "Even in the war, you didn't expect anything from us. You just did what you did and said following was up to us."

"Mm."

"So." The regent exhaled. "I'm here to say I'm sorry." She paused. "As a representative of our tribe, I mean. Because you know I'd die for you, right?"

Gabrielle felt her throat close up. "Eph."

Ephiny leaned forward, and put her hand on the bard's. "We owe you better."

The bard met her eyes, steadily. "Don't I owe you better, Ephiny? I'm no Amazon and I'm definitely no queen."

"You never asked to be queen, and you never asked to be made an Amazon, Gabrielle." Ephiny said, with a tiny smile. "And because you are our queen, and you aren't an Amazon, you've made us into a better nation than we'd ever have been."

Gabrielle remained silent, though her conscience was shockingly abashed when her inner voice readily agreed with what Ephiny had said. She slowly sipped her tea, watching Ephiny fidget with her own cup across from her.

"I wanna be you when I grow up, Gabrielle." Ephiny finally said, with a rakish grin.

"You're nuts." The bard responded. "But thank you." She propped her head up on one hand. "Sometimes I feel like a fraud around you guys. Like everyone rolls their eyes when they see me and wishes Melosa were back."

She'd come a long way with Ephiny, to be able to say that. Gabrielle watched her friend's face, seeing the shifting emotions there. She remembered suddenly all the things they had between them, from the moment she'd taken the right, to Xenon's birth, to Xena's death and beyond and she knew in truth that Ephiny had seen both the worst and the best of her.

The Amazon regent gazed at her cup, then she set it down on the low table before she got to her feet and crossed to where Gabrielle was sitting, crouching down next to her and putting her lips close to the bard's ear. "Me, too." She whispered. "But don't say anything to anyone.. it'll screw my image."

Gabrielle chuckled, and reached up to cup Ephiny's head and pressed it against her own. The uneasiness she'd been feeling eased, and she turned her head to look the Amazon in the eye and found a truth of friendship there she'd only half expected. "I think together, we make a pretty good Queen of the Amazons." She responded.

"We do all right." Ephiny didn't reject the statement. "And we've got good help along."

Gabrielle nodded. "We do." She thought about the valley, and the anger, and, as Xena had often taught her – she let it go for a present reality that was far more palatable.

Life happened. "We're a lucky pair of sheeps tails, Eph. Y'know?"

"Um.. speaking of tails.. " Ephiny took a seat next to her on the floor. "Now that we got that out of the way.. I've got a problem." She said.

The bard leaned on her chair arm. "Do you?"

"Yeah. I need your advice." The regent admitted. "If you don't mind me asking."

"Sure." Gabrielle answered readily. "You can always ask me anything, Eph."

"It's about sex."

"Um."

**

Xena stood quietly in the crossroads, where a lifetime ago she'd had traffic halted to let her load of thatch pass through. She thought about that day, and the animosity she'd felt for what she'd seen as oppressive crowds came sharply to mind as she stood and absorbed the now empty lanes.

Most of the town was off in the nearby woods, felling trees to start the rebuilding process. Xena walked over to the well and sat down on the edge of it, watching Dori run along the broken fences, eyes vivid as she searched for something in the underbrush.

The muddy ground of her birthplace scuffed under her boots, and she crossed her arms over her cloth covered chest as she absorbed the vacant silence around her.

"Boo!" Dori picked up something and came running over to her. "Look!"

Xena spread her boots and held her arms out, as Dori clambered up her, sprawling heedlessly into her lap as she thrust a muddy fist in the warrior's face. "Whatcha got there?"

"Gots a pitty rock, Boo." Dori displayed her find.

"Yeah?" Xena took the bit of stone and examined it. "You're right, Dori. That's real pretty." The warrior confirmed. "Bet you can find a lot more up where we live now, huh?"

Dori turned and regarded the empty square. "No people, Boo." She observed. "Shh. Like that."

Xena looked around, then gave her daughter a wry smile. "You're definitely my kid, Dori." She told the child. "What do you think about that, huh?"

"Good." Dori kicked her feet out, narrowly missing her beloved buddy's knees. "Boo, c'n we go gets fishes? No body like fishes, and I say to go, and go, and no go."

"Sure." The warrior said. "How about you and me and your mama go out tomorrow and spend all day getting fishes. That work for you?"

"Yes!"

There was a scuff of footsteps, and Xena turned, spotting two small figures running towards them. "Look Dor.. I think your friends are coming." She released her daughter as Dori scrambled off her lap and bolted for her cousins.

The two little boys were visibly happy to see Dori. They all met near the steps to the inn, and then with giggles audible to Xena they dropped to their knees and squirmed under the porch and out of sight just as Granella appeared after them, pausing and changing direction as she recognized Xena near the well.

The warrior took a moment to school her expression into one of mild welcome and folded her arms over her chest as her sister in law neared. "Morning."

"Morning." The smaller woman peered around. "You see where those munchkins ran off to?"

Xena indicated the inn with a casual wave. "Under the porch." She replied. "Dori's with em."

"Ah." Granella nodded. "They were missing her this morning. I think they think of her as a sister, of sorts."

The double meaning was not lost on Xena. "They'll grow out of that." She said. "Toris and I fought like cats and dogs."

"So he's said." Granella lifted her hand and set a bucket down near the well. "The cistern back of our place got knocked in." She explained. "Toris is trying to fix it."

Xena scratched her jaw, knowing too well her brother's skill with his hands. Or lack thereof. "That's a tough job." She brushed her hands over the heavy, well fitted stone of the main village well. "Especially with the ground so wet still."

"Mm." Granella sat down on the edge of the well next to her. "Well, I'm sure he knows who he can go to for help." She remarked. "Since your name's all over this one." She turned and released the catch on the well bucket, lowering it down into the depths.

Xena remembered those long days spent chiseling the rock just so, fitting it into the broad circle under the warm sun in a time that seemed so far distant from where she was now it was hard to comprehend. One of the many tasks she'd taken on herself during that long month when Gabrielle had gone to the Amazons. "Yeah." She said, after a brief silence. "Had some time on my hands back then."

"We're not going to have much of that now." Granella said. "The gods only know how we'll get the fields back under plow before spring ends.. it's like we're back to the beginning again."

Xena nodded. "We are."

The bucket reached the top and Granella hoisted it to the edge of the well. "Happy about that?" She asked, glancing at the warrior. "I know you didn't much like the new town."

Truth? Xena felt a deep desire stirring in her, a reclaiming of who she was that had started on the previous day. "Yes." She answered quietly. "I'm sorry people died in the flood, but I'm not sorry that's gone." She met Granella's eyes evenly. "And it's not going to happen again."

Granella balanced the bucket and let her fingers dabble in the water. "Is that really fair, Xena?" She asked, in serious tone. "This place... the people in it aren't your personal property."

Xena smiled humorlessly. "As long as I live." She said. "This will be my hometown. And as long as it's my hometown, the fate of it's in my hands."

Granella peered at her in surprise. "Xena, I don't think..."

"So I don't care what people think." The warrior continued, with a half shrug. "People want to think I'm still a bloodthirsty killer? Maybe I am." Her eyes searched the area. "I'm tired of trying to avoid the consequences of being who and what I am."

"Ares' Chosen?" A tinge of skepticism colored Granella's voice.

"Ares' blood." Xena replied mildly, her tongue tasting the words and finding them stingingly potent. For so long she'd fought the merest notion of it, and now, through the touch of the Sword – she'd come to a curious, unexpected peace with the idea.

Life was damned ironic sometimes. Especially hers.

There was an absolute, dead silence for a long moment, then with a clatter, the bucket fell back down the well as Granella lost her grip on it and she stepped back, holding her hands up to ward off the splashing water.

Xena remained where she was, and allowed the sweet liquid to dampen her skin, licking her lips and relishing the taste of it. She turned her head as she heard childish laughter, and saw Dori squirming out from under the porch with something clutched in her hand. "Ah."

Granella turned and looked.

Dori got up and bolted for the well, her small, compact body moving with a peculiar grace and easy rhythm that even now was easily recognizable. Xena opened her arms and stood up, releasing a tiny whistle as the child closed in.

"Eeee!" Dori launched herself with total abandon through the air at Xena, tumbling over as the warrior caught her and she landed squarely in her arms. "Boo! Look!" She held her hand out, which was full of something long and squiggly. "Aminal!"

"Yeah? Where'd you get that? Tell me." Xena smiled, then looked up at Granella, her expression shifting instantly from doting to something else. "You can stop wondering." She said, in a quiet tone. "She's mine."

Granella looked like she'd been hit by a cart. "Wow. Okay, sorry. Give me a minute here I.. " She lifted a slightly shaking hand up and pushed her hair back. "Xena, I never thought you were lying."

"No." The warrior said, softly. "You never thought I was."

The former Amazon looked away.

"Boo, aminal likes you." Dori observed, as the lizard in her grip opened his mouth and attempted to chomp the warrior's lower jaw. "See?"

Xena lowered her eyes to her daughter's face, which was lit with glee. "He's gonna bite me, shortie. That's owie." She reminded the child. "What's his name?"

"Izaard." Dori supplied. "He was under dere, Boo. He was making a house, and an aminal chased him, and then he..." She opened her hand and giggled as the lizard made his escape, running right up Xena's face and into her hair. "Go go go, Izzard!"

Xena reached up and caught the intruder, then held her hand out and let him jump off to the well.

"Boo!" Dori climbed up and over the warrior's shoulder, almost taking off after the lizard with very little regard for her own safety. "Izzard! C'mere!" She grabbed Xena's extended arm and hung from it, then leaped off and chased after the escaping creature. "C'mon! Lolo! Get'im!"

A little silence fell around them, as the children ran off. Finally Granella turned, and leaned on one side of the stonework, watching Xena with somber eyes. "I thought I had that all settled." She admitted, her gaze dropping and studying the wooden bucket haul. "I told everyone it didn't matter to me."

"So did I." Xena sat down across from her. "So we both lied." She removed a bit of mud from her knee, deposited there by Dori's boots.

Granella remained quiet for a few moments. "I was so angry." She said. "At him, at Gabrielle... and then all those months to sit and stew over it." A sigh. "I hated them. About the only person I didn't hate over it was you." She looked up at Xena. "How did you get through that, Xena? Didn't it kill you?"

The warrior looked up at the sky, watching the fluffy white puffs drift over her. "Tell you something." She said. "One thing I've learned in this barrel ride down the River Styx my life has been."

"What's that?"

Xena turned her head. "If love doesn't kill you, it makes you whole."

Granella blinked at her in silence.

"Gabrielle's need for this child meant more to me than how I felt about how she did it." The warrior said, after a brief silence. "And after Dori was born, it didn't matter."

"Wish I could say that." Granella admitted, in a quiet voice.

Xena found herself understanding far more than her sister in law would have imagined. "My brother is many things." She met Granella's eyes. "But one thing he has is a true heart, and once he gave it, it stayed."

The ex Amazon merely stared at her for a bit, then she shook her head. "Funny." She said. "He says pretty much the same thing about you." She reached out and briefly touched Xena's arm, then turned and picked up her bucket. "Gotta get the kids in for lunch. Nice talking to you, Xena."

"Anytime." Xena murmured, with a half shake of her own head. "We're all such clueless idiots sometimes." She started off in the other direction, towards where she'd seen Dori disappear. "Hope Gabrielle's having a better morning than I am so far."

"Xena!" Cyrene appeared on the porch of the inn. "Here.. quickly!"

Oh boy. The warrior altered her path. Boy, oh boy.

**

Xena heard the yelling as her hands hit the door to the inn, and she pushed the wooden surface inward without hesitation, sending it flying back to hit against the wall with a satisfying bang.

It achieved it's purpose. The rest of the inhabitants of the big room froze, and then turned, several backing away a step as the warrior strode into the room and claimed the center of it, balling her fists and planting them on her hips.

The room was full of what she thought of as oldtimers- the original citizens of the Amphipolis she'd come back to years ago, the men and women who had, against her expectations, accepted her into their lives again even despite the history between them.

"Xena." Johan had been standing before the kitchen door, both hands lifted in defense. Now he dropped them and relaxed a little. "We were just talking about you."

"I know." Xena said. "Gabrielle probably heard you from our cabin."

Johan blinked. "Aye, well."

The oldest of the women walked over to her. "Xena. Just listen a minute..."

Xena lifted both hands up, palms outmost. "No." She said, firmly. "You all listen to me, for a change." She walked around the center of the inn. "I've had about enough of all the damned opinions around here lately."

"Xena." The woman interrupted.

"Granted, my being around isn't always a picnic, but it sure as Hades doesn't mean you've got a right to give up what's ours to a pack of scroungy outsiders."

"But,, Xena.." Johan eased around to one side of her. "Now listen, girl..."

"Not to mention you all thought you'd gotten what you could out of us, then decided to take us out of the picture while you built your dream city there."

"Xena, that's not what..."

Xena rounded on the woman. "Isn't it? Why kick Gabrielle out otherwise?"

"Ah.. isn't that between us and Gabrielle?" One of the older men bravely spoke up, then turned brick red as everyone in the room turned around and looked at him with remarkably uniform withering stares. "Well, she is a grown woman."

Everyone looked back over at Xena. The warrior put her hands back on her hips and exhaled. "She's given me permission to speak in her behalf." She said, quietly. "So on her behalf, I'm asking what the Hades she ever did to deserve that from you?"

"Xena." The woman, one of the shopkeepers who had a cloth store near the inn, made another attempt. She bravely reached out and took hold of Xena's wrists, her fingers only going halfway round them. "Xena, we're sorry."

The warrior eyed her warily.

"It's like this." The older man said. "We worked like dogs, we did, for a real long time."

"I know." Xena said.

"See a chance to make good, you gotta grab it." The old man said, practically. "Had all those merchants coming to us, wanting things, wanting angles.. you weren't here."

"No." Xena said. "I was busy having your taxes remanded and your levy dropped." She reminded them. "We both paid for that."

There was a moment of silence, then the older woman sighed. "As did we, Xena." She said. "We lost a good friend, as well." She added. "But.. I know.. and I think it was because you were gone for so long.. we never really said thank you."

Cyrene snorted.

Xena instinctively wanted to disregard the offer, a dozen further accusations ready on the tip of her tongue she'd been holding in for weeks.

"Them folks just don't think women should run things." The man shrugged. "We wanted their business. You know how it is." He added. "Cyrene, you went along with them!"

"Now.. " Johan stepped forward, his voice angry. "Just hold on there."

Cyrene put her hand on his shoulder. "No, it's true." She looked over at Xena. "To a point." Her face twitched a little. "But you told me.. " Now she turned back to look at the man, pointing at him. "You told me Gabrielle asked to step away from the council."

"Well..."

"Yes, you did say that!" The older woman said. "You mean she didn't?"

A squabble of voices rose, each more strident than the one before. Xena suddenly felt a headache coming on, and her patience slipped, the acrimony causing her body to tense uncomfortably.

It occurred to her, that she might just possibly be getting crabbiest in her old age. "Hey!" She let out a yell, causing the pottery near the kitchen to rattle.

The noise stopped, and everyone shifted uneasily. Eyes went to Xena, a mixture of fear, resentment, and in a few cases, regret. Story of her life, sometimes. "Let's just drop it." The warrior said, after a brief pause. "If we keep this up we'll be pointing fingers until they're all bones."

A distinct silence followed that. Finally, Johan cleared his throat. "Not so easy to do that, Xena."

Xena walked over to the nearest table and sat down in a chair she'd made with her own hands. She rested her elbows on a table she'd also made, and propped her chin up on her fists as she regarded them. "If we want to move forward, we've got to."

"Well, but listen!" The man raised his voice. "We can't just forget everything! We came so close.."

"Dennas, you're a fool!" Cyrene yelled back.

"You're the one's said we should bring them all in!" Dennas shouted. "Everyone was yah, yah.. bring it on.. now we're taken to task? To Hades with you all!"

"HEY!" Xena let out another yell. "SHUT UP!"

The crowd fell silent again.

"Maybe we should just leave." Xena spoke into it, with a quiet resignation, then she fell silent, and the silence lengthened to an uncomfortable degree as the villagers all exchanged looks with each other and tried not to stare at the warrior in their midst.

At last, Cyrene broke the stillness. She walked over and took the seat next to her daughter, and clasped her hands together. "I had a dream." She said. "Before the floods, I had a dream that you and Gabrielle left us, moved away from here, and you were in terrible trouble."

"Mom." Gabrielle entered from the inner hall, making everyone turn at her lighter voice. "That pretty much describes our life most of the time. Being in serious trouble, I mean."

Cyrene turned to look at her. "You were both dying."

Gabrielle came over and sat down on the other side of Xena. "We do that a lot." She said. "I think that's why we always hold this place to be special – because for us it's a place of healing, and home." Her voice gentled. "We don't want that to change. So please – let's stop the yelling, and just move on."

The older man studied her, then he reached up to scratch his jaw. "I guess I could go with just starting fresh, yeah?"

"Yeah." The older woman nodded. "We really are sorry, Xena. And you too, Gabrielle."

"Yeah." One of the other men agreed. "Let's top an ale, and put it all behind us."

Xena glanced over at her partner. "How do you do that?"

"Do what?" The bard's mild, green eyes blinked at her.

The warrior ran her fingers through her hair and straightened up. "Nevermind. Just the next time – you do all the talking."

Gabrielle looked around at the crowd, who were now milling around, the atmosphere lightening. "Don't I always do all the talking?" She asked, in a puzzled tone. "Anyway.. we can't leave." She lowered her voice. "You're not going to believe what Eph just told me."

Xena looked at her warily, but before she could ask, the chairs next to them scraped and they were surrounded by what was left of the village council of elders. "Hi."

One of the men plunked down two mugs of ale in front of them, and sat down. "Let's talk about the future, then."

Gabrielle leaned on her chair arm, watching their faces. "Why do I get the feeling this is going to be one of those 'be careful what you ask for' moments of my life?" She muttered under her breath.

"Mm." Xena sighed. "I think I'll go hunt lizards with Dori."

"Chicken."

"Better a hen than a..mpf."

**

"My head hurts." Gabrielle nestled her cheek against Xena's shoulder, as the warrior obligingly massaged the back of her neck. "I don't know if I can handle all this change at once."

"Mmph." Xena grunted softly. They were in front of the fire in their new cabin, it was after dusk, and the end of what had turned out to be a very long day.

"Why is it, whenever I think I want something, it turns out to be not really what I wanted?" The bard asked, in an aggrieved tone.

"Do I count?"

Gabrielle was briefly silent, then she chuckled. "Boy, did you just get me." She admitted. "No, you don't count. You're the silver lining to my life."

"I think that's my line." Xena demurred. "Cause of the two of us, I'm undoubtedly the black cloud."

"People haven't heard me sing." Gabrielle said. "That opinion could change, y'know?"

Xena bit her gently on the edge of her ear. "Punk."

"Sometimes." The bard agreed, closing her eyes and exhaling. "Xena, I can be the reeve of the village, or I can be the queen of the Amazons. I can't be both at the same time."

The warrior snuggled a bit closer, reaching over to pick up a goblet and taking a sip of it's contents before setting it back down again. "Damned bad timing." She agreed. "Eph surprised me."

"You knew they wanted a kid." Gabrielle objected.

"Mm." Xena grunted softly again. "Don't know that I would have gone about it like she did."

The bard picked up the goblet and sipped from it. "You mean, while Pony was gone?"

Xena nodded.

Gabrielle slowly rolled the sweet honey wine in her mouth, before she swallowed it. "I can see both sides of that." She said, after a bit. "It's hard for me to think about doing what Eph did, but I can understand her not wanting to..." She paused. "I know she didn't want to hurt Pony."

"True." The warrior studied the fire. "Might have been easier on me if you'd gone that route."

The bard lifted her hand and kissed her palm. "I'm sorry, Xena."

"I'm not." Xena replied in a mild tone. "It would have been easier, but I'd have hated you not telling me." She took the cup from her partner and drank from it. "She's screwed either way." She leaned over and gave Gabrielle a kiss on the lips. "Don't you dare offer to tell Pony for her."

"I wouldn't do that." Gabrielle licked her lower lip. "Besides, I think Eph made a good choice, because Pony knows what role Mikah was playing in Athens." She said. "So I think that would make a difference."

"Might." The warrior agreed. She set the cup down and put her arms back around Gabrielle, letting her cheek rest against the bard's head. "What the Hades - maybe they'll all adopt him and use him as the nation's stud."

Gabrielle rolled her head around and peered up at her partner.

"He's cute." Xena's dark lashes fluttered at her.

"So are lambs." The bard finally said. "Doesn't mean everyone should make out with them."

Xena chuckled softly. "Just go with it, Gabrielle. Let Eph figure a way to tell her. They'll be fine – I think once Pony gets over the shock she'll be all right with it. Especially since it's not her."

"Hmph."

They were both quiet for a while, resting together on the low, padded couch as the scent of cinnamon floated gently through the air.

"You think we'll ever find out what was up in that valley?" Gabrielle asked, after a while. "Was it real, Xe? I get further and further from believing that every minute."

Xena sighed. "Truly, I don't know." She admitted. "I want to believe my senses, but most of that was.. it was too fantastic, Gabrielle. Maybe it was a dream, from the gods to test us."

"Test us." The bard pondered. "You know, that's a lot easier to believe than singing elephants."

"Mm. Sure is."

Finally Gabrielle shifted, and slid down onto her back, resting her head on Xena's leg. She folded her hands over her stomach and regarded the thatch ceiling. "I was thinking just this morning, about how I'd like to spend some time here, and just live life with you, and with Dori."

"Uh huh."

"So .. now that I'm lying here thinking of asking you to run away with me someplace, does that mean I'm just going nuts?"

Xena laughed, and ran her fingers through her partner's pale hair.

"Damn it, Xena... I'm serious. I feel like I'm going crazy." The bard complained. "I don't want to be in charge of all those people and tell them what to do."

"But?"

Gabrielle sighed. "I don't want them telling me what to do either."

"You're not crazy." Xena extended her long legs out and crossed her ankles. "That's how I ended up running an army. I hated listening to anyone else."

"Mm." The bard rolled over and draped her arm over Xena's legs. "I guess." She exhaled. "Maybe I'm just still tired."

"Maybe." Xena traced the edge of her jawline, then ran her fingertip over and across her ear. "We'll work it out." She watched the bard's lashes flutter shut. "Once the trading wagons get back.. we can start figuring out what we want this to be."

"They're gonna be surprised." Gabrielle said. "Specially Bennu. He's not going to forgive those guys for splitting on us." She felt her skin tingle at the gentle touch and she returned it, sliding her hand up along Xena's thigh and feeling the shift of tensing muscle under her fingers.

"Mmm.. probably not." Xena rumbled softly, as her hands slowly wandered over Gabrielle's body. "But I'm sure it'll all work out." She leaned back as the bard lifted herself up and they slid together into a tangle of arms and legs and full body contact whispering across the sturdy leather surface.

Gabrielle chucked the worries of the day aside as she concentrated on unlacing the neckline ties of the shift covering her partner's body. The scent of their soap tickled her nose as she succeeded, putting a line of tiny kisses across the curve of Xena's breast.

Xena's hands moved down her sides, and along her hips, and returned, a leisurely, knowing tracing of her that made Gabrielle's breathing shorten as their bodies brushed together and Xena's leg slid between hers and tension in her guts erupted into an irresistible craving.

She lost track of what she was doing as Xena's lips nibbled down her neck, and they rolled together to one side as she felt her partner take control and nip relentlessly at her.

A touch along her side, fingertips tracking down across her belly and down her inner thigh and all she could do was hang on, her breath coming too fast for her to do much else. She felt Xena's teeth close gently on a nipple, and knew a moment of erotic danger that quickly passed as the touch went from teasing to intense and she let out a low groan.

"Mine." A low growl answered her, warm breath leaving a trail of goosebumps across her skin, as the touch slid up the inside of her thigh and became very intimate.

"Yes." Gabrielle managed to get out, just before she grabbed hold of Xena's body as her own started to convulse, wave after wave of sensation as Xena just kept nipping up and down and...

Gods. Gabrielle felt her whole body shaking in response to it, as the touch gentled and the nips evolved into gentle kisses she barely had the strength to return.

She was glad enough to just wrap her arms around Xena's body and let the shivers fade, until she gathered up enough energy to return the favor.

Xena's body was warm, and a little damp, and she could taste a hint of salt on her tongue as she tasted a spot just between her breasts. Then she felt herself pulled around and over, and she was laying sprawled over Xena, her body pressing against the warrior's as she felt the heat ignite in her all over again.

"Tired?" Xena's voice in her ear, teasing and so very welcome.

"I never get tired of you." The bard did some nipping of her own, rewarded by a sharp intake of breath from her partner. "I'm gonna make you..."

A loud noise stopped them both in their tracks, and Xena's body tensed as she sat up while Gabrielle rolled off her and went from her knees to her feet in one smooth motion.

"Mama!" Dori came pattering out of her room, Flameball tucked under her arm. "Come see! Come see my friend!" Her eyes were lit with excitement. "Come see, and we can go get fishes!"

Caught in a cross of sexual and protective instincts, Gabrielle responded by sneezing ferociously, the force knocking her backwards to sit down again next to Xena. "Sheeptails."

Xena collected her scattered wits and stood up. "What are you talking about, shortie? Nobody's in that room are they?" Her eyes went to her sword. "Or do you mean Oogy or something?"

"Friend." Dori took hold of her half on/half off shift and started pulling her along. "Come!"

The warrior paused to grab the sword as she was hauled unceremoniously across the room, and after a moment of indecision, Gabrielle got up and followed her.

They entered the small room that now held Dori's bed, and the vast majority of her toys after a reorganization effort earlier in the day. It was comfortable, and there was a lantern nailed near the door that held a candle to light the inside.

"Okay, now.." Gabrielle eased past her partner, who was standing in the middle of the room, looking around. "There's no one here, honey. That wasn't nice. You scared Boo."

"Look." Dori put Flameball down and went over to the window, pulling herself up onto the sill and sending both her parents into a sudden lunge to keep her from toppling over. They landed on their knees near the opening with both legs held in two sets of very strong hands. "Mama!"

"Dori, you're going to fall out the window and get owie!" Gabrielle yelped. "What in.."

"Mama, look!"

Gabrielle fell silent. Xena made a noncommittal noise deep in her throat.

The baby animal squealed and made a headlong rush for the wall, waving it's nose in the air and bugling as it spotted them.

"Look, mama! My friend!" Dori yodeled happily.

Gabrielle and Xena exchanged looks. "Oh boy." The bard sighed. "How are we going to explain **that**?"

Xena propped her head up on the sill and extended her hand to the baby animal. "Guess we'll think of something."

"Guess we will."

**

The End. (for now)