



## CHAPTER 1

**"VICTORY WILL BE OURS, SO HELP US ARES, GOD OF WAR!"**

*'But, Xena... that is not right. You're all that matters to me.'*

*'If there is a reason for our travels together... it's because I had to learn from you... enough to know the final, the good, the right thing to do.'*

*'I love you, Xena. How am I supposed to go on without you?'*

*'I'll always be with you, Gabrielle. Always.'*

As Gabrielle slowly woke up, the images from her dream faded away like Xena herself had done a few weeks earlier. Sighing, she opened her eyes and looked around the minuscule cabin of the off-shore fishing boat she had hired in Jappa.

It was still the same: still stinking of fish, still creaking and groaning with every beat of the ocean, and still moving so slow that she reckoned she could swim faster.

Wishing that she was somewhere - anywhere - else, she sat up and rubbed her face.

She reached for her diary and her quill and made another mark on the parchment. Counting the lines she had already scribbled, she worked out that she had spent twenty-four days on the boat, and yet her destination was nowhere in sight.

Sighing again, she got off the lumpy mattress and began to go through a brief exercise routine she had developed to keep her strength and her speed intact.

She wished she had enough space in the cabin to perform a few flips, but that would have to wait until she reached dry land. The one time she had tried to exercise out on the deck, the crew had gawked ceaselessly at her beefy arms and shoulders and the tattoo she wore on her back which had made her so uncomfortable that she had gone straight back to the cabin.

After completing the exercise routine, she was about to sit down again when she heard the crew shout excitedly. Quickly throwing down the rag she was using to dry her arms and her neck, she picked up her pair of sais and jumped over to the cabin door to peek out.

"Land Ho!" one of the fishermen shouted, standing on top of the railing and pointing at a blurry coast line some distance away.

"Captain! Captain! Is that Egypt?" Gabrielle said as she ran out onto the deck of the fishing boat. When the captain ignored her completely, she grabbed his arm and pulled him towards her. "Is that Egypt, Captain?"

"No, no, ojousan. That's Ch'in," the captain said. He was an aged, weather-beaten man with the brownish, leathery skin so common among sailors, but his eyes held a certain warmth that he used to convey what he thought of his fair-haired passenger's endeavor.

"Ch'in! You mean to tell me that after twenty-four nights on this barge, we've only made it to Ch'in?!"

"Yes, ojousan. This is only a fishing boat. It was built to carry a heavy load, not to be a racer."

Gabrielle buried her face in her hands and started groaning. Running over to the railing, she stared longingly at the distant coast line. She could feel tears begin to run down her cheeks, but she did nothing to stop them.

"Captain, turn the boat around. Take me ashore," she said strongly.

"What... here?"

"Yes!"

"But we can-"

"Then give me a dinghy and I'll row ashore myself!" Gabrielle said, clenching her fists.

"You'd never make it, ojousan. There must be two nautical miles there!" the captain said and tried to reach for his passenger, but she was too quick for him.

"Captain, I paid you a handsome sum to take me to Egypt. There's been a change of plans. Now I'm hiring you to take me to Ch'in instead!"

"Well... all right. Ready to come about!" the captain barked to his crew, followed by a few words in his own language that Gabrielle just knew had to be a curse of some kind.

Walking back to her cabin, she didn't know if she should feel despair or elation over the unexpected development. She knew from the outset that the journey would be a long one, but she had never envisioned it would take her several moons to get back.

*'On land, I'll be able to move faster. Yes. Buy a horse... steal a horse if I have to... and then go west using the same trail Xena and I used when we were travelling to Ch'in,'* Gabrielle thought, nodding to herself.

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Once the fishing boat had found a suitable spot to moor off the coast, the heavy anchor was released. It had barely splashed down into the water before Gabrielle straddled the railing and began to climb down a ladder that would lead her to the dinghy.

"Gabrielle san... this is madness! You don't know the language, you don't know where you are or which way you need to go, you don't have much money... you'll be dead before nightfall!" the captain said, wringing his hands.

"If that's my destiny, Captain, so be it," Gabrielle said as she stowed her meager belongings down into the dinghy. "In any case, you don't have to worry about me. I'm a survivor," she continued, nodding her readiness to the sailor manning the oars.

"We'll wait two candelmarks for the dinghy to come back. If you decide to return with the sailor, we won't hold it against you," the captain said, but Gabrielle turned her back on him and ignored his words.

Twenty candelrips later, the dinghy scraped up on a rocky beach and Gabrielle immediately jumped out of it like Cerberus itself was on her tail. After she had picked up her travel bags and flung them over her shoulder, she gave the sailor the last of her coins from Jappa as a token of her appreciation.

As a courtesy, she waited on the beach until the sailor had pulled the dinghy free, but as soon as he was on his way back to the fishing boat, she began to head inland.

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Half a world away in Ares' chamber on Mount Olympus, the God of War was busy copulating with a very young, strawberry blonde virgin who had been given to him by a village mayor as a human sacrifice to end a war - he couldn't remember who or why and he didn't care - when he suddenly felt a curious sting in his heart.

The sting and the emotions connected with it fascinated him so much that he lost interest in the sacrificial virgin and gradually slowed down the rhythmic movements. When the curious sting hadn't gone away after a candelrip, he pulled out of the former virgin and tied his breeches.

'Hmmm... interesting. It feels just like... just like... hmmm!' he thought, stroking his goatee. Deciding that he needed to see for himself, he waved his hand and disappeared in a pale blue cloud.

A moment later, he emerged in a small clearing in a forest he had never visited before. To his right, a very familiar figure sat on a log in front of a campfire. The blonde warrior was holding a stick with some kind of fowl over the fire, slowly turning it to ensure that the meat was evenly cooked.

Ares' eyes zeroed in on a small, ceramic urn sitting next to Gabrielle. It didn't take him long to connect the dots, and he cocked his head and started walking closer to it.

Gabrielle looked up, certain she had heard something. She forgot all about the bird over the fire and drew the Chakram. Holding it ready, she scanned the entire clearing but couldn't see anything unusual.

"Great. Another false alarm. I'm beginning to understand why Xena was always so jumpy," Gabrielle mumbled and went back to turning the stick over the fire.

Ares walked around Gabrielle and knelt down in front of the urn. He didn't have to remove the lid to know what was inside.

At first, he only felt anger bubble up inside him over the fact that Xena had apparently just given up and allowed herself to be slain. *'Over some damned fool idealistic cause, I'll bet... that always was her weakness... well, not always... there was a time when she... wait... this is perfect...!'* he thought, rubbing his chin energetically. *'This is my chance... my one chance to recreate Xena in my image. The Xena I love... the heartless, merciless Destroyer Of Nations. The cold-blooded killer... the Conqueror. My warrior queen!'*

Barely able to hold back a resounding laugh, he snapped his fingers and created a perfect clone of the urn that he proceeded to swap with the original. Once he had the real urn in his hand, he raised the lid and took a long sniff of the contents.

"Hello, Xena... welcome to my wettest dream," he said with his black eyes shooting lustful fire, knowing that Gabrielle couldn't hear him. With a triumphant roar, he waved his hand and disappeared from the clearing.

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After rudely shoving the former virgin out of the way, Ares conjured up a large altar made of shiny black obsidian and placed it in the center of his chamber. To get some light, he created four candelabra with eight candles on each to stand at the four corners of the altar.

Once the details were in place, he put the urn with Xena's ashes on the altar and cracked his knuckles - he was ready to perform magic.

"Mortal, you're about to watch history in the making," he said to the whimpering former virgin who was curled up in the corner of the chamber, trying to cover herself with her torn dress.

Ares grinned broadly and stroked his goatee again. Moments later, the smile faded from his face as he got ready to take care of business. With a steady hand, he reached for the urn and unscrewed the lid. After sniffing the ashes again to make sure that it actually was Xena, he distributed the flighty substance evenly on the surface of the altar, making sure that no foreign objects found their way into the gray matter.

Once the urn was empty, he threw away the useless ceramic jar and placed his hands a few inches above the ashes roughly where Xena's torso would've been. To prepare for the dark resurrection, he exhaled slowly and allowed his immortal soul to be filled by the accumulated powers of his bloodline. Closing his eyes, he began to chant an ancient incantation that he knew would give him the results he wanted.

Moments later, black lightning spread out from his fingers that started to caress the ashes. Little, black arcs of Godly power danced about wildly, sometimes skimming the surface of the ashes and sometimes dipping into the matter.

Eventually the streaks of lightning coagulated into four large spikes that took the ashes and began to mold them into the silhouette of a woman - and not just any woman: The muscle tone, the long thighs, the flat planes, the graceful feminine curves and finally the familiar face and the long, dark hair gave away that Xena, once the Warrior Princess but now Ares' Warrior Queen, was being reborn.

In the corner of the chamber, the virgin screamed as she saw life being created before her eyes, but Ares was too far into the resurrection to even notice.

The God of War knew that the final, most difficult, part of the resurrection was approaching fast, so he turned up the voltage and concentrated harder than ever, looking so deep within himself that he almost disappeared from the physical plane. The lightning emanating from his hands changed color from black to red and finally to pale blue; the four spikes still caressing every part of the woman lying on the altar.

And then it was all over - a storm of black light exploded out of the body on the altar, tearing through the chamber with the strength of a hurricane and blowing the four candelabras and the screaming former virgin clear across the room.

A few heartbeats later, the black light returned to the body, entering in a funnel-like effect through the forehead and the center of the torso. After the light had seeped into her, Xena spasmed briefly and then began to breathe unassisted.

Ares took a step back and marveled at the sight of the female form on the altar. Practically drooling just thinking about the endless possibilities, he let his eyes roam slowly down her body, stopping here and there to admire the shape.

To make sure he had performed the incantation right, he put his right hand on the woman's chest just below her breasts to feel if she had a heartbeat. A nasty grin spread out over his features when he felt the woman's heart beat strongly.

Confused by the warm touch on her lower chest, Xena opened her eyes and looked around. Her ice blue eyes showed some confusion at first, but as soon as she focused on the man standing above her, they gained their regular steely quality.

Ares, grinning like a Cheshire cat, folded his arms across his chest so the newly resurrected Xena would be suitably impressed by his bulging muscles. "Hello, Xena. So glad you could make it to my little party," he said in an impossibly smug voice.

"Wh- what am I doing here?" Xena said and sat up on the black altar. After working out some crimps in her neck and back, she coughed twice and ran her hands through her unruly hair.

"Oh, let's just say you had a little incident on a battlefield. I brought you back here so I could fix you up a bit."

"Thank you," Xena said hoarsely, wondering why her throat was aching so badly that it felt like it had been severed.

"You're welcome. Of course, with you back, I'm going to..." Ares moved forward and took Xena's hands in his own so he would seem more sincere. "I'm going to make sure that your training will be intensified. I can't have that my best warrior loses a battle. It makes us look bad to our enemies. You understand?"

"N- not really. I don't know who you are...?"

"I am Ares, the God of War. I'm your master," Ares said, moving in very close to caress Xena's cheek. "You may call me Lord Ares," he added nonchalantly.

"Am I your slave, Lord Ares?"

"Oh, no. No man could ever enslave you. You're my warrior queen, my conqueror... my lover."

"Oh... I think I knew that," Xena said and coughed dryly. "My throat..." she said, rubbing her neck.

"Have some wine. It'll all be better in a while," Ares said and conjured up a goblet filled with red wine.

Xena drank greedily and then threw the goblet away. "Lord Ares, even though I can't remember it, I'm sorry for losing the battle I was in."

"Rule number one, Xena: never, ever, apologize. It's a sign of weakness," Ares said and moved over to a low sideboard at the outer wall of the chamber.

"Yes, Lord Ares."

"Rule number two: never retreat, never surrender. A battle is always fought until the death. On a battlefield or otherwise, there can only be one winner of any given conflict."

"Yes, Lord Ares."

Without warning, Ares spun around and threw a dagger at Xena, aiming directly at her face. Moving with lightning speed, Xena raised her arm and deftly caught the blade inches before it would've struck her eyes.

At first, Ares just grinned evilly, but it didn't take him long before he threw his arms in the air and let out a roar that could be heard clear across Mount Olympus.

Arching a dark eyebrow, she threw the dagger down onto the ground. "Are you displeased with me, Lord Ares? If you are, I wish you would've told me instead," she said in a slightly arrogant tone.

"Nope. In fact, you're everything I ever wanted from you. Mmmmm, oh yeah. Body and soul. Especially the body," Ares said and moved over to stand very close to Xena. Chuckling, he put his hands on Xena's thighs and let his fingers glide slowly upwards while she was still sitting on the altar.

"Lord Ares, you said we were lovers?"

"That's right."

"I can't remember any of it."

"Oh... well, let me refresh your memory," Ares said and took off his vest.

Reacting, Xena wrapped her bare legs around the God's back and pulled him even closer. Before they went any further, she turned her head to look at the former virgin who was still lying on the ground, sobbing from the cuts and bruises she'd received when she had been violently thrown around in the storm created by Ares' incantations. "Slave... take a hike. This is for adults only," Xena said, glaring at the virgin.

Ares grinned again and hurriedly pulled down his leather breeches.

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A candlemark later, two sweaty bodies lay side by side on the obsidian altar, basking in their afterglow.

Xena spent the time tracing Ares' features with her index finger, moving down from his ruggedly handsome face to his throat and continuing down to his well-toned pectoral muscles. "Lord Ares, you called me your Conqueror. Am I the leader of your army?" she husked, nibbling at Ares' ear lobe.

Ares just stared at the blue-eyed beauty lying next to him, not quite grasping that he had finally claimed the prize that had always eluded him. "Yes, but it isn't just any old army, Xena. It's the biggest army ever known to man," he said wearing an impossibly wide smirk.

"In that case, I think I need some clothes."

"Mmmm?"

"I suppose I could go like this, but I have a feeling that it would impede the men's ability to fight."

"You're probably right," Ares said and swung his legs over the side of the altar.

After putting on his leather breeches and vest, he waved his hand in the air and conjured up a dark brown battledress that wasn't dissimilar to the one Xena had used before.

"Here, put this on," he said and threw the dress at her.

"Thank you. And weapons?" Xena said as she jumped into her new leathers.

"That's my Xena," Ares said and conjured up a sword, a breast dagger and a square wooden box. Wearing a proud smile, he handed the first two items to Xena but kept a firm grip on the box.

"What's with the box? Do you want me to throw it at our enemies?" Xena said, stuffing the breast dagger down her cleavage. After making sure the dagger couldn't fall out, she picked up the sword and twirled it a few times to get a feel for it. Satisfied with the weight and the quality of the blade, she instinctively sheathed it in the scabbard on her back. When she noticed that Ares hadn't replied to her question, she raised an eyebrow and put her hands on her hips.

The sight of Xena in such a cocky stance sent a buzz through Ares' system that electrified his entire being, including the lowest part of his gut. "Mmmm. Close, but not quite. Here, open it," Ares said and handed Xena the box.

With a grin almost as broad as Ares', Xena opened the box and took out a razor-sharp circular weapon.

"Ooooh..." she said, gripping the shiny weapon around the edge. Flipping it over, she studied the two designs closely - one side had eight stylized X's made of something resembling gold, and the other had eight skull and bones symbols, painted in the same color as blood.

"Isn't it nice?" Ares purred. "It's called a Chakram. I had it tailor-made for you. You are the only one who can touch it. If anyone else tries, slash, they'll lose a few fingers or even their hand."

"Fascinating."

"Here's a nice, juicy target... take it out!" Ares said as he pulled up one of the candelabras.

Xena pulled her arm back and released the Chakram with a powerful throw. Both she and Ares watched with great interest as the weapon cut through the candles no less than four times on its way around the chamber.

The last ricochet sent the weapon on a collision course with the base of the candelabra, and Xena's eyes popped wide open as the Chakram cut through the solid metal shaft like a dagger through butter.

After catching the Chakram in mid-air, she twirled it around her index finger a few times and then hooked it onto a nook on her belt.

"Very good, my dear. Imagine what it can do to an opposing army. People, horses... nothing can stop that. Nothing," Ares said and grabbed Xena's arm. With a dark grin, he pulled her close and claimed her lips in a searing kiss.

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Exactly six moons after her resurrection, Xena sat atop a chestnut warhorse, watching a battalion of her finest soldiers breach the gates of a grand castle she'd had under siege for nearly a moon.

It didn't take long for her elite troops to slaughter the few remaining defenders and Xena was soon able to nudge the warhorse into a slow walk across the wooden drawbridge and into the courtyard.

The devastation was complete - bodies of men, women and children littered the courtyards; some dead, some hoping to die. They had all heard the tales of the merciless, all-conquering Xena and her gruesome ways, and all of the injured were praying to Hades that he would take them before Xena could.

"Impressive work. Cholerus!" Xena barked, looking around for her right-hand man.

"Yes, mistress?" Cholerus said as he strode over to her. Xena's second in command was a tall, ugly ruffian with a tattooed face and a mean disposition. Xena had chosen him as her number two after witnessing first hand how he had carved his way through a platoon of highly skilled soldiers from an opposing army, and he had repaid her favor by being the most loyal man she had.

"I hope you left a few survivors. We need some live ones to spread the word about what we've done here, you know," Xena said, patting her horse's flank.

"It should be possible to find a few cowards pretending to be dead, mistress."

"Good," Xena said and dismounted the warhorse. "Cholerus, this is such a charming castle. I think I shall keep it. Spare the kitchen and the bed chamber staff... oh, and the slaves working the stables. It'll take too long to break in new ones."

"Yes, mistress."

"Strip the slain men and women and hang their carcasses from the top of the outer walls. That should deter our enemies from trying to recapture this nice, little facility," Xena said and pulled off her leather battle gloves. "Once you've done that, bring all the fit and healthy young staffers to the former King's quarters. That's where I'll take residence," she continued.

"Yes, mistress," Cholerus said and bowed.

A crackle of ozone heralded Ares' arrival, and as soon as he had materialized, he pulled Xena into an embrace. "Wonderful battle, my dear. Your idea of forming an elite guard has paid off. I'm quite impressed."

"Thank you, Lord Ares. Yes, they've proven their worth," Xena said and wiped a few beads of sweat off her forehead.

"You look amazing. All aglow... mmmm, hot and sexy... just the way I want you," Ares said and began to nibble on Xena's neck.

"Please Lord Ares, I'm filthy and sweaty... and I reek of blood... I'm hardly the dish of the day."

"Oh, I love it when you talk dirty. Anyway, how about..." - Ares snapped his fingers and they were instantly transported to the King's chamber halfway up the tower - "... a little bath?"

Ares stepped aside to reveal a bathtub for two filled to the brim with steaming hot water. "Huh?" he said, grinning.

"You've convinced me, Lord Ares," Xena said and began to unbuckle her breastplate.

Half a candlemark later, Cholerus knocked on the door to the King's chamber. When no answer was forthcoming, he opened the door a few inches to alert Xena of his presence, but before he had time to shout, his ears had picked up the unmistakable sounds of splashing and a man and a woman in the throes of passion. Grinning wickedly, he closed the door to allow his mistress to have some privacy.

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The next morning, Xena was out of the king-sized bed only moments after the first rays of the sun had become visible in the eastern skies.

Ares tried to grab her bare leg to pull her back into bed, but he missed it by inches. Instead, he flopped backwards onto the silk sheets and put his arms behind his head. "What are you planning on doing today, Xena?" he said when he realized his mistress wasn't coming back to him.

"Inspect the castle. I need to know the ins and outs of the place," Xena said as she slipped into an outfit Ares had created for her: ankle boots, a pair of dark brown leather pants and a royal blue form-fitting tunic with a leather belt around the waist.

"The ins and outs, huh? Now there's a fascinating concept."

"I would've thought you got enough last night, Lord Ares?"

"Oh, I got plenty, thank you. Hey, that's a fantastic outfit. Something's missing, though," Ares said, climbed off the bed and crossed the floor as naked as the day he was first seen. Waving his hand, he conjured up a small jewelry box that he gave to Xena. "Here ya go, lover. It'll look good on ya," he said with a wink.

Xena opened the box and took out a silver necklace with a pendant that was shaped like two crossed swords. Arcing an eyebrow and shooting Ares a puzzled look, she put on the necklace by slipping it around her hair and onto her neck. The necklace was a bit long, making the pendant end up at the top of her cleavage, but Ares fixed that by waving his hand again.

"Two swords, shaped like an X... the perfect symbol of our partnership," Ares said, holding back Xena's wild hair so he could see the pendant more clearly.

"Of our relationship," Xena added, looking down at the pendant. She looked up and locked eyes with Ares; the intensity of her gaze meant to send another volley of electricity through his body.

"Indeed..." Ares husked, smiling broadly.

"Thank you, Lord Ares."

"You're welcome. Now, before you go and inspect the castle, I better give you the lowdown of what's going on here. The castle was built three centuries ago and you'll find plenty of secret passageways and hidden corridors here. It has a staff of roughly two hundred slaves... well, one or two fewer now..."

"Cholera was quite effective yesterday."

"Yes, he does like slitting throats."

"That's one of his quirks, Lord Ares. He told me it's because he likes to see how much people twitch as he's giving them the knife. The more they twitch, the longer he takes," Xena said, still admiring the pendant.

"Ooooh, nasty. I need to remember his name. Maybe there'll be a position open for him in another campaign. Anyway, back to the castle. The grain and water supplies are fairly full so they'll be able to sustain your stay for at least six moons."

"Good. That's how long I'm planning to stay here, anyway. It's not good to remain too long in the same place. Attracts assassins."

"The barracks for the royal guard were untouched in the battle, so they can be used for your men without rebuilding. And as you can see, the King's chamber is in excellent condition. The Queen's chamber is below and is in a similar state. The Princess' chamber is near the foot of the tower but that was somewhat harmed yesterday."

"Not as much as the Princess was, though," Xena said with an evil little laugh.

"Well, no. Even you would be hard pressed to behead a chamber, Xena," Ares said, slipping his hand under Xena's tunic to grasp at her breasts.

"I have many skills," Xena said, pushing the naked - and strutting - God of War away from her. "I won't be long, Lord Ares," she said over her shoulder as she left the chamber.

Ares threw himself on the bed where he flopped around for a few seconds until the soft blankets settled down. "Excellent. I'll be right here, waitin' eagerly for your return," he said and put his arms behind his head.

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Two hundred leagues east of the castle, Gabrielle was sitting on the cold ground, leaning against a tree in a small clearing. The fire she had built the night before had long since been reduced to embers but she couldn't be bothered to stoke it.

Feeling dead-tired and on the brink of despair, she decided on the spot that if she arrived at yet another mountain, she'd rather jump off it than spend yet another two weeks going around it.

With a groan, she reached into her travel bag and found her quill and her diary. After dipping the tip of the quill into her inkwell, she put it to the parchment.

*'Dear diary,*

*I have just spent the last moon fighting my way through some of the most inhospitable terrain I have ever experienced.*

*I must have taken a wrong turn somewhere, though I do not know where it might have been. All I know is that my boots have been reduced to mere threads and even my blisters have blisters.*

*The horse I bought in Indus only lasted the first two weeks before it bolted on me. I can't say that I blame it. And besides, looking at the terrain I've been through since, it wouldn't have done me any good, anyway. There were days were I did nothing but climb rocks.'*

She flipped the page and put the quill back down to the parchment, but she didn't resume the writing. After a few heartbeats, she rolled up the parchment and stuck it into her travel bag.

"Ah, what's the point. No one will ever read it," she said despondently, rubbing her face with both hands.

She got on her feet and looked at the sun's position to work out what time it was. Calculating that it was roughly noon, she drew her sais and walked out into the forest to find something to eat for lunch.

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A candlemark later, she tossed a quail's carcass aside and started picking her teeth with a bone. Feeling less hungry but still dissatisfied, she drew her sais and began to go through an exercise routine.

An altercation with a common thug two nights earlier had hammered home the point that her senses had been dulled over the course of the arduous journey. Without warning, the thug had managed to jump her and steal her travel bags, and if it hadn't been for the long range effectiveness of the Chakram, he would've escaped with all her belongings.

Shaking her head angrily, Gabrielle cleared her mind of that embarrassing failure and increased the intensity of the exercises to make sure that she wouldn't be caught unawares again.

Beginning with a stabbing attack with her sais, she went into a dizzying display of acrobatics, close combat techniques - both offensive and defensive - and evasive maneuvers before switching to twists, flips, handstands, kicks and punches of all types.

Right in the middle of a difficult maneuver - a reverse flip into a leg sweep - Gabrielle's ears picked up a familiar sound. She recognized it instantly but couldn't fathom where that sound could come from in the middle of a forest.

She quickly got up from the forest floor and strained her hearing, hoping that the sound would return. When it did, she quickly twirled the sais in her hands and ran in the direction the sound had come from.

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Using some of her old Amazon techniques to make sure that she was well out of sight, Gabrielle carefully peeked around a tree trunk to see what was going on.

The sound she had heard was the dinging of a bell at the bow of a small boat. When it dawned on her that she was looking at two fishermen repairing their nets on the shore of a very large lake, she jumped out from her hiding place and walked towards them - calmly, so they wouldn't get frightened of her.

"Hello, I... uh, I come in peace," Gabrielle said and held up her hands.

"Hello, lassie. You look like you're a long way from home," the oldest of the two fishermen said in broken Greek. They were both square-built with strong, callused hands, but one was several years older than the other and sported a long, white beard. The younger of the two was barefaced but was trying to grow a beard.

"You have no idea," Gabrielle said under her breath. "I was wondering if you could tell me the name of this lake?"

"It's not a lake, lassie, it's the Black Sea."

"Oh... where am I, exactly?"

"What do you mean, where am I?"

"Well, what's the name of this nearest city?"

The two fishermen turned to look at each other. The one talking to Gabrielle shrugged, but the younger one moved his index finger in a circular motion at his temple.

"That would be Kytoros," the older fisherman said.

"Oh. Thank you. Uh, would one of you by chance know how far we are from Thrace...? I made a wrong turn somewhere. Probably in Indus. I should've turned south west instead of north west..."

"Thrace? In Greece? Far."

"How far?"

"Far, far. At least two fortnights on foot due west. And then you have to cross the Bosphorus. Can you swim?" the oldest fisherman said, chuckling into his beard.

"Tartarus," Gabrielle growled and punched her fist into the palm of her hand.

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On a green meadow not far from the castle she had claimed, Xena had set up a small training ground - a forty by forty foot square created by placing logs on the grass - where she and her best warriors could hone their skills - unfortunately, none of her warriors could match her so she ended up fighting Ares more often than not.

A line of slaves and servants were waiting at the outside of the square, all wearing identical sandals and gray robes - and frightened expressions. Two young servant girls were minding a fur-lined portable throne set up for Xena, one fluffing the chair's pillows and one holding a tray with wine.

"Again!" Xena shouted, rolling her shoulders.

With a roar, Ares threw himself forward and engaged Xena in a furious sword fight. Again and again, he thrust and swung his blade at her, trying all the tricks and feints he knew to break through her defenses.

Xena held her side well, but even she wasn't able to withstand the constant onslaught of the God of War. Eventually, Ares started pushing her back, literally forcing her into a corner of the cordoned off square they were in.

*'Never retreat, never surrender'* - Ares' words from her resurrection rang in Xena's ears and she knew she had to try a different approach before the God would defeat her.

Jumping up instead of ducking Ares' next swing, she managed to kick the God in the face with both boots before flipping over him. The split second she landed, she spun around and pressed the hilt of her sword into Ares' ribs. "Gotcha," she whispered in his ear.

"Excellent, my dear. Of course, two can play that game," Ares said and grabbed hold of Xena's arm. Moving impossibly fast, he executed a reverse flip that sent Xena flying through the air. The landing was hard enough for her to lose her sword and to have all the air knocked out of her.

Moments later, Ares came down on top of her, straddling her hips and pinning down her arms.

"Let me see you get out of this... WHOA!" Ares said, cut off mid-stream by Xena putting her legs under his arms and kicking him off of her. Effortlessly, Ares flipped in mid-air and landed on his feet a few yards away. "Oh, I do love a woman who shares my idea of foreplay," he growled, wiggling his eyebrows.

"I know, Ares. It shows," Xena said and vaulted to her feet. She picked up her sword and twirled it a few times.

Smirking, Ares didn't even have to look down to know that she was right. "Heh, heh. Well, I think we're just about done for today, anyway, and I know you have a busy day tomorrow... so... care to go back to the castle and roll around like weasels for a few candlemarks?"

"It's certainly tempting... but I need to prepare my speech for my troops," Xena said and snapped her fingers.

At the command, a young, blonde servant girl stepped forward holding a tray with a goblet and a small amphora of wine. After pouring the wine into the goblet, she handed it to Xena and then bowed deeply. "Your wine, mistress Xena," she said meekly.

Xena didn't bother acknowledging the girl. Instead, she sat down on the fur-lined throne and took a small sip of the wine. After letting it roll around in her mouth for a few moments, she grabbed the entire amphora and gave the servant girl such a hard shove that she almost lost her balance.

As Xena poured herself a healthy amount of wine into the goblet, she studied the servant girl. The young girl was blonde and petite, with delicate facial features and soft, grayish eyes.

"Lord Ares, why do I feel I know this servant girl?" Xena said, putting her index finger across her lips, apparently deep in thought.

Ares briefly looked at the servant girl and immediately connected the dots. "Oh, I don't know, Xena. Perhaps she reminds you of someone you've killed?" he said, slowly moving over to stand behind the increasingly nervous servant girl. When he put his large hands on her neck near the base of her skull, she began to shake uncontrollably.

"No, I don't think so... not someone I've killed... hmmm."

"Perhaps she reminds you of someone I killed?" Ares said, cracking open the young girl's skull with a simple tap with his knuckles. As the girl's head was thrown forward and blood and brain matter began seeping out of the horrible wound and down her back, the other servants went into a state of barely hidden panic.

Ares held onto the body for a few seconds to gauge Xena's reaction, but when she didn't even flinch, he let the girl go, making her corpse drop to the ground like a sack of turnips.

"Now I have to get a new handmaiden, Ares," Xena said, rolling her eyes.

"You have plenty to choose from. Shouldn't take you too long."

"Nah."

Ares casually kicked the body of the servant girl, grinning at the color-clashing sight of her blonde head lying in an ever-expanding sea of red in the middle of the green meadow.

"So... weasels?" he said, hooking his thumbs inside his belt.

"Speech," Xena said and emptied the goblet.

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When the sun was high in the sky the following day, Xena strode across the castle's wooden drawbridge dressed in her full battle gear, feeling like she was the ruler of the entire Known World. The sight of the impressive amount of soldiers standing in straight lines in front of her did nothing to quell those thoughts.

After stepping up on a dais Ares had created for her on the far side of the moat, she cleared her throat and raised her arms in the air to get the soldiers to quiet down.

Ares materialized next to her, folding his bulging arms over his chest. He was wearing the most evil smirk imaginable, and it only grew more evil as he let his eye roam over the number of soldiers below.

Once silence had fallen over the massed ranks, Xena took a deep breath and began to speak; her voice had been amplified by one of Ares' Godly tricks and was rolling over the many warriors like a summer thunderstorm.

"Soldiers! Look around you. What do you see? The biggest, most powerful army that ever walked the earth. Ten complete brigades, fifty thousand men... and women! ...all ready to die for our cause: The conquest of Corinth, Sparta, Athens, yes, all of Greece! All of Europe! And why stop there when there's a whole world to be conquered?" Xena said in her booming voice.

Some of the men started to cheer, but they were soon silenced by a couple of hard stares from their commanders.

"There will be no defeats for this army... never retreat, never surrender! Always attack, attack, attack! We'll fight until Celeste herself taps on our shoulder, and once she has, we'll turn around and give our enemies one final kick in the balls!" Xena roared, clenching her fists.

'XENA!' someone shouted from the masses below the dais.

"The world will tremble at the mere sound of our boots. We will carve a bloody path through their shires and kingdoms. We will soak the soil with enemy blood! Victory will be ours, so help us Ares, God of War!"

An unstoppable buzz began to ripple among the soldiers and it became increasingly difficult for the commanders to keep them quiet - they all knew Xena was building up to a big announcement.

"Soldiers! We march on Corinth at dawn!" Xena roared, throwing her arms in the air.

Predictably, the soldiers erupted in wild cheers and it didn't take long for someone to begin chanting Xena's name. Before long, all fifty thousand men and women were echoing the chant: "XENA! XENA! XENA!"

With the constant, deafening chant echoing across the meadows, Xena, the Warrior Queen, stepped down from the dais and grabbed hold of Ares' vest. "You... me... weasels," she husked, dragging a grinning God of War towards the castle.

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## **CHAPTER 2**

### **"WHEN THEY COME, I WILL KILL 'EM ALL!"**

A moon and a half later, Gabrielle finally set foot on Greek soil. Unspeakably tired from the arduous, seemingly neverending trek, she went through the last part of her journey like in a trance. She crossed the familiar rolling hills and frugal plains and went through the dense forests and the clear streams of her homeland without paying attention to anything or anybody apart from herself.

When she finally stood at the top of a small hill outside of Potaideia and looked down upon her home town, she was so hungry, thirsty, filthy and exhausted that she didn't even notice that it had changed.

Gone were the farmers harvesting hay for the coming autumn, gone were the children helping their parents and playing in the hay, and gone were the thousands of sheep that had earlier been the backbone of Potaideia - all replaced by drabness and silence.

Stretching up, she could see that a camp had been set up on the eastern side of the city, and even though her mind was exceedingly fuzzy, she immediately recognized it as a military outpost.

Furrowing her brow, she began to move in the direction of the camp to see for herself what it was all about, but in her foggy state, she didn't look where she was going. The split second she put weight on her foot, it slipped on a rock and she fell hard, sliding down the side of the hill in a cloud of dust and dirt.

After she had come to a stop at the bottom of the hill, she raised herself up on her elbows and shook her head angrily.

"By the Gods! I can't belie-" she growled, but when she suddenly noticed the sorry state of the ceramic urn that held Xena's ashes, her throat contracted almost painfully, leaving her unable to speak.

The narrow leather ribbon she had used to tie the urn to her belt when she was on the road had been ripped apart on her way down the hill. The urn had rolled down next to her, cracking in two when it had hit a boulder.

It was empty.

Staring in utter disbelief at the empty urn, Gabrielle sat up and shook her head again. When that didn't restore the ashes, she wiped her eyes several times, hoping to prove that her tiredness was causing her to hallucinate.

When none of the things she tried to do to herself brought back the ashes, she fell back down on the rocky, dusty ground. Rolling over onto her back, she stared blankly at the pale blue sky, unable to fathom how the ashes could have disappeared from the urn.

A steady stream of tears began to escape her eyes and roll down her cheeks, but she didn't care. She had lost Xena. Again.

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Several candlemarks later, Gabrielle awoke from a fitful slumber where she had relived over and over again the horror of discovering Xena's mutilated body in the Samurai camp in Jappa.

Feeling more like ninety years old than twenty-five, she slowly got to her feet. Even though it was useless now, she scooped up the broken pottery that had once been the urn and carefully put it in her travel bag.

Looking up at the sky, she could see from the tone of light that dusk was approaching fast, so after finding all her belongings at the foot of the hill, she decided to let the military outpost be until the next day and continued down towards Lila's homestead.

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Gabrielle had expected to feel elated when she arrived at her old home, but when she reached the wooden fence lining the small pen, the only thing she felt was emptiness.

She crossed the courtyard and put down her travel bag on the doorstep. As she moved her hand up to knock on the door, she could hear voices from the inside - her sister, her niece and a male voice she couldn't recognize.

The voices sounded downcast, even somber, and it made Gabrielle furrow her brow and take a closer look at her surroundings. In the past, the courtyard had always been fairly busy, but now it was empty.

One of the barn doors was ajar, revealing that Lila had hardly any hay left and there were no sheep or chickens in any of the pens, either.

Feeling her skin crawl, Gabrielle raised her hand and knocked twice on the door. Inside, the three voices stopped abruptly, almost like someone had snuffed out a candle.

Gabrielle took a step back and put her hand close to the Chakram.

Moments later, the front door creaked open, revealing a very frail looking Lila. The gray-haired woman screwed up her eyes a couple of times, seemingly trying to recognize the visitor. Once she had, a warm, friendly smile graced her features.

"Gabrielle...! Oh, Gabrielle..." Lila said and jumped forward. Wrapping her arms around her big sister, she gave Gabrielle the hug of a lifetime that left both women quite emotional. "Come in... come in, please!" she continued, stepping aside so Gabrielle could enter the homestead.

"Sarah, look who's here!" Lila said and made to close the door behind them. Before it closed fully, she looked around the courtyard to see if anyone had followed Gabrielle - or if Gabrielle had brought any soldiers with her.

The familiar smells of the woodwork and the onion soup and cabbage stew simmering on the stove hit Gabrielle hard and she had to scrunch up her face to stop herself from bawling. Looking around, she could see that it had hardly changed at all since her last visit, except for a few items that clearly belonged to a man.

"Aunt Gabrielle! Oh it's so good to see you!" Sarah said and mirrored her mother's hug. Sarah, dressed in a regular farmer's dress with an apron tied behind her back, seemed curiously nervous, but Gabrielle couldn't figure out why.

"Likewise, Sarah. Tell me, why is it so quiet-" Gabrielle said, but before she had time to complete the sentence, Sarah had cut her off, leaving her with a nagging feeling that something was wrong.

"Aunt Gabrielle, please meet my new, uh, friend, Markus," Sarah said and waved the third person over to them. Markus was in his late twenties and appeared to be solid and strong. His face was perhaps a bit too angular and his jaw a bit too square, but his brown eyes were friendly. He was dressed in a dark green outfit and a pair of boots that hinted at him being a hunter.

"Markus, huh?" Gabrielle said with a smile, remembering Xena's Marcus.

"Yes. And you're the legendary Gabrielle," the hunter said in a voice that held just the faintest hint of hostility.

"Uh... I don't know about legendary, but yeah," Gabrielle said and scratched her hairline.

"By the Gods, Gabrielle!" Lila shouted, pointing at the colorful tattoo on her sister's back. "By the Gods! What is that?"

"What? Oh... it's a tattoo, Lila," Gabrielle said, looking over her shoulder.

"Well, I know that, but...! A tattoo!"

"It's a long story."

"Well, tell me!" Lila said and clapped her hands together.

Gabrielle turned around and pulled her sister into a new hug. "A little later, okay? There's something I have to say first."

"All right. Have a seat," Lila said, pointing at one of the chairs at the dinner table. "When did you get back?"

Gabrielle duly obliged and sat down at the table. "Just now, actually. It was a hellish journey. I made a wrong turn somewhere in Indus and wasted several moons getting back on the right track."

"Mmmm," Markus said, staring at Gabrielle with his arms folded over his chest.

"Lila, Sarah... I..." Gabrielle said and sighed deeply. "I have to be the bearer of bad news. In Jappa-"

"Did Xena send you to gain our trust?" Markus suddenly said; his voice no longer holding any pretenses of being friendly. In a gesture that was designed to be threatening, he swiftly crossed the room and put a hand on the back of Gabrielle's chair.

Puzzled, Gabrielle turned around and looked at the man. "Wh- what? What in Tartarus are you talking about?"

"Well, you are lovers, aren't you?" Markus hissed.

Despite her fatigue, Gabrielle jumped up from her chair and shot Markus a very sharp, harsh look. "That's none of your Gods-be-damned business!" she said in a hoarse voice.

Stupidly, Markus misread Gabrielle's intentions and grabbed her shoulder - a heartbeat later, he was flat on his back on the floor with Gabrielle's boot across his throat.

"I told you! I told you! She's sided with the bitch!" he croaked, flailing his arms to try to get up.

"Lila, I demand to know what's going on here!" Gabrielle shouted, maintaining the pressure on Markus' neck.

"W- we thought you knew," Lila said, wringing her hands.

"I don't know anything! So tell me... please."

"When Xena returned without you..."

A look of pure, unadulterated shock flashed across Gabrielle's eyes, and for a moment, she thought it was all a nasty joke set up by an evil deity. The shock quickly passed, replaced by a wave of anger that suddenly flooded her. Clenching her jaw, Gabrielle looked at her sister with a glare that spelled 'stop' in no uncertain manner. "Xena is dead, Lila! I f- ...I found her body... I built her a funeral pyre. I watched her body be consumed by the flames!"

"A- are you sure that was Xena?"

"Of course I'm sure!" Gabrielle barked. "What kind of question is that, Lila? I buried my soulmate, don't you understand what kind of torture that was?" she said through clenched teeth.

Sarah stepped into the discussion and tried to calm the irate warrior down by putting a soothing hand on her muscular shoulder. "Gabrielle, Xena is here... now. She commands a vast army that has swept the land like locusts. Ares is constantly by her side," she said quietly.

"Ares? That's nonsense, Sarah. Xena would never... unless..."

When the warrior felt silent, Lila began to wring her hands even harder and a few tears trickled down her old cheeks. On the floor, Markus just growled but was quickly shushed by Sarah.

"Ares must have stolen the ashes..." Gabrielle whispered. "That's why the urn was empty... Oh, Gods... he must have... he must have resurrected her..." she continued in a voice that slowly faded away into nothing.

The shock and fatigue finally caught up with Gabrielle and she blacked out and slipped to the floor, promptly falling into a deep sleep.

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"Gabrielle...?" Lila whispered, gently shaking her sister's shoulder.

Smacking her lips, Gabrielle just shook her head and wanted to roll over to her other side. "Mmmmm... just five more candeltdrips..."

"Gabrielle, you've been sleeping for a day and a half. You haven't even eaten anything."

"That's impossible," Gabrielle slurred. She rolled over onto her back and rubbed her bleary eyes.

Lila chuckled and sat down on the edge of her sister's bed. "No, it's true."

"Lila, why do you sound like you're a hundred leagues away?"

"Because you're still cuddling with Morpheus."

Gabrielle cracked open an eyelid and looked around her old bedroom that hadn't changed a bit since she had left it so many years - even lifetimes - ago. "Been there, done that... can't recommend it," she said, breaking out into a huge yawn.

"Huh?" Lila said and scrunched up her face. "Oh, never mind. Look, I brought you some bread and water," she said and pointed to the tray she had put on the nightstand.

"Thank you," Gabrielle said and sat up in bed. She ran both hands through her hair and then stretched her back, creating a disharmonic symphony of cracks and pops from her joints.

"Ewwww... by the Gods," Lila said, making a face.

Chuckling, Gabrielle pulled the edge of the blanket up to cover the coarse sleeping shift someone had put on her. "I'm getting old. Life on the road is hard, Lila."

"Must be." Lila tore a corner off a loaf of bread and handed it to her sister who began to wolf it down at once.

"Did you dress me for the night?" Gabrielle said between chews.

"Yes. I didn't think you'd want to sleep in that other outfit..."

"Well, I've slept in it countless times... but thank you."

"You're welcome. Gabrielle..." - "Lila..." both sisters said over each other.

"You first," Gabrielle said, swallowing the bite.

Lila sighed deeply and began to wring her hands again. "Do you remember what we talked about the other day? Every word was true. If you still doubt us, you'll see for yourself today," she said quietly.

"Xena's coming here?!" Gabrielle barked, already on her way out of the bed.

"No no, calm down... let me finish," Lila said and put her hands on her sister's strong shoulders. "These days, we pay tithes once a moon. One of Xena's patrols will swing by and collect it."

"How much?"

"Eighty dinars."

"Gods..." Gabrielle said quietly and let herself slip back down into the bed. When Lila started talking, Gabrielle took a large bite out of the bread she had been offered.

"If we can't pay in coins, they'll take a few sheep, or a cow... or... or something else," Lila said, looking down.

The bite Gabrielle had just taken suddenly grew in her mouth and she had difficulty swallowing it. "You... you mean that they've...?" she said, putting a hand on Lila's arm.

Lila's only reply was a quiet nod.

The corners of Gabrielle's mouth began to twitch and she felt an uncontrollable surge of anger swell inside her. "How often?" she said in a steely voice.

"This will be the fourth time."

"And the patrol will arrive today?"

Nodding, Lila began to wring her hands. "Yes, but you have to promise me you won't do anything about-"

"Like Tartarus I won't!"

"Gabrielle, listen... please listen!" Lila said imploringly. "If you fight back, or, Gods forbid, kill one of them, they'll return in force and k- kill us all..."

"Lila, there's nothing out in the pens so they'll come straight for you! You can't expect me to stand idly by and watch my sister and my niece get raped!" Gabrielle growled, clenching her fists so hard that her muscular arms and shoulders stood out and created a stark contrast to her far softer sister.

"You must, Gabrielle! It's the only commodity we have left."

"No! No, no, no! This ends now! When they come, I'll kill 'em all!" Gabrielle said and jumped out of bed. She quickly got dressed and made sure the Chakram was securely strapped to her belt.

Lila's insides churned ceaselessly, constantly reminding her of what had happened - and what was going to happen. "And then what?" she said quietly. "They'll be back in greater numbers. And then they'll come for you... I'd rather die than to have that happen, Gabrielle."

"You will have to flee, Lila. You, Sarah and Markus... even though he rather obviously hates my guts," Gabrielle said and put her sais into her boots.

"I refuse to leave my home!" Lila shouted and jumped up from the bed. "This used to be your home, too, Gabrielle. Have you forgotten that our parents built this house and the barn themselves?" she continued, gripping her sister's shoulders.

"No, of course I haven't. I was here to see them build it. You were still in Mother's belly, then."

"That's right. And yet you expect me to walk away from that?"

"Gods, Lila! There must be another way!" Gabrielle said and mopped her suddenly sweaty brow.

Lila just shook her head and slipped back down onto the edge of the bed. "Do you have any money with you?"

"No. Not a damn dinar," Gabrielle growled. Sighing deeply, she adjusted the cloth straps holding her top in place and pulled up the silver bands on her upper arms. "Lila, are you sure it's Xena? My Xena?"

"I'm sure. Tall, raven-haired, eyes like blue pools of death... it's Xena."

"You've actually seen her in person?"

"No. She'd never come to such a backwater village. I've spoken to a few traders who had come from down south. She's overrun Corinth and is using that as her new base."

"Oh. That's where I have to-"

The familiar sound of approaching riders made both women run into the living room to look out of the window. In the courtyard, four marauders - all uglier than Charon - dismounted and pulled their horses towards the homestead. After looking at the empty pens, the thugs started grinning broadly, no doubt looking forward to collecting the tithe.

"Where's Sarah and Markus?" Gabrielle whispered.

"Out hunting," Lila answered in a matching whisper.

Outside, the commander told the youngest of the four marauders to tend to the horses while the rest of them began to walk towards the front door of the house.

"Gabrielle, please... don't do anything we'll regret. Run while you can. Come back in a candlemark... they'll be gone by then," Lila said, grabbing Gabrielle's strong arm.

"No. If I did that, I might as well join Xena's army myself. No, Lila. This ends now," Gabrielle said and worked herself free of her sister's grip. With a wink, she slipped out the back door.

Moments later, the commander began to thump his fist against the front door and Lila hurried over to open it.

"In the name of our supreme ruler, Xena, and of our patron, Ares, the God of War, we demand that you pay your tithe," the commander said in a gruff voice. He was in his late forties with several scars crisscrossing his face, including one that had removed a part of his upper lip, revealing a set of bad teeth.

"I don't have any money," Lila said, looking away from the soldiers.

"And you don't have any livestock, either. Good," the commander said and pushed his way past Lila. "You know the price, woman. Where's the tall blonde who was here the last time?"

"Out h- hunting..."

"Oh, that's too bad. Then we'll have to make due with you, old crone," the commander said and began to untie the leather laces holding his breeches in place.

A strange, muffled cry from the courtyard suddenly made him stop. Cocking his head, he quickly re-laced his breeches and stepped back outside to see what had caused the cry.

The sight greeting him made his blood freeze over and he scrambled to draw his sword. All three of his men had had their throats cut; a fine, red line had been drawn across their windpipes silencing them forever.

Gabrielle was standing above the bodies, holding the bloody Chakram in her hand. Her face was a dark mask of warring emotions.

Wide-eyed, the commander stared at the three corpses and then at the she-demon he presumed was responsible. "H-how did you do that?" he croaked.

"Killing scum is easy," Gabrielle said darkly.

"You... you'll pay for this, woman!" the commander shrieked and jumped forward with his sword raised high in the air.

Instead of panicking, Gabrielle calmly stepped aside and put out her foot, tripping up the irate commander who fell heavily onto the ground. Before he had time to recover, she kicked his sword out of his hand and fell down on her knees on his back, burying both sais hilt-deep in his neck.

Unnoticed by Gabrielle, Lila had moved into the doorway where she had watched the gruesome scene unfold. When Gabrielle killed the commander without showing the slightest hint of remorse, Lila fainted on the spot, silently sliding down the doorjamb and onto the ground.

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While Gabrielle was fighting with the soldiers, Ares and Xena were sparring in the training grounds outside the first castle she had conquered. Again and again, their swords clanged together, moving so fast they were reduced to two blurry lines in the air.

When Ares' Godly senses picked up Gabrielle skewering the commander, it left him so surprised that he forgot what he was doing and exposed his center. Xena wasn't slow to exploit it and she delivered what would have been a killing blow to his gut and chest.

"Lord Ares, is something wrong?" Xena said as she pulled her sword back out.

"What? Oh, no. I just sensed something interesting. Something very, very interesting," Ares said, stroking his goatee.

"A nice, little war breaking out somewhere?"

"Not quite. Xena, you need to continue for yourself for a little while. I have a pressing engagement elsewhere."

Chuckling, Xena sheathed her sword and crossed her arms over her chest. "When you say it like that, it makes me think that it's another woman, Lord Ares."

"Why, yes... as a matter of fact, it is," Ares said with a grin.

"A rival?"

"I doubt it, but who knows," Ares said. Leaning in, he continued in a whisper: "If I give her a good dose of the old charm, I may be able to charm the panties off of her."

"In that case, bring her to me. I'd love to separate her head from her shoulders," Xena said and twirled her Chakram.

As usual when Xena talked like that, Ares' juices began to flow and he leaned in even deeper to nibble at her neck. "Mmmm. It's not beyond the realms of possibility that you'll get a shot at that later. But for now, it's ta ta, Xena," he continued and disappeared in his customary pale blue cloud.

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Mere fractions of a second later, he emerged at the courtyard outside of Lila's homestead in Potaideia. When he saw the bodies of the four soldiers, he laughed out loud and began to stroll towards the door of the house, stroking his goatee repeatedly.

Much like the commander had done before, Gabrielle stopped dead in her tracks when she came out of the house after having tended to Lila. She was carrying a shovel, intent on digging shallow graves for the four corpses.

Looking at the unbearably self-satisfied smirk on the face of the tall, dark and ruggedly handsome God of War, she couldn't stop her lips from creasing into a disgusted sneer while letting out a growl that originated somewhere deep in her throat.

"There's no need for you to break a sweat," Ares said and waved his hand. In a flash, all four bodies disappeared.

"Hmmm," Gabrielle growled and put the shovel away.

Smiling evilly, Ares put out his arms and walked closer to the blonde warrior. "It's so good to see you, Gabrielle. How are you?"

"Oh, cut the crap... you're making me sick," Gabrielle said and deliberately avoided the God's arms. "What's your game, Ares?"

"My game? Do you even have to ask? It's the same it's always been," Ares said, turning around so he could admire Gabrielle's rear. "Well, except that now, I actually have all I've ever wanted. That's a big change, I guess. Hey... nice tattoo. Bet that hurt."

"How could you?!" Gabrielle suddenly barked, clenching her fists. "How could you get yourself to steal the ashes...? Of all the lowdown, dirty things-" she shouted hoarsely.

"-I've ever done, that was t-h-e best one. Yep. And I've been doing this ever since the dawn of the Olympians, so..." Ares said and put a surprisingly gentle hand on Gabrielle's arm.

Grimacing in disgust, Gabrielle brushed his hand off her and took a step away from the God to get out of his range.

"On the other hand, perhaps her resurrection was the number one best thing... yes, stealing the ashes was only the second best thing. Or maybe only the third. After all, since her return, I've taken Xena more often than you've had hot showers," Ares said with an evil wink.

"You bastard!"

Ares grinned and buffed his fingernails on his leather vest. "I put the B in bastard, dear, don't you forget that. Yeah, no wonder you kept Xena for yourself all those years. She really does have many skills. Of course, now I get the full benefit of 'em."

"You rotten creep," Gabrielle mumbled under her breath.

"Charming. Well, back to business. It doesn't take a genius to work out where this little thing is headed. You've killed four of Xena's soldiers. In all fairness, she doesn't give a damn about four soldiers when she has nearly fifty thousand at her disposal, but the regional commanders will, Gabrielle. It's the principle, see?"

"I couldn't let them violate my sister and my niece again. End of discussion," Gabrielle said, moving away from the house so Lila wouldn't accidentally overhear the conversation.

"End of discussion... yes, and very effectively so," Ares said and followed her closely, "but it doesn't change the fact that you're up the creek without a paddle."

"Huh?"

"Oh, that's just a figure of speech. Bottom line is that you're in trouble. All three of you. When the regional commander discovers that his patrol didn't return, he'll send a few scouts out to trace their route. Sooner or later, they'll come here. And then what?"

"Then I'll fight them, too," Gabrielle said strongly.

Cornering Gabrielle against the side of the barn, Ares leaned in and put his strong arms on either side of the blonde warrior's head to make sure that she got his point. "And you'll probably defeat them, too, but what about the next team of scouts? Or the next patrol? If enough men disappear from here, you can bet your cute, little green eyes that the regional commander will send out an elite unit. And I can guarantee you that you won't be able to defeat them. You and your family will end up as fresh meat for them... and their dogs."

Gabrielle sighed and put her hands on her hips.

"Hey, what were you going to do about their horses, anyway? Put them down like you did their masters?"

"I was going to burn the harnesses and use the horses as beasts of burden... or the next tithe."

"Good thinking. Of course, it wouldn't have worked very well. The horses are all branded with an A+X... that's short for Ares and Xena do it all the time," Ares said with an annoyingly smug grin as he moved away from the side of the barn.

"Ares... what do you actually want?"

"I want to help you."

"Crap."

"No, I'm being serious. I want to help you by transporting yourself, your sister, your niece and her lover boy far away from here."

"What'll that cost me?"

"Oh, maybe... a little physical gratitude," Ares said and reached up to caress Gabrielle's cheek.

Swatting his hand away, Gabrielle spun around and stomped off. "Forget it. Just... forget it," she said over her shoulder.

"Is that your last word?"

"Yes!"

"All right. Oh, by the way... I hope you aren't too attached to your Amazon gal pals," the God of War said in a mocking voice. "I've just decided that Xena needs a workout. And what better way to do that than to butcher the last remaining Amazons. Have a nice day, Gabrielle," Ares said and disappeared in a blue cloud.

"No...!" Gabrielle cried, but the God was already gone; the only traces of his appearance was a nasty laugh lingering in the air.

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Ten candle-drips later, Lila slowly came to. She found herself lying on her own bed, having her forehead dabbed by a damp rag. Opening her eyes, she saw Gabrielle standing above her, looking worried.

"I'm sorry you had to see that, Lila," Gabrielle whispered, continuing to dab her sister's forehead.

"I had heard stories about... about you and Xena fighting, but... Gods, Gabrielle... you were so brutal," Lila said hoarsely.

"I know. Sometimes, brutality is necessary."

With a groan, Lila sat up in bed and rubbed her face. "How did I get here, anyway? Did Markus carry me here?"

"I carried you here, silly," Gabrielle said with a faint laugh.

"You? You used to be so weak you couldn't even break a twig in two."

Flexing her muscles, Gabrielle allowed a wistful little smile to crease her lips. "That was a lifetime ago."

At first, Lila returned the smile, proud of her big sister's accomplishments and physical presence, but the gravity of the situation soon caught up with her, and she leaned forward and buried her head in her hands. "Oh Gods, Gabrielle... what are we going to do?"

"We'll find a solution. I promise. I'll... I'll contact an old friend. She'll help us, I'm sure of it."

"But I don't want to leave this place, Gabrielle. Why won't you understand that?"

"Lila, listen to me. Listen to me, please!" Gabrielle said and crouched down in front of her sister so they were at eye level. "It would only have been a matter of time before those soldiers would have lost interest in you and Sarah. Sooner or later, they would've killed you both. Believe me, I've seen it happen often enough."

"But..."

"I'll contact my friend and get you out of here."

"Get us out of here? What about you?" Lila said, alarmed.

"I need to get to the bottom of this. I need to find Xena."

"Gods, no, Gabrielle... it's much too dangerous. She'll kill you for sure!"

Gabrielle opened her mouth to reply, but before she had time to speak, Sarah and Markus barged in through the door, holding three rabbits on a piece of string.

"Why are there pools of blood in the courtyard? Why are there four riderless horses in the pen? WHAT HAVE YOU DONE, WOMAN!?" Markus roared. His face was flushed and the vein on the side of his neck was bulging from the agitation.

"I merely did what you should have done moons ago... man," Gabrielle said calmly, re-sheathing her sais that she had whipped out when the door had been flung open.

"A... are you calling me a coward?" Markus said hoarsely, moving forward in a threatening fashion.

"No, Markus... please... please!" Sarah said, trying in vain to hold onto her friend's strong arms.

"Did you know that the soldiers have repeatedly violated my sister and my niece? Your fiancée?" Gabrielle said strongly.

"Of course! That's the reality we have to live with!"

"Mmmm. And yet you did nothing to stop it. That's a coward in my world view," Gabrielle said in a voice as cold as steel as she was tying the Chakram to her belt.

"All right, that does it!" Markus said, clenching his fists so hard his knuckles turned white. "Lila, Sarah... are you going to throw her out or should I do it?"

"Oh, Markus!" Sarah cried, wringing her hands.

Lila ran over to her sister and put her hands on the warrior's strong shoulders. "Gabrielle... please be reasonable..."

"Don't bother, Lila. I'm leaving. My friend will contact you shortly. Once she does, everything will be better, I promise."

After quickly stuffing her belongings into her travel bag, Gabrielle left her childhood home without even looking back. Once she was out in the courtyard, she checked the four horses, eventually choosing the one where the A+X branding was the most legible.

Sighing, she swung herself up into the saddle and began to ride away.

"Gabrielle! Wait!" Lila said, running across the courtyard. Gabrielle reined in the horse and turned it around.

"Yes?"

"Gabrielle... please reconsider," Lila said and put a hand on her sister's strong thigh. "We've... I only just got you back..."

"No, my decision is final. I need to find Xena."

"I d- don't understand you, b- but all right. The traders I spoke to told me that Xena has occupied a castle roughly five days away to the west. P- perhaps you m- might find her there..." Lila said and stretched out her hands.

"Thanks, sis," Gabrielle said with a tired smile. Reaching down, she grabbed Lila's hands and gave them a strong squeeze. "I'll sort this out. I promise," she continued, choking up so badly that she lost the ability to speak.

"Please stay safe. I love you, Gabrielle," Lila said and began to cry.

Gabrielle forced herself to look away so her resolve wouldn't crumble. With a 'YAH!' , she nudged the horse into a canter.

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When Ares returned to the training grounds, Xena was sparring with Cholerus. On his way to the two fighters, The God of War allowed himself a cheap thrill, lapping up the magnificent sight of Xena fighting all-out like a berserker banshee.

Again and again, she pummeled the unfortunate Cholerus until he couldn't get up from the ground. Dissatisfied with his lack of stamina, Xena spat at him and then walked over to her fur-lined chair to get a drink.

"Marvelous, my dear. You're at the top of your abilities right now. You've never fought better. Never looked better, either," Ares said, feeling an itch behind his fly.

"Thank you, Lord Ares. That didn't take you long...?"

"Nah, that was just a little distraction. Xena, are you up for a fight? A bloody one against an opponent who'll fight back with all available means?"

"But of course I am, Lord Ares. Oooh, are we marching on Rome?" Xena said and was already half out of the chair.

"Not quite. The Amazons," Ares said and stroked his goatee.

"The Amazons?" Xena snorted and bumped back into the fur-lined chair. "Pah. They're no match for my army these days." Crossing her legs at the knee, she reached out to the tray that had been put on a small table next to her and took a goblet of wine that she proceeded to drink from.

"Indeed they aren't. It's only necessary to send a small unit there, say, fifty soldiers or so. But I want you to lead it personally."

Xena cocked her head and raised an eyebrow. Putting the goblet down on the tray, she rose and walked over to stand in front of her master.

"Mmmm, that sounds like you have a private score to settle...?" she said, wrapping her arms around the God's waist.

"Possibly. Do you want this fight or not?"

"Of course I want it. What caused it...? Did an Amazon laugh at the size of your manhood?"

"My manhood is of Godly size, Xena!"

"But of course it is. I didn't mean it like that, Lord Ares," Xena said with a wink, making Ares harrumph.

"We attack them at midnight. That way, we'll catch 'em when they're most vulnerable," Ares said, pushing Xena away from him.

"What do you mean, 'we' ? Are you coming along?"

"Yes, I want to experience the fight first hand. I have a little something in mind for some of them."

"Mmmm, fascinating. I love to play with Amazons," Xena said with an evil smirk creasing her lips. "I take it we're not riding there?"

"No, once the team is assembled, I'll zap us right into their camp."

"All right. That should give us plenty of time to roll in the hay. That is... if you're up for it?" Xena said, placed her hand on Ares' crotch and gave it a little squeeze.

"For you? Always," Ares said and waved his hand, moving the two of them away from the training ground and into the King's chamber.

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Later that night, an owl was interrupted right in the middle of its hooting when Ares, Xena and the strike team appeared at the Amazon camp. The bird - no doubt feeling insulted - flapped its wings and took off in a huff.

The Amazon camp was smaller than it had been in the heyday of the fierce warriors, but it still consisted of fifteen huts of various sizes. Despite the lateness of the hour, smoke was rising from the center of the some of the huts, and faint laughter drifted across the camp on the wind.

Looking around, Ares took a deep sniff of the air. "Still smells the same. Herbs, hodgepodge stew, leather and female sweat," he said with a grin.

"I take it you've been here before?" Xena said and drew her sword.

"Often. I used to have a disciple here."

"Really? Who?"

"The Queen. A dim-witted little package by the name of Varia. Which reminds me, only kill the regular warriors. All senior Amazons must be brought to me."

"What in Tartarus for?"

With his dark eyes shooting fire, Ares spun around and pointed an accusing finger at his warrior queen. "Never question my orders, Xena," he said in a deep, menacing voice.

"Yes, Lord Ares," Xena said and looked down.

Somewhere in the trees ahead of them, another owl hooted, but this one didn't sound the same as the one before.

"They're onto us. Hit 'em now while they're still sleeping," Ares said, shooting Xena another dark look.

"Yes, Lord Ares. Soldiers! Forward! Spare the leaders, kill the rest!" Xena roared, twirling her sword. Moving as one, Xena and the fifty soldiers set off in a fast march, flowing into the Amazon camp like an unstoppable tide.

The sentries were quickly eliminated, but one of them had time to blow the alarm horn before her throat had been penetrated by a spear. Even before the last echo of the horn had died out, the Amazons were streaming out of their huts to protect their home.

Feeling highly charged from being in the throes of war, Xena let the Chakram fly and watched with wide-eyed glee as it cut down several fighting Amazons. After catching the Chakram and putting it on the nook on her belt, she twirled her sword and jumped into the fray.

All around her, male and female warriors fought, bled and died in what soon became a confusing and frighteningly brutal close-combat brawl. All sorts of weaponry was used - javelins, swords, daggers, axes and even a pitchfork - and the warriors showed each other no mercy whatsoever.

The Amazons were stronger than Xena had predicted they would be, and a small pocket of resistance on the left flank of the fight had already killed nearly a dozen of her men. She couldn't allow that to go on for too long, so she flipped away from the brawl in the center of the battlefield and landed behind her own lines.

Quickly running over to the left flank, Xena soon spotted the woman she presumed was the Queen at the center of the pocket. The woman was protected by her personal guards who were doing an excellent job of carving through Xena's ranks.

Unhooking her Chakram, Xena took careful aim and let the circular weapon fly towards the small group of Amazons. The weapon screamed through the air, slitting the throat of the first bodyguard, knocking out the second, slicing the sword hand clean off the third and finally digging itself deeply into the ribcage of the fourth and final one.

As the warrior women fell like skittles around her, the Queen raised her own sword and rushed towards Xena. Screaming like a Banshee, the Amazon engaged Xena in a sword fight with a ferocity that almost took Xena by surprise - almost.

The two formidable warriors fought hard using every means possible for several candle-drips before Ares materialized next to them and simply pulled the sword out of the Queen's hand. "Enough, Varia! You've lost. Call off your girls," he said calmly.

With a roar, Varia jumped forward to fight Xena hand to hand, but Xena was ready for her and flipped her effortlessly over her hip.

Once Varia was flat on her back on the ground, panting hard and bleeding from numerous little cuts and scrapes, Xena went down on one knee and pressed the Chakram against the Amazon's throat. "Varia, was it? Well fought."

"You bitch, Xena! How could you do this to us? We were supposed to be allies!" Varia said hoarsely.

"We were?" Xena said puzzled, looking at Ares.

The God of War just shrugged and stroked his goatee. "Sure, earlier. But that was another lifetime. Get her on her feet, Xena."

"Yes, Lord Ares," Xena said and pulled Varia to her feet.

" 'Yes, Lord Ares'," Varia mocked, only to be backhanded hard across the face by Xena.

"Enough of that, Xena, I need her unharmed. Signal your men, this fight is over," Ares said and snatched Varia out of Xena's hands.

"Yes, Lord Ares."

At once, Xena found the small whistle on her belt and blew it, signaling her men to withdraw from the fight.

As the soldiers slowly backed away from the melee, still fighting off one or two Amazons who refused to give up, the extent of the carnage was revealed. Dozens of Amazons were lying prone on the ground, coloring the floor of the forest red with their blood. Xena's soldiers had been hit nearly as hard with more than half their number being killed.

"Cholerus, round up the remaining warrior Amazons. They're to be escorted back to the castle as prisoners of war," Ares said to Xena's right-hand man.

Cholerus, nursing an injured arm, bowed deeply and began to do his master's bidding.

"Xena, once the warriors have been rounded up, torch the corpses and the village," Ares continued in a menacing voice.

"No! You can't!" Varia shrieked, struggling in vain to break free of Ares' grip. "Our Children and the elders are still hiding in the huts!"

Xena briefly looked at Ares, but the dark look in his black eyes told her all she needed to know. "We're at war, Varia. Children and elders die in wars," Xena said coldly and picked up a torch.

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A quarter of a candlemark later, tall, orange flames surrounded the huts and the nearby trees. Within a few candlemarks, the entire village was engulfed by a devastating fire that sent cascades of glowing embers and dark smoke into the sky. Muffled screams and cries were heard from the huts, but the voices were soon silenced.

Enjoying the last afterglow of her battle high, Xena watched the camp burn with her hands casually placed behind her back and her legs slightly apart.

Walking up to stand behind her, Ares greatly admired the way Xena's silhouette stood out against the flames. Xena's edges seemed to fluctuate in the heat in an almost surreal fashion, but what fascinated Ares the most was the fact that Xena's core was always pitch black - just the way he wanted it to be.

"That was an excellent skirmish today, Lord Ares," Xena said and leaned into the God's touch.

"It certainly was. One for the history scrolls."

"What do you need the prisoners for? We could just as easily have killed them all. We practically did, anyway," Xena said and turned around to face Ares. Wearing a cheeky smile, she put her arms around Ares' neck and pulled him down towards her.

"You'll see in due time. It may take a few days, but it'll all work itself out in the end," Ares said moments before he claimed Xena's lips.

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### CHAPTER 3

#### "YOU WANT HER, DON'T YOU?"

The third evening of Gabrielle's journey to Xena's castle was approaching fast and she started looking for a suitable place to spend the night. The food had already been taken care of; a freshly killed rabbit was dangling from the saddle horn.

Arriving at a small clearing in a peaceful section of an equally peaceful forest, Gabrielle reckoned that it would be as good a place as any, so she jumped off her stolen horse and tied it to a tree.

After preparing the circle of rocks that would mark the boundaries of the fire pit, she pulled a petrified log over to the pit so she could have something to sit on while she got the fire going.

The familiarity of the things she did gave her a very bad case of déjà vu and she halfway expected to see Joxer or Amarice or another of their dearly departed friends walk into the clearing and complain about something trivial. Maybe Joxer would show her the holes in his supposedly brand new boots, or maybe she'd begin a verbal sparring match with the junior Amazon over some minutiae regarding how to tie feathers into your hair...

"Or maybe Xena will show up and tell me it's all been a henbane-induced nightmare..." Gabrielle said quietly. Realizing that she had been lost in her thoughts, she shook her head and went back to building the fire pit. After a few strokes of the flints, the straws caught alight and soon, the fire was burning brightly.

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After eating what she could of the rabbit, she flung the carcass into the trees to give some of the scavengers a decent meal. Sighing, she reached for her travel bag to get her quill and her diary.

*'Dear diary,*

*Life is a peculiar thing. Just when I think I have everything under control, something pops up that turns everything on its head, forcing me to start over.*

*I still can't believe that Ares stole Xena's ashes, but he did. I can believe even less that he has given her a new life, but he has. A new soul, shaped in his image, destroying everything that the real Xena and I have worked so hard to accomplish.*

*Right now, I'm on my way to a castle that Xena has reputedly claimed or at least visited several times. Whether or not she's still there is an open question. Even if I don't find her, someone there will know where their mistress is, I'm sure of it - maybe some coins will help loosen their tongues. Or else the pinch will.*

*I have a feeling that things will get worse before they get better. I've had a hard knot of fear in my gut the entire day, and it has only grown worse as I've come closer to the Amazon lands. I haven't seen or heard any scouts yet, and this tells me that Ares was true to his word.*

*If my Sisters are dead, I hope they were allowed to die like true Amazons - defending their village with a weapon in their hand.*

*In the next few days, I'm probably going to run into Xena. I don't know what I'm going to do once that happens. Maybe I'll have to kill her. I hope that won't be necessary, but if I can save many innocent lives by doing so, so be it.*

*After all, this isn't my Xena. My Xena, my soulmate, my lover is already dead.*

*Gabrielle of Potaideia.'*

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The next morning, Gabrielle had just finished eating breakfast - consisting of a handful of nuts and berries she had picked from the bushes surrounding the clearing - when she could hear two people talking somewhere close to her.

Not wanting to be caught by surprise, she quickly kicked some sand on the smoldering embers in the fire pit and hid in the undergrowth. Peeking around a tree trunk that camouflaged her perfectly, she could see two people walking closer to the camp site.

The two people, a man in his early twenties and a woman who was a couple of years younger, both wore battle outfits, and Gabrielle started wondering if Ares had alerted Xena to her presence.

The two warriors didn't seem to be paying too much attention to anything as they walked right past the fire pit without even noticing it. When they were only six paces away from her, Gabrielle reached down and drew her Chakram. Reconsidering almost at once, she put it back on her belt and leaned down to draw her sais instead.

The moment the two warriors had moved past her, she jumped up from her hiding place and knocked out the man by whacking him over the head with the hilt of one of the sais.

The female soldier stared in wide-eyed shock at the way her companion crumbled to the ground, and her shock became even greater when she noticed Gabrielle standing right behind her with both sais poised to strike.

"No, no, please! Don't kill me!" the woman howled, throwing herself down on her knees where she started wringing her hands in a very un-soldierlike fashion.

"What's your name?" Gabrielle hissed.

"A- Alesa!"

"Are you a soldier in Xena's army?"

"Y- yes!"

"Why?"

"What do you mean why? Because it beats being dead, that's why! My b- brother and I were both forced into her army when the soldiers came to our v- village. B- but I haven't attacked anyone... or... or worse. I've just m- minded my own business with my brother here, and... and... we've shoveled a ton of manure in the stables! Honest!"

"I'm not interested, Alesa," Gabrielle said, barely able to hide the smirk that wanted to crease her lips.

Alesa looked down and nodded so hard that her short hair bobbed back and forth. "Y- yes, ma'am."

"Is Xena at the castle?"

"Y- yes. Well, she was when we left late last night. She's with Ares. Are you an assassin sent to kill her?"

"What I am is irrelevant."

"Oh... but... you n- need to know that Ares is always, always at her side. I've n- never seen one without the other being there."

"All right."

"A- are you going to k- kill us?" Alesa said in a tiny voice.

"I could very easily kill both of you right now, but I've decided to give you a second chance. Give me your uniform and walk away."

"B- but...?"

"Would you rather taste my steel?" Gabrielle hissed, twirling the sais. Alesa shook her head vehemently and began to unlace her armor at once.

Gabrielle felt bad for scaring the young woman but she knew she didn't have any choice. If she was wearing a genuine uniform, the chances of slipping into the castle unnoticed would be increased tenfold.

"Your brother will soon wake up. Tell him what I told you. I'm leaving now. If I see you following me, I'll kill you both. Do you understand me?" Gabrielle said, holding Alesa's armor over her arm.

As a reply, the young woman nodded so frantically that Gabrielle was afraid her head might come off.

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Five candelrips later, Gabrielle mounted her horse wearing a complete set of armor over her regular outfit. It was heavy and uncomfortable, and it chafed her chest quite fiercely, but she knew that it would buy her a way into the castle. The horse danced about a little bit, trying to get used to the added weight, but Gabrielle kept a tight rein on it.

Turning around, she could see Alesa and her brother move quickly through the forest. She felt pleased that something had finally gone right and she even allowed herself the briefest hint of a smile - but the smile soon faded from her face when she thought of the challenges to come.

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Gabrielle finally arrived at Xena's castle late on the fourth day of the trek, having gained a full day compared to the typically heavily loaded traders Lila had mentioned talking to. The castle was an imposing, evil-looking structure created solely from dark gray boulders, and it had a deep moat all around it that was bridged by a wooden drawbridge.

Soldiers were posted everywhere: in front of the drawbridge, on top of the tall, defensive walls circling the castle, and even on top of the tower protruding from the center of the courtyard.

Looking at the castle - and especially at the decaying corpses hanging down from the battlements - Gabrielle felt a shiver run down her back at the thought of infiltrating it, but she knew she had to do it.

The dirt road leading up to the drawbridge was wide and in fairly good shape, except for a pair of deep ruts from all the heavy wagons that had used it. A steady stream of traffic - soldiers and beasts of burden dragging carts, all smelling quite badly and kicking up plenty of dust on their way up the road - entered and exited the castle, but while there were a group of soldiers posted at a small gatehouse by the drawbridge, they didn't seem to be checking anything as all sorts of shady characters were allowed inside unhindered.

Taking a deep breath, Gabrielle nudged her tired horse into a walk and joined the queue waiting to get into the castle. Without attracting attention to herself, she started observing the people closest to her: cutthroats, thugs, marauders and soldiers of fortune to a man. In fact, several of them were women, something that Gabrielle was surprised to see, but she wasn't about to complain as it would make her stand out less.

Just when Gabrielle thought she'd get onto the drawbridge without problems, her luck seemed to run out. A man, clearly a high-ranking officer, joined the soldiers manning the gatehouse. They all snapped to attention and began a much more thorough check of the people entering the castle.

Being fourth in line, Gabrielle knew she would be checked as well, so she moved the Chakram from her belt and up under the armor. Wearing a dark scowl that she hoped would be sinister enough to fool the sentries, she decided to act neutral so she wouldn't raise any suspicions.

When she was first in line, the officer walked out in front of her and grabbed the horse's tack so it couldn't move. "You! Where are you from?" the man said. In his late forties, his distinct military stance and his clean uniform made him look more like a soldier than the thuggish guards - he was also far less ugly than most of his companions.

"Thrace," Gabrielle said in a voice she hoped was suitably growly.

"Why have you left your unit?"

'*Good question,*' Gabrielle thought. " 'Cos I wanna join Xena's personal guard," she said out loud.

"Oh, do you now? Well, let me tell you something..." the officer said and pushed his helmet back a bit to let the setting sun play in his gray eyes. "Xena's personal guard is for grownups, wimp."

"Don't judge a scroll by its cover."

The officer seemed to ponder that for a few seconds and eventually stepped forward to give Gabrielle a thorough check. "Well, now that you mention it. You've seen action, haven't you? I can see it in your eyes."

"Mmmm," Gabrielle growled noncommittally.

When a few cutthroats in the line behind Gabrielle began to complain about the time it took to get one rider through the booth, the officer shrugged and moved back from the horse. "Ah, you might as well enter. You'll leave later today, anyway... in little pieces in the back of the meat wagon."

Gabrielle nudged the horse into a slow walk, giving the officer a defiant stare as she moved past him.

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After leaving the horse in the hands of one of the slaves working the stables, Gabrielle set off on a recon mission. The courtyard turned out to be roughly two hundred fifty by three hundred yards, with the stables, the barracks for the local garrison, and the public outhouses located in the part of the courtyard that was closest to the drawbridge.

A building had been built into the western side of the foot of the tower, and at the far end of the courtyard, several rows of low huts with thatched roofs had been slapped together in a rather haphazard fashion.

Halfway down to the low huts, a staircase descended steeply from the courtyard, ending in a heavy-looking oak door that Gabrielle presumed led to the dungeons.

At ground level, the tower was of gigantic proportions, and Gabrielle almost got a crimp in her neck from leaning her head back to take it all in.

'*Well, if Xena really is here, she would choose to stay in the tower,*' she thought.

She knew she had to appear like she had business there, so she flung the travel bag over her shoulder and walked with determined steps towards the building that had been built into the tower.

Five paces before she had reached the door to the building, the officer from the gatehouse slammed a hand down on her shoulder. Gabrielle stopped dead in her tracks and slipped her hand under her armor to grab the Chakram. She tried to listen for the sounds behind the sounds, like Xena had taught her in Jappa, but she couldn't pick up anything out of the ordinary - none of the other soldiers even bothered to look at the two of them.

Slowly turning to face the officer, the scowl she was wearing was real. She could feel her temper beginning to react, but she knew that she had to keep it in check for the time being. "What is it this time, commander?"

"You must have some huge balls under that skirt."

"What?"

"You're walking into the tower."

"So?"

"It's for officers only," the watch commander said wearing a smirk. "A grotty little grunt like you will get thrown out in an instant."

'Grotty?!' Gabrielle thought, clenching her fists. "Like I told you before, I'm here 'cos I wanna join Xena's personal guard."

"Listen, here's what you're going to do: Go down to the stables, get a shovel and start shovelin' horse manure for a moon. Then we'll bump you up to emptying chamber pots for the next moon. If you're still here, then \*maybe\* you'll be allowed to prove yourself in a fight against one of their soldiers. But that's an awfully big maybe considering your scrawny appearance," the officer said, taking a step back to take in Gabrielle's figure.

"But can't I at least-"

"No, you can't. Go down to the stables like I told you. I'll be by in a quarter of a candlemark. If you're not there, I'll kick you out myself the next time I meet you," the officer said and punched Gabrielle's shoulder quite hard.

Grumbling under her breath, Gabrielle turned around and walked back to the stables. On her way there, she could feel the officer's eyes on her and it made her skin crawl.

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Gabrielle was no stranger to mucking out stables so she went at it with gusto, shoveling manure so hard that the few slaves that shared the unenviable task with her glared at her and mumbled curses about her behind her back. A quarter of a candlemark later, she had already emptied out three boxes and was well into the fourth one when the officer arrived.

Not bothering to stop for long, he grinned at her and gave her a mock salute before walking away.

As soon as the officer was out of sight, Gabrielle threw the shovel back into the pile of manure and grabbed her travel bag. After peeking around the corner of the box to make sure the officer wasn't waiting for her, she quickly ran over to the inside of the nearest castle wall.

A door to the wall's internal corridors was only thirty feet further up the courtyard, so after looking left and right several times, she walked casually towards it, behaving like she owned the place. Fortunately, the door wasn't locked so she was able to open it and step inside.

The corridor stretched out in both directions and Gabrielle started rubbing her chin as she tried to decide which way to go. Gruff voices to her left made the decision to go right an easy one, and she flung the travel bag over her shoulder and set off to the right, headed towards the small watch tower in the south-western corner of the castle.

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"Pour!" Xena said as she closed her kimono and leaned back in a chair that had been placed in the center of the King's chamber. The handmaiden duly complied by carefully tilting the first of the two buckets of water she had prepared, allowing the warm water to stream down over Xena's long, raven-colored hair.

The handmaiden's hands were trembling as she performed her duties - she knew all too well what would happen if she tilted the bucket too much and let the water down Xena's face.

After getting Xena's hair thoroughly soaked, the handmaiden put the bucket away and began to massage her mistress' scalp - however the massage only lasted for a few candlerips before Xena lost patience and waved her hand, making the handmaiden stop.

"Do you need more water, mistress Xena?" the handmaiden said, holding the second bucket of hot water ready.

Xena growled a negative reply and moved her wet hair around her shoulder so she could begin to squeeze it dry. Rising from the chair, she walked over to one of the windows overlooking the courtyard.

"Do you want me to dry your hair, mistress Xena?"

"No."

"Will there be anything else, mistress Xena?" the handmaiden said and picked up the basin that had been at the foot of the chair. After pouring the water back into the first bucket to ease her descent from the King's chamber, she put the basin under her arm.

When Xena waved her hand dismissively, the handmaiden curtsayed, picked up the second bucket and hurriedly left the chamber so she wouldn't incur the wrath of her mistress.

As she continued to dry her hair, Xena sighed and furrowed her brow. She began a thorough scan of the sections of the courtyard she could see from the window, but she wasn't able to find anything wrong.

Dusk had fallen and the flickering torches made it difficult to see if anything or anybody was hiding or moving in the shadows. When the typical smells of the late afternoon - the warm bricks in the courtyard, the fresh animal dung on the straws, the open sewers and the strong scent of the horses and the oxen, not to mention hundreds of sweaty, unwashed men and women - combined into an overpowering wall of foulness, Xena closed her eyes and tried to analyze the strange feeling she had in her gut by sense alone.

It felt like a nagging reminder of something she had forgotten, but she couldn't figure out what it could be. At the same time, her heart felt heavy and curiously empty, almost like a part of it was missing. Scoffing at that ridiculous notion, she whipped her hair around and walked back to the chair.

"Lord Ares!" she barked as soon as she had sat down.

"You rang?" Ares said, emerging in his customary pale blue cloud of crackling energy. Once he had arrived, he cocked his head, trying to read the strange expression on his Warrior Queen's face.

Noticing that she was being scrutinized, Xena quickly looked away from the God and concentrated on a stain on the royal carpet. "I think it's time for an inspection of the troops."

"Again?"

"I'm restless."

"Oh, well, in that case, how about we just..." Ares said and began to take off his vest.

"No... not right now, Lord Ares."

"Mmmm?"

"I feel... I don't know how to describe it. Odd," Xena said, scratching her chin.

"Perhaps you've finally produced the heir I so desperately yearn for. Get up, let me feel."

When Xena stood up, Ares walked behind her and put his hands on the lower part of her belly. After probing for a moment or two, he stepped back and shook his head. "No. You're not with child. Strange. All other mortal women I take get pregnant after the first time. Not you."

"Perhaps I'm not capable of bearing children, Lord Ares," Xena said with a half-shrug.

Grinning darkly, Ares let his hands roam up the silk kimono until they covered Xena's bosom. "Oh, no, it's not that. Definitely not that," he whispered into her ear while giving the two globes a little squeeze.

Shrugging, Xena turned away from his touch and went back to the window overlooking the courtyard.

After shooting Xena a pointed look behind her back for the silent rejection, Ares strolled over to his Warrior Queen and put his hands on her hips. "Well, Xena, your instincts tell you something's up, but you can't figure out what it is, right?"

"Mmmm."

Leaning in, Ares continued in a whisper: "I know what's behind it. One of your enemies has sent a world class assassin after you."

"What?!" Xena said and spun around to face Ares; her face taking on the same qualities as a good-sized summer thunderstorm.

"And she's here right now. Inside the castle," Ares said and began to trace Xena's eyebrows with an index finger.

"Why didn't you tell me sooner? We need to-"

"Relax. I have everything under control," Ares said and claimed Xena's lips in a little kiss.

Once the two dark warriors separated, Xena cocked her head and shot her benefactor a puzzled look. "But shouldn't we-"

"No, we shouldn't. Do you doubt me?"

"Of course not, Lord Ares."

Smirking, Ares leaned in and kissed Xena again. "This assassin is rather clever, but I still sensed her presence from the moment she entered the castle," he said around a few pecks and nibbles.

"What are we going to do about her? Do you want me to sound a general alarm?"

"I want you to do nothing of the sort. In fact, I'm hoping that she finds her way here. If she-"

"Lord Ares, have you gone mad?" Xena said and put her hands on Ares' shoulders. "Do you wish to see me dead?"

"Hardly. She's no match for you. And even if she is, she's certainly no match for me," Ares said and flexed his muscles. "As I was saying, if she hasn't shown up by nightfall, I'll make sure that the path here will be cleared for her."

"Ahhh, so we can set a trap for her. Excellent. Nothing excites me more than a little cat and mouse game," Xena said and reached behind Ares to squeeze his buttocks.

"Ahem! The feast tonight will go on as planned. I expect to see you there in the royal blue tunic I created for you. It's such a good fit," Ares said and wrestled free of Xena's firm grip.

"Yes, Lord Ares. I'll be there. Do you suspect the assassin will show her hand at the banquet...?"

"She has often surprised me in the past, so I have a hard time predicting what she might do. There's a chance she'll be there, yes."

"So you know her? She's the distraction from the other day, isn't she?"

"Well deduced, my dear. Yes, she is," Ares said and disappeared in his customary pale blue cloud.

"Hmmm," Xena said and started rubbing her chin. She walked over to the closet and pulled out the outfit Ares had created for her - the royal blue tunic and a pair of dark brown leather pants. In one, fluid motion, she took off the kimono, threw it on the bed and stepped into the pants.

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On her way through the corridors, Gabrielle had found a secluded storage room with a grated window from where she could easily observe the people entering and exiting the building that led to the tower. She had seen dozens of different officers and servants come and go, but Xena hadn't been among them.

Feeling tired, she stifled a yawn and got off the wooden box she had been sitting on to stretch her aching legs. When both her knee joints cracked loudly, she winced and began to rub her knee caps to get rid of some of the stiffness.

*'My plan... what is my plan, anyway? Now I've been sitting here for two and a half candlemarks without even seeing Xena. But she's here, I'm sure of it. Perhaps I should just go into the tower and knock on all the doors...'*

Gabrielle chuckled quietly to herself and began to bob up and down on the balls of her feet to keep the circulation going. After tiring of that, she started shifting her weight from one leg to the other, but the exercise came to a gradual halt when she suddenly realized that an unusually large amount of slaves and servants had begun filing into the building connected to the tower.

Cocking her head, she began to study the steady stream of people more closely and soon came to the conclusion that it very much appeared like a major event was about to take place.

An idea formed in her mind and she quickly took off the armor she had taken from Alesa and hid that and her travel bag behind a few boxes in the storage room. Moving over to the door to the corridor, she opened it and took a good look in both directions.

Realizing that she was alone, she quickly stepped out into the silent, damp corridor and began to move swiftly towards the north-western watch tower.

Thirty yards before she arrived at the small tower, a narrow hallway branched off to the right that she presumed would take her back to the courtyard.

Waiting at the corner of the narrow hallway, Gabrielle put her hand on the Chakram. She held her breath and listened for any strange footsteps, but she was still alone.

Nodding to herself, she quickly moved through the narrow hallway and opened the door at the end of it - she'd been right, she was back in the courtyard.

*'And now to find a suitable disguise,'* Gabrielle thought, fondly remembering the many times she and Xena had played a trick on various opponents by hiding behind all sorts of outrageous disguises.

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Eleven candelrips later, Gabrielle joined the back of the queue of servants, wearing a bonnet to hide her fair hair and a dark brown dress made of the scratchiest wool she had ever encountered - which said a lot considering she had grown up in a sheep town.

She had persuaded a servant girl she had bumped into to give up the clothing items by offering her one of her silver armbands, but the unbelievably coarse material irritated her skin so much that she almost wished she hadn't come up with the idea.

The people in the queue were the typical slaves and servants; mostly women, though there were a few men. Gabrielle noticed with some interest that the castle had slaves of all ages, ranging from strapping young teenagers to people in their late fifties who were hunched over and walking poorly.

Like always, the queue moved very slowly so she had plenty of time to listen in on the conversations of the people closest to her.

"... big banquet..." -- "... all the big wigs will be there..." -- "... going to plan the next campaign..." -- "... I hope that bad boy hunk Ares will be there..."

When Gabrielle heard the last words, she turned around and stared at the person speaking them. The woman, who appeared to be in her late forties, was a homely, big-boned washerwoman in a deep brown cowl whom Ares wouldn't give a second look if she was the last mortal female on Gaia's green Earth.

Moments later, the woman looked up and locked eyes with Gabrielle, shooting her an annoyed look. "Mind yer own damn business, little girl. You can find your own hunk to take to bed," the woman said in a broad dialect, snorting in annoyance.

"Uh, right," Gabrielle said, wondering why she always ended up next to people like that in queues.

At that very moment, the officer Gabrielle had spoken to several times earlier in the day walked past them, making her pull up her bonnet and look away so she wouldn't get caught.

Behind Gabrielle, the big-boned woman was just getting warmed up. "So damn typical of you young'uns. No respect for us elders," she said, pulling up the sleeves of her cowl to reveal a pair of hefty, yet strong arms. "And why in Tartarus don't you carry a tray or anything? Perhaps you think you're one of the body slaves? Well, lemme tell you something, missy, you're not nearly pretty enough for that," she said surly.

Now it was Gabrielle's turn to shoot the other woman a dark glare. Even though she knew it was vital that she stayed in character, she opened her mouth to complain - but before she had time to get into an argument, the queue started moving faster.

"Ha! That just saved your skinny little ass from a good flogging," the big-boned woman mocked, but with the prospect of entering the building and the tower itself, Gabrielle had other, more important, things on her mind.

She was surprised to find that the first building they moved through was largely empty. The floor and the walls were cracked and broken up in several places, making her suspect that several valuable items had been hastily removed by the previous owners when Xena's army had massed in front of the gates.

The interior of the tower consisted of a huge staircase spiraling its way upstairs. The queue Gabrielle was in seemed to be headed downstairs towards the kitchen area, but she could see that the grand dining hall was just up the stairs on the first floor.

Looking around, Gabrielle tried to see if she could slip away from the other servants, but she soon realized that she couldn't. Biting her lip, she decided to continue the charade for the time being.

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The kitchen area was a confusing, bustling anthill filled with servants, slaves and the regular kitchen staff. A massive number of pots and pans were simmering everywhere and the heat from the open stoves was almost unbearable. Sawdust had been put on the stone floor to soak up the blood seeping off the chopping blocks and stop the frantic footsteps of the servants' wooden clogs from reaching ear-splitting levels, but even so, it was a tremendously noisy place, underlined by a stern matron who ran around barking orders left and right, stressing the poor servants to - and sometimes past - their breaking point.

The smell of warm food went straight to Gabrielle's gut, and it responded by sending out a growl that was so loud she wondered why the entire kitchen hadn't come to a standstill. As it was, several of the slaves next to her shot her curious glances.

It didn't take long for Gabrielle to find herself in the thick of things. Getting a tray thrust into her hands, she had a long list of orders barked in her face by the matron who looked like she belonged on a battle field somewhere in the Norselands - all she needed was a horned helmet, Gabrielle thought - rather than in a kitchen.

"Don't you speak Greek? I said bread, salt, pepper, sugar, vinegar, olive oil, upstairs, now!" the matron barked right in Gabrielle's face. Gabrielle nodded several times and tried to curtsy, but the brown, woolly dress was too tight around her hips.

She quickly snatched two loaves of bread, bowls with salt, pepper and sugar, and two vials of vinegar and olive oil and piled them onto the wooden tray. Groaning out loud, she hurried up the spiraling staircase and entered the grand dining hall.

Once she saw the grandeur of the hall, she was almost bowled over. It was of enormous proportions and opulently decorated, with stained glass in the windows, large draperies in the former King's colors hanging from the ceiling, and a huge table shaped like a horseshoe in the center of the room.

"Will you get a move on!" the next servant girl said from somewhere behind Gabrielle, bumping a tray into her back.

"Yeah, yeah," Gabrielle growled and moved forward again.

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Over the next candlemark, all the esteemed guests filed in and found their seats. Along with the other servant girls, Gabrielle was standing along the wall with her hands behind her back, assigned to assist whomever would take the empty chair in front of her.

An obese warlord wearing a bear skin over his shoulders and sporting a large, filthy, full beard sat down on the chair belonging to the servant girl on Gabrielle's left. Moments later, the warlord waved a rather beautiful woman over to him and pointed at Gabrielle's chair.

The woman - in her early thirties - was at least six foot tall, with striking features and auburn hair. She wore a dark green dress that accentuated all the right places and she held a regal air about her that spelled class with a capital C.

'*A real trophy wife,*' Gabrielle thought as she helped the Lady sit down on the chair.

When Gabrielle unfolded a napkin and handed it to the woman, her sharp eye detected that the Lady's hands were curiously strong and callused, not at all delicate like she had expected them to be from the rest of the woman's appearance.

'*Hmmmm,*' Gabrielle thought, sensing that the auburn-haired woman was perhaps playing a charade as well.

Suddenly, the master of ceremonies entered the grand dining hall and slammed the butt of a metal staff down onto the floor. All the guests rose as one, and the servants had to scramble to pull back the chairs before dramas could arise.

At the far wall of the dining hall, a band of drummers began to pound rhythmically on large timpanis to set the scene for the arrival of the host and hostess. All eyes were trained on the huge staircase, and before long, Xena and Ares strode through it arm in arm, wearing identical, unbearably smug looks on their faces.

The split second Gabrielle saw her soulmate enter the room, she felt her heart being gripped by an iron hand, and tears immediately began to sting her eyes. Even though her bottom lip started quivering quite badly, she forced herself to remain still, determined not to allow the inevitable tears to come.

With her jaw firmly clenched, her heart hammering in her throat and her lips reduced to two narrow, bloodless lines in her face, she tried to sneak a few glances at the imposing pair - all in all, she couldn't believe how feral and powerful Xena looked, even if she was wearing an outfit that didn't become her at all.

Accompanied by the pounding timpanis, Xena and Ares strolled casually up towards the end of the horseshoe where two thrones had been prepared for them. Four beefy men from Xena's personal guard pulled out the thrones and waited for their masters to sit down.

After arriving at her throne, Xena waved to the assembled guests and cleared her throat. As one, the guests fell silent, waiting expectantly for their mistress' words.

"Welcome, my friends. You have served us well in the campaigns we've led this year. I promise you there's plenty of wealth to be distributed tomorrow. But first, we eat, drink and be merry!" Xena said and raised a goblet in the air. "Let's get some food on our tables!" she continued and took a long swig of the wine.

On cue, the side doors opened, revealing a long line of servants carrying trays of food and amphorae of wine. The servants quickly entered the dining hall and began to put the trays down on the large table to the sound of the guests cheering loudly.

Gabrielle was so busy looking at Xena - and trying to control the all-out war of conflicting emotions raging within her from hearing her soulmate's silk smooth voice for the first time in many moons - that she didn't even notice that her Lady wanted to sit down.

"Where are your thoughts, girl?" the auburn-haired beauty said after clearing her throat loudly. She had spoken in a stern tone of voice, but a friendly gleam in her eye proved that she wasn't too upset.

"A thousand apologies, milady," Gabrielle mumbled and helped the woman sit down.

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"Have you spotted her yet?" Ares said, leaning in towards Xena.

"Who?"

Xena picked up a turkey drumstick and began to tear chunks off it with her teeth. Before long, her fingers had turned extraordinarily greasy, but she solved that problem by licking them clean.

"The assassin," Ares said, transfixed on Xena licking her digits.

Stopping abruptly between two chews, Xena narrowed her eyes and turned to face Ares. "Wait... she is here? Now? In my own grand dining hall?"

"Oh, she most certainly is," Ares said with a smirk.

Xena stopped chewing altogether and let her eye roam across the female guests. None of them seemed to match the perception she had of an assassin, and that made her even more impressed of the assassin's skills.

Most of the guests - male and female alike - were eating like pigs, stuffing their faces with the free food and drinking uninhibitedly from the endless supply of wine, though there were a few who seemed to be on their best behavior. Now and then, two people cheered loudly and slammed their goblets together which sent large quantities of wine all over - in one place along the horseshoe, one guest had taken up residence underneath the table to eat the scraps that had fallen onto the floor.

"How did she get past my guards...? Fascinating," Xena said, throwing the half-eaten drumstick away and tearing some white meat off the turkey instead.

"Do you want me to tell you who it is?" Ares whispered, adding a little wink.

"No! Oh no, Lord Ares. I want to figure that out myself. After all, if I can't even work out something that simple, how can I call myself your Warrior Queen?"

"Oh, I wouldn't be too worried about that if I were you. After all, you have many skills," Ares said, emphasizing the last two words by leaning in and nibbling on Xena's neck.

Down in the dining hall, one of the servant girls looked like she was about to throw up, and that caught Xena's eye. "Hmmm... that woman down there," she said and pointed with a knife she had picked up.

"Yes?" Ares said, looking in the direction Xena was pointing.

"Could she be the one? The regal-looking, auburn-haired one?"

"The regal one...? No," Ares said, looking past the tall woman until he found the petite, blonde servant girl leaning inconspicuously against the wall. "But it's definitely a good shot, Xena. Her name is Wallona, a chieftainess slash warlord from the deep forests in Upper Gaul. One of the fiercest fighters in the entire region. In fact, she's like an Amazon. Not to mention that she has donated nearly two thousand men to our cause."

"Wallona... I remember that name from the guest list. But I thought that was the mountain sitting next to her...?"

"No, that's her body slave."

"Uggh... disgusting," Xena said and chugged down half a goblet of wine.

"Well, you know what they say about different folks," Ares said, looking directly down at Gabrielle who was trying her level best to blend in with the other servants.

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Two and a half candlemarks later, a large group of court jesters, jugglers and musicians were hard at work trying to keep their mistress satisfied. Most of the people at the banquet had become quite inebriated from the steady flow of wine, and Xena was no different.

Growing ever more restless, she was sitting across the seat of her throne with both legs dangling over the armrest and her head propped up on her arm.

All around the horseshoe-shaped table, the guests had begun to get frisky with each other, and Xena herself had been staring long and hard at the cool auburn-haired woman from Upper Gaul for some time. Occasionally, their eyes had met across the crowded room, exchanging signals that would have made most high priests faint.

"You want her, don't you?" Ares said, moving around to sit on the table so he could look at Xena.

After draining her goblet, Xena simply reached out and waited for her servant to refill it - it didn't take long. "Mmmm, yeah," she said, taking a long sip of the wine.

"I didn't know you harbored such interests?"

"I'm a sexual being, Lord Ares. Deal with it."

Ares slapped his thigh and laughed out loud in a sublimely evil fashion. "Oh, I am! But there's nothing to it, just take her. After all, you're the host. You're free to do anything you please," he continued with a dark grin creasing his lips.

"I need the support of her soldiers. If I'm too rough with her, they'll turn their backs on me."

"That's true."

"But I want her," Xena added in a throaty voice. "Let's see how she looks up close. Cholerus!" she barked and snapped her fingers.

In an instant, Cholerus was at her side, bowing deeply. "Yes, mistress?"

"That auburn-haired woman down there... Wallona. Get her up here. And her servant girl. I'm going to need a witness so it isn't her word against mine in case she doesn't appreciate what I'm gonna give her," Xena said and pointed down among the revelers.

"Yes, mistress."

A scant candlemark later, Wallona and Gabrielle walked up to stand at Xena's throne. Wallona bowed to show her respect and Gabrielle tried to curtsy again, but the dress was still too tight over her hips.

Behind them, the party grew more and more uninhibited with people eating, drinking and whoring to their hearts' delight - especially noisy and unruly was a woman who was lying on her stomach across the table with her skirt flipped up so she could give the burly fellow who was taking her from behind an easier access.

Gabrielle had no time for such trivialities - her focus was squarely on her soulmate. Her heart was hammering away in her chest like a herd of wild horses on the run and the blood rushing past her ears drowned out all other sounds. All she could do was to stare at her loved one's face and her cold, ice blue eyes.

Everything was exactly like Gabrielle remembered it. She recognized every little bump, every little dip and curve, every little wrinkle around Xena's eyes - and yet, it was a different Xena. The unique bond they shared wasn't present. They were standing a mere five feet apart, but she felt so little of their connection that it might as well have been five leagues.

Gabrielle's shoulders slumped when she realized that it wasn't her Xena. *'It's her eyes,'* she thought. *'No... it's what's behind her eyes that's different. There's no warmth in them... no love. No soul. Damn you, Ares, damn you!'*

As if on cue, the God came to up stand behind Gabrielle. With a chuckle, he put his hands on her shoulders and gave them a little rub.

Clenching her fists, she turned her head to stare angrily at the God. He was wearing such a smug look of self-satisfied arrogance that she almost flew into a fit of rage, but she managed to keep her emotions in check.

Realizing that someone had spoken to her, Gabrielle turned her head back around and noted that Xena had arched her left eyebrow - a little gesture Gabrielle remembered so well from their time together that it sent a jab of pain through her.

"I'm sorry, mistress Xena. My thoughts were elsewhere," Gabrielle said quietly, looking down at her feet so she wouldn't appear to be defiant.

"I'll say. I've killed for less, girl," Xena said icily.

Gabrielle's blood almost froze over from the lack of warmth in Xena's voice. Gone was the smooth timbre, replaced by a steely coldness that only held promises of violence and death.

"Mistress Xena asked for your name, girl," Wallona said, lifting Gabrielle's chin with her hand.

"Uh... my name... my name is, uh... Micernia," Gabrielle said, trying to come up with a catchy name while dearly hoping it didn't mean horse dung in Latin.

"You'll have to forgive her, mistress Xena. She's a little dimwitted," Wallona said with an apologetic smile.

Xena seemed to ponder that for a few seconds, but soon shrugged and began to move away from the two thrones. "Mmmm. All right. Come."

"Where?" Gabrielle blurted out, earning herself another arched eyebrow.

"Why, up to Xena's chamber, of course... girl," Ares said, emphasizing the last word to mock Gabrielle.

The small group of people began to walk towards the grand staircase. As they were walking, Gabrielle looked at Xena and then at Wallona and put two and two together.

Her body reacted with cold chills that raced up and down her back and surges of heat that flushed her cheeks and ears. She looked down at her feet again, slowly understanding what was about to happen, but not quite fathoming it.

Behind her, Ares laughed out loud and gave her a pat on the rear. "Oh, look at this innocent little thing," he mocked. "She's blushing. Isn't it cute?"

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## CHAPTER 4

### "THIS EVIL MUST BE STOPPED"

*'Torture... this is torture...'* Gabrielle thought as she stood next to Xena's bed and observed that the sexual act that went on right in front of her didn't go beyond what was commonly acceptable. For every moan, groan and muffled scream, the mortified Gabrielle felt her stomach churn, and when Wallona leaned her head back and let out a particularly impressive cry, she had to swallow hard to keep down the sour surge that threatened to come to the surface.

Once the two sweaty, gorgeous creatures had cried out their climaxes, the torture finally came to an end for Gabrielle as Wallona scooted off the bed, wiped herself dry with a cloth and slipped into her clothes.

Xena was still lying on the bed, as naked as the day she was reborn. She had her hands behind her head and whistled a little ditty through her teeth.

"Thank you, darling. That was nice. Nice and spicy," Wallona said with a smile as she tried to comb down her damp, unruly hair.

"You're welcome... darling," Xena said, looking at the tall, auburn-haired woman with a fairly unimpressed expression on her face.

Buttoning her dress, Wallona turned to face Gabrielle who was flushing so badly her cheeks had turned dark red. "Micernia, it's time to leave."

"No," Xena said and swung her bare legs over the side of the king-sized bed. "Micernia stays. I need her for something."

"Oh... all right. Mistress Xena, I've had a most pleasurable time tonight. I think I shall retire for the evening. Good night," Wallona said and blew Xena a kiss.

"Good night." Xena turned her head and watched Wallona close the door to the King's chamber behind her. The split second the door was closed, the dark warrior rolled her eyes and shook her head. "Bah, what a disappointment."

Gabrielle looked down, unsure of what to say or even if she should address Xena at all. Her plan had seemed so easy earlier, but now when she was actually alone with Xena, the challenge seemed insurmountable - it didn't help that her gut was still churning so badly over the carnal show she had witnessed she could taste the gall at the back of her throat.

Xena got off the bed and stretched her arms above her head to work out the kinks in her back. "All flash and no bang. No bang whatsoever... have you ever tried to hump a fur coat?" she said, giving Gabrielle a full view of her starkly naked body. "Heh, I doubt you have, but anyway, that's what it felt like. How someone so feisty-looking could be so limp in bed I'll never know," she continued on her way over to her clothes that had been shed all over the floor of the chamber.

"Wh- why are you telling me these things, mistress Xena?" Gabrielle croaked, looking away.

"Because when you watched us, you had a look in your eye that told me you're no stranger to love among women. Am I right?" Xena said, suddenly changing direction. In two steps, she was standing right in front of Gabrielle, putting her hands on the wall Gabrielle was leaning against.

Xena's proximity, her nakedness and the musky scent of arousal that emanated from her warm, flushed body wreaked havoc on Gabrielle's emotions and she couldn't stop a huge blush from spreading out over her face and neck. She gulped for air several times and tried to look anywhere but at the naked woman before her.

With a chuckle, Xena put her fingers on Gabrielle's chin and gently turned it back towards her. "Am I right?" she repeated huskily. When she didn't get a reply, she leaned in to claim the servant girl's lips.

At the very last moment, Gabrielle ducked out of the way and quickly slipped under Xena's outstretched arm. She thought she had made it, but Xena just managed to grab hold of the dark brown dress with the tip of her fingers.

"Awww, not so shy, girl. Come on... let me show you a good time," Xena said and pulled Gabrielle back towards her.

Not wanting any part of it, Gabrielle struggled against the pull. Inevitably, the woolly dress was torn apart and fell off her body, revealing her own clothes and her square, muscular body.

Expecting to see a young, petite, nude body under the slave dress, Xena was surprised when she saw that the blonde woman was dressed in a red velvet top and a matching skirt - then her eyes zeroed in on the woman's bosom which turned out to be rather more voluminous than she had expected.

A split second later, Xena's eyes noticed the Chakram on Gabrielle's hip. She had been drinking far too much wine at the banquet for her senses to react at their usual speed, but even in her foggy state, she recognized the weapon that was so similar to her own.

"You're the assassin!" Xena slurred and tried to reach for her own Chakram. When she only grabbed her bare thigh, she realized that the circular weapon was on the floor next to her battledress.

Clenching her jaw so hard that the muscles on the side of her face worked overtime, Gabrielle calmly pulled the tattered remains of the dark brown dress off her so she could move freely if she needed to. With a deep sigh, she unhooked the Chakram from her belt and took careful aim, intent on delivering a killing blow with the first strike.

"Can't we make a deal?" Xena said, as taut as a tigress.

Gabrielle shook her head. Holding the Chakram ready, she tried hard to suppress the tremble that had crept its way into her hands, but she wasn't entirely successful. The two women locked eyes; green as well as blue understanding that this could be the end of the road for at least one - if not both - of them.

"Who are your employers? Whatever they paid you, I'll double it."

"This isn't about money, Xena," Gabrielle whispered hoarsely.

"Then what...? You want land? You can have land... you can have an entire kingdom if you want! Hera's tits, you can have all of Thrace!"

Once again, Gabrielle shook her head. "It's not land. It's about the love. I loved you... but now I have to kill you."

Xena blinked a few times almost like she couldn't grasp the meaning of what the assassin had just told her. Squinting, she looked around in a quest to find a solution before it'd be too late for her. After scouting her entire chamber and finding a few items that could help her, she came to the conclusion that the look of shock on the blonde warrior's face betrayed an inner weakness. "Go on, kill me, then!" she suddenly barked, clenching her fists. "Make it bloody, assassin! Cut off my Gods-be-damned head so you have proof that you really killed me!"

Xena's harsh words gave Gabrielle a nasty flashback to the events in Jappa and it hit her in the gut like a kick from a mule. She couldn't stop a strangled groan from escaping her lips and she briefly lowered the arm holding the Chakram.

At once, Xena exploited the hesitation. Jumping forward, she grabbed Gabrielle's throwing arm with both hands and forced the blonde warrior backwards. The two women wrestled for a few heartbeats until Gabrielle stumbled over Xena's discarded battledress and fell down.

Xena yelled in triumph, but her success was short lived as Gabrielle put her legs under Xena's body and kicked her off of her. With a grunt, Gabrielle vaulted to her feet and flipped away from her opponent.

Ruining her earlier hesitation, Gabrielle released the Chakram with a mighty throw and watched breathlessly as the weapon split in two. The two halves zinged through the King's chamber, cutting through everything in their path, including a large lock of Xena's hair.

Ducking frantically, Xena jumped forward so she could finally grab her own Chakram, but before she had time to pick up the weapon, Gabrielle had thrown both her sais at it, pinning it to the wooden floor.

Xena growled in frustration, but that was soon forgotten when one of the two halves of Gabrielle's Chakram suddenly plowed a furrow across her upper arm. Screaming in pain, she grabbed the bleeding wound and fell hard onto the floor, facing away from Gabrielle.

The Chakram melted back together and Gabrielle deftly caught it in mid-air. With a heavy heart, she began to move closer to where Xena had fallen.

A pool of blood was spreading out from underneath the stricken woman and Gabrielle's stomach made a series of churns and flip-flops when she realized that Xena was bleeding because of her.

*'But this isn't my Xena... she isn't my Xena...'* Gabrielle thought over and over as she knelt down behind the fallen warrior who was whimpering in a tiny voice.

Pushing all emotions aside, Gabrielle held the Chakram ready and grabbed Xena by the hair so she could pull her head back and slit her throat.

Springing the trap she had set for the blonde assassin, Xena rolled over onto her back and kicked out at Gabrielle, striking her squarely in the face and making her stagger backwards. With the immediate danger over, Xena vaulted to her feet and kicked out with both legs at the reeling Gabrielle.

The impact was hard enough to send Gabrielle flying, and she landed on the floor with a thud that knocked all the air out of her. She didn't have any time to recover because Xena instantly jumped on top of her and elbowed her across the face.

Hating this incarnation of Xena more and more for each passing moment, Gabrielle reached up and dug her fingers into the wound on Xena's arm. When the raven-haired warrior screamed and pulled back, Gabrielle fired off a hard blow across her windpipe that made her clutch her throat with a stunned, even frightened, expression in her blue eyes.

With Xena's fighting spirit rapidly fizzling out, Gabrielle flipped the two of them over and straddled Xena's gut. After raising the Chakram high in the air, she groaned in a pained voice, clenched her blood-soaked teeth and thrust her arm forward.

While Gabrielle's arm was still going forward, Ares materialized behind the two warriors and calmly put his hand on the back of Gabrielle's head.

Blacking out instantly, Gabrielle fell down on top of Xena's naked body in a boneless heap of dead weight. As she collapsed onto her former soulmate, she lost her grip on the Chakram which sent the circular weapon clattering harmlessly across the wooden floor.

Panting hard and groaning from somewhere deep in her throat, Xena pushed Gabrielle off her and rolled away from the carnage.

"Thank you, Lord Ares. By Charon's balls, she was a tough bitch," Xena said hoarsely, clutching her aching throat.

"Well, she should be, considering her teacher," Ares said under his breath, taking in the glorious sight of the naked woman in front of him. "Oh, and she still is," he said out loud.

"What...? You didn't kill her?" Xena said as she staggered to her feet, clutching her bleeding wound.

Ares nudged Gabrielle's leg with the tip of his leather boot. When the blonde woman didn't respond, he smirked and walked over to tend to Xena's injury. "No. She's merely unconscious."

"But why?"

"Never question my actions, Xena," Ares said, gripping Xena's injured arm harshly.

"Yes, Lord Ares," Xena said through clenched teeth. When Ares released the grip, she took a half-step back and let out a pained sigh. "By the way... how did she get that Chakram?"

"I'll tell you later. Throw her into the dungeon and get a healer for her. When she wakes up, her head will feel like something Cerberus puked up."

"Oh... you aren't even going to let me torture her? I want to skin her alive for what she did to my arm and my throat!" Xena said angrily, showing Ares the injury on her arm that continued to bleed profusely.

"There'll be plenty of time to do that later. And that little thing... pah, that's not even a scroll cut, Xena," Ares said and moved his fingers up Xena's injured arm. In their wake, the wound magically healed itself.

"Thank you, Lord Ares," Xena said and flexed her biceps to check if the wound had really been healed.

Ares flashed Xena an evil grin as he began to take off his vest. "You're welcome. Now, what do you say we work off your battle rush? I have the perfect remedy. Mmmm?"

Xena responded by smiling and kneeling down in front of the God of War.

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A candlemark later, Xena - having donned her full battle dress - led a group of heavily armed soldiers across the torch-lit courtyard and over to the staircase that would take them down to the dungeons.

Two of the soldiers carried the still unconscious Gabrielle between them, making sure that her feet were dragging through the worst of the horse dung and the open sewers.

Hoping to impress his mistress, Cholerus ran ahead down the six steps and started pounding his fist against the massive oak door that served as the gate to the dungeon. "Open up in there, we have a prisoner for you!" he shouted through a narrow slit in the door.

After the jailer had worked several locks and bolts, the door slowly creaked open, releasing a horrid, stinking cloud of rotten food, unwashed bodies and human waste out into the courtyard.

Scrunching up his face, Cholerus took a step back to make way for Xena and the soldiers carrying Gabrielle. Once they had all gone through, he closed the door behind them.

The dungeon was indescribably filthy and dark; the scattered torches weren't good for anything apart from sending out cascades of soot. Disease-infected rats scurried along the floor, leaving droppings behind everywhere that not only smelled awful but that made the stone floor very slick despite the straws that had been distributed unevenly - and if that wasn't enough, large curtains of cobwebs made by grotesque, hairy spiders adorned most of the walls and the ceilings.

"Throw her in there," Xena said, pointing at a cell that already had five people in it.

The soldiers followed orders by opening the cell door and giving Gabrielle such a hard shove that she ended up face-down on the dirty floor, scaring two rats and a big, fat, hairy spider into hiding.

Walking up to stand in the doorway between the sturdy iron bars, Xena put her hands behind her back and broke out in an evil grin. "How are things, Varia?"

The Amazon queen answered by spitting at Xena.

"That good, huh? What did he do?" Xena said, pointing at the body of a man that had been dumped in a corner of the cell - the man had his breeches around his ankles.

"He tried to rape one of us," Varia said with a growl.

"So you killed him? There's hope for you yet. Well, I trust you'll take good care of this assassin. She'll be a handful when she comes around, even for you," Xena said and walked out of the cell. Waving her hand, she signaled one of the prison guards that he should close the metal door.

"Assassin?" Varia said, looking at the new arrival. It didn't take her one heartbeat to recognize Gabrielle, and she whipped her head around to glare at Xena with a puzzled expression on her face.

Xena noticed the puzzled look but didn't think much of it. Instead, she cocked her head and leaned against the metal bars. "I'll be back some time tomorrow with a few instruments of pain. I've just learned a new technique from one of our eastern friends that's supposed to be highly effective in breaking down a woman's ability to resist an interrogation. You wanna know how it's done?"

"No, I don't, you damn sadist!" Varia said and beat her fist against the bars of the cell.

"Well, I'm going to tell you anyway. For this technique, you need a very sharp pair of scissors and a glowing poker. First you strip her naked. That's always a good start, right? Then you take the scissors and surgically remove her nipples. After that, you use the glowing poker to cauterize the wounds. If she still doesn't talk, you take the scissors and remove her..." Xena said, holding her hand between her legs. "Get the picture?" she continued, winking at Varia.

"You psychopath! You'll burn in Tartarus for this, Xena!"

"Let's see about that. Once the assassin wakes up, tell her what I just told you. Perhaps that'll persuade her to rat out on her employers."

Xena moved away from the bars and went back to the heavy oak door. "Cholerus, we're leaving!" she barked, waiting for her right-hand man to open the door. When he did, she turned around and gave Varia a mock salute.

"You bitch!" the Amazon Queen roared, but Xena simply laughed off the curse.

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On the filthy floor of the cell, Gabrielle groaned a few times and tried to get up, but she was too weak to support herself.

"Lea, Zella, come give me a hand," Varia said as she grabbed hold of one of Gabrielle's arms. The two Amazons stepped forward and helped their queen carry the unresponsive Gabrielle over to one of the two benches in the cell.

"Queen Varia, I don't understand. Isn't this...?" Zella said, scratching her hair.

"Yeah, that's exactly who it is. I think I'm beginning to see what's going on here. Queen Gabrielle, can you hear me?" Varia said, gently slapping Gabrielle's cheeks.

Gabrielle groaned again and her eyelids began to flutter. Almost immediately, she clapped a hand over her eyes when even the dim light in the dungeon seemed so bright that it reminded her of staring into the sun.

"Gods... my h- head. Wh- what h- happened...? Where am I?"

Taking a filthy piece of cloth from one of the other Amazons, Varia began to wave it back and forth to get some air down to Gabrielle's pale face. "You're in the dungeons of Xena's castle. We're here, too... the last of the Amazons."

"Amazons...? Is V- Varia here?"

"That's me, Gabrielle," Varia said and put a warm hand on Gabrielle's cheek. "Xena attacked our village. Nearly everyone was killed."

"Gods, no. Oh, no, no..." Gabrielle moaned, trying to sit up on the bench. With the help of a few strong Amazon hands, she finally managed to sit up straight, though she was still quite weak. "Wh- what happened? Ares told me he'd do it, but..."

"They attacked us a few nights ago. Xena was there personally," Varia said grimly, sitting down next to Gabrielle.

"It isn't the Xena we knew, Varia. You don't know everything. Xena... My Xena... is dead. She was killed in a land far, far away from here," Gabrielle croaked. A few tears escaped her eyes and trickled down her cheeks, but she did nothing to stop them or wipe them away.

A chorus of sighs spread out among the watching Amazons and they all lowered their heads to show respect for their Sister's loss.

"I'm so sorry to hear that, Gabrielle. It explains a lot," Varia said and pulled Gabrielle into a sideways hug.

Sniffing, Gabrielle finally wiped the tears away with the back of her hand. "Thank you. S- somehow, Ares has resurrected the old Xena... the evil Xena," she continued, burying her face in her hands.

"Mmm. I had feared it would turn out to be something like that. Her eyes... her eyes are as cold as the grave. The real Xena's eyes were warm," Varia said quietly.

Commotion at the door to the courtyard made the Amazons look up, all fearing that it would be Xena back to carry out the sadistic plan she had described earlier.

The prison guard lumbered over to the door and worked all the locks and the bolts, finally opening the heavy oak door to reveal one of the castle's healers; an elderly man with a white beard and thin hair, wearing a pale blue robe and carrying a heavy-looking bag.

"Mistress Xena sent me here. I'm Eurethius, the healer," the elderly man said. The prison guard nodded in return and stepped aside to let the healer in.

"Where is the assassin? Oh... never mind," Eurethius said as he looked around the cell, quickly spotting the frail-looking Gabrielle.

"Prisoners, get to the far wall of the cell or you'll taste my club!" the prison guard said and raised the aforementioned item.

"Do as he says, Varia. It'll be all right," Gabrielle said and put a reassuring hand on the Amazon queen's arm.

Grunting, Varia got off the bench and joined her fellow Amazons at the far wall of the cell.

"All right. Let's see what's... by the Gods! There's a dead man in here! Jailer, why is there a dead man in here?" Eurethius said, clutching his medicine bag and taking a step away from the corpse.

"They killed him," the guard said matter-of-factly.

"Well, get rid of it! Sweet Athena!"

"They killed him, they gotta live with him. Don't mean nothin' to me," the guard said and crossed his arms over his chest.

"This is barbaric..." Eurethius grumbled under his breath as he walked through the filthy cell, raising his robe and tip-toeing along so he wouldn't step in anything disgusting.

Groaning under his breath, Eurethius sat down next to Gabrielle and turned her face towards him. "All right... are you really an assassin? You don't look like much of an assassin to me," he said and began to study the extent of her injuries. "Both lips split, teeth are all right. Bruised cheekbones, eyes are all right... if a little red. Is anything wrong with you, apart from the obvious?"

"I have a splitting headache," Gabrielle croaked.

"Hmmm. Turn your head the other way." When Gabrielle complied, he ran his fingers through her hair to check for damage to her scalp. "No blood or other visible injuries. Maybe you have something called a concussion."

A loud crackle of ozone right next to them made all the people in and near the cell jump in surprise. When Ares appeared in his customary blue cloud, the jailer bowed deeply, but the God just waved his hand dismissively.

Varia jumped forward and raised her clenched fists at the God. "Ares, you bastard! Haven't you done enough damage already?"

Ares just lifted his feet and looked under the soles of his boots. "That's funny, I thought I heard a mouse squeak. Nah, all clear," he said and walked over to Gabrielle where he unceremoniously pushed the healer off the bench.

"What are you doing here, Ares?" Gabrielle croaked.

"I've come to check up on my second favorite subject. Hey, that was a sexy fight you and Xena had. I shoulda known that pitting the two of you against each other would lead to fireworks," Ares said and raised his hand to caress Gabrielle's cheek.

Gabrielle snorted at the God's words and tried to move away from him, but he grabbed her arm and held on tight.

"I'm glad to see you have some darkness within you, Gabrielle," Ares said in a menacing tone. "You were about to kill Xena. Warms my heart, that."

"It would, you sick bastard..."

"Mmmm. Yeah. Of course, it would've been for naught. The moment you killed her, I would've resurrected her again. Only this time, she'd be worse. Stronger, less friendly, more like... well, me."

"Then I'll kill myself right now!" Gabrielle said and tore her arm free of the God's grip.

"I can arrange that!" Ares said strongly, grabbing a large handful of Gabrielle's hair and pulling her face so close to his that she could feel the evilness pouring out of him.

"No, Gabrielle!" Varia said and jumped forward, but she and the other Amazons were stopped by Ares releasing a Godly fireball at them.

"Stay! That's a good mouse," Ares mocked before he turned his attention back to Gabrielle. "You wanna die, Gabrielle? Like I said, I can do that. It would be so easy. Tell me, do you feel this?" he continued and moved his hand down to Gabrielle's neck. Pushing his thumb into the base of her skull, he created such an intense pain that Gabrielle nearly passed out.

Her face contracted into a grotesque mask of pain and she was unable to stop tears from escaping her eyes and staining her cheeks.

Watching with glee, Ares broke out into an evil laugh. "If I increase the pressure, I'll crush your skull like an egg. It produces a wonderful, little crunching sound that's so damn sexy it makes me giddy... of course, you'd be too dead to hear it, but your Amazon gal pals over there would all get the full experience. So, it's make-up-your-mind-time, Gabrielle. You. Wanna. Die?"

Through the waves of unbearable pain from the lower part of her skull, Gabrielle managed to croak a strangled 'no'.

Sighing, Ares reluctantly let her go, shaking his head as he deposited Gabrielle back down on the bench. "I'm not a cruel God. If you leave this place, I'll let you live in peace with your sister and your niece. If you stay and try to find Xena again, I'll throw you and your family to the wolves. Get it?"

Gabrielle nodded, clutching her aching neck.

"Good. It was a clever move to have Aphrodite take care of them, but my airhead sister is powerless against me. After all, I am the God of War!" Ares said and disappeared in a pale blue cloud.

As soon as Ares had left, Varia rushed over to Gabrielle to support her before she fell down. "Healer! She needs your help again," Varia said, wrapping her arms around Gabrielle's shoulders.

"What is going on here...? Why did Ares talk like he knew her? That's preposterous... even when all the Gods were around, they never cared two dinars about us people," Eurethius said to Varia while he once again dug out his tools so he could examine Gabrielle.

"It's a long, long, long story, healer. Is she all right?"

"Well, no, but she doesn't have any new injuries," Eurethius said and rose from the bench after giving Gabrielle a brief check-up. "She needs a lot of rest and..."

"Will you stop talking about me like I'm not here!" Gabrielle said angrily, pushing the healer away from her. When she tried to shake her head, she was assaulted by a wave of nausea that nearly made her lose her lunch. Leaning back against the filthy wall, she closed her eyes and let out a long, pained groan.

"I have a few herbal extracts that I think she should take. Here they are," Eurethius said after digging into his bag. "You just mix them with water in a mug or something."

"Won't work, healer. They won't allow us any water," Varia said.

"What? That's barbaric! Let me have a word with the jailer. Jailer! Jailer!"

The uncouth prison guard got off his chair and lumbered over to the cells. With a deep sigh, he put his hands on the bars. "What is it this time, healer?"

"I demand that these women get some water! How can you deny them water for Asclepias' sake?"

"Xena's orders," the guard said calmly.

"This is outrageous! Dead bodies in the cells... won't allow them water... what's next? Rats for dinner?" Eurethius said indignantly, earning himself a few snickers from the Amazons.

"That's not a bad idea, that... we've got plenty of 'em. If I give them water, will you shut up?"

"For now, yes," Eurethius said and adjusted his pale blue robe.

The guard rolled his eyes and left the cell. A couple of candelrips later, he came back pushing a small cart with a heavy barrel of water. Reaching behind him, he took a dipper and dunked it into the barrel.

When he wanted to move the dipper into the cell, it didn't fit between the bars.

"Oh, Hades' nuts..." he said and put the dipper back in the barrel. "All of you, over in the corner! You, too, healer. If you don't move, you can forget all about the water," he continued.

"I think we should do what he says," Eurethius said and put his hand on Zella's arm to shepherd her and the other Amazons into the corner - but when she shot him a fierce glare, he changed his mind and removed his hand in an instant. Taking the safer approach, he helped Gabrielle on her feet and over to the other bench.

While that was going on, Varia was putting the final touches on a devious plan. Nodding to herself, she put out her arms and moved the Amazons into the corner. "Come on, Amazons. The men are right for once. We better get over there. You should always follow your Queen's lead," she said with an enigmatic smile.

The other Amazons grumbled, but complied.

Once the prison guard had opened the cell door, he walked into the cell with hesitant steps. Holding the full dipper in one hand and his metal-tipped club in the other, he never took his eyes off the Amazons on his way over to a small basin in the far corner of the cell.

When he bent down to put the water into the basin, Varia made a gagging sound and threw her hands in the air. "Gods, not into the pisspot! For Artemis' sake, jailer, show some mercy!"

"Whut? This isn't the...?" the jailer said and took his eyes off the Amazons. A split second later, Varia had wrestled the club out of his hand and had beaten him over the head with it. Slumping to his knees, the jailer let out a pitiful groan that only grew stronger when Varia clobbered him for a second time.

"He must have an iron head!" Varia growled and put all her weight behind the third hit that finally made the guard go down for the count. "All right! Zella, Carra, get Gabrielle and the healer. Melliah and Lea, come with me!" she continued, pushing the cell door fully open.

"I can walk... I can walk, for crying out loud!" Gabrielle said as the two Amazons grabbed hold of her arms - in vain, as they wouldn't listen to her.

One after the other, the Amazons streamed out of the cell and into the narrow hallway that led to the oak door. Varia, Melliah and Lea all ran down into the guardroom but found it to be empty.

A row of cloaks were hanging on hooks on the far wall, and in one of the corners, there were several barrels similar to the one the jailer had moved into their cell. Spotting an unlit torch on a desk, Varia went over to pick it up.

"Melliah, grab those cloaks, they'll come in handy. Lea, break those barrels open. Maybe there'll be some food in one of them," Varia said, pointing at the items. Moving fast, she went over to a small fireplace and lit the torch by putting it into the fire.

"Water or ale, Varia, all of 'em," Lea said after having lifted all the lids.

"We need to drink as much water as we can. Who knows when we can get some more. Come on, we need to hurry," Varia said and ran back out into the hallway.

"Varia... listen to me... you must leave at once. When Xena finds out that you've escaped, she'll explode," Gabrielle said, leaning against the wall for support.

"We'll leave, but you're coming with us," Varia said, moving the torch to her other hand so she could hold Gabrielle, but the blonde woman refused the help by putting her hands in the air.

"No."

"Gabrielle...!"

"I said no, Varia. I'm staying. I need to take this to the inevitable conclusion."

"But you heard Ares... he'll kill you and your family!"

Gabrielle shook her head slowly, gaining a steely quality to her eyes and voice. "This evil must be stopped and I'm the only one who can do it. I have to kill Xena before she can do any more damage. I'll just have to be so effective there won't be anything left for Ares to resurrect."

"Gods, Gabrielle, how can you... she's your soulmate!"

"No, this Xena isn't," Gabrielle said hoarsely. "This Xena is the bastard spawn of Ares. She's nothing more than a vessel of evil, so dark and twisted that she doesn't deserve to live."

The harshness of Gabrielle's words made Varia break out into an icy shiver, but deep down inside, she knew that the blonde warrior was right. "Even if you're successful, you'll never make it out of there alive. Ares will see to that," she said and pulled Gabrielle into a warm embrace.

"So be it. The next time we'll meet will be in the Realm of the Dead. Be strong, Varia. The Amazons need you."

Varia discreetly wiped away a few tears and took a step back from the blonde warrior. "We'll go north, far north. We had contact with a few tribes there."

"All right. But you better do it fast. Xena has a long reach, and if I fail my task, she'll come after you," Gabrielle said and clenched her fists.

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A few candle-drips later, Varia and Carra pulled the heavy oak door open and slithered up the stairs to check out the courtyard. Even though everything seemed quiet, they put on the dark brown cloaks they had found in the guardroom so they could blend in.

Varia waved the other Amazons and the healer up towards her, waiting impatiently for the others to join her at the top of the stairs.

"Queen Varia, may I come with you? I wouldn't like my neck to be stretched and I fear it would be once mistress Xena finds out you're missing," Eurethius whispered into Varia's ear.

"All right, but only as far as the next village. We're Amazons, not babysitters," Varia replied in a matching whisper.

"Ohhhhh, thank you, Quee..." Eurethius said, forgetting all about whispering.

"Will you keep quiet!" Varia said, slapping a hand into his gut.

"Sorry..." the healer said, nursing his aching belly. With a nod, he hurried after the other Amazons towards the main entrance.

Gabrielle ascended the stairs as the last of the little group. She was still a bit unsteady on her feet, but she had improved greatly in the intervening candle-drips.

"Gabrielle, are you sure you want to do this?" Varia whispered.

"I have to. There is no other way," Gabrielle said and clasped arms with the Queen in the traditional Amazon salute.

Moments later, Varia hunched over and walked briskly towards the main entrance, leaving Gabrielle all alone in the quiet, torch-lit courtyard.

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After waiting for a few candle drips to make sure Varia and the others had been able to exit through the main gate without problems, Gabrielle quickly ran down the grand staircase in the tower, headed for the kitchen to find a few knives she could use as weapons in the coming struggle.

Once she was fully armed, she began to move upwards in the tower, moving fast but doing it in a leisurely fashion so she wouldn't attract unwanted attention to herself in case she bumped into someone.

As she went past the grand dining hall, she had to stop and rub her eyes at the unexpected sight - in the otherwise so noble hall, an orgy of Olympian proportions had broken out with scores of stark naked bodies copulating wildly and randomly with each other; soldiers, noblemen and -women and servants alike.

Gabrielle's jaw began to slip down her chest as she spotted several of the servant girls she had been standing in line with; even the homely, big-boned woman had found herself a stud, namely Wallona's assistant, the huge man in the bear skin. Shaking her head, Gabrielle soon snapped out of it and continued upwards with surprised - and not a little embarrassed - laughter bubbling up from her chest for the first time in moons.

Her laughter died down when she reached the door to Xena's quarters. A single soldier was standing guard, and that made Gabrielle worry that Xena wasn't in there after all.

*'On the other hand, when has she ever needed protection?'* she thought and slowly drew one of the knives she had stolen in the kitchen.

Taking a deep breath to keep her aim steady, she pulled her arm back and then released the knife. After zinging through the air on a perfect trajectory, it struck the soldier right in his heart and killed him instantly.

Gabrielle ran over to the fallen soldier and pulled out the knife. She looked at the fresh blood, remembering a few other times in her life where she had been in a similar situation. With a sigh, she wiped the knife off in the guard's shirt and reached for the door handle.

As the door opened with nary a hitch or a squeak, Gabrielle's sixth sense told her she was about to walk into a trap, but her conscience forced her to go ahead with the gruesome task, her own safety be damned.

The chamber was dark; both of the large windows had been covered by thick curtains. The tell-tale musky smell of sex was still lingering in the air, triggering Gabrielle's mind into showing a very much unwanted flashback to Xena's escapade with Wallona.

Gabrielle readied the biggest of the two knives and began to move silently towards the king-sized bed. In the darkness, she could just about make out a figure lying under the covers.

The easily recognizable sound of deep, even breathing was clearly heard, so Gabrielle didn't pay attention to the rest of the room.

Moving closer to the bed, she could feel her hands begin to tremble, but she forced herself to focus solely on getting the job done.

When she finally reached the bed, she walked around it and put a gentle, probing hand on the lump lying under the blankets to make sure Xena wasn't trying to trick her - when she felt that it actually was someone sleeping and not a couple of rolled-up pillows, she closed her eyes and remembered a few of the good times she and Xena had spent together.

*'You know, where I'm headed, there'll be trouble.'*

*I know.*

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

*That's what friends do. They stand by each other when there's trouble.*

*All right...friend.'*

*'The moment you pick up a sword, you become a target. And the moment you kill...*

*The moment you kill... What?*

*Everything changes. Everything.'*

*'Gabrielle... when you thought I was dead, you risked your life to try and take me back home.'*

*It was your last wish. For all that you've given me, and all the times that you saved my life, I would go to Tartarus and back just to carry it out.*

*I used to wonder whether I'd ever make it back... now I know that, one way or another, I'm going home one day. Thank you.'*

*'But, Xena... that is not right. You're all that matters to me.*

*If there is a reason for our travels together... it's because I had to learn from you... enough to know the final, the good, the right thing to do.*

*I love you, Xena. How am I supposed to go on without you?*

*I'll always be with you, Gabrielle. Always.'*

Crying silently, Gabrielle gripped the knife with both hands and buried it hilt-deep into her soulmate's throat.

Waking up with a horrific, gurgling scream that made Gabrielle's skin crawl, Xena began to fight for her life. Her limbs thrashed about wildly and she tried to pull the knife back out, but she wasn't able to. After a candelrip, her limbs calmed down. After two, it was all over.

The tangy smell of fresh blood was so overwhelming that Gabrielle left the knife in Xena's throat and took a few staggering steps backwards until her back came into contact with one of the tapestries covering the walls. Sobbing, she slowly slipped down onto the floor where she buried her face in her hands and began to cry for real.

Suddenly and without warning, the two heavy curtains were torn down from the windows, allowing the moonlight to stream into the bedroom. At once, the bed was illuminated, revealing that the person Gabrielle had killed wasn't Xena but Allora, the servant girl who had traded her dark brown dress for Gabrielle's silver armbands.

Fighting down a rising tide of bile, Gabrielle shot to her feet and looked towards the windows.

Xena calmly stepped out of the shadows, holding one hand behind her back and the dark Chakram in the other. "Very nicely done, assassin. You certainly showed no mercy. Too bad you killed the wrong woman," she said hoarsely.

"Xena...?"

"That's right. Did you think I was a ghost? Where did you get this?" Xena said, holding up Gabrielle's Chakram.

"What does it matter now?"

"Because Lord Ares told me that he had my Chakram tailor-made for me."

"Not the first time Ares has lied to you, Xena."

"No?"

"No."

"Hmmm," Xena said, casually moving closer and closer to Gabrielle. Before long, the two women were standing only a few inches apart.

When Gabrielle's nostrils picked up the mix of leather, bronze and Xena's natural scent that she knew so well, the corners of her mouth twitched and she let out a sharp breath.

Xena cocked her head and began to study the blonde warrior's impressive physique. "You intrigue me, assassin. I don't know why... but you do."

"My name is Gabrielle."

"Oh. That's a pretty name," Xena said, mocking Gabrielle by reaching out and putting an index finger on her nose like a proud parent.

Gabrielle reacted by swatting away Xena's hand and taking a step backwards, but Xena wasn't slow in following her, and soon, they were toe to toe again.

"Why are you backing away from me?" Xena husked.

"Why haven't you killed me yet? I was going to kill you," Gabrielle replied with a whisper, hoping against hope that she'd be able to get through to the real Xena.

"Ha, you did kill me! And, don't worry, I will. It's just that I rarely get to square off against such a worthy opponent. You intrigue me... and you excite me," Xena said and suddenly dove down to claim Gabrielle's lips.

Before their lips could make contact, Gabrielle gave Xena a hard shove that pushed the dark warrior several steps backwards.

"Playing hard to get, eh? Suits me fine. Makes the victory all the sweeter!" Xena said and threw her dark Chakram directly at Gabrielle's head.

\*

\*

## **CHAPTER 5**

## **"WHO NEEDS LOVE WHEN WE HAVE WAR, GLORIOUS WAR!"**

Gabrielle's eyes popped wide open when she saw the circular blade come straight for her, but instead of panicking, she flipped to the side and drew the second, shorter, knife from her belt.

When she had evaded the return pass of the dark Chakram, she threw the knife at Xena and flipped again to get on top of the bed.

Xena deftly caught the knife in mid-air and immediately laughed at Gabrielle's poor throw.

"Aw, come on. You can do better than that!" Xena taunted, balancing the butt of the knife in the palm of her hand. In one, fluid motion, she threw the knife back at Gabrielle, caught the dark Chakram and hooked it to her belt. "And you call yourself an assassin! Hah, ridiculous. You wouldn't last a day in my army."

Gabrielle replied by tearing the blanket off the bed, jumping up and going into a corkscrew flip.

The blanket fluttered to the floor, catching Xena by surprise and covering her completely. Cursing loudly, she took a step forward to try to get out of it, but her foot snagged on the blanket and she fell to her knees.

Gabrielle knew that Xena wouldn't stay down for too long, so she performed a backflip and landed right behind the fallen woman. Quickly pulling the blanket aside, Gabrielle snatched her own Chakram from Xena's belt and - adding insult to injury - gave Xena a kick in the backside that made her fall down again.

When Xena realized that she had been tricked, she roared and threw the dark Chakram. The blade tore through the blanket like a dagger through butter, loosening it enough for Xena to pull it apart.

Gabrielle slowly moved backwards, keeping her eyes trained on the dark Chakram as it zinged its way around the chamber. She raised her own Chakram high in the air, knowing that she had to time the throw perfectly.

After waiting for what seemed like ages for an opportunity to strike back, she threw her circular weapon and watched it shoot off on a course that would hopefully intercept the dark Chakram.

Finally getting free of the blanket, Xena laughed again as she tried to taunt Gabrielle into making a mistake. When she realized that her taunts had very little effect, she drew the sword from the scabbard on her back, twirled it and jumped forward to engage the blonde warrior the old-fashioned way.

Above them, the two Chakrams collided in a bright explosion that sent a shower of multi-colored sparks down onto the two fierce warriors. Glowing embers flew everywhere, landing on the bed, the carpet and in the hair of both women. For a brief spell, the fight took second place to brushing embers out of their locks, but they were soon back at each other's throats.

Gabrielle's Chakram returned to her hand without any problems, but Xena's dark blade fell limply to the floor, hitting one of the bedposts along the way which sent it rolling under the bed.

"Aargh!" Xena growled and swung her sword at Gabrielle in retaliation.

Already planning her next few moves, Gabrielle effortlessly jumped up and watched the blade whoosh past harmlessly under her feet. While she was suspended in mid-air, she decided to try a move she had seen Xena do countless times in the past.

Upon landing, Gabrielle first trapped Xena's sword arm between her legs and then twisted her hips, resulting in Xena whacking herself in the face with the flat of her own sword.

Roaring, Gabrielle backflipped away from the already moaning Warrior Queen, delivering a two-footed kick to her chest as a goodbye present.

Xena staggered backwards, clutching her aching mouth. Cursing and swearing in several different languages and dialects, she flexed her pectoral muscles which made the breast dagger pop up from its hiding place.

Flipping it over, she threw it at Gabrielle who was caught completely unawares, only seeing the small blade when it plowed a furrow across her cheekbone. The wound began to bleed almost immediately, so she put a hand on her cheek and flipped away from Xena.

It suddenly struck Gabrielle that Xena was now very close to where the dark Chakram had ended up, but she didn't even have time to finish that thought before Xena had dropped to her knees and was reaching in under the bed to get the weapon.

Gabrielle set off running towards Xena, hoping to make it across the chamber before the raven-haired warrior had time to reach the blade, but she was too late.

With a maniacal grin, Xena jumped to her feet and fired off the dark Chakram. This time, Gabrielle was too close to avoid it and she was struck on the right side of her head just above her ear. Luckily for her it was a glancing blow, but it was still hard enough to make her collapse on the carpet, seeing all kinds of stars and little black spots.

"Enough of this! It's time for you to die, assassin!" Xena roared and straddled Gabrielle's gut. In a reverse of the earlier situation, Xena now held the Chakram at Gabrielle's throat and both of them knew that she wasn't going to hesitate for even a second.

Staring certain death in the eye, Gabrielle used the only weapon she had left. Reaching up, she forced her arms past Xena's and jabbed the warrior's throat in two places, activating the pressure points.

Xena's eyes suddenly flooded with terror, and she dropped the Chakram and clutched her throat, wheezing and choking after the unexpected counter.

"I've cut off the flow of blood to your brain, Xena. You'll be dead in a very short while," Gabrielle said and kicked Xena off of her.

"He... help... me," Xena croaked.

"No."

"He... help!"

"I'll help you all right... help you die," Gabrielle said and hooked her own Chakram onto her belt. She got up and dusted off her hands.

A trickle of blood escaped from Xena's left nostril, but Gabrielle didn't care one bit. Instead, she put her boot on Xena's shoulder and pushed the dying warrior down on the carpet.

When a stream of tears began to leak from Xena's wide, frightened eyes, Gabrielle could feel her resolve crumble and she got down on her knees and used her thumb to wipe away a few of them.

"Goodbye, Xena. I loved you... but dying is the best thing that could happen to you now. We'll meet again some day in another life... in another time," Gabrielle whispered. With a faint smile, she leaned down to place a loving kiss on Xena's quivering lips.

"Gab... ri... elle," Xena said in a thick, strained voice. With the last of her strength, she raised her hand and touched Gabrielle's cheek in a gentle, even compassionate caress.

Gabrielle furrowed her brow. She had already moved her hand up to swat Xena's fingers away, but the unexpected sensations made her freeze. Her heart started hammering in her chest when she realized that something had changed.

"Your eyes! The w... the warmth has returned to them!" Gabrielle said out loud, leaning down to put her hand behind Xena's head. From one moment to the next, her heartrate doubled, turning quite painful as a terrible doubt began to sneak into her mind.

Unsure of what to do, she reached down to take off the pinch, but her conscience screamed in her ear that it was merely one of evil Xena's many tricks. As she was looking, the corners of Xena's lips curved upwards in a weak smile that hit Gabrielle in the gut like a sledgehammer - then Xena's eyes clouded over and rolled back in her head.

"Gods, no!" Gabrielle shouted and quickly jabbed her fingers twice into Xena's neck. When nothing happened, she tried again to take the pinch off, but her hands were shaking too hard to hit the right spots.

"No! No, no, no! Not again! Don't leave me, Xena..." she said, trying over and over to find the right pressure points.

Growing ever more frantic, Gabrielle burst into tears and bared her teeth in a desperate sneer. A barrage of emotions raced through her - anger, confusion, terror and even pure hatred. Hatred, directed at Ares for creating the evil Xena in the first place and at herself for allowing the darkness within her to overrule her love for her soulmate.

When the realization dawned on her that it was too late to save Xena, Gabrielle stopped the frantic movements and slumped to the floor. Once again feeling her heart shatter into a million pieces, she closed her eyes and wrapped an arm around Xena's prone, still body, praying for the darkness to engulf her, too.

Moments later, she jerked upright - her fingers could clearly feel Xena's heart beating strongly.

Confused, Gabrielle thought that she was imagining things, so to be sure, she scooted closer and put an ear to Xena's chest - she could clearly hear the warrior breathe. A touch on the side of Xena's neck confirmed that she had a pulse.

Gabrielle began to chew on her lips, racking her brain to come up with a solution. After a few heartbeats, she decided to try the pressure points again, so she loosened her wrists, breathed deeply and took careful aim.

Jabbing as hard as she could, she thrust her fingers down on the meaty parts of Xena's throat. The jab produced the most hideous crunching sound imaginable and Gabrielle instantly feared that she had made the problem worse.

Before Gabrielle had even had time to remove her fingers, Xena let out a long moan that made Gabrielle's nape hairs stand on edge.

"Xe... Xena...?" Gabrielle said, gently lifting Xena's head with her hands.

The moan segued into a rattling cough and finally into a croak that vaguely resembled Gabrielle's name.

"Xe... Xena? Can you hear me? Gods, I c- can't live without you... I won't live without you! Xena!" Gabrielle said, giving Xena's shoulders an almighty shake.

"All right, all right... I'm awake..." Xena croaked in an unbelievably rusty voice. She coughed again and began to move her right hand up towards her face. Gabrielle intercepted it and gave it a firm squeeze, hoping to feel their special bond.

When she was able to feel the warm, loving sensation very strongly, her bottom lip started quivering, and before long, she burst into tears again.

"You're alive! Ohhhh!" Gabrielle howled, dove down towards her soulmate and claimed her lips in a ferocious, bruising kiss. Once they separated, she wrapped her arms around the warrior's torso and gave it the crush of a lifetime.

"I was dead?" Xena croaked, making Gabrielle chuckle in between the sobs.

"Yeah. S- several times," Gabrielle said into the nook of Xena's shoulder.

"I can't remember any of it."

"I can't forget any of it," Gabrielle said quietly. Her body was still racked by the occasional sob, but hearing Xena's warm, smooth timbre soothed her soul and allowed her to get a modicum of peace for the first time since the events at Mount Fuji in Jappa.

"Shhh... come on. Come on, Gabrielle. Gabrielle...? Gabrielle, I'd like to sit up now," Xena said, trying to wrestle herself free of Gabrielle's iron grip so she could breathe more freely.

"Oh, Xena. It's just... I'm... I can't believe you're finally back. I just can't believe it," Gabrielle said and ran her fingers through Xena's raven-black hair.

"It's all right now."

"No, I'm afraid it's not, Xena. We're in a lot of trouble."

"Why?"

"Don't you remember any of what's happened with Ares?"

"Ares? No... but I have a bad feeling I won't like to hear about it..." Xena said and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Would you mind if I sat down in a chair? I feel so damn tired," she continued and staggered to her feet. With Gabrielle's help, she was able to walk over to the chair she had sat in only candelights before when she was waiting for the assumed assassin to arrive.

Once Xena was seated, she let out a long sigh. A split second later, the sigh got stuck in her throat when she noticed the dead body on the bed.

"What the... who's that?" Xena said, pointing at Allora's body.

"A servant girl," Gabrielle said in a downcast tone.

"Did... did I kill her?"

"No, Xena. I did. I thought she was you."

"Oh... uh..." Xena said and cast her soulmate a long, highly puzzled glance. "Gabrielle, I need to know all that's been going on," she said after a brief pause.

Sighing, Gabrielle pulled up another chair so she could sit next to her lover. Picking up Xena's hand and giving it a squeeze, she took a deep breath and began from the top. "Do you remember anything from our time in Jappa?"

"Jappa...? No. I haven't been to Jappa for... hmmm, it must be ten winters now, I think. We were in Jappa?"

"You died there," Gabrielle said flatly.

"Oh. I'm sorry."

Despite the serious situation and the horrible topic, Xena's apology had been so heartfelt that Gabrielle couldn't help but chuckle. Acting on pure instinct, she reached up and caressed Xena's face. When Xena leaned into her touch and kissed the inside of her palm, she felt such an intense sense of relief that she lost the plot completely and began to cry all over again.

"Jappa...?" Xena probed after a few moments of silent sobbing.

"It was a terrible time that got worse when Ares stole the urn containing your ashes and resurrected you. The old you... the evil you. He used you to lead a vast army of cutthroats, rapists and marauders... the scum of the Earth."

"He always was a bastard," Xena growled, clenching her fists.

"Your army has captured Corinth and I believe it's getting ready to attack Athens."

"We have to stop it!"

"Xena... we're just the two of us. We can't do anything," Gabrielle said and caressed Xena's face again.

"We need to do something... we can't just sit idly by while they... wait a candle-drip, what about the Amazons?"

Gabrielle looked down and shook her head.

"Was that me, too?" Xena whispered.

"I'm afraid so. Varia's tribe is mostly gone."

"Oh, no," Xena said and buried her face in her hands.

"Varia and a few remaining braves were prisoners in your dungeon, but they managed to escape."

"Is there anyone I haven't annihilated? Gods... Gabrielle, is your family all right...?"

Suddenly feeling cornered, Gabrielle got up from the chair and went into the center of the King's chamber. Rubbing her forehead, she turned away from Xena so she wouldn't see the tears in her eyes.

"What did I do?" Xena said hoarsely, gripping the armrests of the chair.

"That wasn't you. That was one of your commanders. He raped my sister and my niece, Sarah. But I settled the score," Gabrielle said quietly.

"Gabrielle, I'm so, so sorry to hear that," Xena said and shot up from the chair. In two steps, she was at Gabrielle's side and pulled her into an embrace.

"Well, none of us can change it now. I only wish I had been there sooner. I made a wrong turn somewhere in Indus, and-

Feeling her soulmate's pain like a knife in her own heart, tears began to run down Xena's cheeks. "It wasn't your fault, Gabrielle. It was mine... all mine," she whispered, hugging Gabrielle for all she was worth.

"No..."

"Yes, it was! I should've been able to resist Ares, but I couldn't. I'm as guilty as the commander. And this," Xena said and gently brushed her fingers across the injuries on Gabrielle's face, "this is my work, too, isn't it...?"

Gabrielle shook her head slowly and began to wipe her eyes. "It happened in the-"

"This is PATHETIC!" Ares roared the second he materialized, making both Xena and Gabrielle jump.

"You damn women and your damn emotions! Now look what you've done! You've ruined a perfectly good plan! For what? For a load of touchy-feely 'oh, I'm so lonely, Xena where are you? You're my soulmate, I can't go on without you' BULL!" he continued, throwing his arms in the air.

At once, Ares began to pace back and forth in the center of the King's chamber, almost wearing a hole in the carpet. Stopping abruptly, he pointed an accusing index finger at Gabrielle. "Hey, little girl, if you felt lonely, why didn't ya just go to Athens or Piraeus or wherever and buy yourself a three-dinar whore? I'm sure she would have humped you just as hard as Xena ever did!"

"You'll never understand the concept of love," Xena said, shaking her head at the God's ranting and raving.

"Love? Love?!" Ares roared, spitting out the word like a rotten tooth. "Who needs love when we have WAR! GLORIOUS WAR! And I should know, 'cos I AM the God of bloodlust, of carnage, of brutal beatings, of braining your opponent just for kicks, of brilliant world-sweeping campaigns that'll stop at absolutely nothing! I am war!"

"Well, we stopped that dead, didn't we, Ares?" Gabrielle said. She wasn't able to hide a smirk but that only spurred the God on even more.

"Temporarily, yes. But now I'll kill you both. Gabrielle, I'll just feed your carcass to the pigs, but Xena... I'll resurrect you again in a new and improved version that won't have any emotions whatsoever. Oh, it'll be a wondrous sight," Ares said and suddenly fired off a fireball at Gabrielle.

The dark blue ball of electricity hit Gabrielle squarely in the chest and sent her flying through the air a good four feet off the floor. Her flight was brutally stopped when she slammed head-first into the wall with a sickening thud. Gravity took over, and she slid down to the floor, leaving a red, slick trail of blood on the coarse wall.

"Gabrielle! Noooo!" Xena screamed and ran around the bed to check on her soulmate, but before she could make it all the way there, Ares pulled her back by her hair and forced her onto the floor. Straddling her hips at once, he clamped his hand down on her throat and began to squeeze the life out of her.

"I could just kill you with a wave of my hand... but this is much more fun. A much more manly way of killing, feeling the prey struggle and die in my hands!" Ares roared, constantly increasing the pressure on Xena's already tender throat.

Weakened from the earlier fight against Gabrielle, Xena could feel that she wouldn't be able to resist the God for long. Probing desperately with her fingers, she felt around for something she could use as a weapon, but the only thing within her reach was one of the legs of a chair that had been broken. Picking it up anyway, she used it to bash Ares across the face several times until he finally eased the grip.

"Oh, you're really asking for it now!" he growled and slapped Xena's cheek with the flat of his hand.

Enraged by the humiliation, Xena raised her legs and thrust her knees into the God's crotch. It didn't hurt him as much as it would have a mortal, but he still took his hands off her neck and let out a high-pitched 'oooooh'.

A split second later, Xena rolled away and vaulted to her feet. Ares was still pre-occupied with nursing his privates, so Xena jumped up and delivered a roundhouse kick to his face that sent him tumbling over onto his side.

After performing a forward flip that took her directly over to the dark Chakram, she bent down and picked it up, intent on throwing it at Ares - but a heartbeat later, she cried out in pain and dropped the circular weapon. Looking down at her hand, she could see that the blade had removed the skin from her palm and the inside of her fingers.

"Ouch, I bet that smarts," Ares said with a grin. "I told ya that it was tailor-made for you. The real you, natch. The weakling you've become can't even contemplate pickin' it up."

Holding her hand tightly against her body, Xena staggered over to the discarded blanket and tore off a strip that she used as a bandage. Hissing with pain, she tried to clench her fist but found that she couldn't.

"Look, there's no point in doing all that nonsense, Xena. I'll fix it for ya... as soon as I've killed you and brought you back to life." Moving quickly, he grabbed Xena by the collar and threw her across the chamber.

Flipping in mid-air, Xena landed on her feet but immediately jumped up again, aiming a spinning kick at the God's face that missed by an inch.

Knowing all Xena's moves by heart, Ares remained calm and waited for her to pull her legs back. Once she had, he went in deep and punched her so hard in the gut that she fell to her knees and began coughing and spluttering.

"Oh yeah, Xena... glad to see you've found your rightful place! On your knees with your face in my crotch!" Ares roared and kicked out at her.

Xena managed to avoid getting kicked in the head by rolling aside at the very last moment, but Ares' leg still struck her shoulder, numbing her arm.

Behind the bed at the other end of the chamber, Gabrielle groaned pitifully and staggered to her feet. Clutching her throbbing head, she watched in disgust as blood immediately seeped through her fingers and ran down her arm and onto the floor.

"Gabrielle!" Xena shouted, forgetting all about her own injuries. In two steps, she was at her soulmate's side and helped her sit down on the edge of the bed.

Gabrielle groaned again, blinking constantly to get the blood out of her eyes.

"The blood is coming from your eyebrow, Gabrielle. It looks worse than it actually is," Xena said and kissed Gabrielle's forehead.

Ares put his hands on the place where his heart was supposed to be and pretended to swoon. "Awwww, isn't this cute? The Weakling Princess nursing her worthless, little sidekick."

"Shut up, Ares!" Xena barked.

"Come and make me, baby. You know, I can keep going all night and then some. How long can you go on, Xena? Ten candlesticks? Fifteen? Sooner or later, you'll succumb to your mortal weaknesses and then I'll have you by the short hairs."

"Don't you ever get tired of talking to yourself?" Gabrielle said, rolling her eyes.

"Nope. Hey, I'll make you a wager, Xena. I'll bet that in twenty candle-drips, you and me will be in my chamber on Mount Olympus givin' and gettin' plenty, just like old times."

"You make me sick, you slimy bastard!" Xena roared.

"Wrong answer, Xena. Oh, well. Maybe I'll just resurrect Callisto instead," Ares said and fired off a huge fireball at the two women.

At the very last moment, Xena jerked Gabrielle out of the path of the fireball and threw the two of them down onto the floor. The fireball continued onwards and hit Allora's body which burst into flames on impact.

"Strike!" Ares said, pumping his fist.

The fire soon spread to the sheets and the tapestry on the wall behind the bed, and Xena knew they didn't have much time before the chamber would be filled by smoke.

"Gabrielle, we need to do something and it needs to be now! Can you... are you...?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm ready," Gabrielle grumbled and sat up. "We need to get out of here, Xena."

"First things first. Take your Chakram!"

"All right, got it," Gabrielle said and quickly snatched her own circular weapon off its little hook. "Now what?"

"Now it's time to hurt a God!" Xena said and shot up from her hiding place, rolled forward across the smoldering bed and picked up the dark Chakram.

"And what's that supposed to accomplish?" Ares said, putting his hands on his hips and grinning broadly.

"You'll see, you creep," Xena said through clenched teeth. "Now, Gabrielle... throw!" she shouted, ignoring the insane pain that shot up through her arm.

Gabrielle popped up from her hiding place and threw her own Chakram harder than she ever had. Almost at once, the two halves separated and screamed towards Ares' position in the center of the chamber.

Even though holding the dark Chakram hurt Xena terribly, she took careful aim and threw the weapon only moments after Gabrielle had released her own Chakram. As the blade left Xena's hand, a cascade of blood followed it and she buckled to her knees, clutching her hand and screaming in pain.

Moments later, the three Chakrams merged in a cataclysmic collision that created an intensely bright light strong enough to rival the sun. A shockwave of energy rushed through the chamber, blowing both Xena and Gabrielle off their feet and onto the floor where they quickly grabbed hold of the bedposts for support.

Staring wide-eyed at the Super-Chakram that came screaming towards him, Ares suddenly realized that the threat was real. Wide-eyed in terror, he scrambled to get out of the way, but it was too late - the powerful blade sliced through his ribcage, cutting his black core in two before continuing through him and embedding itself into the wall behind him.

The God of War swayed back and forth like a leaf in the wind, looking like he didn't understand a single thing of what was going on. With a prolonged sigh, he slumped to his knees and then keeled over, landing face-down on the carpet.

"Never retreat, never surrender, Ares!" Xena roared, throwing the God's own words back at him.

"Is he... is he dead...? Ares is dead?!" Gabrielle said incredulously, shaking her head in disbelief.

"Looks like it," Xena said and ran over to where Ares had fallen. Kneeling down, she put her good hand on his body to check. "Yep. Cold as yesterday's fish. Of course, he was like that even when he was alive..."

"Wow... how is that possible?" Gabrielle croaked, pressing a finger against her injured eyebrow to get the bleeding to stop. Groaning, she staggered to her feet and coughed several times to combat the thick, black smoke that had begun to creep along the ceiling and down the walls.

"No idea. Come on, we need to leave before the fire gets worse."

"Yeah. I'm right behind ya." Looking back over her shoulder, Gabrielle felt a strong pang of guilt in her heart when she looked at Allora's body that had already been consumed by the flames, and she decided on the spot to try to find the servant girl's family so she could apologize.

Xena quickly moved over to pull the Super-Chakram out of the wall, but the blade wouldn't budge no matter how hard she tugged. After a few attempts, she gave up and ran towards the door, coughing and wheezing from the smoke.

Gabrielle hurried over to the doorway to check for a possible ambush, but the smoke hadn't attracted attention yet. "Xena, where do you keep my sais?"

"Uh... I don't know. I have them?"

"Yeah, I never got them back... hey, where's my Chakram?"

"It's fused into the wall. I can't get it loose."

Hearing that, Gabrielle spun around and put her hands on Xena's shoulders. "But... my Chakram! And my sais!"

"I'll buy you some new ones. Come on, Gabrielle, we need to leave!" Xena said, pushing her soulmate out of the chamber.

"No, wait, I have some unfinished business," Gabrielle said and grabbed hold of the doorjamb.

Pulling herself back into the chamber, she stared at the body lying prone on the carpet. "Love always defeats war, Ares," she said, metaphorically thumbing her nose at the God of War.

"Are you quite finished?" Xena said, standing in the doorway.

"Yep. Xena, are you all right?"

"Mostly. My hand is a mess."

"The castle doesn't have a healer anymore. He left with the Amazons," Gabrielle said as the two of them hurried down the grand staircase.

"Perhaps we can find one in the next village. We'll just have to get-" Xena started to say, but stopped abruptly when they went past the double doors to the grand dining hall where the orgy was still in full swing.

Like Gabrielle's had done earlier, Xena's jaw began to slip down her chest and she rubbed her eyes several times. "Uh... buh..." she said, pointing at the squirming, writhing, moaning mass of naked bodies. One of the men - her former second-in-command Cholerus who was roughing up a sobbing servant girl - made a little bell go off in Xena's mind, but she couldn't place the man's face, much less his name.

"I'll tell you all about it later," Gabrielle said and tugged on Xena's leathers. Suddenly, strong voices rose up towards them from below and they shared a moment of panic.

Xena briefly chewed on her cheek but quickly came up with a plan. Putting on her game face, she leaned down to whisper in Gabrielle's ear: "Master and body slave."

Gabrielle shot her a dirty look but nodded in agreement.

Not long after, two officers walked past Xena and Gabrielle going up the stairs, saluting - and envying - their mistress who was extraordinarily busy devouring the mouth of a young, nubile slave girl.

Once the soldiers had gone out of sight, Xena and Gabrielle separated, wearing identical, goofy grins.

"It's been too long, love," Gabrielle whispered, running her fingers through Xena's hair.

"Far too long. Let's make up for it soon. But first, we need to get out of here."

"I gave up my sais and my Chakram. I'm \*not\* giving up my travel bag with my quills and my parchment and my diar-" Gabrielle whispered, but was cut off by another kiss from Xena.

"All right. Where did you leave it?" Xena said once they separated for a second time.

"Across the courtyard in a small storage room. I'll be back before you know it," Gabrielle said and zipped down the grand staircase.

Appearing to have all the time in the world, Xena simply leaned back against the wall and dared anyone to address her.

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Three candle-drips later, Gabrielle came back reporting the fire in the King's chamber had grown out of control and the entire courtyard reeked of smoke. "I can't believe they haven't spotted it yet," Gabrielle said quietly as she and Xena hurried down the stairs to get to the stables.

"Well, they appeared to be kinda busy," Xena said, looking back over her shoulder - so far, everything was quiet.

Once they reached the rear side of the stables, Xena stood up straight, pushed her shoulders back and assumed a regal pose. "Let me handle this," she mouthed to Gabrielle.

Nodding and staying in a state of high alert, Gabrielle only had time to say: "All right."

Xena cleared her throat as she stepped over the threshold to the stables, wearing a suitably arrogant expression that she hoped would scare anyone into submission.

"Mistress Xena!" the stable hand said, rising so fast from the chair he was sitting on that it fell backwards.

Once the stable hand had overcome his initial surprise, he began to stare at the injuries on Xena's and Gabrielle's faces, clearly wanting to ask what had caused them and equally clearly not daring.

"Give us two fresh, strong horses," Xena said in a steely voice. "The castle is too crowded. It's impossible to get any privacy here and my body slave and I need that quite badly."

"Yes, mistress," the stable hand said and bowed deeply.

While the stable hand was busy collecting the horses, Gabrielle leaned in and shot Xena a cheeky glare. "Enough with the body slave-thing already!" she whispered out of the corner of her mouth, but Xena just gave her a swat in her rear end.

"Mistress Xena, these two are some of the fastest you have," the stable hand said once he returned a few candlesticks later pulling two chestnut mares.

"Prepare them at once," Xena said and dismissed him with a cold wave.

"Yes, mistress."

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Not long after, Xena and Gabrielle galloped unhindered across the wooden drawbridge - the booth where the guards were supposed to be was empty - and disappeared into the darkness. After riding for nearly five candlesticks, they stopped to give the horses a brief respite.

"Well... now what?" Gabrielle said, pulling the travel bag higher up on her shoulder.

Xena's mare was quite skittish and she kept tearing at the reins to control it. "I... I don't know, Gabrielle. We need to get to Corinth so we can put an end to the occupation. I just hope they still think I'm their mistress," she said, bobbing back and forth.

"It's risky, Xena. Too risky. I don't want to lose you again... not after all this!"

"You won't."

"What about Ares? What's going to happen to people without a sitting God of War? Remember the last time that happened? It was pandemonium."

"I don't have an answer to that, either. I guess we'll have to wait and see," Xena said, working hard to control her horse.

Gabrielle nodded solemnly. "It's still true, you know... where we're headed, there'll be trouble," she said, remembering the exchange from one of their first nights together.

"Yeah, and friends stand by each other when there's trouble. Right?"

"Right. And lovers stand by each other, full stop."

Xena chuckled and rubbed her brow. "Oh, I feel like we're about to start over, you and I."

"I sense that, too," Gabrielle said warmly. Suddenly getting an urge to feel Xena's warm skin on hers, she reached out and squeezed Xena's hand.

The horizon was slowly turning orange from the fire that spread through the tower, and they were able to hear frantic shouting and scraping-like noises, almost like someone was trying to fight the fire.

"I sure hope the orgy-goers were able to get out of the dining hall..." Xena said with a chuckle.

"A naked fire-line...? There's a first for everything, I suppose. Hmmm... do you remember Wallona at all?"

"Vaguely. We... uh..."

"Yes, you did, but we'll talk about that later. Anyway, she stayed in the tower. I hope she's all right," Gabrielle said and tried to raise herself up in the stirrups to see better.

"You wanna go back and check?"

"No. She was smart, I'm sure she's sensed the danger. She's probably long gone by now," Gabrielle said, shivering when she thought of how she had been forced to watch the auburn-haired woman have sex with Xena.

"Well, let's go to Corinth, then," Xena said, tearing on the mare's reins to get it to turn back around. "If we are where I think we are, we've got quite a trek ahead of us."

"Oh, great. More trekking..." Gabrielle growled and threw her free hand in the air. "But at least we can't make a wrong turn in Indus this time."

"Huh?"

"Another thing to tell you later. Yah!" Gabrielle said, nudging her boots into the sides of the chestnut mare and taking off from the clearing.

Chuckling, Xena continued to look at the sky that grew ever more orange. After a few heartbeats, she sighed and turned her back to the burning castle and everything it represented.

With a Yah!, she nudged her horse into a canter and followed Gabrielle into the dark forest.

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**THE END.**