





"Jarring?" Gabrielle said in a dangerously steely voice.

"Jarring, yes," Xena said and concentrated very hard on stirring the fire. "I think you should keep the humor and discard the rest," she mumbled, looking anywhere but at her lover.

Gabrielle drew a sharp breath but let it out slowly without speaking a word. After a little while, she shrugged and picked up another scroll. "I... I think you're right, actually. Oh, I just wanted to emulate the legendary bards, but... I guess I'm not ready for that yet. I should just stick to writing our shopping list."

"What's that other scroll you're holding?" Xena said, thankful for getting a respite from the potentially lethal subject.

"Joxer's letter. *'Dear Gabrielle and Xena'* ... did you know he's the only one who addresses me first? Anyway, blah blah blah blah, *'would you mind swinging by Kelitamenea? One of my family members is in trouble and I think the two of you could help her.'* And here we are, sitting in this nice, little clearing on our way there," Gabrielle said and put away the scroll.

After taking the pot off the fire, Xena put a wooden spoon into their freshly made stew and poured a large portion into a bowl that she handed to Gabrielle. "Yes, here we are... and now the food's ready, too."

"Thank you," Gabrielle said and took the bowl, smiling as the delicious smell of the stew wafted upwards and into her nostrils. "Mmmm! You are getting better at cooking, love. Much better. It won't be long before you can move on from merely peeling the onions and onto actua-

"Oh, ha ha. Have some while it's hot," Xena said, knowing that there were only two things on Gaia's green Earth that could shut Gabrielle up - and they didn't have time for the other.

Grinning cheekily, Gabrielle did as told and took her spoon and dug into the stew. "So," she said around a mouthful. "About my Hercules scroll..."

Xena's only answer was a muted groan.

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After lunch, a nap and a discussion on the finer points of iambic pentameter - Gabrielle did most of the talking - the three travelers journeyed further onwards to Kelitamenea.

"... then he said, I know all about that, my mother was a blacksmith," Xena said and began to chuckle out loud.

While Xena spoke, Argo kept to a steady pace, gently swaying back and forth as she walked on a smooth dirt road on the verge of a small forest, keeping her two passengers safe on her broad back.

"Gabrielle...?" Xena said and looked over her shoulder at the bard when she hadn't heard a reply to her punch line.

Scratching her forehead, Gabrielle smiled at her lover and shrugged apologetically. "I'm sorry, Xena... I guess you had to be there."

"Hrmpf."

"But it was a funny story overall," the bard continued, tightening her grip around Xena's waist. "Are we there yet?"

Xena rolled her eyes and reached down to tickle Gabrielle's hands. "No, love, we're not. We still have a league to go. We'll be there by late afternoon."

"Oh... okay. Do you want me to tell you a story now?"

"Sure. But not the Hercules one," Xena said, quickly adding "no offence," before Gabrielle's eyes could burn a hole in the back of her head.

"None taken." - *grumble, grumble* - "All right, how about... uh..."

"Don't you have a funny one?" Xena said and steered Argo around a pothole in the road.

"What's up with you and funny stories all of a sudden? Huh? Usually, you can't get it violent enough."

"Eh, it was that gladiator show we watched yesterday. It got a little too much in the end."

Chuckling, Gabrielle nodded against Xena's leather-clad back. "Uh-huh? I wouldn't know, I had my eyes covered through the entire second half. Yeah... okay, how about... oh yeah, I got one-"

"The half-time show was all right, though," Xena mumbled.

"Whassat? Oh... the all-female dancing troupe from Sicily?"

"Who performed the Dance of the Seven Veils, yes. The last time I saw that much female skin was... when... I... visited... love, you're squeezing the life out of me... ugh!"

"Sorry," Gabrielle said, reluctantly releasing her possessive grip on the warrior's stomach. "As I was saying, I have a good one. Four friends were travelling together and they had already crossed mountains, forests and plains. Now, they faced their greatest challenge, a river. A wide, raging river that had already... what's that?"

When the story wasn't continued, Xena grimaced and looked over her shoulder. "Gabrielle, love, you know I'm not fond of those modern, structure-less stories. I prefer it to go from A to-"

"No, no... forget the story. What's that to our left? In the clearing...?" Gabrielle said and pointed at something odd in a small clearing not far from the dirt road.

Looking to her left, Xena could see a very small person sitting on a log, carving something that was too small to be identified from her position atop Argo. The person appeared to be a man as he had the beginnings of a red beard on his chin and cheeks; dressed in a bright green outfit over a white shirt, he wore black boots and a strange, pointy hat in a color that matched his suit.

"Xena, what in the world is that? Is that a satyr?"

"No, it's-" Xena started to say as she pulled Argo to a halt, but before she had time to finish her sentence, Gabrielle had increased the tempo of hers and had cut her off.

"Can't be... no... is it a... no. I don't know what that is."

"Actually, Gabrielle, I'm almost sure it's a-"

"Do you know what that is, Xena?"

For the next few seconds, the only sound heard was a rhythmical tapping of Xena's fingernails on the reins.

Gabrielle knew she had been a bad girl, so she reached up, brushed Xena's long hair away from her neck and placed a little, but loving, kiss on the warrior's bronzed skin. "Sorry. I'll keep quiet now," she whispered as she let her lips do the talking.

"It's a Leprechaun... but what he's doing in Greece, I have no idea," Xena said, looking at the little person.

"A... what? A leper-con? Is that someone who's escaped a leper colony?"

Chuckling, Xena reached down and caressed Gabrielle's arms. "Not quite, love. Come on, let's go talk to him."

"Okay," Gabrielle said and clambered back from her living pillow. With a little effort, she swung her legs over the side and jumped off Argo, pleased to give her sore behind another, unscheduled, rest.

Xena dismounted her horse and tied the reins to a nearby tree. Dusting off her hands, she walked up to Gabrielle and put an arm around the bard's shoulders. "I've heard stories about them when I visited Britannia a few years ago. They live on Erin, the emerald isle... the outer frontier of the Known World."

"Oh... fascinating. I better get my scrolls... maybe he has a few stories to tell," Gabrielle said and quickly took her scroll case and a spare quill.

"Maybe he has. C'mon, let's say hello," Xena said and began to move closer to the visitor, making sure to walk in the clear so they wouldn't spook him.

When they were close enough, the Leprechaun caught a whiff of their scent and looked up. For a second, he looked like he was about to bolt, but groaned and sat down with a bump, clearly nursing an injured leg.

"Oh look, he's hurt his leg, the cute little fella," Gabrielle said. "It's time for some of your many skills, love."

"Uh, Gabrielle, just because he's short doesn't mean that he's a child. And from what I know, they're fiercely proud and independent, so, uh..."

Gabrielle stopped their progress with a firm grip on Xena's elbow. "Oh, phooey! Of course we're gonna help him!"

Without bothering to wait for a reply, Gabrielle strode forward until she was right next to the Leprechaun. "Hello, dear, my name is Auntie Gabrielle. Have you hurt yourself?" she said in a sing-song voice as she knelt down in front of the visitor.

"Aye, luv, I bloomin' well 'ave. I stepped on a bloomin' rock while I wuz on me merry way, but it flipped an' I twisted me bloomin' knee!" the Leprechaun said in a small, yet strong voice.

Gabrielle let out an 'Awwwww' and began to lift the Leprechaun's pants to see if there was anything she could do to help.

"Oi! Wait a minute, lassie!" the Leprechaun said, holding onto the log with both hands so he wouldn't fall off it backwards. "Usually the lassies ask me first if I want ta lose me trousers! ...Oi! Ufff... no, 'ang on, will ye!"

Xena had been watching the scene unfold with an unreadable expression on her face, but when her lover began to manhandle the little person, she put her hands in the air and stepped forward. "Gabrielle, I don't think we should... Sir, please forgive my partner, she's just eager to help."

Looking up at the tall, leather-clad warrior, the Leprechaun's eyebrows began to move closer and closer together, something Xena knew was a bad sign. "There's eager to help and there's... Oi! That's quite enough, young lassie! If

ye go any higher, I'm gonna be dee-vorced by the morn! 'Ang on, will ye...! Listen, I 'ave a couple o' wives and seven'een little sprouts back 'ome an' I... ugh! Enough!" he suddenly barked and moved his open hand in an arch, creating a shower of little, sparkly stars.

When the shower of stars hit Gabrielle, she was blown backwards with a loud, surprised yelp. She flew a good twenty feet through the air before she landed with a soft *phlum* on the forest floor where she almost disappeared in a large pile of leaves.

"Gabrielle!" Xena shouted and hurried after her. Behind her, the Leprechaun huffed disgustedly, rolled his pants leg back down and vanished in a cloud of stars that slowly fell to the ground.

"Gabrielle! Gabrielle! Are... are you all right? Gabrielle...?" Xena said as she got closer. When she suddenly realized that her lover's arms and legs were so far apart that they simply couldn't be attached to a body in between, she panicked and began to tear through the pile of leaves, creating a veritable storm.

Removing the last handful of leaves, she stared in wide-eyed panic as a horrendous sight revealed itself to her - Gabrielle hadn't been torn apart, she had been... doubled.

"Ohhh... my head." - "Ohhh... my head," the two Gabrielles said, sitting up and clutching their identical, fair heads.

Left utterly speechless for just about the first time in her life, Xena let the handful of leaves flutter down to the ground before she sat down with a bump on the forest floor, staring so hard at the two Gabrielles that her bright blue eyes bugged out on stalks.

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"Gab... Gabrielle?" Xena whispered hoarsely, pinching her arm repeatedly to make sure she wasn't just imagining the whole thing.

"Ugh... yeah?" -- "Ugh... yeah...? Wait a minute... who's that?" the Gabrielle on the right said.

The one on the left looked down at herself and then at her double. "Who I am? I'm Gabrielle! Who are you?"

"You're not Gabrielle... I'm Gabrielle! You know, this isn't funny at all!" the other Gabrielle said.

Moments later, the two fair blondes began to growl at each other and shoot fire with their identical emerald green eyes.

Xena just clapped her hands over her eyes and let out a pained groan. "Wait... wait! Which one of you is *\*my\** Gabrielle?!"

"I am." -- "No, I am!"

The Gabrielle on the left jumped up and dusted off the seat of her rust brown skirt. "You. Are. Not. Gabrielle. I'm Gabrielle!"

The Gabrielle on the right jumped up and repeated the motion. "You're really Ares, aren't you? Well, you can reveal yourself now 'cos I'm the one, the only, the real Gabrielle!"

"Do you want to taste my staff?" -- "Do you want to taste MY staff?"

"GABRIELLE!" Xena barked, holding her arms up in the air. When both Gabrielles stopped bickering and turned towards her, the warrior rubbed her suddenly throbbing skull. "We have to get you back into one body somehow... I don't care which one of you is the real Gabrielle, but if you keep this up, you can find yourselves a new bedmate, ya get it? Okay? So pipe down, both of you!"

With that, Xena spun around on her heel and stomped back towards Argo.

The Gabrielle on the left put her hands on her hips and shot an accusing glare at the other Gabrielle. "You see what you made us do? You made Xena upset! You know how sensitive she is underneath her buff exterior. I'd go and apologize if I were you."

The Gabrielle on the right repeated the motion and cocked her head just a little bit. "Well, I'm not going to apologize 'cos you know full well that Xena is going to be perfectly all right in three candlerips... and besides... you made Xena upset, not me."

"I did not!" -- "Did, too!" -- "Did not!" -- "Did, too!"

Walking up to Argo, Xena could hear the Gabrielles continue to bicker and she shook her head repeatedly as she patted the Palomino mare's broad flanks. "Girl, when Gabrielle returns, don't get too surprised... something has happened to her," she said into Argo's ear.

When the horse whinnied in a worried tone, Xena patted her again and ran her hand down the large head. "No, she hasn't been injured again, she's just a little... beside herself. Uh, yes. In any case, don't get spooked, okay?"

Argo whinnied again and turned around so Xena could mount her. Once atop the mare, Xena got herself comfortable in the saddle and looked into the clearing where the two Gabrielles were still arguing. "Oh, this is gonna be the best time of our lives..." she mumbled, rolling her eyes.

When the two Gabrielles finally realized they were about to be left behind if they didn't catch up at once, they walked side by side through the clearing and onto the dirt road.

Predictably, Argo became spooked at the sight and bucked wildly, nearly unsettling Xena. "Whoa! Argo! Calm down, this is what I was talking about... whoa!" Xena said, trying to control the sidestepping warhorse.

"This is your fault!" the Gabrielle on the left said, poking the other Gabrielle in the chest with an index finger.

"Ow! No, this is *\*your\** fault," the other Gabrielle said, returning the gesture.

"You're both at fault!" Xena growled, finally able to get Argo settled down enough to stay in the saddle. "Now get up here so we can continue... uh..."

Suddenly realizing that there wouldn't be enough room for herself and the two Gabrielles, she rolled her eyes again and dismounted. "Go on, get up... both of you. But if you argue even the tiniest bit, I'm gonna... I'm gonna... do something so horrible the gladiator show yesterday will look like a play school compared to it!"

"All right, all right," the first Gabrielle said as she climbed up on the tall mare and scooted forward on the saddle. "But just for the record, I haven't been arguing. She's the one who's... I'll keep quiet now," she continued, cutting herself off before the twitch in the warrior's upper lip would turn into something worse.

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*Two candlemarks later.*

"- But on the other hand," the Gabrielle the closest to the saddle horn said, "if we add just a bit more description there, I believe the paragraph will flow better and in addition to that, it would make the character seem more likeable."

"Mmm... really?" the other Gabrielle said. "Well, I suppose we could do that. On the other hand-"

"No, I have the other hand," the first Gabrielle said, breaking out into a little snicker that soon claimed her twin as well.

"Oh, how could I forget...? Anyway, on the third hand, I think it's a moot point because the character would work better if we introduced her at the start of the chapter and not halfway through it."

"I disagree."

"Well, we have already tried to do introduce a pivotal character late on, but the feedback wasn't good, don't you remember that?"

"Oh, but we were so much less experienced then," the first Gabrielle said and waved her hand.

"Mmmm-yeah," the other Gabrielle said with a thoughtful nod. "Of course, I think the negative feedback was just a result of the many typos."

"I don't make typos!"

"Do, too!" -- "Do not!" -- "Do, too!"

"Well, if I do, you do, too!" the first Gabrielle said, huffing out loud and gripping the saddle horn.

"Do not, I rarely make typos," the other Gabrielle said, echoed the huff and crossed her arms over her chest.

Mumbling a few choice cusswords, the first Gabrielle leaned down and to her right. "Xena, isn't it true that my scrolls are pretty much free of typos? ... Xena? Xena...?"

The first Gabrielle sat up straight and looked at her partner who seemed to be sleepwalking with Argo's reins in her hand. "I think she's fallen asleep," she said over her shoulder.

"Nonsense, not even Xena can sleep and walk at the same time," the other Gabrielle said.

"Well, what do you call that, then?" the first Gabrielle said and pointed at the warrior.

"Earplugs."

"Oh..." the first Gabrielle said and took a better look at Xena - sure enough, she had stuck two little balls of parchment in her ears to block out the sounds produced by the bickering Gabrielles. "Well, I should feel insulted. But I'm not... I'm embarrassed. Because of you!"

"\*I\* should be embarrassed! You've done most of the talking!"

"Have not!" -- "Have, too!" -- "Have not!" -- "Have, too!"

Behind the earplugs, Xena gritted her teeth as she listened to her partner continue to argue with herself. Her mind had started going down a dangerous path where she strongly considered whether the Sisters of Gaia or the Hestian Virgins were looking for new recruits.

When she realized that she was probably too experienced to join any of those organizations, she started fantasizing about accidentally dropping the new Gabrielle off a cliff somewhere - but with that thought came a worrying realization that she didn't actually know which of the two Gabrielles was the original one...

Sighing deeply, she changed the reins from her left to her right hand. "Look, Gabrielle... can you please give my abused ears a rest? I can't go on like this."

Atop Argo, the first Gabrielle felt bad for upsetting her lover and she reached down and caressed the warrior's dark mane. "I'm sorry, love. I'll be quiet from now on, that's a promise."

"Ha! That'll be the day!" the second Gabrielle said, feeling annoyed that Xena was so obviously enjoying the first Gabrielle's hand on her hair. "And if anyone should touch Xena's hair, it's me! I'm her lover!"

"Wait a minute," the first Gabrielle said, "\*I'm\* her lover!"

"No way, I'm her lov-"

"WILL YOU SHUT UP?! SHUT UP, SHUT UP, SHUT UP!" Xena screamed, spooking Argo all over again. Panting hard, the warrior wiped cold sweat off her forehead and shifted the reins yet again. "You two listen to me now and you listen good... it doesn't matter which of you thinks she's my lover 'cos right now, none of you are! Get it?! Tonight, we'll be sleeping separately! In three beds!"

An oppressive silence spread between the three women that lasted for several hundred yards. Then, predictably, Gabrielle couldn't keep quiet any longer. "Oh, Xena," the first Gabrielle said, "I'm so sorry... can't we work something out? I mean... we've shared a bedroll ever since we made love for the first time. Oh, do you remember that? That was so wonderful... the special spot by the lake and..."

"That. Was. My. Special. Spot," the other Gabrielle growled. "You weren't even there!"

"Was, too! Don't tell me I wasn't there... I remember everything! Oh, it was so wonderful and we made love so beautifully and-"

"Gabri-\*elle\*...!" Xena said in a hoarse stage whisper, forcing herself not to think about drawing her Chakram.

"Oops... I guess you asked us to be quiet..." the first Gabrielle said.

"I didn't ask... I pleaded," Xena said hoarsely.

Suddenly the first Gabrielle let out a little, cheerful whoop that made Xena shoot her a look of pure, unadulterated exasperation. "Xena, I have \*the\* best ever idea... what if we... uh, all shared a bedroll tonight...? The three of us?"

When the words had filtered through Xena's earplugs, she stopped walking right between two steps, comically holding her right leg up in the air until she slowly let it down on the ground. "I... Gabrielle... you want t- to... you want to have a threeso- uh, a sleep-in... with yourself?"

"Well, you prefer to sleep on your back anyway, and I prefer to sleep on my side as you know... or rather, on your side," Gabrielle said with a snicker. "I could snuggle up to your right side, and the other Gabrielle could snuggle up to your left. That way, we'd all be able to relax."

Nodding enthusiastically, the second Gabrielle clapped her hands twice. "Oh, a girl could get used to that!"

Xena opened her mouth and then closed it again. Resuming the voyage towards Kelitamenea, she opened her mouth and closed it twice more over the course of the next fifty yards. "No," she finally said.

"Oh... why not?" the second Gabrielle said.

"Because I wouldn't be able to catch a wink of sleep all night."

"But-"

"No means no, Gabrielle!" Xena said decisively.

"Oh." -- "Okay," the two Gabrielles said, both shrugging in a very disappointed fashion.

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## CHAPTER 2

As the trio reached the outskirts of Kelitamenea, Xena took Argo and the two blondes on a direct course to the nearest stable. Once she was sure that her trusty - and slightly confused - steed was well taken care of, she took the saddlebags over her shoulders and walked back out onto the main street with the two Gabrielles in tow.

"Oh, you shouldn't carry both bags, Xena, let me take one of them," the first Gabrielle said, quickly followed by the other Gabrielle who said: "And I can take the other. That's the one with my scrolls and my spare quill."

"They're my scrolls and my quill, thank you very much!" the first Gabrielle said in a growl.

Sighing, Xena pulled both saddlebags higher up her shoulders. "No, Gabrielle. You should think about your knee. Just last night, you said that it's still a bit weak from the injury you suffered in Crete."

"Oh, I just said that to get pampered, really," the second Gabrielle said with an embarrassed snicker.

"But I didn't! What the Tartarus do you know, anyway? You weren't even there!" the first Gabrielle said, shaking her fist at her twin. "Thank you for looking out for me, love," she continued, touching Xena's elbow.

After waiting for a horse and carriage to drive past - whose driver nearly fell off the bench when he spotted the two identical twins - Xena crossed the street and stepped up onto the sidewalk.

"You're welcome. Do you think you can stay out of trouble long enough to rent us three rooms in this establishment right here?" she said as she went past a pair of double doors.

Both Gabrielles took a step back to read the name on the marquee - '*Hotel Messaline*.'

"Messaline...? Why is that familiar?" -- "Now, where have I heard that name before...?" they said as one.

Xena put down the heavy saddlebags and found their coin pouch in one of them. "I don't know where you've heard it, but ten years ago, she used to be a lady of dubious virtue," she said while she counted their dinars to see if they had enough for more than one room.

"Oh." -- "Ohhhh."

"Yes. I knew her when she was running another type of establishment in Gomorrah. She's cleaned up her act now, though. Now, Gabrielle, I'm quite sure she has seen everything on this Earth so she won't be startled by you... unless you begin to act weird. So don't," Xena said strongly, putting the heavy, jangling pouch into the hand of the Gabrielle nearest to her.

"Xena, can't we make a compromise on the rooms?" Gabrielle said, toying with the coin pouch. "Can't we just rent two rooms so you and I can still sleep together? I'd feel so lonely if we weren't sharing the bed."

The other Gabrielle pointed an accusing index finger at her twin, all the while trying to snatch the coin pouch from the other one's hand. "Oh, no you don't... she's my lover, not yours. If anyone should slee-

"Three. Rooms," Xena said in a steely voice she usually only used on the battlefield.

The voice was strong enough for both Gabrielles to nod and look down onto the sidewalk with rosy cheeks. "Three rooms," they said in unison.

"Thank you. Once you've sorted the rooms, stay in the lobby until I get back," Xena said and began to stride up the sidewalk.

"Wait...! Where are you going?" the other Gabrielle said.

Spinning around, Xena put her hands on her ample hips and narrowed her eyes at the two blondes. "To a tavern. I need a stiff drink!" she said before spinning back around and moving away so fast that she was quickly out of earshot.

Once Xena had turned sharp left two buildings down from the hotel, the first Gabrielle threw her arms in the air and made a face at her twin. "Now look what you've done! You've made her upset again! Just so you know, Xena gets really cranky when she has too much to drink!"

Grumbling severely, the other Gabrielle pushed open the double doors and began to step inside. "You're telling me? I know all about Xena getting cranky. And besides, I didn't do anything. You upset her..."

"I did not!" -- "Did, too!" -- "Did not!" -- "Did, too!"

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Entering the tavern, Xena kept standing at the doorway for a few seconds to allow her eyes to adapt to the semi-darkness. A short while later, she was able to pick up a few features from the interior of the bar, but established quite quickly that it was nothing out of the ordinary - seven tables, each with a few chairs, a long, wooden counter where a bar keep was busy reading a scroll, and a row of empty stools in front of the counter.

As usual, the tavern and the handful of patrons that were drinking ale from large mugs smelled of stale beer, old food and fresh sweat, but the heavy air was just like old times for Xena and she even felt the tiniest pang of nostalgia as she descended the two steps down from the entrance.

Looking around, she quickly found the person she was there for.

"Hey, Joxer," she said as she walked up to a table where a well-dressed, burly man was pestering a much thinner, but taller, would-be warrior in a ridiculous armor.

"Xe...! Oh... oh, thank the Gods you're he... I mean... Ah-ha! Good! I see my carrier pigeon found you!" Joxer said, suddenly changing from meek fellow to blustering hero halfway through the sentence just to impress the burly man.

The burly man - weighing at least two hundred and fifty pounds - turned around and leered at the leather-clad warrior. "Who is she supposed to be? Hippolyta, the almighty Amazon Queen?" he said, whipping his head back to Joxer. "Why, you little rodent... I oughtta give you a good slappin'," he continued, raising his hand.

Narrowing her eyes, Xena stepped forward and grabbed hold of the burly man's wrist and twisted it the wrong way. "Nobody, but nobody threatens a friend of mine," she said hoarsely.

"OOOOOW! You miserable Harpy!" the burly man howled, jumping up on tip-toes and staggering away from Joxer's table.

Grinning, Xena applied a bit more pressure to the man's wrist. "Beg' pardon" - *twist* - "that wasn't an insult, was it?" - *twist!* - "Because if it was" - *TWIST* - "it could get really painful for you."

"OOH... OOH... OHHH... n- no... no!"

"I thought as much," Xena said and let go of the man's wrist. "Now scram! I'm not in a good mood today!"

For a few seconds, the man considered talking back to her, but then realized it wouldn't be good for his health. Grumbling, he spun around and quickly left the tavern.

Joxer let go of the breath he had been holding and fell back against the backrest of his chair. "Thank you," he said, taking off his odd helmet so he could wipe his forehead. "I was about to become mincemeat..."

"Who was that and what was it all about?" Xena said and sat down on one of the other chairs at Joxer's table.

"Oh... long story, I'm afraid. Where's Gabrielle?" Joxer said and clasped arms with the warrior.

"She's at the hotel, renting, uh... a room."

"Okay. All right, that was Aggranon, one of the reasons why I sent for you. You see, Ophelia, my cousin's sister's half-cousin twice removed has got herself into a little trouble."

"Your cousin's sister's...?" Xena said, narrowing her eyes as she tried to follow the confusing chain.

"Half-cousin twice removed. Yes, she's a really sweet gal, too. Good-looking and blonde and she's got really nice blue eyes and, uh... she doesn't look anything like me."

"Uh-huh," Xena said, smiling crookedly.

Missing the little jab, Joxer waved at the bar keep to get him to come and refill the mug of ale he had been sipping from. "Anyway, like I said, she has got herself in trouble. Of the pregnant kind."

"Oh, Joxer...!"

"I didn't have anything to do with it!" Joxer howled in a voice that rose half an octave for every word. "By the Gods, Xena! What do you take me for? Goin' after a family member when there are thousands of needy, willing women throwing themselves at me?"

As the bar keep put down two mugs of ale, he briefly looked at Xena and rolled his eyes repeatedly. Grinning, Xena nodded in return and took the mug.

"I didn't mean it like that, of course," she said and took a swig.

"Of course..."

"So she's pregnant. But where's the problem?"

"Well... the father is the youngest son of the richest merchant in the valley. And he doesn't want to... I mean, the son, not the father... no, I mean..."

Sighing, Xena drained half the mug in one gulp and put it down on the wooden table with a clonk. "I get it, Joxer," she said in a flat voice.

"Anyway, the father of the fast approaching baby doesn't want to acknowledge that it's his... and now, he's hired a few goons to make sure my cousin's sister's half-cousin twice removed stays quiet on the matter," Joxer said and took a sip of his own ale that was far too strong for his tastes.

"Hmmm. I see. And you want Gabrielle and I to A, take care of the goons and B, get the merchant's son to see the error of his ways and make him accept his paternal responsibility?"

"Yes, but it's not going to be as easy as that, Xena. If that was all there was to it, I'd have done it myself days ago, ha-har! Ahem... Uh, yes, but you see, the merchant owns half the town and a great deal of the villagers depend on him to buy their produce and stuff."

Xena cocked her head and leaned back on the chair. Fiddling with her gauntlets, her analytical mind had already begun to build a plan that would set everything straight. "And he has threatened to stop buying their produce if his son is forced into accepting the child? Because the mother is merely a commoner?"

"Yes, she's the daughter of the... wait, how did you know?"

"Just a lucky shot. And that means that your sister's cousin-"

"Cousin's sister's half-cous-" Joxer interrupted, but a steely, ice blue gaze made him shut up.

"It means that she's under pressure. From all sides."

"Yes," Joxer said, nodding solemnly.

Mirroring the nod, Xena drained her mug and got up. "That pressure is about to be lifted... and brought down upon someone else," she said in a determined voice.

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"... so, that's what's going on here," Xena said and crossed her legs the other way to compensate for the coarseness of the bunk in one of the three bedrooms the two Gabrielles had rented.

"Why, I never!" the first Gabrielle said, jumped up from a chair and began to pace the smallish room. "How rude! How typical of the rich... after having their way with a young, innocent girl, they just abandon her completely! Ugh!"

"Well," the other Gabrielle said, trying to sneak her way over to Xena but getting stopped by a stare, "we don't actually know if she was all that innocent to begin with. She may have-"

The first Gabrielle stopped dead in her tracks and threw her arms in the air. "I can't believe you said that!"

"Come on, we've met plenty of women like that," the second Gabrielle said, sitting back down on her own chair. "You know that just as well as I do."

"Well, all right... but there were mitigating circumstances then..."

"Even for Lydia?"

The first Gabrielle narrowed her eyes as she thought of the vixen who had practically thrown herself at Xena when they were in Amphipolis to celebrate the warrior's birthday. "Uh... what the Tartarus do you know, you weren't even there!"

"Was, too!" -- "Was not!" -- "Was, too!" -- "Was-"

"WILL YOU SHUT UP AND FOCUS ON THE PROBLEM AT HAND!" Xena howled loud enough for saw dust to trickle down from one of the support beams.

Wagging her index finger, the second Gabrielle moved in towards her twin. "Cranky. Didn't I tell you she'd get cranky?"

"No, you didn't, 'cos I told \*you\* she'd... get... cranky..." the first Gabrielle said, but her voice trailed off mid-sentence when she noticed Xena slowly rising from the bunk with her Chakram in her hand. "Uh, anyway, I have an idea. How about... Xena... that you and I spoke to the girl... what did you say her name was, love?"

"Ophelia."

"Ophelia, right. Well, that you and I spoke to her to find out what really happened," the first Gabrielle said and sent Xena a very cute and charming smile - and remembered to add the little nose crinkle she knew would make Xena's knees weak.

"No," the warrior said sternly.

"Oh..."

"We'll all go."

"Oh, but...!"

"We'll all go. Six ears are better than four," Xena said and got up from the bunk, hooking her Chakram back on its little leather eye on her belt.

The other Gabrielle got up from her chair and nodded nonchalantly. "I agree. Now... the next big question is... what did you do with my staff?" she said to the first Gabrielle.

"It's down at the stables... Your staff? \*Your\* staff? I beg your pardon! That staff is mine and has been ever since Ephiny gave it to me!"

"Ephiny gave that staff to \*me\*. Me, me, me, me, me!"

"No, no, no, no, NO!"

"Did, too!" -- "Did not!" -- "Did, too!"

*SLAM!*

"Hey..." the other Gabrielle said, looking at the door that had been slammed so hard that a piece of wood had broken off the jamb. "Didn't Xena say that she wanted all three of us to go and talk to Ophelia?"

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A few candelrips later, the two Gabrielles hurried across the street to try to catch up with the forcefully striding Xena. The odd team went in through a gap between the bakery and a greengrocer and were soon standing in front of a fairly dilapidated town house with a small pen holding two pigs and a billy goat.

"Wow, she's living here...?" the first Gabrielle said. "The guy definitely took advantage of her. No way a gold digger would live in such a dump. This looks like poverty row back in Potaideia."

"For once, you've said something that makes sense," the other Gabrielle said and reached down to pat the billy goat that responded by braying loudly.

Just as the first Gabrielle opened her mouth to object, Xena drew a deep breath and stepped up a narrow garden path. "Let's find out," she said and raised her hand to knock on the door.

After knocking, they waited for half a candelrip before the door was opened to reveal a very, very pregnant woman in her late teens.

"Awww!" -- "Awww!" the two Gabrielles said as one, rushing forward to take a better look at the protruding belly that the young woman was supporting with both hands.

"Hello, Ophelia. I'm Xena of Amphipolis. These two are Gabrielle of Potaideia. We're friends of Joxer's. He's asked us to come and sort out your problems," Xena said in a calm voice, knowing full well that the young woman had to be spooked by the identical twins that were jostling to get to the front of the line.

"He- hello. Their mother named them both Gabrielle...?"

"Long, long, long story," Xena said in a flat voice.

"Oh... Please come inside. My parents are out working in the field, but I can't do that anymore. Would you like some tea?" Ophelia said and stepped aside to let her guests in.

"Yes, please." -- "No, I'm fine, thank you." -- "Hey, I could use a mug!" -- "Make your own, then!" -- "I beg your pardon!" the Gabrielles said over each other.

Ophelia stared wide-eyed at the two bickering twins as they walked past her and into her home. "Boy, I hope I won't have twins," she mumbled as she closed the door behind Xena.

"How far are you?" Xena said, helping the pregnant lady into the living area of the modest house.

"Eight moons and ten days. My mother tells me it could happen at any moment."

After Xena had helped Ophelia sit down very gingerly, she looked briefly at the two Gabrielles before crossing her arms over her chest. "We know about the father. And we know that he won't acknowledge the child as being his."

"Oh... yes. There's nothing I can do about that. I'll just have to live day by day," Ophelia said somberly.

"Not if we can help it. Ophelia, I have to ask. Joxer told me that the father is supposedly the youngest son of a rich merchant. Are you sure it's his?" Xena said, crouching down in front of the pregnant lady to look her in the eye.

"Xena!" -- "Xena!" both Gabrielles said as one in an identical shocked voice.

Ophelia smiled wistfully and waved her hand in a reassuring fashion. "Oh, it's all right. Yes, I'm sure. He is the only man I've ever been with. I..."

When Ophelia didn't continue, the other Gabrielle leaned forward and put a warm hand on her knee. "You can tell us everything, Ophelia. We'll try not to judge you."

"Try not to judge her?!" the first Gabrielle said and almost jumped up from the chair. "Of course we're not gonna... I'll keep quiet," she continued when she noticed the dark look on Xena's face.

Chuckling, Ophelia shook her head. "I love him. It's as easy as that. I didn't need to look for anyone else when I had already found the right one for me."

"Awww!" -- "Awww!"

"Ophelia, we're trying to get to the bottom of this deal. What's his name and where does he live? I'm planning on paying him a friendly visit," Xena said and got up. "And I stress friendly!" she continued when she realized that both Gabrielles were staring at her.

"His name is Hyperionus. He and his father and older brother live in a small palace just to the North of our village. I can see you're strong, but he has many thugs working for him. I'm not sure that-"

"Oh, you shouldn't worry about me. Gabrielle... both of you... please stay here and take care of Ophelia. I'm going out there at once. Let's see if I can't talk some sense into this fellow."

"You? A sensitive chat? You?" the other Gabrielle said and let out a loud belly laugh that slowly faded away when she realized that the others were giving her funny looks. "Oh, puhlease. When has Xena ever done a sensitive chat?"

"What in Tartarus do you know?" the first Gabrielle said, jumping up from her chair. "You weren't even there when she and I talked about-"

"Were, too!" -- "Were not!" -- "Were, too!" -- "Were-"

*SLAM!*

"Oh..." the other Gabrielle said, looking at yet another slammed door. "Now we made Xena upset again..."

Through all that, Ophelia let her hands glide over her belly, dearly hoping that she wasn't about to have twins.

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Xena laughed out loud as she let Argo stretch her powerful legs through a deserted section of the road out of town. The headwind forced her long, black hair back from her shoulders and made it fan out behind her like she was under water.

Argo seemed to be enjoying herself, too. Allowed to go flat out for the first time in several moons, the rugged warhorse took full advantage of the rare opportunity and thundered along the road, around the gentle bends and across the shallow fords that crossed the road.

After a few miles at maximum speed, Argo knew that it was time to take a breather and began to slow down to a fast canter.

Grinning broadly, Xena reached forward and patted the proud mare's neck to show her support. "Excellent work, girl. Good to see that us old girls still have the ability to get-up and go, eh?"

As a response, Argo whinnied and tossed her head almost like she was asking her rider a question.

"I know... I love her, too, but Gods... we need to get the twin to go away somehow. Their bickering is driving me nuts," Xena said, grimacing to herself.

Up ahead, a small palace slowly came into sight. The entrance was guarded by a low hut and a bar that had been lowered across an offshoot to the main road. Two burly guards were playing cards at a table, but when they noticed the approaching rider, they got up and drew their swords.

"My name is Xena of Amphipolis. I'm here to talk to Hyperionus of Kelitamenea," Xena said, deliberately keeping her hands on the saddle horn so she wouldn't appear intimidating.

"You got an appointment?" the first guard, a decidedly ugly man in his late twenties, said as he came out to block the path so Xena couldn't come inside the perimeter.

"Not exactly, no."

"Then scram," the guard said and grabbed hold of some of Argo's tack to force the horse around.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Xena said in a deceptively calm voice, knowing that Argo wouldn't budge for anyone less than Zeus himself.

"Or what?" the guard mocked.

"Or you'll find it painful to get out of bed tomorrow morning."

The two guards briefly looked at each other, but instead of applying common sense to the situation, they decided to attack Xena from both sides at once.

"Oooh, dumb guards... my favorite!" Xena said and jumped straight up from the saddle with an echoing SHEEEEEEEEE'YA! Twisting around in mid-air, she landed on the foot of the first guard which made him stop dead in his tracks and howl in pain. "Oh, was that your foot? I'm terribly sorry," Xena said and elbowed him hard in the gut.

The other guard ran around Argo's front roaring wildly and holding his sword high in the air, but he never got closer to Xena than four paces - performing a perfect dropkick, Xena stood almost horizontally in the air and fired off a two-booted thrust to the man's chest.

Landing safely, Xena flicked her hair back from her eyes and made a face at the two guards who were both on the ground, resting their weary heads. "Oh, I had hoped you'd be more of a challenge... but all right," she said and pulled Argo past the lowered bar and into a courtyard.

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A brief while later, Xena stepped into an atrium that had clearly been made to Roman design. Twenty marble columns stretched out on either side of the entrance to hold the roof, while a swimming pool had been set deeply into the marble floor at the center of the atrium. A life-sized alabaster sculpture of a nymph holding a cornucopia acted as the faucet for the pool, though it was dry for the moment.

"Hmmm," Xena said, understanding very well how a poor woman like Ophelia would have been swept off her feet by the opulence and grandeur of the palace.

"Hello. Can I help you?" a male voice said from Xena's left.

Turning around, she soon spotted a man in his late twenties come out of another building and walk towards her. The man was dressed casually - yet elegantly - in a dark gray toga-like tunic, and there was a definite aristocratic air about him. "Depends," Xena said, studying his handsome features, noting his fashionable, well-kept full beard, his strong jaw and his unwavering gray-blue eyes that were almost as bright as her own.

"Oh? On what?"

"On whether or not you are Hyperionus?"

"I am," Hyperionus said with a smile as he reached for Xena's hand, intent on kissing it.

Putting her hands on her hips, Xena assumed a confident stance and looked the man straight in the eye. "However, that's not your real name, is it?"

"Well deduced, my dear. Although I'm Greek in spirit, I'm Roman by birth. Titus Lucius Caëlius is the name I use when I visit my family in Rome. And you?" Hyperionus said in a pleasant, modulated voice.

"I'm Thracian."

"Ah. That explains your height," he said and winked. "... but not why you're here," he continued as he walked around Xena to take in her figure from all angles.

"I've come to ask why you won't accept responsibility for Ophelia's baby?"

"Ah... drats," Hyperionus said and clapped his hands together. "And here I thought... no, hoped... that you were here to audition for my grand Bacchanalia next moon. Ah, well. Guards!" he barked, turning away from Xena.

Moving very fast, Xena's hand shot out and grabbed onto Hyperionus' arm. "You just confirmed that you are the father... why this charade? Why not be a real man and support the mother of your child?"

"My dear," Hyperionus said in an overbearing tone as he tried unsuccessfully to pry Xena's strong fingers off his arm. "She was a nice little distraction, but no more than that. I've had countless women since her... believe me, she was merely adequate compared to some of the others. A candlemark is all I spent with her, why should I give money to her little bastard for years to come? Or perhaps you expected me to marry her? That's too gullible, even for a woman."

"Charming. Like a snake. You haven't heard the last of me," Xena said and strode away from the atrium before the approaching guards, Aggranon among them, could reach her.

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### CHAPTER 3

*Sniff!* - "Ohhhhhh, how nice!" Joxer said, deeply inhaling the scent of the colorful flowers he had picked for Gabrielle. Quickly fluffing the bouquet to make it appear larger, he adjusted his odd armor and helmet and walked up the narrow garden path to the house of his cousin's sister's half-cousin twice removed.

After knocking on the door, he took a step back and cleared his throat. When Gabrielle opened the door, he held out his hand and buttered up his voice. "Welcome to Kelitamenea, Gabrielle. I have some flowers for you. I've picked them myself just now."

"Oh... that's nice, Joxer. Ah," the first Gabrielle said, looking over her shoulder. "Please come in. You may want to, uh, brace yourself. We have a little surprise for you."

"A surprise? Oh, I love surprises. One of the best surprises I've ever had was at a Harvest Festival once when a girl showed me her- GAHHHHH!" he shouted and jerked backwards until he had his back up against the door.

Staring wide-eyed at the second Gabrielle who had popped up from behind the door, he felt his head begin to go light and floaty and dark spots soon impeded his vision. "Uh... buh... you... there's tw- buh... what in Tartaruhhhh," he said and promptly fainted on the floor, crushing the carefully selected flowers underneath him.

"Oh. Just. Wonderful," the first Gabrielle said and put her hands on her hips. "That was you. Again."

The other Gabrielle mirrored her twin's action and added to it by sticking out her tongue.

"Was not!" -- "Was, too!" -- "Was not!" -- "Was, too! Oh, who cares!" the first Gabrielle said. "C'mon, take his arm. Move him over there and put him down gently."

"Move him where?"

"Right ther-" - *BA-DA-BUMP!*

"Oh, sorry. My bad," the other Gabrielle said with a shrug.

"For the love of Aphrodite, which part of 'gently' didn't you understand?" the first Gabrielle barked, clenching her fists. "Ophelia, did you see that?"

Ophelia - who was sitting with one hand on her belly and one across her eyes - just shook her head.

"Oh..." - *Knock, knock!* - "Oh, who can that be now? Why is everyone suddenly pounding down our door!?" the first Gabrielle said and threw her arms in the air.

The other Gabrielle stepped over Joxer's prone body and put her hand on the door handle. "It's Xena," she said over her shoulder as she opened it.

"Thank the Gods," the first Gabrielle mumbled.

Xena walked inside with determined steps, but stopped dead in her tracks when she noticed Joxer lying on the floor and Ophelia sitting in a chair looking like she'd rather have been working in the field after all. "What's... what's been going on here, Gabrielle?"

"Oh, not much, love. Joxer came, saw and fainted. That's all, really."

"Uh-huh?" Xena said and arched an eyebrow.

The other Gabrielle stepped forward and put a loving hand on Xena's elbow, a gesture that was immediately answered by an angry growl by the first Gabrielle. "Did you get to speak with Hyperionus, love?"

"She's *\*my\** love," the first Gabrielle growled, but she was dismissed by a nonchalant wave from her twin.

"I did," Xena said and stepped over the prone Joxer. "He's exactly like we expected him to be. Rich and shameless. He's also a Roman."

"A Roman?" -- "A Roman?" the two Gabrielles said as one.

"Yep. Titus Lucius Caëlius is his real name."

Finally managing to get up after a bit of a struggle, Ophelia put a hand on her aching back and took a few staggering steps into the center of the house. "I knew that. Doesn't change what I feel for him. Don't you think he's as handsome as Adonis, Xena?"

"Well, he's got charisma and presence, that's for sure," Xena said, nodding. A split second later, both Gabrielles attached themselves to her arms, acting so possessively that she had to let out a long chuckle.

"Yes, he has," Ophelia said dreamily on her way over to a stove. "He's also got a wonderful smile and... anyway... are you closer to a solution yet?"

"Don't know about a solution, but I certainly have a suggestion," Xena said, dragging both cute blondes over to the chair Ophelia had just vacated.

Once she was comfortably seated, Xena leaned back, crossed her legs and smiled up at the two bards who both smiled back - and promptly began to growl at each other. "I think we should arrange a reconciliatory meeting. Perhaps tomorrow afternoon or early evening. Not just for you and Hyperionus, but for the whole town."

"A meeting?" Ophelia said, slowly preparing the stove to make supper.

"Yes. Earlier, Joxer told me that the livelihood of about half the town depend on the merchants, which means they'll probably start out by being on his side. However, half of those will be women, and I'm guessing that nearly all will be mothers. I'm quite sure that once they hear about your plight, they'll pressure their husbands into... well, let's say, supporting your cause," Xena said with a wide grin.

"Oh... it's a plan, but... you don't know the villagers like I do, Xena. They're not... well..." Ophelia said with a shrug.

Nodding, Xena pointed her thumbs at both Gabrielles. "Leave that to us. With two bards in the family now, we should be able to come up with a defense for you that will, uh... blow them away. Right, Gabrielle?"

"Right!" -- "Well, I can't make any promises." -- "What?! What kind of defeatism is that?" -- "That's not defeatism, it's just being realistic!" -- "No, it's not, it's-" -- "It's being realistic!" -- "It's defeatism!" -- "It's being realistic!"

Clapping her hands over her eyes, Xena let out a pained groan that sounded like Atlas had transferred the entire weight of the world onto her shoulders.

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*The next day, just before sundown.*

After Xena, Joxer and the two Gabrielles had been working all day to set up enough benches in the community hall at the end of main street to seat all the residents, everything was just about ready.

Once Xena and one of the Gabrielles had put the last bench in place, the bard moved in very close and put her hand on Xena's arm. "Love, what are we going to do about... her...?" she whispered so the other Gabrielle wouldn't hear.

"I don't know. Something. Which one are you?"

"Wh- 'which one'? By the Gods, Xena, don't you recognize me?" Gabrielle said in a shocked voice as she put a hand on her bosom.

"You're identical... but you have very different personalities for some reason. One is always positive, one is always negative. Which one are you?" Xena said with a cheeky gleam in her eye.

"I'm the positive one! No, really, I am...! I'm... Oh, Ares' Balls!" the other Gabrielle said and began to grind her jaw when she realized that Xena wasn't falling for her performance.

When the first Gabrielle noticed that something was going on, she sort of tip-toed over to her lover and her twin to spy on them, but Xena soon looked through that ploy as well.

"Gabrielle, what's going to happen today?" Xena said to the new blonde bard.

Caught eavesdropping, Gabrielle's cheeks instantly flushed red and she shuffled back and forth on the spot. "Oh, we're going to get this mess sorted and help Ophelia. Why?"

"Never mind. Thanks," Xena said and turned to the Gabrielle she had spoken to first. "See? Different personalities."

"What a load of..." the negative Gabrielle said and stomped away from the two women.

As she followed her twin with her eyes, the positive Gabrielle cocked her head and let out a confused grunt.

"Xena... what are we going to do about... her?"

"I'll think of something. Don't you worry about that," Xena said and wrapped her arms around her lover. When the need to connect became too strong to ignore, she pulled the bard close and offered her a little kiss on her forehead. Immediately reconsidering, she leaned down and gave Gabrielle a proper kiss on the lips. "Mmmm! I love you," she said when they separated.

"Oh, that was nice... I love you, too... but that was the first kiss since yesterday morning!" Gabrielle said and thumped a finger into Xena's gut.

"I know. I wanted to make sure that you were the right one first. I didn't want to cheat on you, you know," Xena whispered and kissed her partner again to make up for lost time.

Behind them, the first residents began to enter the community hall and filter down to the first available benches. Joxer, having tended to his cousin's sister's half-cousin twice removed while they were waiting for the villagers to show up, ushered people to their seats with his usual aplomb.

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*Two candlemarks later.*

After the positive Gabrielle had delivered a passionate speech as to why the villagers should support Ophelia, an elderly man held up his hand and rose from his bench. Xena quickly pointed at him to award him the time to speak. The man's neatly groomed white beard and elegant clothes made it easy to see that he was from the wealthy part of the town who depended on the merchant.

"Warrior, your cause is noble, but you do not have all the facts. In our fair town, we prefer to maintain a status quo. It's not only best for business, it's best for our peace of mind as well. It is clear to all present that the delightful young lady is in dire straits, however, it is my opinion... and the opinion of a fair number of people in here, I might add... that she could and should have nipped it in the bud much earlier. She is by far not the first young lady to end up expecting a bastard child, but why should the rest of the town suffer from her lack of backbone?"

A cheer rose from the elderly man's side of the community hall as he sat down, but several distraught murmurs were heard from the other side where the independent residents were seated.

"Nipped it in the bud...? A bastard child...? Her lack of backbone...?" the first Gabrielle growled; her eyes narrowing dangerously as she looked at the elderly man.

Xena rose from her chair at the end of the community hall and held up her hands. "Thank you for your contribution, Sir. I think we should hear from one of the... yes, Ma'am, you have the floor," she said, pointing at a middle-aged woman seated on the other side of the room who had raised her hand in the air.

The woman - dressed in a coarse, charcoal dress and showing the signs of a life spent doing manual labor - squeezed her hands and cleared her throat. " 'Beg pardon, good Sir, but you do not have all the facts, either. In my younger years before I met my husband, I worked for a healer who specialized in solving the problems that young girls had got themselves into. It is not simply a matter of nipping it in the bud, good Sir. It is a drastic, dangerous intervention into the female body. To me, there's-

The elderly man who had spoken before shot up from his chair and pointed at Ophelia who was sitting next to the two Gabrielles. "Then the young lady in question should have kept her legs firmly closed!"

A ripple of murmurs spread like wildfire through the spectators, moving up the rows until both Gabrielles were grumbling like hungry lions.

"Sir, you are speaking out of line!" Xena said strongly, but her words didn't have an effect on the irate gentleman.

"This!" he said, once again pointing at Ophelia, "obviously stems from a lack of proper upbringing. I guarantee you that none of the daughters of the finer houses here in Kelitamenea will ever suffer this fate!"

"Sir, you are out of line!" Xena said in a stentorian voice that left no room for misinterpretation.

The elderly man smirked and sat down, having already delivered the message he wanted to convey. Predictably, the people at his side of the community hall all began to clap and cheer, and the people at the other side began to boo and whistle.

For once, both Gabrielles agreed on something - they were both hopping mad and were chewing vigorously on their lips to stop themselves from jumping up and adding their two dinars to the conversation.

Xena sighed deeply and looked at Ophelia who was sobbing into a handkerchief. A wave of anger nearly overwhelmed her and she briefly toyed with the idea of letting her Chakram end the discussion, but knew that it wouldn't be the right answer. "So," she said strongly to be heard over the murmurs. "So... here's what we have. Ophelia is about to give birth. Hyperionus is the father but he will not accept his responsibilities, even to the point of not bothering to show up at this meeting. Ophelia's parents cannot support Ophelia and her child. Citizens of Kelitamenea, what do you propose?"

The community hall fell silent as none of the residents had anything to say.

After a short while, a young couple dressed in dark brown clothes fit for farmers rose from their seats on the independent side of the room. "Warrior, I'm Deros, this is my wife Hermia. We have room for Ophelia and her child if she can work in our field once her recuperation is over."

*'Two adult women for one man? How perverse!'* a woman shouted from the wealthy side of the room, but the person was quickly silenced by one of Xena's patented steely glares.

"Thank you for your offer, Deros," Xena said and put a hand on Ophelia's shoulder. "Ophelia, what do you say?"

Ophelia could only nod, but she did so strongly.

"All right. I hereby declare this meeting adjourned," Xena said and tapped the heel of her boot on the floor three times.

Within a matter of seconds, both sides of the community hall had risen and were filing towards the exits. Grunting, Xena shook her head slowly as she looked at the crowd. "And I thought I had seen it all back home in Amphipolis... ah, whatever," she mumbled to herself and made her way over to the two Gabrielles.

The warrior put her hands on the two bards' shoulders, immediately feeling the tension under the smooth skin. "Gabrielle, do you want to do a little staff practice?"

"Yes!" -- "Yes!" both Gabrielles said, jumping up from their chairs.

"Good. Ophelia, Joxer... Gabrielle, Gabrielle and I will be down at the stab-

A commotion at the door made Xena spin around and look: a large group of people - independents and wealthy alike - suddenly poured back into the community hall while shrieking loudly and flailing their arms in the air.

"Marauders! Marauders! With torches! Just outside! Marauders!" they howled, creating a deafening cacophony of voices.

"Marauders, my foot... they're Hyperionus' men..." Xena growled and drew her sword. "Gabrielle, the practice will have to wait. We've got heads to clobber instead."

"I'm with you!" -- "I'll be your right-hand woman, Xena!" -- "The Tartarus you will, that's my job!" -- "Not anymore it isn't." -- "I beg your pardon!?" -- "Deal with it!"

"Save it for the crooks, Gabrielle," Xena said and pushed her way through the mass of people going the other way.

By the time she and the two Gabrielles stepped out onto the sidewalk, Aggranon and seven other thugs had assembled in front of the community hall, sitting atop tall horses and holding lit torches that shone brightly against the semi-dark late evening sky.

"Hey, Hippo," Aggranon mocked.

"What he call you?" -- "Whassat?" the two Gabrielles said, but Xena merely laughed coldly and twirled her sword.

"Xena, I'll run down to the stables and get my staff... can you hold the fort while I'm away?" the first Gabrielle said. Once Xena had replied with a nod, she legged it down main street, leaving little clouds of dust in her wake.

"It must be a bitch to travel with twins like that," Aggranon said. "But I guess it must have its good sides, too," he continued, grinning broadly.

Xena twirled her sword again and stepped down from the sidewalk and onto the main street. "State your business and leave, chump."

"My name is Aggranon, Hippo."

"And I'm Xena, chump."

The warrior's name sent a ripple of unrest among the men, and some of them began to look over their shoulders to work out the best way to escape.

"Is that a fact?" Aggranon said coolly.

"Yes. So... state your business and leave."

Aggranon furrowed his brow but decided to stick to the original plan. Feeling slightly less cocksure than he had before, he nevertheless stuck out his jaw and sent Xena a disdainful glare. "We're just here to show our support. We heard you had organized a civic gathering and--"

"A civic gathering? How strange to hear such big words from the mouth of a thug like yourself. I'll bet Titus Lucius taught you that phrase. Where is he? Didn't he have the guts to come down here himself?"

Aggranon opened his mouth to reply but thought better of it. Instead, he turned his horse around and led it away from the community hall. His men quickly followed, and soon, all eight were lined up at the sidewalk at the other side of main street.

Huffing and puffing, the first Gabrielle returned with her staff, but when she stopped next to Xena and tried to catch her breath, the second Gabrielle snatched the tool from her hands.

"My staff," the second Gabrielle said, twirling the Amazon fighting staff in her hands. -- "The Tartarus it is! That's my staff!" -- "Nuh-uh. My staff." -- "Is not!" -- "Is, too!" -- "Is not! Xena! That's my staff, will you please tell her that it's my staff...!" the first Gabrielle whined nasally.

Before Xena had time to settle the life-and-death situation, Joxer came tearing out of the community hall clutching his head. "Ophelia! Ophelia! She... oh...! She...! Ophelia... She... Oh! The baby!" he howled, frantically touching his belly and then down between his legs and onto the ground.

"Her water broke?!" Xena barked, slapping her forehead.

"Yes!"

"Aw great, just what we needed..." Xena groaned, looking across the street at the thugs who seemed to find the crisis very amusing.

"Don't worry, I'm on it," the first Gabrielle said, handing the staff to the other Gabrielle.

Once the first Gabrielle had taken Joxer back through the doors, the second Gabrielle tapped her foot on the ground. "And now she's stealing my thunder. Again! I won't allow it. I won't!" she said and handed the staff to Xena before she stomped away from the sidewalk and through the doors.

Xena just rolled her eyes repeatedly and put the staff down on the sidewalk.

"Good help is really hard to find these days, huh?" Aggranon mocked from the other side of the street.

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Inside the community hall, the mess had grown in strength and had reached a level just below pandemonium. The residents of Kelitamenea were howling and speaking loudly everywhere; some were trying to fortify the hall by stacking up the benches to block the windows, and some were gathered around the elderly man with the strong opinions to be told what they should do.

In the middle of it all, Ophelia was lying on her back on the hard floor, wailing like a woman about to give birth. Joxer ran around like a headless chicken and the two Gabrielles were standing with their hands on their hips, bickering endlessly about which of them should be delivering the baby.

Down on the floor, Ophelia raised her head and looked at the circus-like scenes. "I'm so c- cold... would you mind getting me... he- hello? Ga- Gabrielle?"

Deciding to let their bickering rest for the time being, the two Gabrielles knelt down at opposite ends of the pregnant Ophelia. "Shhh, we're here now. You're cold?"

"Y- yes..."

"Joxer, run over to the... JOXER!" the first Gabrielle barked when she realized that their friend was far too befuddled to understand even the simplest of Greek commands.

Clutching his odd helmet, Joxer stopped running around, but his knees were still visibly knocking. "I'm awake! I'm awake!"

"Run over to the hotel and get some spare towels and blankets... and something we can use for a curtain. There are too many people in here!"

"Yes... yes!" Joxer said and scooted out the back door.

The first Gabrielle looked at her identical twin and decided to swallow some of her pride. "Gabr- I mean, uh... never mind. We need hot water. Plenty of hot water and some bowls to store it in. Can you take care of it?"

"Don't tell me what we need... I know perfectly well what we need!"

"Gabri-\*elle\*...!" the first Gabrielle said, unwittingly slipping into the tone of voice Xena had used in the first few moons they were travelling together.

"All right, all right... may I breathe while I get it, please, Princess?" the other Gabrielle mocked as she got up and dusted off her knees.

A cry by Ophelia signaled the end of the discussion, and the other Gabrielle slipped away to fetch the much-needed items.

"Shhh, Ophelia. Don't worry. You're in safe hands now," Gabrielle whispered, looking up under Ophelia's soaked dress to see far she had come.

"You- you've done this before...?" Ophelia croaked.

"Well, not exactly, but last year, I helped a dear friend of mine give birth. Of course, she had a Centaur so we needed to slice her op- uh... never mind. Sorry. Don't you have a healer or a midwife in town?"

Deros and Hermia, the two people who had offered to house Ophelia, came to Gabrielle's rescue and knelt down next to the panting Ophelia. "They're one and the same. Our healer is in the next village," Hermia said, "there was an outbreak of something contagious and he wanted to use it for his studies."

"So... we're on our own?"

"Not quite, I helped my sister deliver her twins and they are jus-"

"Not twins! Anything but twins!" Ophelia howled, letting out a long, echoing, wailing sob that sent chills down the spines of everyone present.

Rubbing her brow, Gabrielle tried to calm Ophelia down by speaking to her in a low, soothing voice. "Shhh, Ophelia, relax. It's all right. Joxer will be back shortly... oh, here he is now..."

Throwing himself onto the floor - huffing and puffing - Joxer handed Gabrielle a huge curtain and a full load of blankets and towels. "He... re... you... go..."

"Thanks, where did you get that huge thing? Never mind. Just hold it up so no one can gawk at her. Hermia, can you help me, please?" Gabrielle said, stuffing a rolled-up towel under Ophelia's head to make her more comfortable.

Exactly on cue, the other Gabrielle came back balancing steaming hot water in the top bowl of a whole stack of wooden bowls.

Once everything was in place, the first Gabrielle looked at her four helpers with a worried expression on her face. "All we need now is a bit of good fortune..." she said just as Ophelia's eyes popped wide open and a contraction tore through her body.

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On Main Street, the screaming from inside the community hall drowned out the rhythmic clip-clop of the two-horse buggy that slowly came up the street, but Xena had already spotted it as it entered the town.

Upon stopping, Hyperionus was helped down by the driver who assisted his master by holding out his hand. Once he was on the ground, Hyperionus walked away from the driver without even looking at him.

"D'ya need help combing your hair, too, Roman?" Xena drawled once Hyperionus was close enough to hear, earning herself a snicker from one of the thugs across the street.

The dark look Hyperionus shot her proved that he didn't, but he soon regained his swagger and walked up to stand next to her. "You use that word like a curse, Thracian."

"That's because it is. I've had my fair share of run-ins with Romans. Scratch at the glossy surface and something nasty always shows up."

"Well-traveled, well-spoken and well-muscled. What an unusual combination of attributes for a woman," Hyperionus said and made no effort to hide the fact that he was undressing her with his eyes.

"You should see more of Greece. Women like that are a dime a dozen here," Xena said coolly.

"I'll make a note of that. In the meantime, may I go inside and see the mother of my child? Aggranon has told me that everyone is still in there."

Narrowing her eyes, Xena tried to read the expression on Hyperionus' face but couldn't decipher the slightly detached look so typical for male Romans. "She's busy. Why don't you leave a message and I'll give it to her."

Hyperionus laughed out loud and clapped his hands together. "Oh, you are a clever one," he said as he took a step back from her. "I'm afraid you leave me no choice but to finish this the Roman way. Aggranon!" he suddenly shouted to the thugs who all jumped into action.

Fully prepared for Hyperionus' all too predictable trickery, Xena moved at the speed of a striking Cobra and swept his feet out from under him. Once he had landed on the ground with a bone-rattling crunch and a shocked expression on his face, she grabbed hold of his tunic and dragged him to his feet.

Getting up on wobbly legs, a short but very sharp-looking dagger fell out of his sleeve. "Charming," Xena hissed in his ear as she kicked the dagger in under the sidewalk.

"Your master and I are going inside now!" she shouted to the waiting thugs as she and Hyperionus began to walk backwards onto the sidewalk. "If you're thinking about torching the building, remember that this fella," - Xena gave Hyperionus a shove in the back - "will be roasted, too!"

After the doors had closed behind Xena and Hyperionus, Aggranon let out an impressive curse and threw his torch onto the ground where it slowly fizzled out.

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## **CHAPTER 4**

Xena shoved Hyperionus up the aisle towards the far end of the community hall, noting with some satisfaction and relief that most of the hysterical villagers had left.

"Look who's here," she said once she reached the groaning Ophelia. With a grunt, she forced Hyperionus down onto one of the few benches the villagers hadn't pushed up against the walls and began to look for some means to tie him down. Quickly finding a couple of blankets, she tore long strips out of the first one and tied his legs to the bottom part of the bench.

"Xena, good you're here," the first Gabrielle said. "We're having a little trouble... well, Ophelia is."

"I'll be right there, love," Xena said, tore the second blanket to shreds and tied Hyperionus' hands behind his back. "If you want to escape, be my guest," she said to him, showing him the razor-sharp edge of her Chakram.

"I'm not that stupid, Thracian," Hyperionus said surly.

Joxer - thankful for the respite - wiped some sweat off his forehead and came over to greet Xena. "Me and Deros ushered everyone out the back door. Was that okay?"

"Yes, Joxer, that was very good. Thank you," Xena said and patted the would-be warrior on the shoulder. "All right, what do we have here?" she continued as she knelt down between Ophelia's legs to see for herself.

The other Gabrielle reached in under Xena's dark mane and began to muss her neck, but the second she noticed the murderous look on the first Gabrielle's face, she pulled back - not without sticking out her tongue at her identical twin, though.

"She's pushing like crazy but not much is happening," the first Gabrielle said.

"Hmmm. It's your first, Ophelia?"

"Uh-huh...!" Ophelia groaned.

"Right. You have narrow hips and you're not very open yet, so... hmmm," Xena said and leaned back on her thighs, running through a whole list of possible scenarios in her mind. When most of them came back as unusable in the current situation, she began to chew on her cheek and looked up at Gabrielle.

Gabrielle, knowing exactly what her partner was thinking, covered her mouth with her hand. "Like with Ephiny?" she said quietly.

"We could be looking at that, yes. Let's give nature a little more time first."

The other Gabrielle moved forward again and reached for Xena's arm. "Hey, isn't it creepy how things have happened in pairs in this adventure? First, I'm split in two, then we have two distinct groups in the town, then we have two things happening at once..."

"I'M NOT HAVING TWINS! I'M NOT!" Ophelia howled, leading to everyone trying to calm her down again by shushing her or blowing cool air down on her severely strained body.

Xena began to chew on her cheek again, thinking hard about when to intervene. "What's the gap between the contractions?"

"Only a couple of candledrips," Hermia said.

"Hmmm. Does Kelitamenea have a healer?"

Rubbing her forehead, Hermia shook her head repeatedly. "No. He's away."

Behind them, something began to pound rhythmically on the front door, making Hyperionus break out into a loud laugh. "It'll all be a moot point in a few 'drips anyway, Thracian. That's my men dying to meet you."

"You got the dying part right," Xena said hoarsely. Jumping up, she looked Deros straight in the eye. "Can you fight?"

Shocked, Hermia hurried over to her husband and took him in her arms. "No, he can't!"

"All right. Joxer, you're with me," Xena said and strode up towards the door.

"I am? But... but of course I am! Ha-haaar! I am there! Joxer, the Mighty, never misses a fight! I'll be so close to you you'll think I'm a boil on your butt, Xena!" he said, trying to turn up his bluster - unfortunately, his knocking knees betrayed his bravado.

"But, Xena!" -- "Xena! I want to fight!" both Gabrielles said as one from their spot next to Ophelia.

Stopping halfway to the door, Xena drew her Chakram and her sword and looked with steely determination at her partner. "No, Gabrielle, you stay here. You're in charge. Come on, Joxer."

Both Gabrielles watched in wide-eyed tension as Xena and the unlikely warrior ran back up the aisle to get to the door before Aggranon and his thugs could break it down and take them by surprise.

"Did you hear that?" the other Gabrielle said. "She left me in charge. Me, the little farm girl from Poteidaia."

"No, she left me in charge. Me! The Amazon Princess!" -- "Did not!" -- "Did, too!" -- "Did not!" -- "Did, too!" -- "Did-"

"I'M NOT HAVING TWINS! I'M NOT HAVING TWINS!" Ophelia howled at the top of her lungs, making everyone around her jump a foot in the air.

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The rhythmical pounding grew stronger and stronger, and by the time Xena and Joxer reached the front door, the top hinges were already beginning to give way. Thinking fast, Xena came up with the perfect battle plan - all it needed was a little diversion. "Joxer, run to the back door, come around the building and attack them from behind," she said in a strong voice.

"Co- come around the buil... the building...? You want me to come around the building...? And attack them? By myself...?"

"Yes, Joxer. I know you have it in you," Xena said, gripping Joxer's arm hard and sending him a silent plea not to be too heroic.

"A- All right. I will. For I! Am! Joxer, the Mighty!" Joxer said, but was once again let down by a part of his body; this time it was his vocal cords that couldn't stop trembling.

"Good man. Now get moving!" Xena said and gave him a little shove.

With Joxer gone for the moment, Xena began to push back on the doors, hoping that she'd be able to withstand the ramrod until Joxer could do his part.

A candelrip later, Joxer's familiar battle cry could be heard over the din of the rhythmical pounding, quickly followed by a roar of laughter from the thugs. Xena used that as her cue and tore open the doors with a whoosh.

A thug was standing right outside, but even though his job was to break down the doors, a surprise visit by an irate Warrior Princess was clearly the last thing on his mind as witnessed by the look on his face when the butt of Xena's sword slammed into his forehead.

"One down, seven to go!" Xena barked as the man let go of the ramrod and collapsed onto the sidewalk.

Looking at all the thugs to etch their relative positions into her brain, she quickly laid a plan of attack and executed it almost at once. With a resounding "ALALALALALALALALALALALA!" she raced into the street to attack a group of four thugs who were taunting a helpless Joxer.

The first man went down from a double-booted drop kick to the chest; the second succumbed to a helicopter kick to the head; the third foolishly tried to draw his sword only to find it kicked out of his hand followed rapidly by a leg sweep that sent him flying rear-over-elbows; the fourth briefly attempted to take a swing at Joxer, but gave up and ran away from the charging Fury.

The third man still hadn't learned his lesson and tried to get up, but Xena gave him an almighty shoulder block to the gut that made him change his mind on the spot.

"You wanna do the other ones, Joxer?" Xena said, grinning maniacally.

"Uh, no... you're on such a roll... g- go ahead and wipe out the rest, too. I think I'll have a lie-down," Joxer said in a shaky voice as he bent over to retrieve his sword that one of the thugs had effortlessly yanked out of his hand.

Running footsteps behind them made Xena spin around, but she lowered her sword when it turned out to be one of the Gabrielles wielding her staff. "Which one are you?" Xena said flatly.

"I'm the positive one. The real one! Ugh, I just couldn't take it anymore! The other Gabrielle and I began to bicker about the best name for the kid... I suggested names for a girl and the other one only had names for boys. I think Ophelia suffered some kind of nervous breakdown... she kept moaning 'no twins, no twins'... anyway, now I'm here. What's the score?"

Smiling at her partner, Xena wrapped a strong arm around the bard's shoulders and gave her a little squeeze. "Four down, four to go... but they're regrouping."

"I don't think I'm ready for the big brute," Gabrielle said and pointed her staff at Aggranon who was busy scolding his three remaining assistants for failing to beat a buffoon and a single woman.

"Oh, he's all mine. You can have the three others. Wanna go at 'em now?" Xena said and began bopping up and down on the balls of her feet.

Gabrielle nodded and assumed her favorite offensive stance and two-handed grip. "Yeah, let's take 'em down...!"

"Oh, I love it when you talk dirty," Xena said, pretending to swoon just before she took off in a fast run, headed directly for Aggranon.

Gabrielle chuckled out loud and took another route that would make her intercept the three junior thugs who ran away from the Warrior Princess the split second they saw her charging them.

Holding her staff horizontally, she engaged the first of the three younger thugs by whacking him over the shins. Pulling back at once, she raised the staff and went through a fast left-right combination to his ribs that was designed to drive the air out of his lungs. It worked perfectly and he collapsed onto his knees, wheezing and panting to get some air back into him. Quickly moving behind the downed man, Gabrielle finished him off by whacking the staff across his shoulders.

The second thug was smarter and jumped back from Gabrielle's first swing - unfortunately for him, he hadn't counted on the staff-wielding Amazon to perform a reverse swing almost at once, and that hit him squarely on his

temple. At first, he swayed like a reef caught in a breeze, but then he keeled over and landed face-first onto the dirt road.

The third man briefly weighed his options and came to the conclusion that he would be better off if he wasn't anywhere near the Amazon, so he dropped his sword on the ground and high-tailed it out of there.

"Ha! Big chicken... hey, that's the same guy who ran away from Xena...! He really oughtta find a new career," Gabrielle said, making a thorough scan of the area to make sure that there weren't any additional thugs waiting in the shadows.

Meanwhile at the other side of the street, Xena and Aggranon were carefully sizing each other up. Both holding their swords in their right hands, they slowly circled each other to gauge their relative strengths and weaknesses.

Occasionally, the sounds of Ophelia screaming from inside the community hall filtered out to the two fighters, but they appeared to disturb Aggranon much more than his opponent. "What in Tartarus are you doing with that woman in there? Sounds like you have the thumbscrews on her..." he said around a couple of jabs.

"Oh, she's just trying to deliver your master's child," Xena said, waiting for a gap in Aggranon's defenses, but slowly tiring of the endless dancing about. "Are we gonna fight or what?"

"We're gonna fight... and you GONNA DIE!" Aggranon roared and swung his sword wildly at Xena's neck.

The warrior easily sidestepped the attack and retaliated by kicking him in the gut. It only stunned the experienced thug momentarily, but it was enough for Xena to jump up, perform a pirouette in mid-air and kick him across the shoulders before landing on her feet.

Groaning out loud from the unexpected counter, Aggranon nearly dropped his sword, but managed to hold onto it. Spinning around, he lashed out with a strong backhand that impacted with Xena's jaw, though only superficially.

Fueled by a healthy dose of battle rush, Xena laughed wickedly and went in deep; first she placed another kick in the thug's gut; then she elbowed him across the jaw as a tit-for-tat, and finally, she grabbed his head with both hands and flipped him over her hip.

Landing with a dust-inducing bump, Aggranon let out a pained groan but tried to get up at once - only to be stopped by a hard staff hit across his brow that made his eyes roll back in his head.

"Love, are you all right?" Gabrielle said and yanked Xena close to her so she could take a good look at the warrior's jaw. "He hit you! How dare he hit you?" she said as she poked and prodded at where Aggranon had struck Xena.

"We were in a figh- Oh, I... hey... oh, I... I'm quite all right, thank you! This is what got us into trouble in the first place!" Xena said, taking the bard's probing hands in her own. "You've given me harder knocks when we've made love," she whispered as she claimed Gabrielle's lips in a searing kiss that showed that all the battle rush hadn't left her system.

From the community hall, a particularly long scream was followed by an even longer pause and then a window-shattering "WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

"Oh... will you listen to that! All's well that ends well, huh?" Gabrielle said and wrapped her arm around Xena's waist.

"Yep. We better hog-tie these thugs before we go and take a look at the little tyke... but first," Xena said and spun Gabrielle around so she could kiss her again.

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Once the seven marauders - the eighth and final one hadn't stopped running yet - were tied together using a highly sophisticated Persian tuck and weave that would be able to withstand anything short of divine intervention, Xena and Gabrielle walked back inside the community hall to greet the newest citizen of Kelitamenea.

It wasn't difficult to see where they should be going because a whole group of people were standing at Ophelia's temporary bed, admiring her baby - except Joxer who had fainted and was being tended to by an old woman.

As Xena and Gabrielle came closer, the group spread out to reveal Ophelia holding her baby in her arms, completely lost in the little one's peaceful face.

"It's a boy," Ophelia whispered, flashing Xena and Gabrielle a very tired smile.

"Congratulations, Ophelia. He looks to be in good health, even if he was a little early," Xena said and knelt down next to the woman and her son to give them a thorough check.

Gabrielle walked over to her twin and pointed at Joxer. "What happened to him?"

"Oh, some people are just too sensitive to things like that. Once the boy's head started showing, Joxer just fainted. Ah. He's kinda cute, though, don't you think?" the other Gabrielle said.

"Cute? Oh, Ophelia's boy? Of course."

"No, silly... Joxer," the other Gabrielle said and slapped her identical twin.

"Cute? Joxer? Cute?"

"Yes, Joxer. And yes, cute."

"You think Joxer is cute?"

"Yes, am I not allowed to think someone is cute?"

"Sure, but..."

"Ha! Of course! You want him for yourself, don't ya?!" -- "By the Gods... I do not!" -- "Do, too!" -- "Do not! -- "Do, too!" -- "Do not, not, not, NOT!" -- "Do too, too, too, TOO!"

Almost ready to tear her hair out, the real Gabrielle spun around and pointed at Xena's leather-clad figure. "What in the seventh level of Tartarus would I want Joxer for when I have \*her\* and we create earthquakes every single time we take a roll in the hay!?" she shouted, suddenly realizing that everybody in the community hall - including Xena - were gawking at her. "Well... we... do..." she mumbled, feeling her cheeks turn so hot she could have fried eggs on them.

Xena got up and dusted off her knee pads. "He's perfect, Ophelia, and so are you. You'll be up and about in no time."

"Thank you, Xena," Ophelia said quietly, snuggling down next to her son.

While Hermia knelt down next to Ophelia, her husband Deros clasped forearms with Xena. "Once she's ready to be moved, we'll take her home to our hut. Everything's going to be just fine, I promise."

"You're a good man, Deros. Thank you," Xena said and gave his arm a good shake.

Down on the bench, Hyperionus observed everything silently, staring at his child that was resting across Ophelia's chest. "Xena?" he said, tugging at the bindings that tied him to the bench.

"What do you want, Roman?"

"You can't keep me tied up here forever. I won't do anything now. I'm not that much of a beast."

"Mmmm. And yet, you carried a concealed dagger," Xena said as she checked the knots to see if they were still secure.

"That was then. This is a whole new situation. If nothing else, we Romans are experts at -"

"Exploiting the people and raping the lands you conquer?" Xena said sarcastically.

"Come now, we merely try to educate the people. Some of them are quite barbaric... I'm sure you'll agree. No, what I wanted to say was that we Romans are quite adept at seeing potential where others see problems. And the mother and her boy have potential."

"Hyperionus, I'm giving you a friendly piece of advice now... ignore it at your peril. You had your chance with the boy and you blew it. Don't even think about trying to indoctrinate him to the Roman ways. I know how you raise boys over there... nothing good has ever come out of it," Xena said in a quiet, menacing voice as she severed Hyperionus' bindings with her Chakram.

Massaging his liberated wrists, Hyperionus turned towards the warrior and nodded solemnly. "I'll heed your advice, Xena. I'll send some dinars instead. Isn't that what you wanted?"

"Yes."

Having overheard the conversation, both Gabrielles came over to stand on either side of Xena, each putting a hand on the warrior's elbows. "We'll be back to check up on Ophelia and her son, Hyperionus. So if there's anything wrong, Xena will know about it. And then \*you'll\* know about it," the first Gabrielle said.

"Well, at least it's a boy," Hyperionus said casually as he adjusted his toga-like tunic.

"I'm... what?" -- "Whassat? What did he just say?" both Gabrielles said as one, visibly getting ready to clobber the Roman with the staff or her fists, but Xena pulled them away before they could put their plans in motion.

Once Xena had taken the two irate Gabrielles a few paces away from the Roman, she turned around and shot him a dark look. "Hyperionus, your men are outside. They're still alive, if a bit sore. Oh, and I'd leave now if I were you."

"Don't worry, I will," Hyperionus said and began to walk down the aisle.

"Glad to see the back of him," the other Gabrielle grumbled, snuggling herself tightly under Xena's arm - and earning herself a look of outrage from her identical twin.

"Yeah... and now, only one problem remains," Xena said and sighed deeply.

"Oh, so I'm a problem now?" the other Gabrielle said.

The first Gabrielle hurriedly went around Xena and poked an index finger three times into her twin's chest; once for each word. "Yes. You. Are."

"Well, one of us is."

"Oh, that's rich... are you saying \*I'm\* the problem?"

"Yes. You. Are," the second Gabrielle mocked. "I just think you're jealous that Xena is with me instead of you now."

"But... but... but you are me! And Xena's with me! \*Me!\*"

Hearing that, the other Gabrielle leaned her head back and let out a resounding belly laugh. "Oh, that's rich... I'm much better looking than you."

"I beg your pardon?!"

"Believe me, sister, you're gettin' old and it doesn't become you," the second Gabrielle said and strutted straight over to Xena. "The babe and the bard is an item now."

"Why, you miserable little..." the first Gabrielle hissed through clenched teeth. Suddenly unable to reign in her temper, she rushed forward with her hands stretched out ahead of her, intent on throttling her identical twin into submission.

"That's enough... enough! GABRIELLE, THAT'S ENOUGH!" Xena shouted at the top of her lungs. When her words weren't enough to calm her partner down, she leaned her head back and roared "Aphrodite, Athena, Hera, Echidna, anyone! PLEASE come and rescue me from this life of misery!" towards the heavens.

The answer to Xena's plea came at once: a loud crackle and a bright, pink flash of little hearts that rained down from the sky heralded Aphrodite's arrival. Once the Goddess of Love noticed that everyone was staring at her, she put a hand on her neck and cocked her plentiful hips. "Hi, everybody! It's always nice to have an appreciative audience, don'tchaknow! Tee-hee!"

"Oh, babes... what's going on here...?" she continued in a very puzzled tone once she laid eyes on the two Gabrielles who were engaged in a double-sided headlock, groaning and growling like a pair of badgers.

Xena - giving the battling bards a wide berth - inched her way over to Aphrodite where she sighed and shrugged despondently. "They've been like this since yesterday morning. We ran into a little person in the forest on our way here. Gabrielle wanted to help him... and... \*that\* came out of it," Xena said and pointed at the twins.

"A little person...? In the forest...?" the Goddess said, putting a pinkie finger on her lips while she was racking her brain. "Oh! I have it... o-yeah, leather babe... don't you worry, the Mighty Dite is gonna fix everything! Don't go anywhere, I'll be back!" she continued and disappeared in her customary pink cloud.

Before Xena even had time to move a muscle, Aphrodite returned and winked repeatedly with her long lashes. "I always wanted to say that! Tchaaa!" she squealed before disappearing again.

"From the frying pan into the f-" Xena started to say, but found herself nearly knocked down by the Goddess and a guest - the green-clad little person they had run into in the forest.

Once back, Aphrodite put her arms in the air to get people to settle down so she could introduce her companion, but it didn't work, so she put two fingers in her mouth and let out a whistle that was loud enough to tear down the walls

at Jericho. "Right! Quiet, please! Goddess in the house, don'tchaknow! I'd like to introduce you to someone very special... my distant relative from the emerald isle, Seamus O'Flanagan!"

"What a peculiar name..." Joxer said, sitting up on the floor and pushing his pointy helmet back on his head so he could scratch his forehead.

"I'll give ye peculiar names, sunny boy," Seamus said and began to roll up his sleeves to prepare a spell.

"No, no, couz, let's not get carried away," Aphrodite said and put a calming hand on the Leprechaun's shoulder. "Right, where was I...? Oh yeah, Seamus is part of an exchange program set up by Daddy and the Big Kahuna in Erin so we can all broaden our horizons. It's worked really well, too!" the Goddess continued with a snicker.

The throaty grumble emanating from the two Gabrielles seemed less enthusiastic.

Rolling his sleeves back down, Seamus put his hat on crooked and cast an appraising look at the assembled people. "I s'pose ye want me ta transform the blondes back into one bein', aye?"

"We would be very grateful if you did, Sir," Xena said sincerely.

The other Gabrielle let go of her twin and moved to the front of the crowd of people watching the two fantastical beings. "Okay, you just hold your horses, pal. If we're going back into one person, it should be me who's left standing and she who's shredded by the strings of time."

"I beg your pardon!" the first Gabrielle said, moving forward as well. "I'm me! You're not me, you're... you! You're just an imposter!"

"Am not!" -- "Is too!" -- "Am not!" -- "Is too!" -- "Am not!" -- "Is too!" -- "Am not, not, not, NOT!" -- "Is too, too, too, TOO!"

Smirking, the Leprechaun tugged at Xena's leather skirt and leaned in towards her once she had bent down. "'ave they been behavin' like this the whole time...?"

"Pretty much, yeah..."

"Ye Gads, they're worse than my wives... all right, stand back, ev'body!" Seamus said and rolled up his sleeves. The only people not listening were the two Gabrielles, but that suited him just fine since it meant that they were standing in close proximity to one another. "'ow 'bout a little dose o' this!" he said and cast a spell at the two blondes by moving his open hand in an arch that created a shower of little, sparkly stars.

When the shower of stars hit the two Gabrielles, it expanded until they were both fully engulfed. With a loud report, a whiff of vanilla and a bright, emerald green flash, the shower of stars slowly fell to the floor to reveal a single Gabrielle - who promptly spun around on her axis and keeled over.

"Gabrielle!" Xena shouted and rushed forward to help her lover.

"'s funny, that's not what 'appens back home..." Seamus said and looked at his fingers. "Eh, I guess ya learn som'thin' new ev'ry day."

Clapping her hands in appreciation of the cool light show, Aphrodite leaned down and kissed her relative's forehead. "Seamus, why don'tcha go back to my party pad and fix yourself a little drink? I have something to say to the leather babe and the, uh... single bard."

"Aye, will do, toots. Meet ya there?" Seamus said and winked at the Goddess.

"But of course, couz! We haven't finished broadening my horizons yet," Aphrodite said with a snicker and blew Seamus a little kiss just as he disappeared in a cloud of stars.

Lying flat on her back, Gabrielle cracked open her eyes and looked up into Xena's cobalt blue orbs that were shining with worry. "Hey..." she croaked and tried to sit up. "Ugh. I have a headache. What happened? Did you get the number of that speeding chariot?"

"I'll explain later, love. C'mon, I'll help you," Xena said and put a hand on Gabrielle's back to help her up into a sitting position.

"Oh... hello, Dite," Gabrielle said once the owner of the pink negligee in front of her nose came down to greet her.

"Hi, sweet pea! Boy, that was too much of a good thing, huh? I watched it all from afar," Aphrodite said and effortlessly pulled Gabrielle to her feet. "I was getting worried, you know..." she continued while giving the bard a thorough frisking to check if she was all still there.

"Aphro-\*dite\*...!" Gabrielle said, snickering embarrassedly when the Goddess insisted on checking her cleavage.

"Well, a girl needs all her bits, you know," the Goddess huffed but soon recovered to place a little kiss on the tip of Gabrielle's nose. "You're all there, snookums."

"Thanks," Xena drawled and pulled her partner into a loving hug.

Aphrodite - ever the showman - put her hands on her heart and pretended to swoon. "Awww! Mondo neato, you two! You definitely make my heart go ba-da-bing-ba-da-boom. I love you to bits, guys! You're, like, the best mortals ever!"

"Ba-da... what?" Gabrielle said, scratching her hairline.

"No idea," Xena whispered into Gabrielle's hair. "How about we said goodbye to everybody and went over to the hotel? I have something I really, really want to show you."

Snickering loudly, Gabrielle blushed red and turned around to claim her lover's lips in a deep kiss. Once they separated, she traced her index finger down Xena's strong jaw and onto her throat. "That sounds wonderful, because... I love you, you know," she whispered in between little kisses.

"I love you t-"

"Sweeeeeeeeet!" Aphrodite squealed, fanning herself with an intricate oriental fan that she had conjured up out of nowhere. "Oh, don't let me stop ya! Oh! Oh, I have \*the\* best idea, like, ever! Instead of going to a grody hotel, why don'tcha come up to Mount Olympus with me? I got a bubble bath, a king-sized bed with satin sheets, mood music, an endless supply of wine and honey and strawberries... all you could ever wish for. Whaddaya say?"

Gabrielle hooked her arm inside Xena's and looked up at the warrior with an expectant look on her face. "Well...? Satin sheets..."

"Would you like to go there?"

"Oh yes, please," Gabrielle said and snuggled up next to the warrior.

"Then that's where we'll be going. Aphrodite?"

Nodding enthusiastically, the Love Goddess broke out in an exotic shimmy and an equally exotic jungle-like cry. "Uh-huh! Uh-huh! I'll fix it up good for ya... see ya in a flash!"

"We'll give you a call when we're ready to go!" Gabrielle shouted, but the Goddess had already disappeared in a cloud of little, pink hearts.

Once things had settled down a bit, Xena and Gabrielle walked over to Ophelia who was humming a lullaby to her son who had been stirred by the commotion.

"Take care, Ophelia," Gabrielle said as she knelt down next to the tired woman and put a hand on her shoulder. "We'll be around to check up on things. Okay?"

Putting her slumbering baby boy on her chest so she knew where he was, Ophelia smiled up at the bard and put out her hand. "Yes. Thank you for everything. It has been an interesting couple of days..."

"I'll say! Well, see you later," Gabrielle said and clasped arms with Ophelia.

Once Xena and Gabrielle had said goodbye to Hermia - her husband had already gone back to their house to prepare for Ophelia and her baby - they went over to Joxer who was standing with his odd helmet in his hands.

"Thanks guys," he said and pulled them into a strong hug. "We didn't get to spend much time with each other on this one... maybe next time?"

Gabrielle nodded and playfully punched his makeshift armor. "Sure. It was nice seeing you, Joxer. Stay safe, okay?"

"But of course. You, too."

Smiling, Xena pulled Gabrielle close and leaned her head down to place a kiss on the bard's hair. "Oh, we'll be just fine, Joxer. Count on it."

"Good. And now, I'm off to organize the town's defenses. They're a shambles if you ask me," Joxer said and put his helmet back on. "Ohhhhhh, Joxer the Mighty, everyone admires him, he's so handsome it's a sin..." he sang at the top of his lungs as he walked up the aisle.

"Uh, yeah," Gabrielle said and scratched her cheek.

With a sneaky glance at everyone present, Xena turned Gabrielle around and led her over to a secluded part of the community hall. "Are you ready?" she said once she had given the bard a little kiss.

Gabrielle smiled and reached up to trace Xena's lips with an index finger. "I couldn't be more ready."

"Aphrodite?!" -- "Yooohoo, Dite?" they both exclaimed as one, chuckling when they realized they had sounded equally desperate.

It wasn't long before the Goddess arrived and whisked them away to a few days of peace, fun and plenty of loving between cool satin sheets.

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**THE END.**