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The Broken Arrow
By
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Chapter 1: The Perils of Tavern Dining

The coastal fog was slowly rolling into town as Lessa wearily stepped through the tavern doorway. Squaring her shoulders, she steeled herself against the casual noise of this late afternoon crowd. *"Just a quick meal,"* she told herself, *"then I'll return to..."* return to what is indeed the question. *"Will I ever go home?"* she wondered, shaking her head. It was best not to think too far into the uncertain future. The future would arrive when it did.

Tired but cautious, she scanned the interior of the tavern and its patrons. She selected a small table by the unlit fireplace. It had a good view of the room, her back to the wall, and clean shot at the door. No, her instincts hadn't slipped... *yet*. The tavern, *Hog's Head* the faded sign outside the door declared, had lost most of its lunch crowd. There were several farmers at a large table, regulars from the sound of them, a few merchants conversing amongst themselves and a couple of barmaids. A second glance revealed that the woman sitting at the table next to her was in fact, not a barmaid. She appeared to be a patron. A solitary female traveling alone. This was odd. Lessa noticed clear green eyes observing her. The woman appeared only slightly older than Lessa. She had a delicate mane of strawberry blond hair framing an attractive face, not overtly friendly, just curious. Not wanting to be noticed, especially not now, Lessa looked away, willing the anxiety to dissipate by sheer force. Deciding to leave, she was stopped by the barmaid's approach. She was a young girl,

maybe fifteen, with short blond hair. *Do I look that young?* Lessa wondered to herself, then shook her head. She hadn't been fifteen for three years. It seemed a lifetime away.

"What'll ya have?" the girl asked politely.

Lessa didn't have the strength to hide the exhaustion in her voice, or pass up what was to be her first meal in two days. "Can I get some food for three dinars? And some apples for my mount?" Reaching for her money, Lessa winced as her leather armor creaked loudly, the thick hide protested the archer's lack of attention.

"I'll see what I can find," the young woman replied with a kind smile as she accepted Lessa's money. "The food won't be fancy though."

Nodding acceptance, her attention was diverted as a huge man crashed through the tavern entrance with uproarious laughter. "Who owns the funny striped pony?" he asked, jabbing a fat finger behind him and looking around the room.

With an audible sigh, Lessa raised her head. It figured. "She belongs to me, but she isn't a pony."

"I'd like to buy her for my kids," he said, still laughing with eyes that said refusal was not an option.

"I'm sorry. But she isn't for sale." Lessa thought the big man's next words as he said them.

"Everything's for sale, little girl. I want that pony."

This was why she'd not been able to eat a hot meal in two days. As soon as she stopped anywhere, inevitably someone would remark about her unusual mount. Not ideal when one was on the run. Last time she'd bolted from the tavern and taken off. Now she was too hungry. She'd already paid for her food, and Zeus be damned, she was going to eat it.

"Look, friend," she said, with an edge creeping into her voice, "She isn't safe for kids, she isn't safe for you and she isn't for sale. I'll prove it to you if I have to." He stood staring her down, waiting. "Fine. I'll bet you ten dinars that you can't sit on my mount for two seconds."

"That little thing?" The farmer bellowed with laughter. "I'll break it's back!"

"I take it we have a bet then?"

Gabrielle watched the exchange with interest. She had seen the unusual woman come into the tavern, looking as if she'd not slept in days. The woman was hard not to notice. She had shoulder length hair a color Gabrielle had never seen before. It was dark brown, but burgundy and rust as well—the color of a deep sunset after a forest fire. The woman was small, shorter than herself, Gabrielle supposed, and looked like she couldn't be much more than sixteen. Dressed in dark green and black leather she had a short sword strapped to her back in a scabbard that also served as a quiver for several arrows. She looked small for a fighter. Still, Xena was the warrior Gabrielle was used to, and most people seemed small in comparison. Unlike Xena, this woman wore dark green pants that tucked into the top of her armored boots. Her midriff was bare, the armor on her chest not reaching much past her bust. Gabrielle's inventory of the stranger's armor was interrupted as the woman stood and, with the rest of the crowd in the tavern, headed outside.

The bard couldn't keep from smiling as she saw the pony the farmer had referred to. It was smaller than the horses outside the tavern, and it was impossible to tell if the animal was black with white stripes or white with black stripes. Every inch of the animal's fur was striped. Equal bands of black and white draped themselves over the animal in an exotic pattern. *"Xena won't believe this,"* Gabrielle thought.

Lessa smiled as she approached the creature. Green eyes looked into black in silent greeting as a small crowd gathered. "This is Socrates. I'll untie her. If you can stay on her back for two seconds, I'll give you ten dinars."

"That isn't a proper saddle," the farmer complained, looking at the heavy blanket strapped to the animal's back.

"Go on, Talen," one of the other farmers encouraged. "You don't need a saddle to ride a pony." A chorus of cheers greeted the farmer as he rolled up his shirt sleeves.

"Easy girl," Lessa said gently to the striped animal, "wait 'till he's on..."

No sooner had the farmer put his full weight on the animal's back, then the head went down and the back legs kicked up. The big man flew over the beast's head, landing flat on his back several feet away. The farmers on the porch of the tavern laughed and cheered as they helped their friend up. Brushing the dust from his tunic and trousers, he walked over to Lessa, a bashful grin on his face. He looked at the animal a moment and noticed its ears flattened back against its equine head as it stomped a foot aggressively.

"You win, young lady." The farmer reached into a pouch at his side and extracted ten dinars, putting them in Lessa's hand. "I've ridden horses most of my life, but I've never been thrown so quickly. Something tells me she also bites."

Accepting the coins with a nod and a quick grin, Lessa spent a few moments stroking the animal's head and speaking to it in soft tones before heading back into the tavern. Just as she returned to her table, the barmaid approached with a bowl and platter. "I found four apples," the young woman remarked placing the food on the table. "Hope that's enough."

"That's fine. Thank you." Lessa vaguely heard herself answer, as she handed the woman an additional dinar from her winnings. Her immediate awareness was focused on the feast before her. The bowl contained a thin soup. It was not much for flavor, but it was hot and had a few bits of meat and some onion in it. The platter had some fresh bread a few strips of dried fish and a large hunk of cheese in addition to the four large red apples. So distracted by the meal, Lessa didn't see the strawberry blond approach until she sat down at her table. By then it was too late to warn her away with a glare.

"Hi," the young woman said pleasantly, "I'm Gabrielle. That thing your horse did was amazing."

Lessa looked up with a glance and returned to her food. "Not a horse," she said around a mouthful of hot bread. "Getting thrown is not that unusual." She carefully put the four red apples in a satchel at her waist, and packed the rest of the bread and dried fish. After breaking off a small piece of cheese, she packed that as well.

Gabrielle nodded, aware that this woman was trying to ignore her. "So what is she?"

Lessa looked up, surprised that the other woman was still there. She took a moment to really look at Gabrielle. Aware of her scrutiny, the bard sat up straight and looked at Lessa without fear, kindness clear in her features. "Well, if you're that interested, Gabrielle, she's a zebra."

"Zebra..." Gabrielle tried out the word. To her it sounded as exotic as the unusual horse looked. "Not from around here, I suppose. I take it she likes apples?"

Lessa glanced around the tavern to be certain. Her first assumption appeared to be correct, this woman was indeed alone. Probably not the Gabrielle that she'd been told about. Besides, she didn't really have blond hair. "Yes, Socrates likes apples. Zebras are similar to horses in most respects. And yes, she isn't from around here." The hot soup had done wonders for Lessa's disposition. She popped the bite of cheese into her mouth, savoring the tartness of it, and ventured a question of her own.

"If you don't mind my asking, Gabrielle—you're dressed like a traveler, but surely you know the coast line and forests around it are not a place to be traveling alone."

Gabrielle smiled. "I'm not alone. I'm meeting a friend here. She had something to do when we got into town. I hope she gets here soon; I'd love for her to see your...zebra."

Lessa stopped chewing, the color beginning to drain from her face. "Does this friend of yours have a name?" She asked trying to sound casual.

"Xena."

Lessa had just taken another sip of broth from the bowl and almost choked. "Xena," she croaked.

"You've heard of her?" Gabrielle asked dubiously. "She's still a warrior, but not like she used to be..."

"Ah, no. I've never heard of her," Lessa replied, quickly draining the last of the broth from her bowl. "It's just that Xena is such an unusual name, lovely in fact. I'm sorry I won't be able to

meet her Gabrielle, but I've got to be going."

Lessa couldn't get to the door fast enough, as soon as she opened it, she stood face to face with another warrior. Actually she was face to face with another warrior's chest. A female warrior.

Xena looked down, amused at the woman no taller than her shoulder. She was dressed in green and black, looking every bit the archer. "Excuse me," the slight woman muttered, pushing past Xena. The warrior watched casually as the archer quickly untied her unusual horse, leaped on, and headed out of the village at full gallop. Xena felt a disquieting suspicion begin to grow.

"How odd," Gabrielle remarked as she met Xena in the doorway. "I was just starting to tell her about you when she left all the sudden."

"What did you say about me?" Xena asked, turning to face her companion.

"Nothing, really. She just asked if I was traveling alone, and I said I wasn't and mentioned your name then..."

Gabrielle was interrupted by Xena's whistle as she signaled for her horse, Argo. "Gabrielle, I don't have time to explain," Xena said evenly, "I heard some rumors when we got into town that we were being followed, and I want to ask that woman some questions." Argo trotted up, and the warrior vaulted into the saddle. "There is a small cove two miles south of this village, by a waterfall. Wait for me there. I think we'll be having company this evening." With that, she signaled Argo and turned to go.

"How are you going to follow her?"

"This way leads to the shore— there's sand, cliffs and ocean. It won't be hard. I'll see you later." Xena lightly kicked Argo as they raced from town at full gallop.

Lessa had ridden for about ten minutes along the sandy shore when she first heard the hoofbeats off in the distance. Crouched as she was on her steed's back, head down, she risked a quick look behind her. As she feared, the big warrior was following her. Using her strong legs to signal Socrates, she headed the animal to the water's edge. The sand there was firm, she'd be able to increase her speed. Cliffs jutted up from the sand about two miles distant. If she could reach the steep trail before being caught, she was confident her compact, nimble footed zebra could outmaneuver Xena's war horse on the narrow trail. The trick would be keeping her lead along this open expanse of sand.

As the steady thrum of hoofbeats increased in volume, Lessa didn't have to look to know the warrior gaining on her. Briefly she considered grabbing a hand crossbow attached to her blanket saddle and firing on her pursuer, then thought better of it. She couldn't kill Xena with one shot from a zebra's back at full gallop. Stopping and giving herself up never crossed the archer's mind. Xena was chasing after her for a reason, and she could guess that meant Xena knew why she'd been in Tenthe in the first place. "*She must have assumed the worst, seeing me with Gabrielle,*" Lessa thought, sea spray whipping at her hair and face.

Xena gained steadily on the fleeing woman in front of her. It was clear to her that the woman she pursued was proficient on horseback. The striped horse and armor clad woman moved in sync as they raced across the wet sand. Xena could see a long bow and small crossbow attached to the side of the saddle; she was definitely in pursuit of an archer. Her quarry's muscular build, in spite of her small frame, indicated she was also a warrior. Looking father up the beach, she could see where the other was headed. A steep trail headed up into the cliffs, where forest abruptly met sea. If the archer made it to the trail before Xena could stop her, the smaller striped animal would have the advantage. "I'll just see that doesn't happen then," she whispered fiercely under her breath.

A half mile to the trail, Xena caught up with the archer. Approaching from the inland side, she forced her quarry into deeper water. When she was alongside, she leaped from Argo's back into the smaller woman, knocking her off her horse and into the shallow surf. Xena didn't say a word. If words would have persuaded this woman to stop running, she would have already.

Lessa felt as if she'd been hit by a Titan. The muscular form flying into her drove her clear from her saddle and on her back into the cold salt water. Quick as lightning, she brought her legs up and with a thrust surprisingly powerful for her size, threw the warrior back over her head. With a

jump she was on her feet. For a half second she thought about drawing her sword. She well knew Xena's reputation, if in fact this was Xena. If she drew her sword now, she'd probably never draw another...ever.

Xena was surprised by the throw, but managed to pull her legs in. With a graceful tuck and spin she landed on her feet, splashing in the surf. Both women eyed each other critically, trying to anticipate the other's next move. Lessa was cautiously backing up, fists at the ready, heading for dry sand. With a leap Xena was over her head, landing on the other side driving her back into deeper water. "I just want to ask you a few questions," she said flatly.

"Forgive my impertinence," Lessa replied, "but I don't believe you."

"If I wanted to kill you, you'd already be dead."

Lessa nodded. "Maybe, maybe not." With that she stopped moving backwards and lunged straight for the warrior. Connecting solidly with Xena's torso, she knocked the air from the big warrior's lungs. Surprised, and reacting from instinct, she responded with a right forearm across the archer's back. Lessa dropped, unconscious, into the knee deep surf with a splash.

Xena sighed and turned the body over with her boot, sea foam receding off the still form leaving fine sand in its place. Unceremoniously, she hoisted the body out of the surf and positioned it across her shoulders. Any water in the archer's nose and mouth would drain out. Xena grimaced at cold wet body dripping water down her back and arms as she headed up the beach. Argo watched the striped horse with interest. It in turn was studying Xena most intently.

"Don't worry." Xena said as soon as she got within earshot of the animal. "I'm not going to hurt her." She spoke in soothing tones, looking occasionally over her shoulder at the beast as she draped the woman across Argo's back and tied her arms and her legs. That done, she tried to approach the striped animal, who deftly stepped out of her reach. "Suit yourself," she muttered, grabbing Argo's reins and heading up the shore. In moments she heard the footfalls of the smaller animal as it followed behind.

Gabrielle had just gotten the campfire under way and set water to boil for tea when she saw the vague outline of figures moving up the beach. A moment's observation and she was sure it was Xena, Argo with a something across her back, and the small striped horse. Zebra, she corrected herself. Straining her eyes, Gabrielle hunted for the other warrior, then realized she'd been looking right at her. *She* was that bundle across Argo's back. As her friend entered the campsite, Gabrielle rushed to her, concern apparent in her voice.

"What happened?"

"She's fine Gabrielle." Xena replied gently, soothing the other woman's concerns. "She wouldn't stop running."

"So she started swimming?" Gabrielle asked, noticing the water dripping from the still form on Argo's back. "Get her down from there, she'll catch her death of cold. So will you for that matter. Come here and warm up by the fire."

Xena smiled in spite of herself. So like Gabrielle to worry about the little things. No matter that she'd just captured someone who could be as proficient with a bow and arrow as she herself was with a sword, Gabrielle was worried about her getting the sniffles. Still, it was dusk now and the temperature was dropping swiftly. Taking a step toward her horse, Xena grimaced at the squishy feel of seawater seeping out of her boot. She didn't want to think about the effect salt water was going to have on her armor.

"Oh, hi, Socrates," Gabrielle said, addressing the zebra that had just stepped into their campsite. It kept a wary eye on her mistress.

"She won't let anyone get near..." Xena had been looking down as she positioned Lessa's body against a tree near the fire. When she raised her head she watched in amazement as the bard slowly stepped up to the unusual animal.

Socrates studied Xena with a decidedly smug look on her face. "Don't worry," Gabrielle soothed, "your friend is going to be fine. Xena didn't hurt her—well not too bad anyway." Slowly the bard reached her hand out and let the animal see her open palm, then gently stroked its head and

neck.

"I'll bet this is for you," she continued, pulling a large red apple from the bag of food attached to the horse's saddle. The equine sniffed the apple for a moment before accepting it in a large bite. "I'm going to get your friend to wake up now. Don't wander off. I'm sure she'll appreciate a familiar face."

"And you didn't think you had a way with horses?" Xena teased.

"It's because Socrates isn't a horse, she's a zebra. I must have a way with zebras."

"Is that so? You're really something, Gabrielle, you know that?" Xena said fondly as the bard joined her by Lessa's still form.

Gabrielle joined Xena in removing the cold, soaked armor from the unconscious woman.

"What do you mean?" she asked, blushing at the compliment.

"You just have a way...with everyone." Xena replied shyly, not meeting the bard's appreciative gaze. "We weren't in the water very long," she continued, changing the subject, "I don't see how she got so soaked."

"Well, you're almost as soaked. When we finish with her, your armor is coming off next."

No point in arguing, the bard was right. "Yes, ma'am," she replied with a chuckle.

Lessa began to wake up as the last of her armor was gently removed. When she finally opened her eyes, she realized she was dressed in a clean dry shift her clothes and armor drying by the fire. She was grateful to see her armor was not too close to the fire. Drying out too quickly was hell on leather. She noticed that her hands and legs were tied as Xena approached.

"You slept long enough," the warrior said evenly.

"You hit me hard enough," Lessa retorted sullenly, looking down at her bound hands. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Xena extend two fingers and draw her hand back. "If you're going to poke me- cut off the flow of blood to my brain- don't bother. I'll talk."

Xena shrugged and put her hand down. "You didn't seem too willing to talk before."

"Well, I've heard about the procedure and it doesn't sound too pleasant." Lessa heard Gabrielle chuckle from the other side of the fire. "Besides, before I had a least a chance of escape, and I had my clothes on."

"Suit yourself. Why don't we start with your name."

"Lessa."

"And why were you following us?"

"I wasn't exactly following you," Lessa replied, shifting uncomfortably. "I mean, I was supposed to be following you, but I changed my mind at Delphi and I left before the two of you did. I honestly expected you to take the inland route, not the coastal."

"We did take the inland route, but that was four days ago." Xena commented. "So how did you manage to get from Delphi to Tenthe in only four days if you took the coastal route?" the warrior asked.

"By not stopping..."

"No wonder you're exhausted." Gabrielle blurted from where she sat near the fire. Xena shot her a look and the bard quickly busied herself with other things.

"So who do you work for?" Xena asked evenly.

Lessa sighed, apparently giving up. "There is a quiver on my saddle. In it is an arrow with black feathers. It will explain everything."

Xena stood and took a step towards the zebra who took an identical step backwards. The warrior shot an irritated look at Lessa who shrugged.

"I'll get it," Gabrielle offered, hurrying over to where the animal stood. The zebra nickered softly at the bard's approach, but didn't move.

"It's all right, Socrates," Lessa called. "Let her get it."

A moment later Gabrielle returned with the arrow. It was a bit fatter than most arrows, expertly made with short black feathers for flights. At its tip was a nasty looking barbed arrowhead. "Go ahead, break it open," Lessa suggested.

Before Xena could stop her, Gabrielle broke the arrow across her knee, extracting a thin piece of parchment from the hollow shaft. She unrolled it with delicate fingers and read the note, looking up with disbelief.

“You were supposed to kill me?” Gabrielle asked, stunned.

“Let me see that.” Xena demanded, concerned as she reached for the note. She scanned the parchment, her eyes narrowing in anger as she muttered a single word, “Callisto.” Then she offered the captive archer two more words. “Talk, now.”

“I was kidnapped by Callisto’s thugs during an archery competition three months ago. It wasn’t so bad at first, I was looking for some travel and adventure anyway. But it was a big mistake. The work was easy, the pay was good, but there was a lot I didn’t bargain for. I didn’t realize that she was completely insane. She had just decided she needed an archer and...a companion. Callisto is one sick mind, I’ll grant you that.

“Four days ago she left me in Delphi with that note and explicit instructions to kill Xena’s companion, someone she referred to as an irritating blond named Gabrielle. I thought I’d be able to do it. In fact, if you’d gotten there in the morning when you were supposed to, I might have. But I had all day to think about it. I asked around. The stories I heard made it clear that the only thing in life I needed to fear more than an angry Callisto would be an enraged Xena.” Lessa shrugged again. “So I took off and have been running ever since. I was hoping to avoid you and Callisto, but my luck seems to have run out.”

“What could make you willing to kill another person in cold blood?” Gabrielle asked quietly.

“A lot of things,” Xena and Lessa replied in unison, then frowned at each other for a moment.

“Did she threaten your family?” Xena asked.

Lessa nodded and Gabrielle had her answer.

“Well, it looks like you’ll be traveling with us for a few days.” Lessa held up her hands for Xena to untie and the warrior shook her head. “Not so fast,” Xena continued, “If you’re lying, we can’t trust you. If you’re telling the truth and we keep Callisto from killing you, I think you’ll forgive me.”

Lessa nodded. The warrior’s logic made sense. “Can I at least take care of my zebra?” she asked.

“I don’t see why not. Just don’t be stupid.” Xena cut the rope that tied the archer’s feet together, but made no move to untie her hands.

Lessa got up and gingerly walked a short distance from the fire. Her feet were bare and clearly accustomed to boots. Socrates walked over, nickering softly, bending slightly so her ears could be scratched. Gabrielle joined them, approaching cautiously.

“Can I help you?” she asked, noticing Lessa’s awkwardness with her hands tied together.

“That’s awfully brave, considering I was sent out here to kill you,” Lessa quipped, straining to release the straps to the blanket-saddle.

“Yes. But the point is you chose not to kill me, isn’t it?” Gabrielle replied, helping lift the saddle off the zebra’s back, aware of Xena’s watchful glances.

“If you say so,” Lessa shrugged. The bard gently put the saddle on the ground near the fire. “You can give her an apple if you want while I comb her out.” The two worked in silence for a few moments while Lessa brushed the zebra’s coat, then inspected each of the animal’s four small hooves. Gabrielle noticed Xena tending to Argo.

“I need to help Xena. I just want you to know there’re no hard feelings, okay?”

Lessa smiled in spite of the exhaustion plainly evident on her face. “No hard feelings. I’ll say one thing for you, Gabrielle, you’re a class act. And don’t worry, I don’t hold you responsible for Xena’s behavior,” she continued, raising her bound hands. “She’s taking sensible precautions.” The bard smiled sadly. Giving Socrates a final scratch, she walked across the camp site.

Xena had finished with Argo and was removing their bed rolls from the saddle packs. “Xena,” Gabrielle said gently, getting the warrior’s attention. When she turned, the bard continued.

“Leave that for later. If you don’t get out of this wet armor, you’ll catch your death.” Xena glanced over to Lessa and noticed her lying on the ground, head resting on her saddle near the fire, sound asleep.

“You’re right. But first, go toss this on top of Lessa.” She handed the bard her blanket.

Xena sat patiently in front of the fire, watching Gabrielle gracefully drape the blanket over the sleeping archer who mumbled incoherently and curled into a ball, a smile on her unconscious face. She then sensed the bard’s warmth at her back at the customary tugging as her armor was loosened. Carefully, Gabrielle set the pieces of armor away from the fire to dry. She handled them so gently Xena noticed, even as she felt them as slabs of ice being removed from her body. It had gotten colder than she expected. When the last of it was off she was suddenly very aware of Gabrielle’s proximity...and her warmth.

“Your skin is like ice,” Gabrielle commented as she lightly touched the warrior’s shoulders. She felt the warrior tremble slightly. Thinking it was from the cold, she quickly retrieved a blanket from her pack. After gently wrapping it around Xena’s sitting form, she poured her some fresh tea.

“I don’t know what I’d do without you.” Xena said, accepting the steaming mug. She tried to keep the humor in her voice, but knew she was deadly serious.

“I’ll remember that.” the bard replied, eyes laughing. “So what are we going to do with her?”

Xena sipped her tea thoughtfully and gazed into the fire. The hot liquid warmed her within, the wool blanket drew the chill from her skin, and Gabrielle’s presence heated her in ways she thought it best not to dwell upon. “Tomorrow we’ll go after Callisto. I think she and I need to have a little talk. And you,” Xena looked at Gabrielle seriously, “will need to be careful whenever Lessa is around. Even if she looks like she’s asleep.”

“But I...”

“Gabrielle, we don’t know if she’s one of Callisto’s plants, or if she really is running away from her. If Callisto really wrote that note, she certainly intended me to find it sticking out of your chest. I’m not prepared to gamble with your life, and I’m not prepared to have you gamble with it either.” Xena did her best to communicate the gravity and urgency of her words, warmed yet again by the bard’s understanding smile in return.

“Thank you, Xena.” she said softly. “Now try to get some sleep. Please.” Gabrielle stretched out by the fire, pulling Xena down with her.

The warrior was about to protest until it became evident the bard wanted a portion of the blanket that she’d been wrapped in. Remembering it was Gabrielle’s blanket, she smiled to herself. “*If Gabrielle can share, I guess I can too,*” she thought. Stretching out between the warmth of the fire and Gabrielle’s body, Xena felt too much bliss to sleep.

Chapter 2: Runaway, Archer, Thief

Lessa awoke to the customary warm breath of her traveling companion as the zebra snorted in her face, nudging her gently. “I’m awake, enough already,” she mumbled as she opened her eyes to a dizzying array of black and white. Fumbling under her saddle with her right hand, she found her cache of food and extracted an apple, handing it to the expectant zebra. It was then she noticed her hands were untied.

Sitting up with a start, she looked around the campsite. Xena sat across the fire tending to her armor. Gabrielle was nowhere to be seen. “I undid the bow strings on your weapons,” Xena announced flatly, and if you don’t mind, I’ll hang on to your sword for awhile.

“Sure, no problem,” Lessa said, seeing her hopes for escape melting away like ice in summer.

“Here,” Xena said, tossing the archer an oiled rag and some compound. “Your armor needs some work.”

“You’re telling me.” Lessa picked up her leather breast plate and set to work, but was distracted by the aroma of cooking coming from the fire. A rabbit hung from the spit and some plants were steeping in liquid off to the side. The familiar rumbling in her stomach was unmistakable. “Um... I have some bread and cheese. I’ll trade for some rabbit?”

Xena stopped sharpening her sword and studied the archer. Her neon blue eyes unreadable, Lessa felt naked in their gaze. “Fair enough,” she said after a long moment. “But we’ll wait for Gabrielle, if you don’t mind.”

“No, of course not...”

“You could elaborate a little on your story while we’re waiting.”

Lessa searched her packs and brought out the bread and cheese, placing them on a flat rock equidistant between her and the warrior. “Story?” she said, returning to work on her armor. “Does that mean you don’t believe me?”

“Let’s just say I’m undecided.”

Lessa’s retort died on her lips as Gabrielle stepped through the shrubs at the perimeter of the campsite. Freshly bathed, her hair not quite dry, she looked radiant. “You were right about the stream, Xena, it’s freez— oh hi, you’re awake.”

The smile on Xena’s face at Gabrielle’s return did not go unnoticed by the archer. Lessa smiled at the greeting, doing her best to be a casual observer of the body language between warrior and bard. There was a chance Callisto was wrong about these two, so perhaps she was wrong about more as well.

“Lessa was just about to tell us a bit more about her background while we have a bite to eat.” Xena explained, finishing with her sword and proficiently tucking it into its scabbard.

“Go on,” Gabrielle urged, taking a seat next to Xena. She broke off a piece of bread and rabbit then handed it to the warrior. Next she served Lessa, then herself.

“There isn’t much more to tell. I don’t know what you’re after...”

“Well, you said you were kidnapped from an archery competition. Are you any good?” the bard asked, placing a small piece of meat on a bit of bread then popping it into her mouth.

“As a matter of fact, I won. The competition in the kingdom of Minos. I win every year,” Lessa said, around a mouthful of food. “I returned to Socrates with my winnings, and she gave warning just as I was hit in the head.” The archer turned around and frowned at the animal watching her. “A little more warning next time would be helpful.” The zebra snorted and turned away.

“It looks like she can almost understand you,” Gabrielle observed.

“The funny thing is, I think she can. She’s the most unusual animal I’ve ever seen.”

“Where did you get her?” the bard asked, serving Xena a second helping of food.

“I stole her.”

Xena looked up at that admission, arching an eyebrow.

“A horse trader my father knew had three of these magnificent animals. When I went into market and saw them, two had already been skinned. Soc here was the only one left. The merchant discovered they couldn’t be broken for riding and didn’t see any other use for them. They simply won’t behave if they don’t want to. I didn’t have the money to buy her, but when I saw those eyes, I had to do something. So I devised a plan.” Lessa could see Gabrielle listening intently to her story, hanging on every word. For her part, Xena seemed divided between occasionally looking at Lessa and watching the bard listen to the story.

“That night,” she continued, “I went visiting, supposedly to bring him news from my father; they were friends. He lived alone, his wife and child taken by a sickness a few years ago. I fixed him dinner. I put something in his mulled mead to make him sleep, then I set to work. I had ridden my horse, a gift from my father, which was an excellent animal. It was small for a horse, only slightly bigger than Soc, but a well trained animal and black as pitch. This merchant, Gagnon, had three other horses as well, not too much bigger than the zebra. One was tan, the other two chestnut. I made a wash of black soot and water, and painted the other three horses so all four were solid black. It dried quickly, then I used some flour paste to paint white stripes on all four animals. I figured Gagnon would see four zebras the next morning and have to wash them all to see which one was real, only they’d all be horses. I hoped that would give me enough of a head start to avoid capture. Gagnon would naturally accuse me, when he found my horse painted like a zebra in his pen, but I’m sure my adoptive family would argue the point. They have a rather unrealistic view of me. I left

evidence at home that I'd fallen in the river- an accident doing laundry, which I'm not very good at, to further confuse the issue, then set out with Soc to live as the persona I created for the archery competitions."

"So you're adopted?" Gabrielle asked.

"Let's just say that my mother thought it best I grow up with my father's family as one of their own. I've never really fit in with them though. I'm just too...different."

Gabrielle nodded, understanding. "And Lessa isn't your real name?"

"What is more real, Gabrielle, how we see ourselves, or how others see us?"

"Good point," the bard observed, pouring three cups of tea from the pot with the steeping herbs. "So when did you discover that Socrates was unusual?"

"Well, I had a funny feeling that night as I worked," Lessa continued. "Almost as if I was being watched. I guess my scheme was creative enough that Hermes smiled on me that night. Soc was as quiet as could be. I intended to walk her from town but she kept nudging me in the back. I finally got fed up and tried hopping up on her back. She didn't throw me, and I'd heard horror stories from Gagnon. She just seems to understand what I say, follows me around. Kinda like a dog I suppose." There was a loud nicker and snort from the edge of the campsite, followed by the stamp of an irritated hoof. "But much smarter." Lessa amended.

"So archery was the only reason Callisto was interested in you?" Xena asked, sipping her tea.

The archer had almost forgotten about the warrior's presence. She had been so still, so quiet. Lessa suspected she'd worked very hard at being unobtrusive. "I'm the best archer she'd ever seen. She wanted you to find that arrow sticking out of Gabrielle's heart and wanted you to seek her out because of it. Callisto is good with a sword, quarterstaff, and hand to hand fighting, but she isn't as good with a bow and she knows it. I'm certain there were other factors in her decision, but the archery was first and foremost."

"She pegged me with a dart." Xena observed.

"And don't think we haven't all heard *that* story a thousand times." Lessa laughed. "Fact is, she had a clean shot while you were preoccupied. I could have made that shot with my eyes closed. But piercing Gabrielle's heart, not in battle, in a crowded market place with you keeping a watchful eye on her *and* not have that arrow deflected or caught, now *that* takes an expert."

"Don't you think your family is looking for you?" Gabrielle asked, feeling uncomfortable at the turn the conversation had taken.

"I doubt it. The river where I lived was pretty treacherous. People have drowned in it before. Occasionally the body isn't recovered."

"Where is Callisto now?" Xena asked.

"When she left me at Delphi she said she and her thugs were going to Korinos to do some recruiting. She fully intends to build another army. She wants your blood, Xena, and she knows she's going to need at least an army to get it. After Korinos I think her next stop would be Eselan."

"Then I'd say we have four days to catch up with her before she reaches Eselan," Xena observed. "If you're telling the truth."

"Wait a minute. I'm not going with you. Callisto will kill me. She's going to know Gabrielle isn't dead. She also knows there isn't any way I could have missed. This is a death sentence..."

Lessa's fear had an agitating effect on the zebra which began to bob its head nervously.

"You have a choice, of course," Xena said evenly. "Travel with us or risk facing Callisto on your own. I will have my talk with her. If there's anything left when I'm done, she very well may come after you. And there's one other thing," Xena continued, finishing the last of her tea, "Like it or not, you threatened to kill Gabrielle. If you choose not to travel with us and I see so much as a glimpse of you, I'll have to assume you're trying to make good on your threat." She left her words hanging, a slow smile crossing her face as she watched the archer think about them.

"Look, Xena," Lessa said, trying quell her anxiety and think clearly. "I fully intended to travel up the coast as quickly as possible. I need to warn some people about Callisto before she...discovers my disloyalty. We both know the trail that way is thin. The odds are good that you might see me."

“Then I strongly suggest you travel with us.” With that the warrior got up and began to saddle Argo.

“Would the Warrior Princess mind if I got cleaned up in the stream before leaving?” Lessa asked sarcastically, standing and loosening the shift she’d slept in.

“We leave in a half hour,” Xena replied, not looking up from her preparations.

The water was indeed cold, the bard hadn’t lied. Socrates stood near a bend in the stream, intermittently drinking and blowing bubbles. Gabrielle approached quietly and stopped behind a large boulder. Lessa’s back was to her, dark hair slick with water, appearing almost black. She was naked, reaching for her breeches, muscular arms graceful in their movements. From the back she did resemble Xena, only much smaller. Gabrielle couldn’t be sure but her back appeared to be covered by a series of scratch marks. The archer turned around before she could get a better look.

“You don’t hide very well, Gabrielle,” Lessa commented, seemingly unconcerned as she faced the bard, naked from the waist up.

“I...I wasn’t hiding.” she stammered, “I was going to let you know we’re leaving soon.”

“I see,” Lessa shrugged, putting on a leather halter. “Well, then, thank you. Soc and I are just about ready. Can you give me a hand with my armor?”

Gabrielle swallowed, carefully crossing the stream, to join the archer on the other side. Lessa put her armband in position, holding it in place while Gabrielle tied the laces. “How did you know I was there?” she asked, conversationally.

“Over there,” Lessa said, gently touching her arm then pointing to the shadow cast by the tree as it splayed across the sandy bank. “Standing next to the boulder you stood out bright as day.” Gabrielle nodded, helping the archer with the rest of her armor. She wore more guards on her right arm and a slightly different style of armor on her front and back. As she worked, she could feel the archer’s green eyes watching her, and could feel the cold moisture on her skin from the stream. Overall, the effect was pleasantly uncomfortable. As Gabrielle adjusted the straps in the back, she got a better look at what were definitely healing scratch marks.

“You’re good at this,” Lessa commented.

“Thank you, I get a lot of practice. What happened here?” Gabrielle asked, positioning a buckle away from a particularly angry scratch mark.

“Callisto.” Lessa said flatly.

“Why?”

Before answering Lessa looked at her for a long moment. Then a huge grin spread across her face, accompanied by a lyrical chuckle. “I guess Callisto was wrong after all,” she muttered to herself.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, Gabrielle, that she is mistaken in the nature of your relationship with Xena.” Lessa said, softly whistling for the zebra to join her.

“How so?” Gabrielle asked, accepting Lessa’s offered arm and joining her on the back of the zebra.

“Callisto thinks you and Xena are a bit closer than you are, that’s all. She was trying to replicate that closeness with me and I’m relieved to discover she is quite mistaken.” Lessa explained as Socrates slowly walked back to camp.

“I’m closer to Xena than I’ve ever been to anyone.” Gabrielle protested.

“I don’t doubt that, Gabrielle, but I suspect that you’re not having sex with Xena. The two of you aren’t lovers are you?” The trio entered the clearing of the campsite, leaving Gabrielle wide eyed and stunned. Xena was scattering the remains of their campfire and looked at the bard with concern.

“Everything okay?” she asked quietly.

“Ah... yes. Fine.” Gabrielle answered in a rush, color rising to her cheeks as she saw the warrior, almost as if for the first time.

“Then get the rest of your stuff together, we’ve got to go.”

Lessa finished tightening the saddle on the zebra, not looking up at the warrior’s approach.

“We’ll take the trail you were heading for yesterday,” Xena said without ceremony. “You in front, Gabrielle and I will follow. If you try to hurt her, I swear I’ll kill you.”

Lessa looked up without anger. “Xena, if I had made a move to hurt Gabrielle, she’d already be dead. You’ve got my weapons, and you have my word. If you still feel that isn’t good enough, then by all means kill me now. I’m tired, Xena, and I suspect that if you don’t kill me Callisto will soon enough. Frankly, I think you’d be quicker about it.”

“If what you’re saying is the truth, archer, then you’ve nothing to fear from Callisto.” Xena walked away, then quickly vaulted onto Argo’s back. “I think you’d better ride, Gabrielle,” she said turning her attention to the bard. “It’s going to be a quick pace.”

“Sure,” Gabrielle replied. With a quick swallow, she grasped Xena’s strong arm and was gracefully lifted into position behind the warrior. Still profoundly affected by Lessa’s words, her arms trembled slightly as they wrapped themselves around the warrior’s waist.

Heading across the beach, Gabrielle looked out into the surf and thought about the archer’s words. Xena and her— lovers? “*Why would Callisto think that?*” she wondered. Socrates started a lazy lope in the shallow surf and Argo followed. It was the most comfortable gait that was faster than a walk, and the animals seemed to agree. With the breathtaking shore line stretching out as far as she could see, it was easy to get lost in thought. Easier still with the rolling gait of Argo and her arms wrapped around a well muscled, very warm body.

“You’re awfully quiet,” Xena commented when they neared the steep cliffs.

“Just enjoying the ride,” Gabrielle replied with a bashful grin into the warrior’s back. Xena turned her head in surprise, a wry smile on her face as the bard turned her head, keeping her smile out of sight.

“I’m glad to hear it. When we get to the cliffs, I want you to sit in front. It’s pretty steep.”

Nodding mutely, Gabrielle looked up in awe at the steep sheets of rock directly in front of them. It was almost impossible to see a trail, seeming better suited to sure footed mountain sheep than a horse or zebra.

Lessa hopped off Socrates and walked over to Argo. “There’s a small village up there called Poli. We should hit it by nightfall. It’s situated by a small lake on relatively flat ground. I suggest we camp there.” Xena nodded in agreement, letting Gabrielle down and rearranging some of their gear.

“Do you want me to carry some of your stuff?” Lessa offered. “There’s going to be a lot of up and down, at least ‘till midday.”

“That would be helpful, but I’d still like to keep a hold of your weapons.”

“Xena, you’re nothing if not predictable.”

“Then you don’t know me very well,” the warrior replied evenly.

Accepting their gear with a light laugh, Lessa headed back to Socrates. “I know you better than you think,” she muttered to herself as she attached the gear to her blanket saddle.

The trail was an exaggerated series of steep switchbacks working their way up the cliff face. It was narrow, barely wide enough for Argo, but the horse kept her footing even in the most rocky patches. Xena sat behind Gabrielle one arm lightly around the bard’s waist, the other holding Argo’s reins. In the steep inclines Gabrielle could feel her body pushed against Xena as the warrior leaned forward in the saddle. Going downhill it was the reverse, Xena pulling the bard against her as she leaned back slightly, helping the horse with her footing. They didn’t talk much that day, Xena was even quieter than usual. When they did converse, Gabrielle felt the distracting sensation of warm breath against her ear as the warrior spoke, or saw Xena’s tan profile just behind and above her shoulder.

Lessa was not too far off, but the distance was more than casual conversation would allow. As a result, the bard was forced to occupy her mind with the scenery, which became more treacherous by the mile. That also left more time for the awareness of immediate sensation. She could feel Xena’s breathing through the armor pressed against her back. There were moments the

bard thought she could almost feel the warrior's heartbeat as well. When that happened she could feel her own pulse quicken in response, desperately hoping it went unnoticed by statuesque woman behind her. It was cold out, but she was kept deliciously warm by the strong body behind and gentle arm around her middle. Her olfactory senses were enticed by the subtle smells of the sea, leather and something else equally as pleasant that Gabrielle could only surmise was Xena herself.

When they stopped for a midday rest, Gabrielle's legs felt like water. She doubted it was just from the hours of riding. "I'll have a look around," Xena announced quickly and headed up the trail. Gabrielle watched her go, puzzled. When she saw Lessa's approach, she busied herself with getting some food from their packs.

"That was abrupt." Lessa noted, looking off into the horizon.

"She's just having a look around."

"If you say so," the archer shrugged, looking back down the trail. "But it isn't as if anyone could really sneak up on us with a trail this narrow."

"What do you think she's doing then?" Gabrielle asked with genuine interest, voice slightly edged with irritation.

"I'd say regaining her composure. If not that, then she's probably taking a leak," Lessa replied, heading back to her own mount and taking a bit of dried fish out of the saddle bag.

"I've been thinking about what you said earlier, Lessa," Gabrielle said quietly, "and I really think you're wrong. I don't know where Callisto got that idea, but Xena isn't interested in me like that. Hercules maybe, but not..."

"Gabrielle, that is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard," Lessa said, doing her very best not to laugh outright. "It's obvious to me how she feels I suspect the only reason you've not heard anyone else comment on it is a healthy fear for their life. I, on the other hand, will most likely not see the full moon so I've got the luxury of honesty."

"But Herc..."

"Is probably a way for her to blow off some steam. No wonder she's so frightening, she's in a constant state of sexual frustration. I guarantee that if she had a choice between Hercules and you, muscle man would be lonely indeed."

"You're making fun of me," Gabrielle said, hurt she looked down into smiling green eyes.

"Maybe a little, Gabrielle, and I'm sorry." Lessa smiled with genuine kindness, her eyes widening suddenly. "Look, I've got an idea."

"Here," she said, rummaging into her saddle pack. Smiling, she extracted a polished piece of metal. It was slightly curved, about the size of the bard's hand. "When we camp tonight, I'll set this by the fire. I'll position it in such a way that you can brush your hair or whatever it is you usually do in the evenings, and you can see if Xena is watching you. If you stay put when I set this up, I doubt Xena will see it— she won't know you're watching her."

Before the bard could respond Xena came walking back down the trail. Lessa quickly tucked the mirror back into her bag, making the pretense of getting an apple for the zebra. "Last one, Soc. You'd better make it last."

"We're making better time than I expected," Xena announced, looking at the archer suspiciously. "We'll make camp outside of Poli, but we'll be able to get some supplies."

"I hope they have apples," Lessa said to no one in particular.

Chapter 3: Mirror, Mirror

The trio reached Poli well before dusk. The trail meandered into a canyon and widened out so the two equines could walk side by side. Gabrielle and Lessa talked amiably, Xena participating in the conversation only occasionally. With the small village barely in sight, they left the trail, heading towards a densely wooded area by the lake Lessa had mentioned.

"This looks good," Xena announced, deciding on their camp site.

Lessa looked around and shrugged. "If you say so." She dismounted from Socrates and stood waiting for Xena and Gabrielle to do the same. They didn't.

“Where are you two going?” Lessa asked, puzzled.

“We’re going to stop by the village. You stay here, and try to keep Socrates out of sight.”

“Aren’t you afraid I might run off?” Lessa asked removing the zebra’s saddle.

“Are you that stupid?” Xena asked in return with a smile. She turned Argo towards the small village.

“If you can, get some apples for Soc!” she called after them. Looking around the shore of the small lake, she addressed the zebra. “You heard the princess, make yourself scarce.” With a flick of her head the zebra headed into the dense trees.

Looking down at her saddle, Lessa decided she might as well set up camp. She had most of the warrior’s gear here anyway. After collecting firewood, starting the fire and putting some water on to boil, she set to arranging the bedrolls. While unrolling the blanket she’d used the previous night, a small pouch fell out, landing at Lessa’s feet. She stooped to pick it up, surprised at how light it was. A closer examination of the blanket showed that the pouch had been sewn into the bottom, concealed under a patch. With a quick look over her shoulder, the archer dumped the contents of the pouch into her hand; a strawberry blond lock of hair tied with a thin piece of leather was its only contents. “*Warriors!*” Lessa thought. With a sigh, she put the pouch back where it belonged and rummaged through her gear for a needle. Taking a loose thread from the end of the blanket, Lessa set to work sewing.

“So what do you think of her?” Gabrielle asked Xena as they slowly walked to town. Argo trailed behind Xena, punctuating their conversation with the occasional snort. It felt good for the bard to stretch her legs, and as much as she appreciated the warmth of the warrior’s body, it was much easier to talk to her this way.

“Well, definitely an unusual animal. What did you call it, zebra?” Xena replied with a smile.

“Not Socrates, Lessa!”

“She seems unusual as well, but not quite as charming,” Xena quipped, still grinning.

“I don’t think she was treated very well by Callisto. When I went to get her at the stream, I saw that her back was covered with scratch marks.”

“Really” she said, arching an eyebrow.

The two women had reached the tiny village. It was easy to spot the tavern—it was the only building obviously populated. The noise level dropped significantly when the warrior and bard stepped into the main room. All eyes turned to the door, and a nervous murmur swept through the dinner crowd. It was irritating, but Xena was used to it.

“What can I get you?” an old woman asked when they’d taken a seat at a nearby table.

“I’d like to buy a bed roll and some traveling provisions, bread, cheese, a little wine, and some apples.”

“Eleven dinars, fix you up real good.” the woman said smiling. She was missing several teeth.

“Fine.” Xena replied, nodding to Gabrielle, who discreetly fished the money out of her satchel.

The old woman returned with a bundle of provisions wrapped in a blanket. An unpleasant memory surfaced at the woman’s approach. Xena quickly surveyed the room. A few farmers, a blacksmith, maybe a merchant or two. This quiet, sleepy town was a raider’s dream. The warrior suspected that its inaccessibility was its best protection. Pushing thoughts out of the past from her mind, Xena and Gabrielle headed out of the tavern to a patiently waiting Argo.

“You’re not that warlord anymore, Xena,” Gabrielle said quietly. “That isn’t who you are now.”

“Can you always tell what I’m thinking?” Xena asked gently, surprised by the bard’s astute observation.

“Only sometimes,” she replied with a reassuring grin. “Sometimes I get the feeling it’s just as well I don’t know what you’re thinking.”

“*You can say that again,*” Xena thought to herself as they headed back to camp in comfortable silence. Walking near the warrior, arms not quite touching, Gabrielle again pondered the archer’s words, her thoughts equally divided between wondering how Xena might feel about her as well as how she truly felt about the enigmatic warrior.

Gabrielle loved Xena, certainly. In a way, that was the easy part. Never had she been as open, honest, and vulnerable with anyone as she was with her friend. But physical desire? Yes, she knew there was that too, but those feelings rarely surfaced. Perhaps because she suspected Xena did not feel the same way. No, Xena probably felt towards her as one would for a baby sister. But still, sometimes she wondered.

There was no sign of Lessa at the campground when they arrived. Two bedrolls had been neatly rolled out side by side next to a blazing campfire. A skin of water hung near the flame heating, and the remainder of their gear was neatly stowed near the bedrolls. Lessa’s saddle blanket was positioned on the other side of the campfire, but that was the only indication the archer was around.

Sudden sounds emerged from the dense trees beyond the campsite. Harsh words and the thrashing sound of a fight could clearly be heard through the foliage. Xena and Gabrielle ran the short distance to the trees. Just beyond they were brought up short by what they saw.

Six men, fishermen by the looks of them, surrounded the archer and were engaged in combat. One was swinging a net, another a club. Two had short swords and the remaining two grabbed for Lessa with bare hands. Gabrielle was about to charge into the fray when a restraining hand on her shoulder stopped her. “Wait a second,” Xena said quietly, watching the fight with interest.

At that moment, Lessa ducked and rolled under the feet of the man with the net, who promptly released it onto his companion with the club. Rolling to her feet behind him, Lessa shoved him with a booted foot and wrapped the remainder of the net around him. A quick turn and Lessa kicked the sword out of the hand of it’s wielder, catching it as it fell. Without missing a beat she kicked behind her, catching a barehanded attacker in the face with her boot. Another one down.

Gabrielle wordlessly looked from the fight to Xena who studied the archer, a thin smile on her lips. A glance down revealed that her hand had freed her chakram from its thong. “Just in case,” Xena whispered.

Lessa allowed herself to be grabbed by the remaining unarmed attacker, using the leverage to kick two more charging at her. That accomplished, she threw the man over her shoulder, thrusting the sword she held down at him. She pierced the inseam of his trousers, pinning him to the ground between his legs.

“I wouldn’t move if I were you.” she said tightly, leaping into the air and landing a backwards flip over the head of the remaining charging swordsman. Pulling two daggers out of her boots as she landed, she let them fly. The first pieced the shirt sleeve of the sword wielder to a tree, the second landing hilt first into his hand, knocking the sword from his fingers with a painful yelp. At the sight, three of the unpinned fishermen took off at a run, carrying a still unconscious companion with them.

With deliberate slowness Lessa walked to the tree, and using her boot, hoisted the sword into the air, catching it easily. She unpinned the man’s shirtsleeve, not looking as she threw the dagger at her boot. With a *thwap* the blade entered it’s sheath. “Beat it,” she muttered to the man, who took off at a run after his companions. Stooping to retrieve her other dagger, she glanced at Xena and Gabrielle before walking over to the man pinned to the ground, sword sticking out between his legs.

Casually tossing the dagger in the air and catching it, she surveyed the evident terror on the man’s face. “What’s your name, friend?” She asked.

“Mekor— please don’t kill me.”

“Mekor, you and your pals were going to steal my horse. The last person that tried that got a broken pelvis for his trouble...”

“That’s gotta hurt,” Xena muttered under her breath.

“Funny thing was, I didn’t do it.” Lessa continued. “That animal does not like strangers. And she’s more foul tempered than I am.”

As Lessa spoke, she tossed the dagger higher and higher over the man’s face, only moving her hand to catch it at the last possible second. “And I distinctly recall,” she continued easily, “that you said you were going to have your way with me.” With that, she did not reach her hand out to catch the descending dagger, rather, stuck out her boot and caught the dagger in its sheath.

“Show off.” Xena said, causing a smile to ease across Gabrielle’s features.

“I didn’t mean it,” the terrified man pleaded.

“Oh I see, why didn’t you say so before?” Lessa asked, her hand resting on the grip of the sword, gently rocking it back and forth. The frightened man squirmed to keep the blade away from anything sensitive. “I wish I had a better sense of humor. You should think about that before you threaten a woman, you know.” With a quick pull, she freed the sword from the ground. Mekor jerked in fear, wetting himself. “It seems we have a problem,” she continued, noticing the stain spreading down the front of his pants. “Tell you what, Mekor. I was planning on camping here one night. I suggest you personally see to it I’m left alone. If I have any more trouble, I just might stay a while and see to it your life is very miserable indeed.”

He crawled to his feet, almost paralyzed with fear, afraid to run. “Don’t forget your blades,” she said, handing him the swords. He was about to flee when she put a hand on his shoulder. “And, Mekor,” she jabbed her thumb behind her. He looked up and for the first time saw Xena and Gabrielle standing near the trees. What little color remained drained from his face. “Don’t make me have to send my big sister after you. I’m the one with the sense of humor in the family, and she so hates it when people pick on me.” In seconds he was gone.

“A little over done, don’t you think?” Xena observed.

“I didn’t know when you guys would show up. They thought I was traveling alone. You could have helped, you know.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Xena observed, getting several apples out of Gabrielle’s bag. “You seem to have had things well in hand.” At that, she tossed three apples to the archer who caught each one, beginning to juggle when the third arrived. Gabrielle laughed, amused, especially when Socrates nudged the archer from the back, causing her to stumble and drop an apple. In an instant it was gone, replaced by the contented crunching of the zebra.

“What’s for dinner?” Lessa asked as they headed back to the fire.

“I don’t know rabbit I guess,” Xena said as she unsaddled Argo.

“But we had that for breakfast!” Lessa complained.

“For someone who acts like she’s starving, you’re pretty particular,” Gabrielle observed, helping Xena with Argo’s tack.

“It’s not that, guys, honest. It’s just that with this lake, why don’t we have fish?”

“A little cold for swimming, don’t you think?” Gabrielle asked, heading to the campfire to check on the heating water.

“Who said anything about swimming?”

“You want your bow,” Xena said flatly. It wasn’t a question, she knew the answer. For a moment she locked eyes with the archer, penetrating blue searching out resilient green. It was clear the woman could fight; did she have any more surprises in store?

“Just to catch us some fish. I’ll take the string off soon as I’m done,” Lessa said, not flinching from the warrior’s gaze. Xena was welcome to see into her soul. The archer doubted she could however.

Xena walked to the stash of weapons. “Long bow or hand crossbow?”

“Long bow if you don’t mind.” Lessa said politely, not moving from her place by the fire.

Gabrielle watched the exchange with interest. It was clear some sort of understanding was being reached between the two fighters. Aside from several sarcastic comments, the archer had given Xena a wide berth, and been very clear in her acceptance of the older woman’s authority. She had also been very careful around Gabrielle, treating her with courtesy and acknowledging awareness

of the warrior's eyes watching her whenever she was near the bard. Her moves were measured and deliberate. It was clear she knew her life depended on it.

Xena handed Lessa the longbow, string and her scabbard. She'd taken the sword out, but left the arrows. The archer selected two arrows then handed the scabbard back. Gabrielle watched with interest as she strung the bow, checking the tension when she finished. The three of them walked the short distance to the lake, Xena's hand never straying from her chakram. Lessa climbed onto a small rock outcrop. She watched the lake for several long moments, then stooped to pick up a fist sized rock. After laying both arrows in a groove in her bow, Lessa tossed the rock high into the air. It came down with splash into a shadowed area of the lake; an instant later, she released the arrows together with a resounding *thwap* of the bowstring. In the blink of an eye, Gabrielle saw both arrows sticking out of the shallow bank, two large, still fish impaled through the eye with an arrow. The bard was stunned.

"How...?" Gabrielle asked in wonder as the archer unceremoniously unstrung the bow, handing the pieces back to Xena.

"Did you think I was *bragging*, Gabrielle?" Lessa asked her with a smile as she headed to the bank to get her fish.

Gabrielle looked at Xena, amazement still apparent on her face. "But..." she stammered.

"If that's all it takes to get you speechless, I'd've taken up the bow a long time ago," Xena said with a wry grin as she headed back to the fire. "Lessa might need some help cleaning those fish," she called back over her shoulder.

No sooner had they finished eating, than the rhythmic sounds of deep breathing could be heard from Lessa's side of the fire. "She must be exhausted," Gabrielle observed, pouring another cup of wine for Xena, then herself.

"Traveling four days straight will do that to you," Xena commented, sitting away from the fire, behind Gabrielle and a short distance to the right.

"I still can't get over that shot," she muttered.

"Well, she did say she won the competition at Minos. It's a very serious contest," Xena observed, glancing at the sleeping woman.

Nodding, the bard picked up her brush and sat on her bedroll. Something shiny caught her eye. There, between the stones of the fire at the edge of her bedroll, was Lessa's shiny bracer. By shifting her seat just slightly, she could gaze down and see the face of the warrior to her side. For a moment she considered moving, of not observing Xena with such stealth, but curiosity got the best of her. It would be a simple way to find out if there was any merit to the archer's words.

As she began to brush her hair, she watched Xena drink her wine. She noticed how the warrior gazed into the fire, glanced at her, then lifted the mug to her lips. After a couple of quick glances to the softly snoring archer across from them, Xena's eyes made fewer and fewer trips to the fire. They were entirely focused on Gabrielle. Xena slowly drank her wine and openly watched the bard brush her hair. Gabrielle could see Xena's eyes focus on her hands as she lifted the brush to her hair, following the brush as it easily passed through. The warrior's eyes began a lazy descent down the bard's body, stopping briefly on her throat, then resting on her breast as her chest gently moved, breathing. When Xena's eyes reached her bare abdomen and the warrior unconsciously moistened her lips and smiled, Gabrielle almost dropped the brush. There was hunger in those penetrating blue eyes. Affection, lust, desire, it was all there.

Gabrielle could feel the color rising in her cheeks as she finished with her hair. Xena wanted her, and she hadn't known, hadn't really known until now. Why had the warrior not said anything? Why had she kept it hidden? "*Maybe it was just the wine,*" she thought. But she knew better. When she raised her head and looked back into the curved mirror, her own desire was clear in her eyes. But Xena didn't see her, didn't know the warrior's expression had effected her so profoundly. Xena's customary unreadable look had returned. Downing the last of her wine she stood.

"I'm going to have a look around," Xena said quietly, her voice neutral. She headed off into

the trees.

She didn't wait for Gabrielle's response, so the bard nodded, seemingly to no one. "If only I'd known, Xena" she whispered. "It's alright." Unsure if she had any regrets about what she had just done, Gabrielle picked up the shiny bracer and tucked it under Lessa's saddle blanket. The archer didn't even stir, and in that moment Gabrielle envied the younger woman. She had no idea how on earth she was going to sleep this night.

Xena walked for what seemed like hours. A quick glance at the moon told her she'd been gone for two at the most. There was nothing to worry about in the wooded glade by the small lake, Lessa had seen to that. As the warrior quietly stole past the tavern she'd visited earlier, she heard Mekor commiserating with his wounded friends. She doubted any of the others would risk invading the privacy of their camp.

As the warrior stole back into the woods, a thousand fragmented thoughts tumbled through her troubled conscience. Xena had given up asking why she tortured herself so. Stolen glances turning into loving looks fanned the fire of desire burning within. The sound of Gabrielle's voice, the soft glow of her skin in the firelight, the lightness of her hair, Xena drank all of this in and more. She reveled in the bard's affectionate nature and the moments when she'd feel her tender skin on her own. A touch, a caress, the holding of a hand— Xena guarded all of these memories fiercely, revisiting them often.

There were the shy glances that crackled with the electricity of their chemistry- it seemed to Xena that she and the bard had been engaged in an erotic dance since the day they'd met. She was smart enough to figure that Gabrielle was aware of this, too. How could she not be? She was certain the archer knew. She had caught the young woman's emphatic stare at midday. Xena frowned at the memory.

Again Xena reminded herself why approaching Gabrielle would be a mistake. She could not risk hurting her friend, or hurting herself with rejection. Deep down, she knew she was a monster, one that had lived her life for years, whom she kept in check only with great effort. Who, with provocation, might again resume its control. With all of the things she'd done, all the people she'd hurt, someday, someone was going to get their revenge on Xena: Warrior Princess. How could she ask the bard to share that life with her? Yet Gabrielle was already a part of that life. She did share it, willingly. Still, with that remaining boundary, she might share her life, but not the tainted darkness of her soul.

But just as Xena reminded herself why she should leave the bard well alone, she fantasized about what would happen if she didn't. In the darkness of the trees surrounding the lake, she sat and let weariness leave her as she pictured Gabrielle in her mind's eye. The shining of the sun off her hair, the gentleness in her eyes, the softness of her skin, the fullness of her lips. The warrior's breathing deepened as she focused on her fantasy. Many times she'd imagined making love to the bard, in many places, in many ways. Now though, with the moon bathing the campsite in a soft glow, she thought of only a kiss, warm lips coming together, mouths engaged in dance, tongues intertwined. She knew she could kiss those lips forever, savoring them for eternity.

Xena sighed and stood. There was a place and time for fantasy, and this wasn't it. As she headed back to camp, a sad smile on her face. She vowed to revisit this fantasy later, when she had the time and privacy to explore it fully.

Chapter 4: Message In The Massage

Gabrielle woke well before dawn. It was unusual for her. Thinking back, she tried to remember if she'd been woken from a dream, but no images came to mind. She smiled at the sound of steady breathing from the warm body next to her. Turning her head she could see dark hair peeking out from the warrior's blanket and the elegant outline of shoulders as she slept on her side. Turning back to the dying embers of the fire, she saw the softly snoring archer across from her, head propped up on her saddle. Reaching towards the fire ring, Gabrielle grabbed a couple of pieces of wood. Sitting, she shifted her blanket around her shoulders and carefully placed the sticks into the

fire, blowing gently to rekindle a blaze. She looked up at the sky, smiling at the constellations she rarely saw. She was familiar with the stars of the early evening, but was a stranger to the pre-dawn sky.

Xena shifted slightly behind her, rolling from her side onto her back, an unconscious arm knocking her blanket to her waist. Gabrielle gazed at the sleeping warrior for a long moment. It was unusual to see the warrior's face unguarded, muscles relaxed in sleep, breathing easy. Gabrielle smiled; Xena looked a lot younger this way. Carefully she pulled the blanket up and tucked it gently around the warrior's body. With gentle fingers she lightly traced the line of her collar bone and cheek. She drew her hand away when she felt the warrior's muscles shudder. She didn't want to wake her friend. Cautiously she brushed a stray strand of hair covering Xena's lips. When her fingertips grazed the softness of the warrior's mouth, she pulled her hand away. This time in wonder. She stared at her fingertips for a moment, feeling her temperature rise and heart race, then gently put them in her mouth. With a heavy sigh she laid back down, as close to Xena as she dared, and for a time watched her friend sleep.

When Gabrielle woke a second time it was with a start. "I'm up, stop it," she heard from across the campfire. She laughed at the sight of the zebra nudging Lessa, snorting playfully in her face. The archer frowned at Gabrielle's laughter and did her best to push the zebra away. "I'll get you an apple, give me a minute."

"Does she do that every morning?" Gabrielle asked as Lessa handed Socrates an apple, the animal walking away, crunching contentedly.

"Unfortunately, yes. It's really bad when I don't have anything to give her." Lessa sat upright and stretched for a moment before looking past the bard. "Where's Xena?" she asked.

"Probably out getting breakfast- or tending to Argo."

Lessa nodded and looked around the perimeter of the lake. There was no sign of the big warrior or her horse. "So," she ventured cautiously, "any interesting revelations last night?"

It took a moment for Gabrielle to realize what she was asking about. When understanding dawned on her, the crimson of her cheeks gave Lessa her answer.

"So what are you going to do about it?" she asked conversationally.

"I don't know," Gabrielle sighed, giving up on any pretense of not trusting the young woman. It could be a mistake she knew, but the thought of another woman to talk to- about Xena- was too appealing. "What would you do?" Gabrielle asked. When Lessa arched a knowing eyebrow, she added hastily "if you were me."

"Torture her." she replied, reaching for her armor.

"What?!"

"You feel a certain way about her, you've got a pretty good idea she feels the same way about you- but she won't act on it. I strongly feel that there is a price to be paid for such behavior." Lessa shrugged. "That is, unless you don't want her to approach you about it- you could approach her."

"How?" Gabrielle wondered and blushed, realizing she'd spoken out loud.

"C'mere" Lessa said with a disarming smile. "Sit down here- in front of me."

Gabrielle complied, feeling a little uneasy at where this was going. She felt better when Lessa instructed to sit with her back facing the archer. "Oldest trick in the book," Lessa said conversationally as she rubbed her hands together, warming them. "I want you to shut your eyes and pretend I'm Xena."

"What!?" Gabrielle exclaimed and was about to turn around when a firm but gentle hand pushed her head back- facing forward.

"You asked, I'm showing you. Trust me or don't- make up your mind." Lessa waited for the bard's nod of acceptance before continuing.

"As I was saying, relax, close your eyes and think about Xena." With that Lessa gently put her palms on the bard's shoulders. She began to feel strong hands massaging the muscles of her neck. Confident fingers loosened the knots accumulated by nights of sleeping on the ground.

Gabrielle sighed, a slow contented breath of air forced from her body as images of the warrior filled her mind. It wasn't so hard to picture Xena doing this. As soon as her mind made that connection she began to feel more than the contented responses of her muscles. Picturing her friend with strong hands on her back, gently, rhythmically working her muscles caused a barrage of new sensations. Everything external relaxed, her muscles turning to water, but within she felt like a taut bowstring. She could feel the blood racing from everywhere to somewhere below her stomach. Her skin felt tingly all over and she vaguely heard her own breath, softly ragged. Her body wanted to be touched all over, caressed everywhere. Abruptly she remembered that it was *not* Xena behind her and broke from her reverie with a start.

"What are you doing?" she demanded turning around.

Lessa looked at her with gentle green eyes, a comforting smile on her face. "I'm demonstrating how I think you should approach the warrior, Gabrielle. How you felt just now thinking about her- I'd bet Socrates' apples that she will have that same response if you touch her."

Gabrielle nodded mutely. There was nothing to say. With a friendly squeeze on the arm, Lessa stood and walked back into the trees, greeted by a nicker from the zebra. She left Gabrielle with space to compose her thoughts, to put her rampaging feelings into some sort of order.

It was about ten minutes later that Xena came out from the woods astride Argo, confident and beautiful in the early morning light. Gabrielle smiled in greeting- her skin tingleling anew at the sight of her friend. Xena smiled in response and dismounted in an easy fluid movement. She carried two rabbits and handed them to the bard.

"If we cook both of them now, we'll have some meat for lunch." It was still early, time enough to cook the rodents. Xena's eyes quickly canvassed the camp site and came to rest again on the bard. "Where's Lessa?"

"I think she's tending to Socrates."

Xena nodded and removed the archer's long bow, hand crossbow and quiver from Argo's back. With confident strides she headed to the trees.

"Are you up for some target practice?"

Lessa was stooped over the zebra's rear leg, examining the hoof, and looked up with surprise. "On you?" she asked watching the warrior's approach.

"It never hurts to practice," Xena replied, handing over Lessa's weapons with a grin.

"You don't think there's the slightest chance I might hurt you?"

"If you're as skilled as you claim, I think you could avoid killing me." Her honeyed voice flowed over Lessa like a challenge. With a curt nod, she began stringing her bow as Xena walked to the other end of the meadow. Lessa slapped Socrates on the rump and the zebra trotted back into the trees, away from the two women.

It didn't take Gabrielle long to skin and spit the rabbits. It wasn't as if she didn't have enough practice with the activity. She headed to the trees to see what Xena and the archer were up to and was brought up short by the sight of Lessa aiming an arrow at her friend.

"Stop! What are you doing?" she shouted.

Bowstring still taut Lessa slowly turned her head facing the bard. "Target practice," she replied and, with her eyes still on the bard, let the arrow fly.

Xena, distracted by Gabrielle's outburst almost missed the catch. She caught the arrow as it passed, grazing her shoulder, drawing blood.

"If that'd been poisoned, you'd be in trouble." Lessa called to the warrior.

"Lucky shot." Xena replied with a frown.

Realizing that this must be Xena's idea, Gabrielle sat, watching- determined not to be an additional distraction.

Lessa then notched two arrows into the bow, as she'd done fishing the night before. With a *thwap* she let them fly. This time the warrior was ready and, lunging to the side, she caught them both in her right hand. Then with a quick grab of her left she caught a dart. Gabrielle looked at Lessa, shock registering on her features. She'd hadn't even heard the hand crossbow fire. But there

she stood holding the device in front of her. Lessa nodded, impressed, and reached for another arrow. This time she fired at the ground. The arrow skipped up catching dirt, making visibility difficult. Xena leaped into the air coming down on the arrow with her feet.

“Careful!” Lessa shouted. “Don’t break the shaft.”

“Then don’t shoot at my legs,” Xena replied with a shrug.

Lessa fired several more arrows, Xena catching each one. She made it look effortless, but Gabrielle could see by the concentration on her face, that this archer was indeed challenging. Lessa glanced back at her quiver— she had three arrows left. With a quick glance at Gabrielle, Lessa smiled. As she extracted the arrows, Gabrielle noticed that two were straight, but the third had an unusual bend in the shaft and odd looking fletching. Holding the bent arrow in her mouth, Lessa notched the two straight ones in her bow, pulled the string back to her eye, then slowly rotated the bow ninety degrees. She held it now, almost looking like a crossbow, then fired. The arrows shot out, speeding for each of the warrior’s shoulders. Xena dropped low and with a spin to the side, reached with her right hand to capture both arrows as she turned, Lessa dropped the curved arrow from her mouth into the bow. With a quick turn she righted her bow and fired. No sooner had Xena caught the arrows then she turned to see a third speeding toward her. As she readied herself to catch it, the arrow abruptly changed course heading away from her face to her abdomen. Mid grapple, the warrior changed direction and caught the arrow in her left hand, barely. Her shoulder spasmed once but she held on to the arrow.

“That’s all my arrows!” Lessa called from across the field.

“Fine,” Xena replied with a grimace, and stooped to pick up the ones she’d dropped after catching.

“That was some shot,” Gabrielle said quietly as she and Lessa walked across the clearing to join Xena.

“You should thank me for that.” Lessa said while they were still out of earshot. “She pulled her left shoulder catching that last one- it’ll hurt like Hades tonight.”

Gabrielle stopped in her tracks, staring after the archer as she walked over to Xena and retrieved her arrows. Checking the condition of each one, she put them back in her quiver, then unstrung the bow. With a smile she handed the equipment back to Xena, then headed back to the campsite. Gabrielle shook her head— Lessa had guts, that was certain, however, provoking Xena also seemed to hint at a lack of common sense.

“Are you okay?” she asked tentatively, unsure of just how irritated Xena was.

The warrior smiled down warmly at her friend, even as she shook out her left arm. “I’m fine, Gabrielle, never better.”

“Xena,” the bard replied, as sternly as she could muster. “You may be a lot of things, but you’re not a very good liar.” She gently dabbed the warrior’s bleeding shoulder with the clean scrap of cloth she’d dried her hands on after cleaning the rabbits. Xena waited patiently until Gabrielle was finished, hoping her delight at the bard’s gentle fingers looked like tolerant amusement.

“Let’s just say I don’t lie very well to you, and leave it at that,” Xena replied. They stood together for a moment- looking at each other. There was a look of understanding in the bard’s eyes that Xena had never seen before. Instantly she felt very nervous. As if sensing her emotional near panic, Gabrielle squeezed her right arm gently.

“I’ll go check on those rabbits- why don’t you break camp?” With a gentle smile she headed after the archer.

Xena watched her go. “*What just happened here?*” she wondered to herself. Something had changed, of that she was certain. For the longest time the slight touches had set Xena on fire, the smile on the bard’s lips made the warrior’s heart sing- Xena was certain Gabrielle had no idea how profoundly she was affected by their closeness. This time she knew. It was evident in her eyes. She knew Xena’s heart raced when she smiled, that her skin responded to her touch- she had that power. Xena smiled and shook her head, walking back to the camp site. *Maybe not*, she decided, this is Gabrielle after all- the same Gabrielle she’d been traveling with for the past couple of years. What

could cause such a change in her now?

“Come on, princess— shake a leg.” Lessa sat astride Socrates, carrying most of their gear now, save for her weapons. Gleaming black and green armor set against the dizzying black and white of the zebra.

Xena stared a long moment at the archer. With a quick glance to Gabrielle she muttered, “Don’t call me that.”

Lessa watched her a moment, helping Gabrielle with the last few bundles of gear and food. “Yes, your highness,” she replied. Xena looked up quickly but the archer had moved away- not seeing the icy glare.

“The trail is much better today,” Lessa continued. “Not as much right on the coast, but we’re still heading up. There is a hot spring that starts out two days from here. We can have a nice hot bath in a steaming creek if we continue two hours past the trail split that heads to Loki. If we get that far we’d be more than half way to Eselan.”

“You’re awfully familiar with the route?” Xena observed dryly.

Lessa shrugged, “Callisto left very specific instructions for me to meet up with her- she didn’t want me to get lost.”

“Can’t imagine why,” Xena muttered under her breath then vaulted to Argo’s back. She extended her arm to Gabrielle and, although there was more room with some of their gear with Lessa, the bard still sat blissfully close, her arms snug around the warrior’s middle.

“So who taught you to use a bow?” Gabrielle asked while the road was still wide enough for the equines to walk side by side.

“My older brother is supposedly the archer in the family. There was this time when I was two and visiting- he lives with our mother- and picked up his long bow. It was as big as I was, but I managed to pull the string on it- and got several arrows embedded in our ceiling.”

Gabrielle laughed at the story, Xena smiled, but not at the story. “Did you get in trouble?” the bard asked.

“Surprisingly, no.” Lessa shrugged. “My mother is...well...kind of a free spirit. Since my father was married at the time of her affair, it was just as well because she’s not the settling down type. Luckily his wife got pregnant at the same time my mother did. Mother gave birth to me in his barn and Father managed to sneak me into his wife’s room as she was giving birth. She was so out of it, she’s never suspected that in fact she didn’t give birth to twins. I have a half-sister who thinks she’s my twin.”

“Sounds like a lot of trouble to go through,” Xena commented. “You’re quite sure they won’t miss you- thinking you’re dead and all?”

For the first time the archer looked sad. “I suppose they miss me,” she said quietly, absently running her fingers through the mane of her zebra. “But it wasn’t any good with me there. I had a connection with my Dad, but I’m just not built the same way as the rest of the family. It hurts to leave, but not as much as it would hurt to stay.”

“I know the feeling,” Gabrielle said into Xena’s back.

Without thinking, Xena laid her hand over the bard’s, interlacing her fingers and squeezing reassuringly. Gabrielle smiled and wouldn’t let go when the warrior tried to take her hand away. Xena turned her head, glimpsing her friend out of the corner of her eye.

“Thank you, Xena,” Gabrielle whispered into her neck, and after a quick hug, released her.

Lessa headed up the trail in front of Argo, leaving Xena with a smile on her face she mistakenly assumed the archer didn’t see. Lessa thought about her family, her mother and her place in the universe. *Why is it, she wondered, that the ones with the dark and tortured past fall the hardest?*

The riding that day was easier, if not more frightening. There were fewer places where the trail narrowed dangerously, but when it did it was usually at the edge of a cliff overlooking an endless expanse of ocean. It made Gabrielle light headed to look down and see so much surf and rock beneath her. Waves thundered into the cliffs, scattering sea spray in hypnotizing patterns. To

the bard it seemed that the brilliant blue of the shallows dared to compete with the beauty of Xena's eyes. The ocean lost of course, but not by much.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Xena asked, distracting the bard from a particularly tricky patch in the trail.

"So now you know what I'm thinking," Gabrielle replied with a smile.

Xena laughed quietly and began to hum. Not really anything in particular- she just felt exceptionally good. Gabrielle sighed contentedly and leaned against Xena's back, resting her head against her friend, wishing Xena would find a more convenient place for her sword.

Xena was relieved that the archer was far enough ahead to be out of sight. Something was unusual about that woman, and it was more than just her annoying personality. For someone so young, she was too confident, too self assured— "*to much like me,*" she thought. "*But without the darkness.*" It was pretty clear what Callisto saw in her, she was beautiful, strong, brilliant with a bow and smart. That last bit puzzled Xena. Lessa was obviously smart enough to realize Callisto was insane- why would she wait three months to try to escape? She didn't for a minute believe any of Lessa's story involving her actually being prepared to kill Gabrielle. She didn't appear to have an ounce of evil in her entire being. A twisted sense of humor maybe. She'd displayed that when she toyed with the fishermen, but certainly not evil.

The path began to widen out, turning back again into the mountainside. Argo was about to catch up with Socrates just as a group of men rounded a bend in the trail. Xena signaled the horse to stop. From where she stood she could see them through some shrubs, but they hadn't seen her.

"Well, well, what do we have here?" the largest of the five men asked. They were all dressed in filthy clothes and reeked of rancid ale and fish. Three had swords, two had crossbows. Loaded ones at that.

"Trouble, if you don't get out of my way." Lessa replied smoothly.

"Big words for a little girl traveling alone on her pony."

Lessa frowned. "I don't know who hates what more. Me being called a little girl or Socrates being called a pony."

"Oh, well, sorry to offend," the thug said smiling, revealing several unsightly gaps where his otherwise unattractive teeth should have been. "Let me make it up to you." He grabbed at his crotch suggestively.

"You know, bathing usually works for fleas."

Several of the thugs snickered, making Romeo frown angrily.

"Off your pony now, girl!" he demanded.

"Maybe you'd better ask my big sister first."

Taking her cue, Xena nudged Argo forward with her knees and the big horse casually walked around the bend in the trail. She sat there, bored smile on her lips and studied the thugs.

"Problem sister?" Xena asked sweetly.

Lessa looked back at the men, now seeming a lot less confident. Romeo, however, was still defiant. "Get 'em!" he shouted and rushed forward at Xena.

One of the archers fired his crossbow just as the sole of Xena's boot firmly connected with Romeo's nose. A distinctive crunching was followed by a thwap. Xena snapped her head in Lessa's direction at the sound to see the young woman deftly catch the crossbow bolt before it hit her chest.

"You lost this," she called to the archer, then threw the bolt back at him. With another crunch it impaled the man in the shoulder. He screamed and dropped the crossbow. "Oops, sorry." Lessa shrugged with a smile.

From her vantage point Gabrielle didn't see a whole lot of the fight. She grabbed the closest thing to her, which was Lessa's longbow, and hit the next thug that rushed Argo in the head with it. It made a dull thud as it connected with the man's skull and he fell to the earth, unconscious. The bow was much heavier than it looked.

"Hey, watch the bow," Lessa cautioned, turning her head to face Gabrielle and away from the second archer who fired at her.

“Look out!” Xena called. This time the archer caught the crossbow bolt without looking. Xena’s eyes narrowed in suspicion, but her attention was diverted by two more men rushing Argo, swords drawn. Extending both feet, she broke two more noses as the men fell, unconscious. The two injured bowmen ran away, the other three in unmoving piles near Argo.

“How did you catch that?” Xena demanded as they continued on their mounts up the trail.

“Oh, come on, Xena, same way you do. You heard the bow string snap. I knew how far away that guy was- it was no big deal.” With a smile she added, “Besides, you warned me. Thank you, by the way.”

Xena nodded, not sure if she believed the archer or not.

The rest of the day’s ride proved uneventful. They had left the cliffs several hours behind and were now heading into patches of lush forest. There were glimpses of a meandering stream on either side of them. Gabrielle noted with interest the colorful algae, moss and lichens that flourished near the moisture. In places, steam could be seen rising off the water in delicate tendrils.

“Are these the hot springs you mentioned?” Gabrielle asked as the three women walked on foot, giving Socrates and Argo a rest.

“Yeah,” Lessa nodded. “Tomorrow night we’ll be at the main source, then we should be at Eselan by tomorrow afternoon. Anyway,” she continued, “you can tell how hot the water is by the color of the moss and stuff. Stay away from that pale yellow- it’ll burn. That bluish green stuff,” Lessa pointed to a patch a short distance from the yellow, “that’s the best.”

They followed the stream until it opened up into a clearing. There was a nice stand of grasses heading into a small copse of trees. Argo’s ears perked up at the sight. The ground was flat and to the edge was a circular pool of water. About twelve feet in diameter and clear, it was edged by the large boulders that extended below the surface. Gabrielle smiled at the sight of shallow ledge a couple of feet below the surface and the blue green moss that covered some of the rocks.

“What a perfect camp spot!” she said, rushing forward to test the water.

Xena looked around, there was plenty of fallen wood for a fire, shelter from the wind, easy observation of the trail and a canyon that carried sound to listen for danger. It was an exceptional camp spot. Her eyes also lit on the hot pool, steam curling seductively off its surface. Surprisingly, she saw no evidence of previous use. She said as much to Lessa.

The archer shrugged. “I guess this route doesn’t get much traffic. Except of course unless you’re a brigand on the run from Eselan to Loki. I don’t think they’d be much in the market for scenic camp sites in that case.” Gracefully dismounting from her zebra, Lessa began to unload Xena and Gabrielle’s gear. After removing her own bedroll she re-mounted the equine.

“Just where do you think you’re going?” Xena asked dangerously.

“There was a stand of fruit trees a ways back. I was going to head back and see if any of them had apples. Soc is out and you know how she gets.”

“Fine.” Xena agreed. “But the zebra stays here. We’d be so disappointed if you ran off.” The zebra nickered thankfully and trotted over to join Argo, still wearing the now irritated archer on her back. Argo snorted in greeting and went back to chomping grass, an activity which the zebra joined in enthusiastically.

“Socrates! Stop it,” Lessa commanded, and was promptly ignored. “Look, Xena, if I walk there and back it’s going to take hours. I’ve ridden just as long as you have...”

“Nothing like a nice walk to work out the kinks from the trail,” Gabrielle supplied helpfully.

“Oh great, now you’re starting.” Lessa dismounted and, still grumbling, removed the blanket saddle. Taking an empty saddle sack, she turned to go. With a soft nicker the zebra nudged her in the butt, then snorted softly at her when she turned back around. “Don’t even try to apologize.” Lessa said sternly. “You’d just better let me sleep in tomorrow,” she added softening.

“We’ll be sure to save you some dinner.” Xena added, “Sister.”

Lessa turned back around and, feigning anger without much success, shot back, “in your dreams, sweetheart.”

Gabrielle watched as she headed around the bend and out of sight, then turned to see what Xena was up to. The wince of pain was unmistakable as the warrior removed the saddle from Argo's back. Remembering what Lessa had told her earlier, she rushed to help.

"Here, let me get that," Gabrielle said, taking the saddle from Xena. "You get something for dinner- I'll take care of the rest here."

It was the usual division of labor so Xena didn't protest even though the bard had been most insistent about taking the saddle. Her shoulder hurt anyway, most likely the archer's fault from this morning. "*Or my fault,*" she thought, "*for almost missing.*" She headed off into the trees and with her chakram made quick work of a large pheasant. Sitting at camp, she dressed the animal for cooking while Gabrielle built up the fire. Inwardly she was glad the archer would be gone for awhile. It was nice to spend time alone with her friend. Xena suspected the archer knew how she felt about the bard. Those green eyes told her as much, and that fact she found most disquieting. If a total stranger could see it in a matter of hours, how could Gabrielle not after years? Then again, if you drop a frog into hot water it'll jump out. If you put a frog in cold water then heat it, it will die, not noticing the increase in temperature.

With dinner slowly cooking and camp well established, it was now time for the warrior's favorite ritual of the evening. Xena couldn't remember exactly how it happened, probably an indulgence to let Gabrielle feel like she was doing something useful so long ago, but now she dreaded the thought of ever having her armor removed any other way. It was still an indulgence, surely, only now it was Xena who indulged in the gentle attention of the bard. Listening to her stories, going over the adventures of the day, sometimes getting her hair brushed- these were all guilty pleasures the warrior cherished.

"Over here, Xena." The warrior turned she swallowed, hard- eyes drinking in the sight. Gabrielle stood at the edge of the hot pool, dressed in nothing except a clean shift. She tested the water with her foot and smiled. "It's perfect."

Xena walked over as Gabrielle sat down on the grassy bank. She stood next to the bard, not knowing what sight was more intoxicating, the clear steaming pool, or Gabrielle.

"Is there any wine left?" Gabrielle asked, looking up at her friend. When Xena nodded mutely, she added with a radiant smile, "Then get it."

Xena returned with the wine, and while she scanned the area one last time, picking out probable ambush sites, Gabrielle started unlacing her boots. Xena removed her scabbard and chakram, setting them down carefully and within easy reach. After taking off her boots, she sat next to Gabrielle, legs dangling in the deliciously hot pool. Gabrielle knelt behind her and after handing Xena the wine skin, began to loosen the buckles that held the shoulder plates to the back plate. Then, reaching her arms over Xena's shoulders, she removed the hook that held the breast plate to the shoulder plates. Born of nights of practice, Gabrielle deftly removed the various pieces of armor. She was less talkative than usual, not that the warrior minded. She felt herself relax as the armor was removed, kicked her feet slowly in the water, drank wine and let her mind wander.

Gabrielle gently pulled Xena's arm to her. At first startled, then relaxing when she saw Gabrielle work the leather laces of her forearm bracers. "You've gotten really good at this," Xena remarked, not knowing quite what else to say.

Gabrielle just looked at her smiling. "Thank you," she replied, her eyes laughing. "You've gotten more patient." She continued, working on Xena's other arm.

"Well, I don't know I'd go that far..."

"Admit it, warrior, this bard has had a mellowing effect on you." Her words and tone were playful, but to Xena truer words had never been spoken.

"You have, Gabrielle. You have no idea how much," Xena replied seriously, unable to add *I love you* to the end of her sentence.

Gabrielle nudged her playfully, "Now look who's getting soft."

Xena laughed at that. No matter what, Gabrielle knew just what to say to put her at ease. Still, as the last of her armor was undone, Xena wondered if Gabrielle felt the heat of her skin as her

blood rushed to be close to the contact of the bard's fingers. Sitting on the bank now, only in her shift, she felt the bard's breath against her cheek.

"Get in the water, there on the ledge." It was not a suggestion, it was not a request, it was a command. Xena looked over her shoulder with an arched eyebrow, feeling the twinge of her shoulder as she did as she was told.

"Okay," she replied, curious now as to what the bard had in mind. She sat in the water, which rose up above her hips, on the smooth rock ledge. Gabrielle sat down behind her where the bank sloped down to the water. She saw the bard's graceful calves and feet on either side of her hips as she felt gentle hands twisting her hair. "What are you doing?" Xena asked as she felt the bard fashion her hair into a bun and fasten it in place with a smooth stick.

"Nothing," Gabrielle replied as she rested her palms on Xena's shoulders. Tentative at first, then stronger, she began to work at the muscles of Xena's neck and upper shoulders. The warrior sighed, a relaxed blissful sound that she couldn't have stopped if she'd wanted to. This felt too damn good. Carefully, Gabrielle undid the straps that held the shift in place, and began to massage the rest of the warrior's muscular shoulders.

For her part, Gabrielle couldn't believe this was happening. Not only that it was her, sitting here massaging Xena, having her way with the warrior's shoulders, but that Xena was actually letting her. She delighted in the feel of the warrior's soft skin, smiled as the knots gave way beneath her probing fingers. With boldness born of growing confidence, she extended her hands down Xena's arm. Focusing her attention first on her left arm then her right, delighting in the feel of muscle moving beneath skin, Gabrielle felt dizzy in knowing it was her hands making Xena respond this way. Everywhere she touched, she felt the muscles respond, encouraging her in their immediate relaxation. She thought back to that morning, of her own muscles turning to water, and remembered what had happened to her on the inside. That beneath the warm glow of relaxation, an inferno of desire had ignited at thoughts of Xena touching her. She wondered to herself if Xena was feeling the same thing as she slowly brought her hands back up to the warrior's neck and with strong hands massaged the base of her skull and neck.

Xena's heart worked furiously to pump blood every place it wanted to be. The nerve endings of her skin demanded it, to relish every exquisite touch. Her abdomen craved it to send those signals lower, as for lower? Let's just say the pleading of that sensitive area would not be denied. Like water, every tension flowed away, every care, every worry and for a time every regret and dark memory had no place in her mind. She was connected to the woman she loved and for now that was all that mattered. It was moments before she noticed that Gabrielle was humming, and with a final sigh, she smiled and leaned back, eyes closed, enjoying the bliss.

As she shifted back, Gabrielle scooted down from the bank, into the water with Xena. As the warrior leaned into her, she was supported by the bank. With gentle fingertips she stroked the warrior's neck and collar bone, singing softly. With a lazy smile on her face, Xena appeared to be asleep. Gabrielle looked down at the warrior's chest, rising and falling with contented breaths as her fingers caressed soft skin of neck and shoulders. She didn't know how long they sat like that—time seemed to stand still, but her eyes didn't. They kept drifting to the edge of Xena's shift, the edge that cut across the top of her breasts. Mesmerized, she saw her own hands drift lower and lower until tentative fingers traced the edge of the garment. She stopped herself just as Xena caught her breath. Frozen in fear, she dared not move.

"You don't have to stop, Gabrielle," Xena whispered, relaxing against her once more.

Hands shaking now, Gabrielle swallowed and eased a finger under the top edge of the garment. With languid fingers Xena caressed the bard's arm, encouraging her in the exploration of her flesh.

"Oooohh," Gabrielle purred as her hand made contact with the softness of Xena's breast. Encouraged by the warrior's low moan, she eased her other hand under the shift.

"Yes, Gabrielle," Xena sighed and slowly rose up and rolled over, her knees between the bard's legs, hands on the bank over the smaller woman's shoulders. For a moment she gazed at her

friend, uncertainty clear on Gabrielle's face, startled by the passion so evident in her own.

Gabrielle reached up and with gentle fingers traced the warrior's face from her chin to her ear. Gently reaching behind her neck, she drew her in.

That was all the invitation Xena needed. Slowly, so slowly she thought she'd explode, her lips descended on Gabrielle's. Softly, tenderly she kissed the bard, savoring every minute detail—the pulse beating beneath tender lips, tongues caressing each other in greeting. The bard wrapped her arms around Xena, her hunger becoming evident, and insistent. With strong arms Xena pulled Gabrielle into the steaming water, arms wrapped around her middle, keeping their heads above water with strong kicks of her powerful legs. When they broke apart, Xena could only stare in wonder at the desire evident in Gabrielle's face. She reached for her again, hungry, needful, only to have the bard duck below the surface of the water. She looked down, trying to follow Gabrielle as she swam beneath her.

Gabrielle wanted to shut her eyes against the stinging heat of the water. It took but a second to duck out of her shift and as she headed for the surface, she glided up against Xena's back, feeling the warrior moan as she rubbed her bare breasts against the length of her body. Breaking the surface Xena's lips descended on her once again, taking her breath away, kissing her fiercely.

Lessa watched all of this from her vantage point behind several large trees. She'd made it back faster than she thought and had sat, silently watching the warrior and bard, giving them what privacy she could. When she saw Xena draw Gabrielle into the steaming water though, she stood.

"Not 'till tomorrow night, you don't," she said quietly to herself as she headed back up the path to make a noisy entrance. She checked the moon— she'd been about three hours, served them right for taking so long to get to it.

Whistling to herself, she slowly entered the campsite going first to the fire, then looking to the pool as an afterthought. She found Gabrielle submerged in the pool, save for her head, and Xena standing on the bank, sword drawn and soaking wet.

"Do you guys always bathe in your clothes?" Lessa asked innocently as she studied the dripping warrior. "I'd put something on if I were you, you'll catch your death," she remarked with an unabashed gaze at the warrior's erect nipples, quite evident in her soaked clothes. "What's for dinner?"

"Perhaps you'd like to check the perimeter?" Xena growled, unamused by the interruption.

"Check the perimeter yourself," Lessa replied. "You're the one who made me walk to get the apples. Besides, I'm starving."

"Fine. I will." Grabbing a dry shift from her saddle bag, Xena stalked off into the woods.

"What are you doing?" Gabrielle demanded when the warrior was out of sight. "Everything was going perfectly."

Gabrielle climbed on to the bank, Lessa noting with amusement that she was no longer wearing her shift.

"Well, at least one of you has the sense to bathe naked," she quipped, handing Gabrielle her bedroll to dry off with. "Look, Gabrielle, I'm sorry. I didn't know- okay? Tomorrow, I promise I'll make it up to you. Do you know this bird is going to burn if you don't turn it?"

Gabrielle laughed in spite of herself. She was no less annoyed by the interruption, but did see the humor in it. "Is food all you think about?" she asked, getting dressed.

Lessa thought a moment, "pretty much, yes. Well, food *and* sleep- oh yeah, and getting apples for Soc."

A few minutes later Xena stormed back to the fire. Dinner was ready and the pheasant was surprisingly good, considering their inattention about turning it. There was also some fresh bread and spicy cheese.

"Where's this from?" Xena asked, wrapped in her blanket by the fire. Lessa had been smart enough to avoid any further comments about how she found them.

"Those trees were owned by a young couple. Their goat was stuck part way down the cliff- I helped them get the goat back, and she gave me a lot of food. I can't believe I carried as much as I

did. It would have been nice to have ridden..."

"You rescued a goat, from a cliff in the dark?" Xena asked, cutting her off. She was beginning to believe very little of what the archer said.

"The moon is bright enough to see- or hadn't you noticed? It'll be full tomorrow." Lessa explained around a mouth full of food. "I did slip though." She lifted her elbow to reveal a nasty abrasion and already purpling bruise. "Damn goat tried to kick me."

"Good for the goat," Xena muttered under her breath.

"So did they have apples?" Gabrielle asked, smiling quickly at Xena.

"They did, in fact. Of course if I'd ridden I could have carried..." A glare from Xena ended Lessa's narrative. "Never mind."

It was an awkward evening. After they'd eaten and settled down to sleep, none of the women seemed able to. The moon shown down brightly and Lessa was well aware of radiant blue eyes watching her every move. *Mother help me*, she thought, *this is too much pressure. How am I supposed to sleep with them with them staring at me wishing me asleep?* Finally she decided to just roll over away from the other two and stare at nothing in particular.

Gabrielle was stretched out by the fire, Xena curled around behind, strong arm wrapped protectively around her. Xena studied her profile in the moonlight as the bard gazed into the glowing embers of the fire. "I'm sorry about earlier," she said quietly.

"Sorry about what?" Gabrielle replied, turning in her arms to look at her. "It wasn't your fault...things were interrupted."

"Is that what you want?" Xena asked, daring to hope.

"To be interrupted?" Gabrielle smiled. "Certainly not." Then drawing the warrior down for a loving kiss added, "When we have privacy..."

Xena nodded with a frown at the back of the obviously conscious archer. *Of all the stupid luck...* With more than a little regret and frustration, she settled down with Gabrielle, warmer than she'd ever been, and waited for sleep.

Chapter 5: The Temple of Aphrodite

Gabrielle opened her eyes and looked around the camp. Xena and Lessa were both gone. It was mid morning and she couldn't figure out why no one had woken her. There was nothing in the fire ring except cold ashes. Annoyed, she began to look around camp for some indication as to where her friend and the archer might have gone.

Her friend. A guilty smile crept to the bard's lips, almost lover. Just as memories of Xena's kiss swept through her she heard the murmur of voices on the morning breeze. Creeping silently through the forest, she stopped behind a large tree to listen.

"Okay, sis, you've proved your point. No need to rub it in." It was a male voice, melodic, and one Gabrielle had never heard before.

"I'm not the one rubbing anything anywhere," Lessa replied with a chuckle. "I just happen to have a sense of style about these things and mother said she didn't mind."

Curious, Gabrielle peered around the tree, staying out of sight, and saw Lessa's black and green armor gleaming in the morning light. A light breeze gently blew the mane of sunset hair— she looked absolutely beautiful. Sitting astride Socrates, she was talking to a man equally magnificent. He had to be one of the handsomest men Gabrielle had ever seen.

"Do they know who you are?" the man asked. He was such a contrast to his sister. While both were beautiful, he reminded Gabrielle of a sculpted vase that you'd admire from a distance where Lessa reminded Gabrielle of a favorite shirt— one you'd want to keep near you. His blond hair was cropped close to his head, azure blue eyes were clear even at this distance. He was muscular but had a soft appearance as well. He had two small wings sprouting from his back and seemed to radiate light as he leaned against a tree talking to his sister.

"Of course not. You're acting like I've never done this before..."

"But, duh, you haven't ever done this before..."

“But that’s not something you need to worry about. Look brother dear— you had your shot at this. Several as I recall, an entire quiver full, and you blew it every time. Just let me handle this, okay?”

The man crossed his arms over his chest defensively. “Saying I wipped out is a little strong. They’ve caught a clue.”

“And kept it bottled like an aging wine. Aged wine is good, wonderful— I love the stuff but there is a point that you’ve got to drink it, enjoy it or you realize that you’ve been aging it for nothing. Trust me.”

Gabrielle drew back behind the tree, keeping out of sight, listening intently.

“Chill ‘Stacy. I totally trust you. I just want you to be careful. Xena is a very dangerous woman. Way tense, I’ve asked around— I know what I’m talking about.”

“*Stacy?*” Gabrielle thought to herself. “*That must be Lessa’s real name.*”

“Believe me, Xena is the least of my worries at the moment. If you were even slightly perceptive, you’d be worrying about me falling for the bard myself.” Gabrielle’s head shot back round the tree. Lessa tossed an apple to her brother who fed it to the zebra, never taking his eyes off his sister. “Don’t worry,” she continued with a light laugh, “I was *joking*. I adore Gabrielle, and Xena too, but I’m not falling for either of them. Frankly, I’m more concerned with avoiding Callisto if you don’t mind. Not that she wasn’t entertaining mind you, but she’s... well... a bit...” Finally Lessa shrugged, “Sick for my taste.”

“I warned you about that too, ‘Stac,” he replied smiling gently at his sister’s frown. “You still have the arrow?”

“Of course I do.” Gabrielle was surprised to see all of Lessa’s weapons on the zebra’s blanket saddle. She picked up her scabbard and pulling at a leather thong, extracted a small white arrow from a hidden compartment in its side. “But as I told you before, I’ve no intention of using it. There is no doubt in my mind that these two people are very well aware of how much they’re in love with each other. If Xena weren’t so convinced she’d frighten Gabrielle away by approaching her, she would have, and if Gabrielle weren’t so clueless she’d know that.”

“Clueless! Is that what she thinks of me...” It was not until Gabrielle looked around the tree again that she realized she’d spoken out loud. The beautiful man was gone and she was face to face with Lessa’s boots. She looked up at the archer, who was looking down, a frown on her otherwise beautiful face.

“You are supposed to be asleep, Gabrielle.” Lessa’s tone surprised Gabrielle. She almost sounded like Xena. Patient, tolerant, very mature and not terribly amused. Gabrielle had to remind herself that she was actually older than the archer.

“Well, I’m sorry to disappoint you, Stacy.”

Gabrielle swallowed nervously as Lessa’s eyes darkened at the use of her name. “So you’ve been here a while, I take it?”

Gabrielle nodded, feeling both guilty and nervous. Lessa smiled and shook her head. “Don’t worry, it could have been worse.” With a shrug she helped Gabrielle to her feet. “I’ll apologize now, Gabrielle, please don’t take this the wrong way.” Before she could respond, the archer’s lips had covered her own.

Instantly Gabrielle wanted to push her away, but realized she was frozen in place. She couldn’t move; she didn’t want to move. She breathed in the scent of Lessa’s hair and saw the colors of the forest swirl around her. Before she realized what she was doing, she felt her arms around Lessa’s back and neck, drawing her in, craving more of the delicious passion ignited by lips that moved so sweetly upon her own. *This can’t be happening*, she screamed to herself, wanting more of it anyway. Wanting it to be Xena.

“Gabrielle... Gabrielle...”

Gabrielle woke with a start, confused, sighing with relief as she focused on Xena’s face above her own.

“Are you alright?” Xena asked, her hand still resting on the bard’s shoulder from shaking her awake.

Gabrielle looked around. It was full light, probably mid-morning. Suddenly unsure of just how much recent history was a dream, she answered cautiously. “It’s nothing, just a strange dream.”

“Must have been a good one,” Xena smiled. “From the sound of it anyway.”

Gabrielle smiled weakly. “How’s your shoulder?” Desperate to change the subject, she sighed inwardly when a slow, sultry smile eased across the warrior’s face.

“Never better, Gabrielle. How did you know I pulled it?”

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Lessa step into view behind Xena, shaking her head emphatically. “I just knew,” Gabrielle replied, looking down to avoid the archer’s relieved grin.

Xena nodded, declining to force the issue and stood. “We’ll be leaving soon, you’d best get packed up.”

Gabrielle’s eyes followed Xena as she walked across the camp site to begin readying Argo for the day’s journey.

“Why did she let me sleep so late?” Gabrielle asked Lessa, deciding her dream must have been the result of unevenly cooked pheasant. She looked at Lessa curiously. Her clothes were damp, her hair drying in tendrils around her face. She didn’t look nearly as beautiful as she had in her dream, so it must have been a dream. Wasn’t it?

“Trust me, it wasn’t my idea. When I suggested waking you, she almost took my head off with that round killing thingie.”

“Chakram.”

“Bless you. Anyway, I suspect she thinks you should be well rested— for what I can’t imagine...”

“Is Socrates ready to go?” Xena called to Lessa from across the clearing, her voice holding more than a hint of warning.

“Damn, she has good hearing,” Lessa muttered and then whistled for the zebra.

It wasn’t long before the trio was ready to depart. Xena made one last look around the camp site, double checking to make sure all traces of their passage were gone. With a start, Gabrielle headed back over to the hot pool, remembering she had left her shift there.

“It’s okay Gabrielle,” Xena smiled, walking over. “Lessa took a bath and fished it out early this morning. It’s with your things.” Gabrielle smiled, suspecting where the archer had gone to avoid the wrath of Xena’s chakram.

“Where would you like to ride?” Xena asked as they walked up to Argo. Gabrielle was surprised; she’d never been given a choice before.

“In front, I think,” she replied. “Unless you’d rather have me in the back?”

“Front is fine, Gabrielle.”

Xena held Argo’s reins while the bard mounted, then gently took her place in the saddle behind her. With a warning glare to Lessa, who took a sudden interest in the foliage of the forest, they set off into the woods.

“Tonight we’d better keep an eye out for Callisto’s thugs,” Lessa commented, keeping her glances to the warrior and bard astride Argo to a minimum. “She usually leaves three scouts a day behind her as well as a day ahead. You might consider giving me my weapons back?”

“We’ll see,” Xena replied. Gabrielle turned to see Lessa’s long bow and scabbard securely attached on Argo’s saddle on her right, the hand crossbow on the left.

“Thank the gods it was a dream,” she muttered to herself. With a sigh of relief she studied the arm around her waist, memorizing the sensations that now raced through her. It was the sweetest torture. Xena’s breath against her cheek as she spoke, the delicious movement of her breasts at her back, the arm wrapped snugly around her waist, occasionally caressing her thigh. Gabrielle was sure Argo’s saddle would be soaked by the time they stopped for lunch.

Lessa rolled her eyes to the skies for the hundredth time that morning. As much of a romantic as she considered herself, the unsuccessful restraint exercised by the bard and warrior were

too much to stomach, even for her. The passion crackling in the air was thick enough to slice with a two-handed broadsword. A very dull two-handed broadsword.

“Why don’t I go on ahead?” Lessa suggested. “I’ll see if...”

“Good idea,” Xena replied with an even gaze.

“I get the impression you don’t like her,” Gabrielle said after the archer had trotted off into the woods.

Xena shifted slightly behind the bard, causing a new wave of pleasurable sensations to reverberate through her lithe frame. “Well, she did threaten to kill you.” Gabrielle gently pried the reins from Xena’s hand and put the warrior’s other arm around her waist.

“But she was honest about it.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

“Well, I don’t hold it against her, and if I don’t, then I don’t see why you should.”

Xena smiled— for the life of her, she couldn’t remember ever enjoying a ride through the woods more. “So tell me about your dream?” she asked, murmuring into the bard’s neck.

“Well,” Gabrielle began, wondering how much to tell Xena. Before continuing, something caught her eye. Gazing down at Lessa’s scabbard a thin leather thong extended from the scabbard’s side. Reaching down, she tugged on it and a hidden compartment opened in the scabbard, a delicate, tiny white arrow, falling into her hand. Gabrielle put the arrow back, grateful Xena was more interested in the back of her neck than what she was doing. “It was one of those dreams you tend to forget as soon as you wake up,” she explained. “I don’t think you were in it, Xena— I always remember those dreams.”

They had ridden only a short distance further in silence. Xena kept her thoughts to herself, trying to put her feelings into words, then those words in to some semblance of lucidity. But Gabrielle was the one with verbal eloquence, who could turn even the simplest phrase priceless. When she finally found the words that would have to do, she opened her mouth to speak, not knowing Gabrielle had been facing the same struggle.

When the bard thought of Xena and all that woman meant to her, she was rendered mute. Words could not even begin to describe the depth and intensity of her love for the warrior. She doubted words ever could.

“Gabrielle...I...”

“Xena...I...”

The two women laughed. “You first, Xena,” Gabrielle continued, “since I do most of the talking.”

Xena sighed and took a deep breath. This was it. “I just want you to know how much...”

“X E N Aaaaaaaa!” A powerful yell and the thunder of hooves brought the warrior’s head up with a snap. Lessa charged into view at full gallop, dirt from the forest floor spraying in every direction as Socrates skidded to a stop. There was blood on the archer’s face and her shirt was torn in several places, revealing more blood. “We’ve got big problems. Give me my weapons NOW!”

Xena nodded once, deciding. There was no mistaking the urgency in Lessa’s face. This was a battle and from her bearing it was clear she could handle battles. No panic, no fear— just a sense of urgency and purpose. With fluid movements she untied the thongs that held the archer’s gear to her saddle.

“I think it’s the four groupies of Ares but I’m not sure.”

“The four horsemen?” Gabrielle wondered aloud.

“I think so,” Lessa replied easily catching her scabbard and buckling it in place across her back. “Really ugly guys on horses and one of them smells *really* bad.”

“That’d be them,” Xena quipped, tossing first the longbow then the hand crossbow to the archer.

“There’s one more thing, Xena,” Lessa added as more hoofbeats could be heard off in the distance. “They mentioned Gabrielle by name; they’re after her.”

“Damn you, Ares,” Xena muttered, then nudged the bard from Argo’s saddle. “Gabrielle, go

with Lessa— get out of here, I'll catch up with you.”

“But I can help,” Gabrielle replied protesting.

“Listen to her, Gabrielle.” Lessa urged, maneuvering Socrates to Argo’s side. “Xena, do you know where the temple of Aphrodite is? About eight miles away?” Lessa asked as she helped Gabrielle onto the zebra’s back behind her. A cloud of dust could be seen through the trees, getting closer. Shouts could now be heard and an acrid smell began to fill the air. Xena leaned down and quickly covering the bard’s lips with her own, kissed her fiercely.

“I love you, Gabrielle,” she said simply, “and I have every intention of showing you just how much. Keep her safe Lessa, your life depends on it. I’ll find the temple and meet you there.”

“I love you, Xena,” Gabrielle replied, eyes brimming with tears. “Be safe.”

With a yell Lessa charged Socrates away from Xena, away from the soon to be battlefield. Gabrielle hung on to Lessa for dear life. She had no idea the cute little zebra could move this fast. She was closer to the ground, and the animal was not as broad as Argo, but these things were of little comfort. The gait was different and holding on to Lessa’s thin body was much less comforting than Xena’s muscular frame.

Moments later hoofbeats could be heard gaining on them. With a quick glance over her shoulder, Lessa cursed. “Pestilence— why in Hades did it have to be Pestilence?”

“What?” Gabrielle yelled, trying to be heard over the sound of breaking branches and hoof beats, her eyes watering now from the stench moving closer.

“Hang on tight,” Lessa yelled, and turned sharply to the right, leaping over a fallen tree, heading up a ridge, one hand on the reins, the other removing a cross bow bolt from a belt at her waist. Continuing a complicated series of direction changes at full gallop, Gabrielle was sure that they were going to be brained by a low hanging branch at any moment. The truth was, if she’d been on Argo, it would have happened. As it was, the compact animal maneuvered through the forest faster than the big mare could. With a glance around Lessa’s shoulder, Gabrielle was shocked to see the archer using both hands to load the crossbow bolt into place. The reins were hanging, untended around the zebra’s neck.

“You dropped the reins!” Gabrielle shouted.

“Don’t worry,” Lessa shouted back. “Soc hates the smell as much as we do. “Get ready to duck when I say so.”

Gabrielle nodded. When they crested the rise, she almost fainted at the stench. Charging toward them from the side was a hideous figure astride a mangy black horse. Tattered robes, decaying armor and flesh teeming with disease headed toward them, a face grimacing in fury or delight. The figure held a small crossbow, pointed it at Gabrielle and fired. At Lessa’s signal Socrates reared up, putting Lessa’s body where Gabrielle’s had been a moment before. She caught the bolt and shouted in fury as tiny insects began to eat into her flesh.

“Ow!” Gabrielle was nauseated at the sight, tiny black worms burrowing under the skin of the archer’s hand. Lessa quickly threw the bolt back, catching the horseman in the neck. It didn’t seem to bother him. He put down the crossbow and picked up a whip. Even at this distance Gabrielle could see that the slithering along its surface was not due to the gentle breeze. Socrates’ ears flattened back nervously.

“Duck!” Lessa shouted as the whip lashed out.

Gabrielle did as she was told and from the corner of her eye she saw the whip biting into the flesh of Lessa’s arm as it wrapped around. With a mighty tug she pulled the whip from the horseman’s hand, then drawing her own crossbow, fired.

The bolt sped from the archer’s bow and hit its mark with a squish as it embedded in the horseman’s left eye. He let out a blood curdling scream as both he and his horse vanished. Gabrielle sat amazed until Lessa’s yelps diverted her attention.

“Ow, ow, ow, ouch, ow, ouch!” She was trying to untie the whip around her forearm even as it continued to bite into her flesh. Tiny thin snakes, that appeared to be nothing save teeth and mouths, attacked with a vengeance. “The back of my belt.” Lessa gasped, “a black crossbow bolt-

get it out and stab the whip with it.”

Gabrielle found the bolt attached securely to the archer’s leather belt. She pried it from its niche, and with a grimace at the snakes now threatening her, stabbed the whip. With a flash of light, it was gone. With a relieved sigh, Lessa nudged the zebra forward. Socrates headed through the trees, putting as much space between them and the lingering stench of Pestilence as possible.

“We should go back and help Xena,” Gabrielle said when the stench had subsided enough to risk opening her mouth.

“Xena will be fine, Gabrielle. Three horsemen are no match for her and I’m afraid I’ve got a more immediate problem.” She held up her arm for the bard to see. Nasty red welts covered her hand where the parasites had burrowed under her skin. Gabrielle felt nauseous as she saw that they were still moving. The archer’s forearm was also a mess, her shirt was in bloody tatters, and in two places thin strips of skin hung loosely. Continuing her examination she noted that Lessa had several nasty gashes on her neck and several large nicks and dings in her armor. *She must have taken them all on before warning us*, she thought.

“Not all, Gabrielle.” Lessa replied, weakly. She either didn’t notice or didn’t care that she’d read the bard’s thoughts. “Just Famine.” She handed Gabrielle the reins. “Why don’t you drive for a while. Soc knows where to go.” With that she slumped forward, resting her head against the zebra’s neck, an arm dangling to each side. With a nod and kick of her legs, Gabrielle urged Socrates forward, keeping one eye on her charge, the other on the forest and headed for safety.

Xena cursed silently as Pestilence broke off the attack and rushed past her, but there was nothing to be done for it. Famine charged, a skeletal form on a skeletal horse, wielding a rusty sword. Drawing her own sword, Xena met the attack, the clang from the striking swords showering her with sparks and setting her teeth on edge. Two more grotesque figures surged forward. The shriek of Hatred and wail of Despair deafening to her ears. Leaping from Argo’s back, Xena released her chakram mid flip. It ricocheted off of several trees, finally hitting Famine’s sword, then plunging into the chest of Despair. The wailing was silenced and the horseman vanished. Hatred and Famine dismounted approaching her from either side. Hatred was dressed in black, pinched face distorted in an angry grimace, obsidian sword swinging menacingly. He lunged first, Xena parried the blow easily, kicking back as Famine approached from behind. The battle fully engaged, she parried their blows as she planned her own attack. She would not get many openings from Ares’ henchmen, and had to make each one count.

Finally with a leap that made a mockery of the laws of physics (which thankfully had not been invented yet) Xena leaped over the head of Famine and with a fierce sprint, ran the monster through from the back, not stopping until the tip of her sword extended from the skeletal chest and impaled Hatred to a tree as well. With a flash they were gone.

“Nicely done, my dear.”

Xena spun at the sound of Ares’ voice as the God of War stood behind her, applauding. “I’m sorry you won’t get a chance at Pestilence, but that brat of Aphrodite’s has already dispatched him.”

Xena walked past the god to pick up her chakram from the ground formerly occupied by Despair. “Who?” she asked, not terribly interested, returning the weapon to its proper place.

“Oh, so you don’t know?” Ares smiled. “Then I’ve already won.”

“Ares, what are you talking about?”

“I was worried, can you believe that, actually worried that you might form some sort of bond with that little friend of yours, Grettle, isn’t it? A bond that would keep you from returning to my services forever.”

Xena shrugged, disinterested in the cat and mouse game demanded by the God of War. “It’s Gabrielle, and that’s already happened. You’re a bit late, over a year at least.”

“Am I really Warrior Princess?” Ares circled, toying with her. “Then explain to me why, as we speak, she is entering a temple of Aphrodite with Aphrodite’s daughter, Ecstasy?”

“What?” Xena exclaimed, loosing her facade, but too concerned to care.

“Short girl, unusual hair, rides a zebra- I’m sure you’ve seen her,” Ares continued conversationally. “If you think her brother Cupid has an appetite for sex...” He rolled his eyes skyward. “I’m surprised she’s decided on your brat though,” Ares smiled menacingly. “I think you’re more her type.”

“And you expect me to believe you?” Xena asked, regaining her composure.

“I’m not the God of Lies, Xena. And yes, you are more her type— she has a thing about mastering powerful women— I’ve heard stories. But listen, you know me to be an honorable man. Honestly, it’s for old time’s sake. You might as well come back now, join me before the pain of seeing that little friend of yours... well... writhing in ecstasy drives you back.” He snickered.

“Ah, I see your purpose, Ares,” Xena purred, reading the motives beneath the God’s words. “I suspect Lessa, if she is who you say, has robbed you of several warlords, or you fear she can. Love is more powerful, even than you— I can see where she’d infringe on your body count. Fortunately, I have more faith in Gabrielle’s love for me than you do.”

“You’re lying there, Xena. And it does not become you. That brat is infatuated with you, nothing more. What is there to love? Nice packaging surely, but beneath it all you’re a warlord who quit. Someone who had it all and traded it for nothing. How long do you think she’ll stick around once the novelty of conquering a warlord has worn off? You’ve gotten soft Xena, and soft won’t hold her interest for very long. Your past, your nightmares, all the people on this planet who want and deserve your head on a platter, you’re going to face up to them and when you do, Gabrielle will either be long gone or die another casualty of Xena: Warrior Princess.”

“If you don’t mind,” Xena whistled for Argo, “if there’s nothing else, I’d like to go.”

“No, no, by all means, Xena, go.” Ares chuckled as he began to slowly vanish. “I’ll leave a candle on for you.”

“Naturally the Titans were more than a little upset to discover I was not in fact a goddess... Socrates, is something wrong? I thought you liked the story?” The zebra stopped walking and began to bob her head up and down. Gabrielle looked around— they had been walking without any semblance of a trail for some time and the bard had no idea where they were. Listening to the sounds of the forest, her ears picked up the unmistakable gurgle of running water. She gingerly slid off the zebra’s back, careful not to dislodge the barely conscious archer. Taking the reins in her hand, she led the zebra through the dense foliage towards the water. As she’d hoped, they reached an enormous outcrop of rock, water spilling from the middle of the rock face into a steaming pool below. Boulders surrounding the pool were covered with blue green algae. Lessa struggled to raise her head at the sight.

“In...water...now,” She gasped. Gabrielle nodded and, as gently as she could, pulled the injured woman off the zebra. Lessa landed in a heap on her back. Gabrielle was shocked at her appearance. The parasitic welts had spread from her hand and arm to cover all visible skin. Her neck and throat throbbed painfully, bleeding in several places where the worms had eaten through to the surface. Blood trailed out her nose and ears and her eyes were completely blood shot. Gabrielle was grateful she’d not eaten lunch or she was sure she’d have lost it.

“You’ll be okay,” she assured the archer, not entirely sure she believed it herself, and dragged her by her armor the short distance to the water. Not knowing how else to proceed, she rolled the archer’s body completely clothed into the steaming pool.

As soon as she made contact with the water, Lessa screamed and thrashed as the surface of the water began to froth and churn. Steam exploded everywhere as Lessa, struggling, sank below the surface. Afraid she’d done the wrong thing, Gabrielle reached into the water, frantically searching for some sign of the archer. For long moments nothing happened, Gabrielle couldn’t see any sign of her below the boiling surface. Finally, with a loud gasp, Lessa’s head broke the surface of the steaming pool. Gabrielle grabbed her by her armor and dragged her out, with a heave pulling the gasping woman forward. Free of the water and crawling on to her hands and knees, she coughed a

couple more times then sat back, drinking in deep breaths.

“Thank you... Gabrielle,” she sighed. “You saved my life.”

“What happened?” Gabrielle was amazed. The welts, the worms--all was healed. Lessa’s eyes were bright and smiling, all of the bloodied gashes gone as if they’d never been. Her torn shirt was the only remnant of the battle they’d fought.

“The parasites? It’s residue from Pestilence. Zeus, how I despise Pestilence.”

“I mean, what healed you? Was it the water?”

Lessa looked a bit uncomfortable as she glanced at the steaming pool she’d just climbed out of. “Well, you could say this is very special water. It has cleansing properties. We’ll need a bucket full to wash down Socrates, then I’ve got something to show you.”

It didn’t take long to clean Lessa’s blood from the zebra. When they’d finished, the black and white of the unusual animal gleamed. Glowing white set off by rich black, dripping, water the creature looked truly magnificent. The water had a different effect on the archer’s appearance. While she was physically healed, Gabrielle noted that water made the Lessa’s armor creak loudly and gave her a rather rumpled look. She couldn’t help laughing to herself.

“What’s so funny?” Lessa asked, sending Socrates off to forage in the foliage with a playful slap on the rump.

“It’s nothing. Just that every time I look at you- you seem to be drenched for some reason. Do your clothes ever get a chance to fully dry?”

Lessa joined in her laughter. “Not lately, that’s for sure.” With a smile she took Gabrielle’s hand and pulled her towards a thick stand of trees. “This is what I want to show you.”

A short distance from the pool and hot spring, the rock wall opened to a small entrance to a cave. There was a short barrier in front, but easily stepped over, of carved stone, with a torch resting near the opening. Symbols were carved around the opening, simple on the sides, very ornate at the top.

“This is the temple of Aphrodite?” Gabrielle asked.

Lessa nodded. “Not just any temple, Gabrielle. I have it on very good authority that this is her *favorite* temple.”

“This is where you said Xena would meet us, right? Can we go in?”

Lessa put a restraining hand on the bard’s shoulder. “Not so fast, my friend. First you must ask permission. There are candles inside. They start just inside the entrance and follow the twisting tunnel all the way inside the cave. What you have to do is light that torch, put it in the holder here,” she pointed to an indentation carved in the doorway, “think about why you would want to enter this temple, and what offering you might give. If the candles light, you’re welcome to enter. If they don’t,” Lessa shrugged, “it’d be healthiest to stay away in that case.”

Gabrielle nodded. “Mind repeating the part about offerings?”

“Well, Aphrodite is the Goddess of...”

“Love.” Gabrielle replied.

“So think about that- I’m sure that’ll be acceptable.”

Gabrielle returned to her bag to pick up her flint and tinder. As usually happened when she tried to start a fire, she thought of the first night she’d spent in the company of Xena. She smiled at that distant memory. She’d been determined to follow the brave warrior no matter what. Choosing to leave an arranged marriage to Perdicus, her sister Lila, her family and village behind. She’d had romantic ideas at first, about seeing the world and recording wondrous adventures for future generations. That first night however was anything but romantic. Xena had warned her to stay away, so she tried to be discreet. She’d watched from a distance as the strong woman set up camp. First, she scouted the perimeter, picking up wood for her fire. She had killed a fat duck that night and was roasting it over her fire. Gabrielle’s mouth still watered at the memory. She’d forgotten to bring any food in her enthusiasm at leaving and was feeling ravenous. From her hidden place she’d watched Xena remove her armor. A series of cuts and bruises were healing slowly on her back, arms and legs. Finally the warrior set down her blanket and began to eat. Gabrielle had already had made several

futile attempts at a fire and she was cold. Cold, hungry, and desperately wanting the companionship of the woman sitting by that fire eating roasted duck, she approached.

Xena hadn't seemed too keen on her company at first, but the icy facade slowly began to melt. Xena laughed at her stories, taught her so many things-- some lessons were quite deliberate, like starting a fire. Some she suspected the warrior didn't even know she was teaching the bard, like strategy, and loyalty. Before the first cycle of the moon had passed, she felt closer to this woman than she'd ever felt to anyone. A part of Gabrielle knew that Xena had felt it, too. Even when she was angry with the warrior, or scared, or otherwise preoccupied there was a connection there that, as Xena had said, bound them closer than blood ever could. This woman was the other half of her soul and she would stay with her, forever.

Gabrielle hadn't realized she was lighting the torch until a burst of fire shot into the cave. Like a wave, a flame lit the first candle then jumped to the next and so on, traveling on each side of the opening until the flame disappeared out of sight around a bend in the tunnel. Moments later a warm eerie glow filled the entrance, like glowing earth. Lessa whistled appreciatively. "I think that is a resounding welcome, Gabrielle. Let's go in."

Gabrielle cautiously followed the archer through the entrance. The passageway was narrow, maybe four feet wide, and gently sloped downward. The air was surprisingly comfortable for a cave, warm but fresh, not stuffy. The tunnel twisted back upon itself and in moments Gabrielle could no longer see the entrance. There was enough light to see, but unusual shadows danced everywhere. As they walked in silence, Gabrielle couldn't help but notice how at ease the archer was here. She carried a satchel over her shoulder and from time to time she stopped to right a fallen candle, or replace one that was nearly exhausted. Finally the passage opened up into a circular chamber. It didn't have a high ceiling, twelve feet at most and was easily fifteen feet in diameter. Every flat rock surface along the walls was covered with candles. Thin curtains of silicate rock hung in dizzying patterns from the cavern ceiling reflecting the candle light, bathing the entire room in a warm glow. With a gasp that caught in her throat Gabrielle stared openly as Lessa turned around. The candle light reflected off the archer's hair hypnotically, her green eyes almost glowing in the warm candle light.

"Yes, I know." Lessa smiled with a shrug, diffusing a potentially awkward situation. "It looks interesting in candle light." Gabrielle cast her eyes down, wanting to look anywhere but at the archer when she noticed shallow circular indentations that were interconnected, along the edge of the cavern. Gabrielle counted ten of them, with one extra large one at the far side. Two things however dominated the chamber-- an area of the floor strewn with soft looking furs and a stone pit. Water cascaded into the pit, then from the pit it headed through a channel underground. There was a ledge in the pit, similar to the hot pool they'd camped at last night, only this pit was empty of water, save what passed through the channel. Lessa quickly made way around the chamber, checking various niches in the rock, standing up candles that had fallen over, and replacing several that had all but burnt down. Finally she extracted a wooden plank from an indentation in the rock and inserted the plank into the rock pit. It easily slid into place and when it did, the water no longer spilled down through the floor. It stayed where it was. The pit was beginning to fill.

"This is a temple?" Gabrielle asked finally.

"Of course it's a temple. Granted, it might not look like most temples, but believe me-- Aphrodite pays very close attention to what goes on in here."

"So where's the altar? Where do you leave offerings?"

Lessa was busy with the slowly filling water pit but nodded in the direction of the furs. "Over there."

Curious, Gabrielle picked up a corner of several large furs and peered underneath. Sure enough, she saw a slab of pure white marble set into the floor. It was warm to the touch.

"Hot spring keeps it warm," Lessa said. "Like the water here. Now listen carefully to me Gabrielle-- this is important." The bard reluctantly turned back to face Lessa. Fortunately she was standing mostly in shadow- her green eyes still radiated, but the effect was less distracting. She spoke

quietly, the sound echoing musically around the room, but the gravity of her words was crystal clear. "From the moment this pit is full of water, you'll be allowed twelve hours in here. It takes an hour for each of these tiny bowls to fill." Lessa pointed to the ten circular indentations in the floor. "Water will spill over the edge of the pit here," she pointed, "and go into the first bowl then the next and so on. When the water gets to that large one by the altar, you've got two hours left. Whatever you do, don't wear out your welcome."

"What is it you expect me to do in here?" Gabrielle asked, puzzled by Lessa's urgency.

"That isn't my business, although I might have my suspicions. Look, enjoy the bath, enjoy the safety, I don't care. Gabrielle, you're here with Aphrodite's blessing. This chamber is yours for the next twelve hours; no harm will come to you. Whatever you choose to do or not to do is your own decision. Weapons however are strictly not allowed. I'll keep an eye on your stuff outside. Xena should be here soon-- after fighting Famine, Hatred and Despair, I'd think she might want a nice hot bath too. I'll leave the water skin here." She set it into a hole near the pit, "It will stay cold here. Also, here's some food in case you get hungry. Look Gabrielle, you saved my life, this is the least I can do-- to tell you about this place. You entered this temple in the right frame of mind, you can't possibly make any mistakes in here." Lessa turned to go and as an after thought added, "There's some nice smelling salts behind that rock ledge-- and some soap. I'd use them if I were you. No offense, but we did have to dispatch Pestilence." With a smile she was gone.

It didn't take Xena long to follow Socrates' trail to the place where the bard and archer had battled the demon of Pestilence. The stench still lingered in the air, most prominent at a burnt patch of ground. The warrior stooped to pick up a small crossbow bolt. "The work of Hesperus," she muttered to herself. A few feet away lay another. She picked it up as well and continued. Now the trail was even easier to follow, patches of blood drying on the forest floor, like signposts. Concerned for Gabrielle's safety, she urged Argo forward, traveling as fast as she dared, and followed.

Gabrielle let out a low sigh as she eased herself into the steaming water. Her eyes fully adjusted to the candle light, she let them wander around the cave. Easily it was the most beautiful cave she'd ever seen, colors rich and inviting, patterns of rock impossibly intricate. Even the air was warm and freshly fragrant. Fragrant-- there was a hint of something displeasurable and Gabrielle knew it was her. Lessa had been right, the stench of Pestilence hung like glue. Reaching behind her, she found a leather sack, and opening it she could smell the clean scent of sea salt and herbs. Taking several large handfuls, she deposited them into the water. Returning the satchel to its niche she picked up the soap and set to removing all traces of Pestilence.

Xena quickly dismounted at the sight of Socrates, eyes widening slightly. The animal was positively gleaming. The zebra raised her head and nickered in friendly greeting at the warrior's approach. "So we're friends now?" Xena asked as she walked over.

"It takes her awhile to get to know people-- unless they have unusually disarming personalities."

"Where's Gabrielle?" Xena asked, turning to face the archer standing behind her. She was surprised to find the woman virtually gleaming as well. Other than a torn shirt, she looked positively radiant.

"She's fine, Xena," Lessa replied to the warrior's unspoken question. "I'll take you to her. I hope you didn't have too much trouble with Ares' thugs?"

"They're gone," Xena replied dryly, following the archer through the trees. "I did have an interesting conversation with Ares though. He doesn't like you."

Lessa smiled. "I wouldn't say he's particularly good at making friends. Kind of a control freak, if you know what I mean." Lessa stopped at the cave entrance. "She's in there, waiting for you."

Xena looked at the symbols of warning surrounding the door, then eyed the archer

suspiciously. "Is what Ares said true?"

"There will be time to answer your questions later," Lessa replied gently. "Right now there is someone who needs your attention more. Leave me your weapons and armor, I'll keep an eye on things out here. You'll be safe."

Torn between wanting answers immediately and wanting to know Gabrielle was safe, Xena stood indecisive for the briefest moment. Then she removed her chakram, handing it to the archer, and unbuckled the belt that held her scabbard in place. Her breast plate followed. "Would you see to Argo?" Xena asked as she stepped into the cave entrance.

"Of course, Xena," Lessa replied, giving her shoulder an affectionate squeeze. "But I ask one thing in return." She gazed easily into the warrior's bright blue eyes. "Be as honest with yourself as you are with Gabrielle." With a final grin she turned and headed back through the trees. Xena took a deep breath and walked forward, into the warm glow of candle light.

She approached silently out of habit and smiled at the sounds of water and of Gabrielle humming. Breathing deeply, she picked up pleasing scent of herbs, melting wax and Gabrielle. Rounding a final bend in the tunnel, she stood breathless as the cavern opened up before her. Candles everywhere cast a warm glow throughout the room, but no where was the effect as inspiring as the light reflected off of Gabrielle's skin-- leaning back in the steaming water, neck arched, eyes closed with her arms stretched out on the rock rim of the pit, relaxed. Xena was too overcome with emotion to move.

"By the gods, you are beautiful." Xena whispered.

Gabrielle opened her eyes and smiled. "As I recall I said that to you once."

Xena nodded, moving closer. "But you were high on henbane at the time."

"That's not why I said it, Xena." Gabrielle stood, water streaming off of her body and held out her hand to the warrior. "Join me."

Xena crossed the cavern and stood, drinking in the sight of Gabrielle with hungry eyes. Stepping onto the outer ledge of the pit, Gabrielle cupped Xena's face with gentle hands drawing the warrior's lips to her own. Like ice, every doubt, every second thought, every preconceived notion of her relationship with Gabrielle melted away. Gods be dammed, her past was not going to keep her from this love. She had fought countless battles for so much less. She would not be denied the one who had already vanquished her and saved her in the process.

Breaking away from the kiss, Gabrielle smiled. "Turn around." It was a command, not a request.

"Why?" Xena asked softly, not wanting to take her eyes from the bard's face.

Gabrielle laughed, a lyrical soft laugh. "So I can undress you, silly. The laces are in the back, remember?"

Xena complied, feeling at first the familiar sensations as Gabrielle untied the leather dress. When it was removed, her body shuddered at the sensation of dripping wet hands, splaying across the skin of her back. Water ran down, Gabrielle's hands following it, until Xena felt Gabrielle's hands at her boots, removing those as well. With slightly trembling hands, she turned Xena back around and led her into the warm, steaming pit.

A huge grin eased across the warrior's face as she was surrounded by the hot water. picking up the soap Gabrielle glided through the water to Xena. Under the steaming surface she felt Xena's strong hands rest on her hips as she approached, guiding her closer, slowly easing up her abdomen, gentle and confident, her eyes never leaving those of the bard. Working the soap into a healthy lather between her hands, Gabrielle reached for Xena, smiling as her sudsy fingers slipped across the warrior's skin, grateful to disguise the trembling of her hands.

"Watch it," Xena warned as the caress began to tickle and that was all the encouragement needed.

From outside the cave, Lessa lifted her head from her sewing as she mended her shirt at the sounds of uproarious laughter coming from within. "In the temple of Aphrodite, they decide to get

into a tickle fight?" she said out loud, frowning at the amused nickers from the relaxing equines a short distance away. "Oh yeah, like you two are the real experts." She shrugged returning to her sewing.

The laughter subsided, giving way to tenderness as Gabrielle insisted on washing Xena's hair. While it eased some of the awkward tension that permeated the cavern whenever their eyes met, it also served to build a steady wave of passion Xena feared would consume her. As she sat, the luxurious feel of the bard's hands as her neck, scalp and back were massaged, she could also feel herself flooding with desire. Desperately she wanted to consume the flesh of her soul. To know every part, hear every sigh of pleasure, to make her feel with the same intensity that raged through Xena at the bard's slightest touch. The breasts against her back, sliding against her skin, the gentle fingers, the light kisses on her ear-- there was no way Gabrielle could know what this was doing to her. Not unless Xena showed her. With surprisingly strong hands, Gabrielle pushed Xena's head under water for a final rinse.

As she broke the surface she felt hands on her shoulders, holding her down. With only her head above water, Gabrielle had Xena pinned. The bard panted from the earlier exertion as well as something else. "I've got you, Xena!"

Xena sat on the low ledge, Gabrielle standing in the water above her, looking down, looking powerful. Desire continued its powerful burn at her center, blue eyes darkened and narrowed, a slight curl to her smile.

"Don't even think about it." Gabrielle warned, her own expression hungry. "I have you... and I'm going to take you." Leaning into Xena, Gabrielle kissed her fiercely, an exploring hand easing between her legs. Xena jumped as probing fingers reached her center.

"Gabrielle!" she gasped, stunned at the bard's advance. She'd imagined making love to Gabrielle many times, but hadn't ever imagined the bard making the first move. New torrents of desire washed over her and she feared she'd orgasm before the bard touched her further.

"I want you, Xena," Gabrielle said softly, eyes pleading. "I've wanted you forever. Please, Xena, show me how to take you. Show me how to please you. Teach me."

The words rushed over Xena like nothing she'd ever heard before. For this woman she'd fight all of Tartarus. She'd defy every occupant of Mount Olympus. She would hold nothing back. For the first time that she could remember, she felt utterly defenseless and was glad of it.

Xena slowly rose out of the water, bringing Gabrielle with her. Standing together in the middle of the pit, she took the bard in her arms. "Gabrielle, I've loved you for so long." She whispered fiercely, "I..."

Her words died as Gabrielle pulled away and gently put a silencing finger to the warrior's lips. "Show me, Xena."

Xena smiled, a lopsided grin brimming with love. Now she would be denied nothing. Drawing Gabrielle to her once more, she easily lifted the bard and carried her from the pool to the furs nearby. Slowly kneeling, she kept the bard in her arms and hungry lips descended on Gabrielle's mouth. Slowly, so slowly she did not even realize it as it happened, the bard was lowered the rest of the way on to the soft furs. Xena took her time delighting in the soft mouth so welcoming to her own, the feel of a velvet tongue intertwining with hers; each sensation savored. Lips never leaving Gabrielle's, Xena's hands trailed down the bard's body, leaving a wave of desire in their wake.

A whimper escaped the bard's lips as Xena's mouth shifted to her throat. "Yes, Xena," she whispered as strong hands cupped her breasts, "Oh, Gods. More."

More?! Xena thought as her mouth trailed down to the bard's breasts, wetness flooding through her. *Does she have any idea what's she's doing to me?* As if in answer she felt Gabrielle's hands on her back as her fingers curled, blunt nails digging into the muscles of her back. It had been Xena's intention to take her time, to make each gentle caress count, but Gabrielle's responses were making that wish a fantasy. Each low moan, each pleading whimper, the commanding sighs-- all of these threatened to rob Xena not only of her senses, but of her restraint as well.

Driven wild by another small cry that reverberated inside the warm cavern, Xena shifted, easing a powerful thigh between the bard's legs. "Oooohhhh," Xena purred as her skin slid against wetness that was not drying water from either of their bodies. Gabrielle pressed herself against the muscles of Xena's leg even as the warrior rolled over.

Straddling Xena's leg looking down into radiant blue eyes, hungry with desire, Gabrielle smiled as she slowly rocked her hips back and forth, smearing the warrior with slick wetness. Reaching out with both hands, she cupped Xena's breasts even as the warrior arched forward to claim the bard's mouth once more. Still writhing against her thigh, Gabrielle pushed Xena back down. Gazing down, she couldn't help but smile. She never wanted to forget the look on the warrior's face. The hunger, the passion, the unabashed love she read there; it was one of those rare moments when you realize how perfect it is, even as it's happening.

With tentative lips she descended upon Xena's breasts, growing more confident as a nipple hardened in her mouth and she felt as well as heard Xena gasp. "Yes, Gabrielle, perfect." She had thought she'd reached the limits of arousal, but she was wrong. As the bard moved her lips against her breasts and wriggled her body against her flesh, Xena was at the breaking point. She had to possess the bard now, to drive her to the heights she herself was flying at.

Another roll and she hovered over Gabrielle once again. Trailing kisses down the bard's muscular abdomen, touching lightly with feather light fingers, she didn't stop until she reached the soft down at the apex of Gabrielle's legs. Xena kissed the indent of Gabrielle's hip, smiling at the pleased whimper she caused. Gabrielle relaxed her legs, allowing Xena to part them with gentle hands. When Xena kissed her other hip, she felt a gentle but firm shove at the top of her head. "Are you trying to tell me something, Gabrielle?" Xena teased gently.

The intensity of hunger in the look Gabrielle gave her wiped the smile from Xena's lips. "Xena, I want you to take me with your mouth, take me with your hands. I want you to utterly possess me. *Please!*" Gabrielle's voice as well as her words, husky in their need, had vanquished Xena. She was the bard's to command. Gently lowering her mouth to Gabrielle's entrance, she paused a moment hovering over the velvety folds, teasing them with her breath, inhaling the intoxicating sweetness. "*Yes!*" Gabrielle panted thrusting her hips upward and breaking the bounds of Xena's restraint.

Sliding her tongue through velvety warmth, lapping up the nectar that abounded there, Xena feasted. Distantly she could hear Gabrielle's cries of pleasure as they reverberated in the cavern. She felt rather than heard the pants, the endearments, as the bard's body moved beneath her. Xena possessed all of Gabrielle, from curious exploration with her lips and tongue to artful mastering. The bard cried out as Xena's tongue circled the tight bundle of nerves at her center, massaging her to glorious climax. Xena felt shaking hands at the top of her head holding her there as the quaking subsided. Finally Gabrielle's hands dropped to her sides, but still Xena did not move. Not moving her lips or tongue she simply held Gabrielle, and waited. When the muscle spasms stopped completely and the bard's breathing evened, she moved. Gently thrusting her tongue deep inside of Gabrielle's entrance, she felt her lover's body respond again.

"Oooohhhh gods," Gabrielle groaned, hips bucking against Xena's face. In moments she was again riding the crest of climax. This time however, when Gabrielle's quakes were done, she let go. Gently easing herself up the bard's body, she rested her thigh between Gabrielle's legs. Gazing into the young woman's face, she was surprised to see tears streaming from her eyes.

"Gabrielle- what's wrong?" She asked concerned. Gabrielle opened her eyes, beaming with love at the warrior, her warrior. She tenderly touched Xena's face, slick with her wetness.

"Xena," she whispered, "I love you so much it hurts."

Happier than she had ever been in her life, Xena rolled over and held Gabrielle, first as she cried unhindered tears of happiness, then as she slept. Xena herself did not expect to drop off, but she did. So at peace, she hardly noticed when sleep overtook her. It wasn't until she felt gentle caressing drift over her body that she awoke. Lazy, peaceful, with blissful slowness Xena eased out of unconsciousness. When the gentle touches extended to her inner thighs, she was fully awake, eyes

open.

“Feeling jumpy, Xena?” Gabrielle teased, her loose hair easing across the warrior’s abdomen as the bard kissed her breasts.

“Lovin’ every moment of it,” she whispered, her hand tracing lazy patterns across Gabrielle’s back.

“Good,” Gabrielle murmured into Xena’s sternum as she began her descent.

“Oooooohh, ah,” Xena’s eyes widened in surprise when the uncertain tentative touches to her sex as she anticipated didn’t happen. Abruptly, powerfully Gabrielle’s lips descended on Xena’s center. And just as quickly they backed off.

“Noooooo,” Xena groaned as Gabrielle teased her with her mouth. For long moments she kissed Xena passionately, reveling in the scents and textures beneath her tongue. The closer the warrior got to climax, the more Gabrielle shifted to teasing Xena in all of these wondrous place. Finally when she could feel all of Xena’s muscles convulse, she lifted her head, and shifted position. Replacing her mouth with nimble fingers, she gazed down at Xena as she began to pant forcefully.

“Open your eyes, Xena,” she commanded. “I want to watch.”

Xena opened her eyes and held Gabrielle’s loving gaze. Between pants she managed, “Yes Gab...reille, perfect. Inside...” The bard inserted two fingers, then a third into Xena’s coral opening. “Yes,” she gasped, not flinching from her lover’s gaze. “More Gabrielle... harder.” Gabrielle’s eyes widened at the flood of wetness beneath her hand, she moved in rhythm with Xena, matching the force of the warrior’s body stroke for stroke. Xena continued to hold Gabrielle’s gaze, “Yes... I need ... just... one...” With a final thrust Gabrielle felt powerful muscles clamp down on her fingers. The shudder of orgasm racing through her body, exquisite spasm after exquisite spasm rocked through her, turning her blood to silver. “Oooooohhhhhh,” Xena finally sighed as her muscles relaxed. Gabrielle held her there, warm and comforting, basking in the glow of intimacy that bathed them both. Slowly, gently the bard extracted her hand, smiling at her lover.

“How?” Xena panted, looking at Gabrielle, awed expression on her face.

Slowly Gabrielle brought her hand to her lips and slipped her fingers in her mouth. “You’re a good teacher,” she purred, as Xena sat up, consumed by her desire once more.

“You must be way pleased with yourself.”

Lessa jumped at the sound, sticking herself with her sewing needle. “Ow!” She put her bleeding finger in her mouth and turned around furiously. “Cupid! I hate it when you sneak up on me.”

Cupid shrugged, taking a seat next to his sister. “I could have been one of them.”

“Not bloody likely. They’ve only been in there for a few hours. I don’t expect to see any sign of them until sun-up at the earliest. I had the perfection of this sunset all to myself.” For a moment he looked out over the shining blue ocean. This was indeed a perfect sunset.

He looked at his sister, her dark hair reflecting the burning brilliance of the sun as it reflected off of the expanse of ocean. She seemed so at home here. Her hair was like the sunset, the black and green of her armor reflecting the living forest behind them, her fragrance even, the clean smells of sea and earth. She did not belong in any village, and now she never would. “You can’t go back you know,” he said quietly.

“I know.” She grinned. “It’s okay. I never wanted to anyway. We are what we are and it’s pointless to try to pretend otherwise.”

“But you could have had a regular life. Family, friends, no dieties chasing after you,” he said, putting a gentle arm around his sister. Lessa leaned in close, gazing at the sunset.

“You are my family, brother dear. And I have friends- I know I’ll be on Xena’s good side for eternity. As for the rest,” she shrugged, “it’s worth it. Ares would hate me anyway, I am my mother’s daughter.”

“Not quite,” Cupid murmured.

“Okay, so I’m not an air head. But at least this way I’ve earned Ares’ displeasure, and, after

this I think his respect as well.”

Cupid laughed at that. It was so like Stacy to belittle the wrath of an angry God. “Don’t get me wrong. I think what you did is totally killer. The bogus thing is, it’s just that it’s a choice you didn’t have to make. I don’t really need a sidekick. You’re taking an unnecessary risk.”

“But Cupid, you do need the help, if not a sidekick.” She took his large hand in hers, feeling very small compared to her brother. “This proves it.” She nodded in the direction of the cave. “You might be the God of Love, but you don’t understand every relationship. I know I don’t. So maybe I understand some things you don’t. I do have a different frame of reference after all. You’ll still have to do the bulk of the dirty work, but from time to time, I think you might come across a special case that needs my expertise.” She looked up into his brilliant blue eyes and smiled, “I don’t mean to hurt you. I know how fragile the male ego is.”

Cupid smiled, shaking his head. It was a wonder Lessa hadn’t ended up on the business end of a lightning bolt already she had that knack. “Chill grrl. I don’t feel threatened by you in the slightest. So you’re a better shot with the bow, you can sweet talk Hermes out of a pony, you can get Hephsestus to build you weapons, insult Ares and live. You’re also my sister who is afraid of bugs and snakes and there isn’t anything I wouldn’t do for you.”

“Socrates is not a pony,” Lessa smiled, eyes shining. “You know Cupid it’s your fault I’m not the least bit interested in men.”

“How’s that?”

“Because I demand that they be warm, charming, sensitive, intelligent, and funny. But then they remind me of my brother so I think *eeeeenmmmm*.” Lessa said giving him a fierce hug.

“I feel so honored,” Cupid replied dryly, kissing the top of her head. “So what’s up with them?” he asked releasing her.

“Xena and Gabrielle?” Lessa glanced in the direction of the cave, then returned her eyes to the sunset. “The usual. Occasionally they’ll both curse the day they met me, but ultimately they will know in their hearts that for each other they are the greatest treasure in the universe.” Lessa sighed, “Gabrielle will continue to grow, forcing Xena to do the same, like it or not. She will be frustrated from time to time by Xena’s gift of understatement. I heard she once described Mount Olympus as ‘big’. Xena will learn more about giving than I think she ever wanted to know. Giving up on some independence, responsibility, letting someone care for her and occasionally take care of her. I think she will be surprised when she realizes it makes her a stronger person, not to mention less edgy.”

“I see you’ve spent some brain time on this,” Cupid commented, standing and extending a hand to his sister to do the same. “So what’s your next gig?” he asked as they walked along the edge of the cliff.

Lessa grimaced. “I still have to deal with Callisto. Everything I told Xena was true.” Cupid raised an eyebrow. “Well, mostly true. She did kidnap me and expected me to kill Gabrielle. I needed something believable to have a real reason to travel with them. I should see that she gets put back in prison where she belongs.”

“And after?”

“I don’t know. Travel some, maybe. I’m sure there are people out there that could use my services.”

Cupid rolled his eyes skyward. “I don’t suppose you’d let me contact you when I need your help as opposed to you deciding for me.”

“Cupid! How many attempts did you botch with these two? After that last stupid plan of yours I had to step in.” Seeing the look of hurt crossing his face, she amended, “I mean that in the nicest way of course. Lets just see how it goes, shall we?”

“Fine, solid.” Cupid raised his hands, surrendering. “I’ve got time for dinner, then I’ve got to go. Let’s talk about something else.”

Lessa smiled triumphantly as they walked back to the fire pit. “So, how’s Psyche?”

“You are so beautiful.” Gabrielle sighed as she looked down at Xena’s face. Finally free to

touch the warrior at will, her hands continued with their ceaseless exploration. Delicate fingers caressed the warrior's face, pulling themselves through her rich mane of dark hair. "I can't believe this is actually happening. That this isn't just a dream I'll wake up from, like so many others."

"It's real, Gabrielle," Xena said softly, looking up into her lover's eyes. Drawing a gentle finger down the bard's cheek, she drew her in for a kiss. Warm and slow and sweet, she was certain she'd never tire of kissing Gabrielle's lips, or any other part of her anatomy for that matter.

"When did you realize you loved me?" the bard asked, as she shifted her position to lie on top the warrior. Xena wrapped her arms around Gabrielle's small frame, wishing she'd never have to let go.

But I ask one thing in return. Lessa's words came back to Xena as clearly as if she were in the cave whispering to her, *Be as honest with yourself as you are with Gabrielle.* Xena thought for a moment; it was hard to remember a time when she did not feel love for Gabrielle burning in her heart. "A very long time ago. I'd had... feelings... for you since I'd met you, but after you left me to go home, I knew it was much more."

"So why didn't you ever tell me?" Gabrielle whispered into the warrior's chest, sighing at the feel of Xena's strong hands on her back.

"I didn't want to risk losing you. I knew you felt something for me, but I thought it was different. Besides, with me you're a target for all who hate me. I always assumed you'd eventually tire of the 'adventure' and settle down."

"I'm glad we've gotten past that," Gabrielle murmured, trailing soft kisses across Xena's chest. "I love you more than anything, Xena. Danger is nothing if I can be with you, and as long as I'm going to be in danger anyway." She closed her mouth on a soft nipple. "At least this way I have the pleasure of sharing your heart... and body."

Xena smiled, delighting in the delicious sensations coursing through her veins. "Both belong to you Gabrielle, do with them what you will."

Gabrielle lifted her head and looked around the cave. The air had stayed wonderfully warm. Heated by the water from the pit, she quickly counted the full bowls cut into the cave floor. Nine were full of the steaming water. Between lovemaking and dozing, then awaking again to delight in the pleasures of the flesh, Gabrielle had lost all track of time.

"I know exactly when I fell in love with you." Gabrielle continued conversationally as she moved to Xena's other breast.

"Hummm?"

"I mean I was infatuated from the moment I saw you, but it was the moment after you rescued the baby— King Gregor's heir— that I realized that I wanted nothing more than to spend the rest of my life with you." Gabrielle lifted herself off of Xena's body, moving down slightly, trailing kisses and soft bites across Xena's muscular abdomen. "Of course I didn't start craving you physically until that time in the well."

"The nutbread?" Xena purred, eyes closing with pleasure as Gabrielle squirmed between her legs, teasing the insides of her thighs with soft caresses.

"Um humm." Gabrielle breathed into the soft curly mound, smiling as a shudder swept through the warrior's body. "It was so clear to me then, touching you and climbing up your body warm and wonderful. Xena, you are magnificent."

Xena felt it then, the soft lips pressing against her center, velvety tongue caressing her in ways that truly were magnificent.

The time spent in the cave infused Xena with more healing than she knew she'd ever deserve. The glorious creature who had shared her life and her heart for so long now possessed and shared her soul as well, and Xena knew she'd never felt happier. Tender, gentle, loving, Xena could be all of these things for Gabrielle, and even more she could enjoy the stillness of reclining in the bard's arms, allowing herself to be touched, to be kissed, to be loved. Immensely grateful, she was still curious at the sense of wonder Gabrielle had for her body. She wanted to know the story behind every scar and paid very close attention to the touches that turned Xena to water.

“Don’t want to move,” Gabrielle murmured hours later, resting on Xena, one arm reaching over her head, caressing long dark hair absently, her other hand stroking the warrior’s arm as it rested across her stomach.

“So don’t move,” Xena whispered, delighting again in the scent of the bard’s hair.

Gabrielle sighed, “But we have to.” She pointed across the cave floor. “The last bowl is filling. We have to be out before it’s full.”

Xena nodded reluctantly. She didn’t even want to fathom the wrath of Aphrodite. “Think we have time for another bath?” Xena asked, accepting Gabrielle’s hand and standing.

“I think so.” Gabrielle slipped her arm around Xena’s waist as they walked the few steps to the steaming pit. Xena entered first, then held out her arms as the bard descended into the warmth of her embrace as well as the water.

Tender endearments were murmured as each lovingly bathed the other. Each caress a promise of more, a lifetime of more, each kiss a gladly given vow. Finding a soft blanket behind the pit they dried each other, happy, exhausted and completely content. Finally dressed once more, Gabrielle removed the plank closing off the pit and the water slowly descended into the depths of the cave. Arm in arm, warrior and bard walked past the flickering candles into the cool air of a new dawn.

Standing for a moment at the cave entrance, looking out to the sunrise over the ocean, both women paused in the perfection of the moment.

“Nice timing,” a gentle voice teased behind them. Turning around, they saw the archer cooking something over the fire, smiling at them. She stood in greeting, and after a quick squeeze of her arm around Xena’s waist, Gabrielle walked over to Lessa and hugged her, kissing her quickly on the mouth.

“Thank you,” Gabrielle said beaming.

Surprised, not to mention pleased, Lessa smiled. “No, thank *you*.” Then with a grin to Xena asked, “So you gonna kiss me, too?”

“Not likely.” Xena replied dryly.

Lessa shrugged. “No matter. Breakfast is ready.”

“What is it?” Gabrielle asked looking suspiciously at the golden discs cooking on hot rocks.

“Something I call waffles, I think you’ll like ‘em.” Lessa handed Gabrielle a flat stick she’d been using to nudge the discs for even cooking. “Don’t let ‘em burn. I’ll go close up the cave.”

Gabrielle took the stick and watched her go, then noticed Xena’s eyes on her. “You know, you’ll feel better if you thank her,” Gabrielle said gently. Xena sighed— the bard had a tendency for being right. Shaking her head, she followed Lessa into the cave. Upon entering the main cavern she stopped in the shadows and watched the archer silently.

Lessa had busied herself with tending to the chamber. She straightened the furs over the altar, made sure the plank for the pit was where it belonged, checked the temperature of the water spilling into the pit and returned the water skin to its proper place. “You might as well come out, Xena, I know you’re here.” Xena stepped from the shadows as Lessa turned to face her.

Blue eyes widening in surprise, Xena was for a moment speechless at the sight of Lessa in the glow of the candle lit cave. In this setting it was clear that she was indeed standing before a goddess.

“I’ve got the warrior princess speechless? I think I’ll keep this outfit.” Lessa said with a gentle smile.

“I’m sorry,” Xena replied. “I didn’t mean to stare. I want to thank you.”

“Thank me? Whatever for?”

“For this,” Xena replied, taking in the cave with her eyes.

Lessa looked at Xena for a long moment before responding. Clearly she was debating about how much to tell the statuesque warrior. “Xena, I want to make something perfectly clear. I don’t have the power to make people fall in love. I’m not like my brother. My only talent is in recognizing when people are indeed in love, but perhaps not acting on it.” Her eyes softened as she continued,

“I know how you feel about gods in general, and how you feel about a few of us specifically. I don’t need to tell you that your relationship with Ares you wrought yourself, and you know that Gabrielle had no part in it. Let me also assure you that the woman you have become is indeed making a difference. Gabrielle will not be judged for sins of the old Xena. She is...protected from your past to a certain extent. Of course the life the two of you lead now... that’s fair game. I can promise you that I will not let Gabrielle be made to pay for something you did before you met her.”

“For that I owe you everything— and I’m not sure I can owe a God.”

“You owe me nothing, Xena. This is between Gabrielle and me.” Lessa tossed her long mane of gleaming hair over her shoulder. The reflections were hypnotic. “I’d treat her well if I were you. I’m kind of sweet on the bard, and I’ll be watching.”

Xena nodded mutely, blinking her eyes against the splendor of Ecstasy in her element. “Are you going to kiss me now or not? It might just bring you luck.”

Xena smiled. *Resistance is futile*, she thought as she stepped toward the goddess. Placing an uncertain hand on each side of Lessa’s face, she leaned in and covered her lips with her own. Her lips were soft, warm and beat with a vibrant pulse. As Xena pulled back she could feel a tingling persist on her own mouth. All in all, the kiss was considerably more chaste than the warrior had expected.

“Well, I don’t bite after all,” Lessa muttered reading the warrior’s thoughts. The two headed to the exit of the cave.

“What about the candles?” Xena asked.

“I almost forgot.” Lessa blew into the air behind her and the candles at the back wall extinguished themselves, slowly moving around the sides of the cave and following, but only as Xena and Lessa passed, the last one going out as they stepped through the cave opening.

“I still think you’re a show-off.” Xena muttered.

“This is ambrosia!” Gabrielle exclaimed delighting in her fourth waffle.

“Not quite.” Lessa shrugged, “Ambrosia has more of a poultry flavor— like chicken.”

“Very funny, ‘Stacy.’” Gabrielle chided.

“I’d rather you call me Lessa.”

“But I’ve never been on a first name basis with a goddess before.”

“Suit yourself,” the Goddess of Passion shrugged, tossing an apple to Socrates and reaching for the syrup. “Overrated experience, isn’t it?” she asked looking at Xena who, mouth full of her own waffle, nodded.

“So you were saying,” Gabrielle continued, “that Cupid has in fact tried to get us together?”

“And how,” Lessa agreed. “Let me see, he realized he didn’t need an arrow when your heart exploded after that King Gregor thing.” Gabrielle blushed slightly. “And he, quite frankly, was afraid to shoot you.” Lessa frowned at Xena. “Thought he’d get that round killing thingie imbedded in his back for the trouble.”

“Chakram.” Xena said.

“Bless you.” Lessa continued, “So helping out Callisto with her target practice and pegging you with that dart— that was supposed to do the trick.”

“How? I was unconscious?”

“Yes, but someone,” Lessa glared at Gabrielle, “was supposed to open up a bit more about her feelings when you recovered. Then there was the Temple at Thessaly.” This time Xena looked away, embarrassed. “Someone was supposed to confess her love to a certain someone else that even the *entire temple* was painfully aware of.” Lessa shook her head. “There have been countless other times Cupid paid the two of you a visit. The Titans, the nutbread, fishing in the lake. Finally when I heard his latest plan, well, I had to step in. It was dreadful.”

“What was it?” Gabrielle asked.

“He was going to shoot someone from your past— Perdicus I think his name was. Have him show up and ask for your hand in marriage.”

Gabrielle shook involuntarily. "I'm glad you stepped in." Then remembering something, added, "I thought you said you didn't use arrows?"

"For shooting people no, I don't— but I suppose I could."

"What about that arrow that's in your scabbard?"

"You've been snooping, Gabrielle, and it isn't polite to snoop on a god," Lessa frowned. Reaching behind, she picked up her scabbard and extracted the tiny white arrow. "You can have it if you want."

Gabrielle held the arrow, the length of her palm, in careful fingers. It appeared to be crafted from white marble. A sword was etched into one side a feather quill on the other. "It's beautiful," she breathed.

"Thank you. Carved it myself. It helps me think... and plan." Lessa smiled deviously.

"I'll treasure it always."

Lessa laughed. "If you want, Gabrielle, but I wouldn't bother. Your treasure is sitting right in front of you. That— that's just an arrow." Putting two fingers in her mouth, Lessa whistled and Socrates came striding over, greeting first Gabrielle then Xena with a playful nudge. "Soc and I have to go. We've got some unfinished business to take care of."

"Callisto," Xena said, it wasn't a question.

Lessa nodded. "Not all of my work is as enjoyable as getting acquainted with the two of you." Xena noticed that Lessa's eyes didn't leave Gabrielle's face as she spoke.

"Will we see you again?" Gabrielle asked.

Lessa smiled, a warm inviting smile, "Absolutely." Then with a grin to the warrior, "but not very often. But I'm sure I'll be thinking of you from time to time, and I suspect you'll feel it when I do."

After quickly hopping up on to Socrates' back, she smiled one final time "Be well, you two," and with that she was gone.

"I wonder what she meant about thinking about us?" Gabrielle wondered aloud.

"I don't know," Xena replied splitting the last waffle between them. "I'm sure we'll find out."

Packed and ready for travel, Argo stood waiting patiently as Xena and Gabrielle stood arm in arm overlooking the ocean. "You know, Xena, I've never been this happy," Gabrielle said, absently turning the marble arrow over in her hands.

"Nor I, Gabrielle," Xena said, kissing the top of the bard's head.

"And you know what else?"

"Hummm?"

"Lessa was right." Gabrielle turned in Xena's embrace, looking up at her lover with bright eyes. "You are the greatest treasure." With that she tossed the marble arrow over the side of the cliff. It tumbled and turned on its way to the rocks below, finally shattering with the melodious chime of tiny bells.

"I love you, Gabrielle."

"I love you, too, Xena, and you're right." Gabrielle looked down to where the ringing of the shattered arrow continued. "She is a show-off."

Smiling the lovers turned from the cliff, heading for Argo, and the rest of their lives.

The end...