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Assassin... Oracle... Bard
By Bat Morda
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1996

Prologue: Callisto

Callisto sauntered into in the prison wrinkling her nose in distaste against the fetid stench of refuse and decay. Her eyes gleaming, she walked along the corridor of gated cells with the jail keep until she reached the end of the stone corridor. Few prisoners were currently housed in these iron cages, those who were appeared to be asleep, drunk or both.

"I want to talk to that one," she said unceremoniously to the keep, gazing at the occupant leaning against the stone wall of the last cell. The stout man nodded and inserted his key into the heavy lock. With a swift turn and hard pull he opened the heavy barred door. The occupant of the cell eyed Callisto with interest, not moving as the warrior studied her, nodding approvingly.

“Leave us,” Callisto said to the jail keep who shut the door, its lock snapping into place with a clang. Without a second glance the big man turned and left.

“Uncanny,” Callisto said, with a light chuckle. “You’re absolutely perfect.”

“Nice of you to think so,” the prisoner replied dully. “Mind telling me who you are?”

“My name is Callisto. Not that you’d ever heard of me I suppose, what I want to know is- have you ever heard of a woman named Xena?”

The prisoner shrugged. “I’m in prison, not living under a rock. Of course I’ve heard of the Warrior Princess.”

Callisto paused in her stalking. “Sharp tongue for one who needs my help.”

“I don’t recall asking for your help?”

“Ah, but you will. What is your name girl?”

The prisoner frowned at being called ‘girl’, she always hated that. Especially coming from someone who couldn’t be much older than herself. “Alandra,” she replied.

“Ah, but that’s not what I’ve heard.” Callisto teased in a sing song voice, gazing into vibrant green eyes. You may go by the name Alandra but that’s not who you are, is it Raven?”

The prisoner arched her eyebrows slightly at the accusation. “You think I’m Raven- The Raven? My friend, you are deluded.”

“Is that so?” Callisto asked, laughter in her voice. “Then explain to me why a woman of ill repute, who was housed in this very jail, left this morning... dead.”

“Must have been something she ate.” The prisoner replied, “the food isn’t very good here.”

Callisto circled the smaller woman, “it had nothing to do with the fact she was carrying Martinus’ child? What better place to dispose of trash than in a garbage dump? I suppose Martinus was going to put up your bail today... except that I killed him this morning.”

Green eyes narrowed with controlled rage, “so I guess I work for you now?”

“Oh, I like you” Callisto purred, “you’re smart. But what is a woman with such a sunny disposition doing with a name like Raven?”

“You know,” Raven replied, “Light exterior- dark heart.”

“And I don’t doubt your darkness Raven,” Callisto said, appreciatively. “Don’t forget that. Smart, dark... in time I might think you beautiful as well.”

“I can hardly wait.” Raven replied dryly. Callisto responded with a backhand slap across Raven’s face. The young girl didn’t flinch, but continued to study the warrior with mild amusement.

“There are limits to my tolerance of impertinence.” Callisto spat.

“Apparently.” Raven replied.

Taking a deep breath Callisto continued. “So if you know about Xena, do you also know about the woman she travels with?”

Raven shrugged, “I’ve heard she travels with a bard who isn’t too shabby with a quarter staff. Can’t say I pay much attention to the Warrior Princess’ private life, I intend to avoid meeting her.”

“Ah, but if you want my help, you’ll just have to risk it. Tell me Raven, have you ever seen the Oracle at Minos?”

Raven shook her head, wishing the war lord would leave- make that, get her out of jail then leave. She was beginning to think the woman mad; people that cheerful were usually crazy.

“Not many people have, she’s quite shy. But I have a simple plan, if you help me I will get you out of this dreadful place- you do this one small thing for me and you will be free to go your own way.”

“I’m listening.” Raven said, evenly.

“I want you to go to Minos. Make an attempt on the Oracle’s life, but don’t kill her. Xena is in the area and naturally they will send for her help. When they do, I want you to kill her little traveling companion, Gabrielle.”

“And then?” Raven asked, flicking strawberry blond hair behind her shoulder.

Callisto smiled, looking into Raven’s green eyes, “I want you to take her place.”

Chapter 1: Assassin

Gabrielle shifted her stance slightly and swung her staff in a tight arc behind her opponents legs. Instead of connecting, the blow was easily blocked as she'd hoped. Her opponent, now slightly off balance was in no position to block her next strike to the mid-section. Had it been anyone but Xena, the blow would have connected solidly.

"No fair." Gabrielle complained as Xena leaped gracefully over her head, landing behind her. Argo lifted her head from the clover field at the outburst, chiming in with a loud nicker. "I didn't ask you," Gabrielle shot back to the mare.

"Argo has a point," Xena observed dryly. "All's fair in love and war."

"Then perhaps I'm fighting on the wrong battle field." Gabrielle replied with a glare.

Xena arched an eyebrow. "You've had enough practice for one day?" she asked, noticing the thin sheen of sweat covering the bard's body, her red hair hanging in damp tendrils.

"With the staff maybe," Gabrielle replied stepping closer to the warrior. With deliberate movements she unclasped her top, letting it fall to the ground. Running her hands slowly over her breasts and down her abdomen a seductive smile slid across her lips at Xena's eyes widening in appreciation. Gracefully she undid her skirt and let it fall to earth as well, watching Xena's eyes roam over her body. When the azure blue gaze fell to her hips, the warrior moistened her lips unconsciously. Leaning in for a hungry kiss, Gabrielle ducked out of her grasp with a laugh.

"Gotcha!" She exclaimed, taking off at a run to the nearby lake.

With a wry grin Xena watched her lover run for a few moments before removing her own armor. They'd been working out all morning and a swim in the lake would feel quite good. She took her time, her pulse quickening in anticipation of the cool water, and Gabrielle.

Naked, Xena walked through the short grass to the shore of the lake. Gabrielle was nowhere in sight, but her boots were discarded nearby. Xena stopped to listen. The waterfall tumbling into the crystal blue waters of the lake made listening difficult but the warrior's keen hearing picked up the heavy panting of the concealed bard.

Still unable to locate her visually, Xena began climbing the rocks that rimmed the side of the lake. Gabrielle was close by- just hidden. About twenty feet up the sheer rock wall, nearing the waterfall, an outcrop of rock overhung the deep lake. It was from behind the outcrop that Gabrielle came at Xena yelling loudly, swinging on a rope.

"Yiyiyiyiyiy" she howled, in her best Xena impersonation. Xena flattened herself against the rock face and let the bard swing past. As she headed back over the water, Xena leaped and caught the rope a body's length above the bard.

"Hey!" Gabrielle exclaimed.

"Let me guess," Xena replied coolly. "No fair?"

"We'll see about that princess," Gabrielle replied beginning to climb the rope.

Xena couldn't help but remember the time they'd been trapped in that well. Gabrielle, barely able to hang on, much less climb. Hard to believe it had only been a short year ago, the bard had come so far, improved so much, "*and stolen your heart in the process*", Xena thought ruefully. They'd only been lovers for several months and still, every time with the bard was a rebirth for the warrior.

Gabrielle reached Xena's foot, and securing her position on the rope with her feet, she gently caressed Xena's leg with her free hand. "Give up Xena?" She asked, reaching the warrior's knee, nibbling on it playfully.

"To a *bard*?" Xena replied, "I don't think so."

Gabrielle smiled, and hoisted herself two more times. Still secure on the rope, she was able to lean forward and trail wet kisses across the warrior's thighs.

"Gab...rielle," Xena murmured, "I don't think this is the best place for..."

The words died on her lips as Gabrielle gently teased the soft down between Xena's legs, first with her fingers then, her mouth.

"Oh really?" Gabrielle said, drawing back. "Well maybe this will be more to your liking."

Another couple of pulls on the rope and she was even with the warrior's breasts. Sliding her free arm around Xena, Gabrielle attacked one ample breast hungrily, then the other. She released Xena long enough to shift the rope then brought her legs up, hooking them around Xena's hips. With a chuckle, she let go of the rope, wrapping her arms around Xena as well. "Not quite like the last time I climbed you like a tree?" She murmured into Xena's neck.

"Better," Xena replied. "Definitely better." Xena could feel Gabrielle's moist labia pressing against her own sex, and did her best to think clearly. Under the circumstances, it was *very* difficult. "I can let go", she thought, looking down into the deep blue of the lake. But the thought of falling twenty feet into cold water, with a bard wrapped around her body was unsettling. Besides, there was the chance that Gabrielle might be hurt. Very carefully she passed her hands over each other as she slowly descended the rope. She almost lost her grip a couple of times as the bard's tongue caressed the outside of her ear, or her teeth nipped at her throat. Gabrielle shifted again, sending a charge like electricity through Xena's groin as nimble fingers reached to caress an already taught nipple.

Xena gasped as the cold water closed on her feet. The rope descended all the way to the water and she was going to make use of every inch of it. Gabrielle's ambush could not go unanswered. Shifting again Gabrielle straddled Xena's thigh, sliding her wet cleft down, until she could take a firm breast into her mouth.

Gabrielle squealed in surprise as Xena let go of the rope and gracefully slid into the water, bard still attached. Under the surface of the cool lake, Xena trailed her arms up the sides of Gabrielle's body, reaching behind her neck and claiming her mouth with her own as they broke the surface. They kissed for long minutes, Xena treading water for them both, Gabrielle's strong legs still wrapped around the warrior's middle. Finally Xena headed to shore, awkward but well worth it. When the water was shallow enough for her feet to touch bottom, she hoisted the bard higher, claiming the bard's breasts with her hungry mouth.

"Xena." Gabrielle panted.

"Mummmm?" Xena asked her attention focused on the task at hand.

"Why do you always win?"

Xena drew back from the bard's breast and gave the question some thought. "Are you complaining?" She finally asked.

Gabrielle smiled, lovingly brushing wet bangs away from the warrior's forehead. "No" She breathed, canting her head, claiming Xena's lips with her own.

"Good," Xena replied when the tender kiss broke. "Because I see this as a tie," she said as she carrying her to their camp on the grassy bank.

From the dark shadows in the cliff wall, Raven watched. Skilled in silence and patience she could sit immobile for hours, days if necessary. Her back supported by the rock wall, limbs relaxed and comfortable she watched and listened; studying the bard with professional detachment. At first Callisto had been angry with her refusal to carry out her orders as planned. "*How can I take the bard's place on looks alone?*" Raven asked. "*What good is assuming the role then failing as soon as I open my mouth to speak. Will that not alert Xena all the more?*" Callisto had finally been won over by the assassin's logic and had given her a month to follow the duo provided she could do so unobserved.

Glad to be out of that rancid jail, Raven welcomed the challenge. And it was indeed a challenge. It took a week of careful observation of their trail before she could follow close enough to see her quarry, undetected, and several days more before she could get close enough to hear them. She spent part of her day determining where they were headed, then it was a matter of scouting ahead to find the most likely camp spot. After finding a safe spot to hide it was a matter of waiting, and Raven was very good at waiting. At first she spent as many nights alone as in the company of her quarry, but as she grew to understand the warrior's thinking, she was now always in good company.

She sat and watched in silence, night after night. Listening to their conversation, noting the cadence of the bard's speech, reading their body language, watching them make love. She would drift into a light sleep only when she saw Xena sleeping. Then after they departed in the morning,

she'd doze for a couple of hours before choosing an alternate route to their likely destination and sprinting. Raven ate very little. Some bread, and cheese she carried with her, as well as berries and other edible plants she found along the way. She wasted no time hunting game, getting protein instead from a variety of insects encountered in her search for plants. It was simple, basic. Assassins, the good ones at any rate, knew to keep things simple.

So she watched with a sense of detached professionalism as Xena gently lowered her bard to the ground. Soft spoken endearments were exchanged as the warrior covered the bard's body with her own. Strong hands caressed the face so like Raven's even as long fingers stroked strawberry blond hair the same shade as her own. Raven was used to the uncanny resemblance of Gabrielle by now, although at first it had been a bit of a shock. Raven noted that she would need to get her hair cut, a little shorter on the bottom and she'd need it short over her eyes, but that was easily done. Getting the right outfit might be a bit harder but it could be done. She didn't take notes, there was no need.

Raven remembered everything. Every book she ever read, every conversation she'd ever heard. Every sight, every sound, scent, every body, every kill- they were with her... always. After one glance at the bard's garb, Raven noted the color, cut, and weave of the material. A lesser assassin might have just planned to steal the bard's clothes after the deed was done. But Raven never stole from the dead. She was an assassin, not a thief. Besides depending on one's *client* for anything was risky, often blood stains were enough to undo sloppy assassins, and Raven was not sloppy.

Attention to detail had been a way of life since she could remember. At once her salvation and her curse. Her earliest life must have been much like any other child of her village. She didn't know, she couldn't remember back that far. No, her memory, every crystal clear image, was after *It* entered her life and shattered everything.

It. The beast that had moved into their house after her father had died in a farming accident. She suspected her older brother had received *It's* attentions first. Adonis didn't handle *It's* affections well. Like her he rarely ate, seldom spoke, never smiled. Ravaged by remorse and guilt he took the rage out on himself. First with fire then knives, finally when he could take no more he hung himself in the barn. He was sixteen. Raven was ten at the time. She could not be sure but suspected *It* started with her when she was eight. Pinned down on the table from *It's* greasy bulk she turned her head from the fetid stench of *It's* breath. As she did, she saw a raven perched on the branch of the tree outside. No longer was she a little girl being raped by a monster grunting like a boar in rut. She was the raven. She studied the details of the bird's form. The shade of black, the quick movements of the bird's head, the wisdom in those avian eyes. If she were a bird, a raven, she could fly away, be elsewhere. From that moment on when *It* cornered her she was gone. Unconcerned by the betrayal of her own body, she left it. She would fly, leaving the village, the valley, everything terrestrial and claim the sky as her own.

Sadly, she would return, when *It* rolled off of her like a beached whale and told her to get out. After wiping herself off in the kitchen, she would go out to the chicken pen and gather eggs or milk the cow. All the while honing her rage, waiting. Raven thought *It* left few visible scars. She would not eat eggs, nor milk and whenever she came across a wild boar, she killed it. Killing was a natural part of life. There were predators and prey. She did not run from the predatory part of her nature. Rather, she emersed herself in it like a hot bath.

Raven remembered her first kill very clearly. Around the one year anniversary of her brother's death, *It* didn't seem to notice. For some reason *It* was drunker than usual and that proved to be *It's* fatal mistake. Raven was not a large for her age, actually she was rather slight and clearly undernourished. She was however very strong, even for the age of eleven, and inside of her a weapon forged from her torment and honed on her rage waited to be drawn. This particular evening *It* decided on some new sport. Taking a wine skin, *It* dumped the entire contents over Raven's nude form. After telling her to hold the wineskin *It* began to lick the purple liquid from her flesh. As *It* moved up her calves Raven fingered the strap on the wine skin experimentally. The strap was thick but not wide, and most likely long enough. She felt a surge of adrenalin mixed with calm as the

weapon unsheathed itself. Before *It* got past her knees she had wrapped the chord around *It's* neck. With muscles she didn't realize she had she strangled *It*. Oh *It* tried to fight but too much wine and a lumbering bulk were no match for years of meticulously honed rage. As *It* turned more purple than the wine staining Raven's skin, she noted the bulge of *It's* eyes, the silent gasp for air *It* would not get and the look of terror as *It* realized *It* was about to die. Only then did Raven smile. The look of satisfaction easing across her features was the last thing *It* ever saw.

After that her weapon became her life. Killing became her profession. Everyone eventually ended up in the Elysian Fields or Tartarus- she just helped some arrive there sooner. She was quick, efficient and careful. Her clients were usually dead before they realized they were in any danger. It kept them from begging for their lives. Not that it would have made a difference. Usually there was little or no pain involved for the client; for Raven it was a point of professional pride. Sure she could make it hurt, but she only did that if the client in some way reminded her of *It*.

Before even seeing Gabrielle, Raven decided it would be best to quickly break the bard's neck. Make it look like an accident if at all possible. If Callisto wanted to take credit to torment the warrior, Raven didn't care. But she knew of Xena's healing proficiency, so most of her other options were out.

The assassin's expression didn't change as Gabrielle's cries of passion became louder, the sounds of desire and fulfillment filling the early afternoon air. She watched the passionate scene before her with neither disgust nor excitement only detached interest. The amorous display held the same fascination one might have for the unusual plumage of a rare bird, even more so since she would most likely be a participant if Callisto's plan came to completion.

Callisto's plan bothered Raven. Clearly the war lord was insane, not the calculated clear thinking insanity that Raven suspected she'd succumbed to, but the raving insanity of a madwoman. Raven had only accepted the job from a desire to be out of that rancid prison. With Martinus dead, Callisto was indeed her only hope. The prospect of killing the bard didn't bother her, but the requirement to take her place, even if only for a short time did lace Raven's thoughts with worry. While she had assumed many roles in her career as an assassin, this one as lover would be new.

Raven wasn't stupid. She knew that looking and sounding like Gabrielle would not be enough to convince the warrior that she was indeed Gabrielle. She wasn't squeamish about the prospect of physical intimacy but knew that if the warrior didn't suspect by then... Raven strongly doubted she smelled like Gabrielle after all. Besides, there were thousands of minutely subtle signals exchanged by people in a constant symphony of sensation. While she could feel them, and distill most of them into very specific elements, she doubted she could mimic them- certainly not all of them, for very long. This was a challenge that, while she readily accepted it, had honest doubts if she was up to it. So with calm eyes Raven waited and watched as Xena surrendered herself to the gentle ministrations of her lover and was again reborn.

Chapter 2: Oracle

Daphne woke with a start, the word *sister* dying on her lips. As her eyes adjusted to the dim light of a few embers in the fireplace she saw gentle eyes gazing into her own. With a small sigh she relaxed.

"Daphne, are you alright?" A warm voice asked, rich with concern.

"Just a dream Beatrice..." Daphne replied nodding slightly and touching the loving arms that held her in a circle of protection.

"A dream or a vision?" Beatrice asked, relaxing her hold slightly, but not letting Daphne go.

Daphne shook her head, closing her eyes in an attempt to erase the memory of her recent sleep. It wasn't fading. "I don't know yet love," she shrugged, "what happened?"

Beatrice released her hold on Daphne, and after sliding out of bed, crossed the small room to the fireplace. She put some small sticks on the embers which quickly ignited into flame. "You became very still," she explained as she put several larger logs onto the fire. "Something was clearly bothering you, you were very tense, and you became cold."

Daphne nodded, taking in the details supplied by her lover. Oh, she might be the famed Oracle of Minos, but it was Beatrice who was instrumental in sorting out her thoughts and dreams that became prophecy. “Did I say anything?”

Beatrice shook her head, her long braid swinging gently with the motion of her head. “No, wait.” She said suddenly, looking up. “You said the word ‘sister’ just as you were waking up.”

Daphne arched an eyebrow at the information that at the moment meant nothing to her. Without being asked, Beatrice crossed back to the table by the bed and, picking up a heavy glass pitcher, filled a matching goblet with water. She handed the goblet to Daphne who took it gratefully, kissing the inside of her wrist in thanks.

Beatrice smiled at the gesture. Socially their roles were quite different, but Daphne never failed to let her know with every fiber of her being just how much she was loved. Unconsciously, she fingered the three small hoops pierced through her left eyebrow that marked her as a slave. Daphne’s slave. Turning back to the table she picked up Daphne’s tablet and quill, handing them over as she crawled back into bed.

“Is it my imagination or do you actually read my mind?” Daphne asked as she snuggled back into the warm embrace of her lover.

“You’re not hard to read love,” Beatrice replied, taking a sip of water from the offered glass. Daphne smiled and began to scribble on the tablet. “So, what did you see?” Beatrice asked as she lightly kissed the strawberry blond hair at Daphne’s temple. Lightly caressing the oracle’s neck, she deliberately tried to distract her from her sketching. It was important for the drawing to emerge on its own.

Daphne knew this as well and sighed at the loving attention. “There was darkness, a lot of it. That may be why I became so cold. Not the dark of night, but the dark of evil. Well, not quite evil, maybe something else, I’m not sure.”

“Go on.” Beatrice murmured behind Daphne’s ear.

“I keep seeing the image of a mirror, but I think it’s a symbol.” Her thoughts were starting to coalesce and the speed of her sketching increased.

“Dark and light perhaps?” Beatrice asked.

“Something like that. But this is more personal.” Daphne stilled her hand and turned in her slave’s embrace. Genuine dread clouded vibrant green eyes. “I’m involved.”

Beatrice kissed her gently. “Go on love,” she encouraged.

“I see lovers.”

“Us perhaps?”

Daphne shook her head. “Not us, but like us. There are so many parallels. I can see Lachesis weaving frantically. The threads spun by Coltho coming together as Atopos the crone readies her shears. Similar threads but made from the wool of very different sheep. Two of us are similar, another is so different. So dark. There is one with an affinity for dark, it’s so confusing.” Daphne began to rock slightly, staring off into the vision of her dream. Her words began to rush out, tumbling over each other like water from the pitcher. “I see death, hatred, torment. Someone tries to kill me but it’s a ruse. There is a battle. A vulture watches from a tree as an eagle battles a smaller bird over the death of a sparrow. I can’t see the other, it’s too dark. This bodes badly for the eagle. With the sparrow gone darkness rushes out. An inky blackness covers the land and Ares stands in triumph.” Slumping back into Beatrice’s embrace Daphne took several deep breaths.

“Is there anything more?”

Daphne nodded mutely, closing her eyes tightly against the awareness that slammed into her consciousness with all the force of a war hammer. “The darkness,” she whispered tightly, “is my sister.” Glancing down at her tablet she closed her eyes again at the sketch glaring back at her. A raven perched in a tree stared back at her, eyes shining brightly.

Beatrice gently pried the quill pen from cold fingers. Taking the tablet and the glass she placed them carefully on the table near the bed. Turning back she wrapped her arms around the cold body of the oracle murmuring gently into the hollow of her neck, “It’s over love, we can sort this

out in the morning.”

“But...” Daphne choked, fighting for some breathing space from the appalling vision.

“Shhhh,” Beatrice whispered trailing delicate kisses along the length of her throat. “You will be Oracle in the morning, but for now you’re mine.”

“I don’t deserve you Beatrice.” Daphne murmured, grateful for the opportunity to surrender yet again to the woman easing her back down into the pillows.

“Deserve me?” Beatrice chuckled, “love, you own me.”

“No more than you own me.” Daphne whispered, gently touching the three rings above her lover’s eyebrow. With that she drew the woman who was her heart and soul to her. Surrendering herself and yet claiming herself in the process.

With skilled movements, born of years of familiarity, passion ebbed and flowed, chasing the demons of Daphne’s vision from their bedroom. Beatrice well knew the toll the *gift* of prophecy took from her lover. It was at moments like these where she felt she knew her place in the universe. It was within her power to fill the well in Daphne’s soul that the visions drained. Only she could give the oracle the strength she needed to banish the night terrors from her sight, to let her rest, let her live. Oracles were notorious for dying young; their ability taking just too much from them. With her help Beatrice knew that Daphne might not only live to be an old woman, but would also have a life in the process. While tradition, culture and society at large might see their relationship as drastically different, each woman knew they were equal partners in the office as well as life of Oracle of Minos. Without Beatrice, Daphne would not be able to help so many and that knowledge made her smile. Not because she craved power or position, but because it was so apparent how much she meant to the wise woman.

Beatrice smiled as Daphne gently rolled her over. Straddling her hips, looking down with love in her eyes, Daphne slowly undid the braid that kept her strawberry blond mane in place for sleeping. Beatrice loved the sight of her with her hair down, the feel of it, the way it reflected firelight. As full lips descended on her own, caressing and exploring her body Beatrice’s thoughts drifted back to her arrival at the palace. In moments she relived first meeting this gentle woman who treated her with such reverence, to loving her for the first time.

Born into slavery, it was all Beatrice ever knew. She was luckier than most, her mother had been a skilled cook to a kindly nobleman. He allowed his servant to keep her child and she grew up attending to his children. She was permitted to sit in during their education and became quite learned. When her mother died, he agreed to sell her away from memories that were too painful to bear. Passing through several noble households, not all of which were pleasant, she arrived here in Minos. Purchased by the king himself. She was a gift to his daughter, who she discovered was only a couple of years older than herself.

That was six years ago, when she was seventeen. At nineteen, Daphne was only the king’s Daughter, not the Oracle of Minos. From the very beginning Daphne treated her with special care. There was a shy giddiness to the young woman’s words and actions that as a slave Beatrice found very confusing. It was only in the course of tidying the woman’s library that she found the writings. Writing that since early adolescence predicted a number of events. There were mentions of headaches, nightmares, rain storms, good crops, bad crops and the arrival of a slave. Beatrice blushed as she read the description of herself, then blushed further to what Daphne had described in vivid detail doing with her. She stopped reading abruptly when she got to the part where Daphne described discovering Beatrice reading her words. The slave turned slowly to see Daphne enter from the garden, smiling at her with devotion shining from her face.

Beatrice sighed at the memory of then and the sensation of now, as Daphne parted the folds of her labia with her tongue. She would never refuse Daphne, even though she knew Daphne would not think badly of her for doing so. While the vestiges of slavery were important to the people outside the palace, within the palace walls they held no meaning. Granted it took several years of constant effort on Daphne’s part but in time Beatrice did believe. Only rarely did the specter of

servitude rear it's ugly head and when it did it was the doing of some other member of her father's staff. Daphne had made it abundantly clear that she would under no circumstances assume the mantle of Oracle unless she and Beatrice were granted a private residence and privacy. At the time Beatrice had wondered out loud why Daphne just didn't burn her papers of ownership.

"Oh, I did that the day you arrived," she had replied.

Beatrice opened her eyes to the aroma of cinnamon filling the cozy bedroom. "You're up early." She said propping herself up on an elbow, studying the figure hunched over the desk, writing.

"I can't be decadent every morning, now can I?" Daphne replied as she rose from the heavy wooden table. Moving to the blazing fireplace, she picked up a heavy mug of tea from where she'd set it to keep warm. "Sleep well?" She asked with a wry grin, handing the tea to her lover.

"What sleep I got was blissful, and the sleep I missed... even more so."

"Glad to hear it." Daphne replied leaning in for a luxurious kiss. "Because I need you to do something."

"About the vision?"

Daphne detected the subtle note of disappointment in the younger woman's voice and smiled. Beatrice was irresistible when she was insatiable, but at the moment too much hung in the balance to spend the morning making love. "Yes love, about the vision." With gentle hands she unclasped her lovers arms from around her neck and crossed back to her desk, looking over at what she'd just written. "I need you to take my horse and go to a tavern, it's in the outer-most village to the south. I don't know the tavern's name, but you'll know it, a red rooster will be walking around just outside."

"Appropriately vague for a vision." Beatrice quipped.

Daphne ignored the jibe and continued. "Inside, sitting by themselves at a table will be two women, the eagle and the sparrow."

Beatrice peered over the rim of her mug. "The lovers?"

Daphne shrugged, "I think so but I'm not sure. You'll know them when you see them, I think one of them might remind you of me."

"The eagle or the sparrow?" Beatrice asked, annoyed with the vagueness of prophecy, a name or two from time to time would be nice.

"You tell me, love." Daphne shot back.

"How can I? You didn't include siren in that list."

Daphne smiled in spite of herself. "You will need to take the small portrait with you. I don't know why," she added forestalling the next barrage of questions "I just know you need to. I need to meet with these women, but not here, someplace safe and secret. The temple will be watched so we have to be careful. When you leave that village do so separately, go to the next village north, I will try to meet you by the well at the west end."

"And the darkness?"

"She will be in the village attending to business of her own."

Beatrice nodded and got out of bed. "When do I leave?"

Daphne looked at her with concern clouding her delicate features. "Have your bath and dress, after you've eaten you can go." She shook her head, "I wish I could go myself and leave you out of this..."

Beatrice held up her hand. "We're in this together love. Besides you've already told me I'm going to live to be a very old woman. Is there anything else I should know?"

Daphne nodded, glancing down again to her notes, "if you see a lost child in the village, leave him be. Keep the eagle and the sparrow away from him as well. If I don't meet you by the well, come back here and we'll try tomorrow night. Be careful," Daphne admonished, "one of these women is especially dangerous, while my prophecies haven't been wrong yet, I'd hate for your longevity to be my first erroneous prediction."

Beatrice eased out of bed and headed for the bath. "Daphne," she said with a wry grin,

“your most infuriating quality is that you’re never wrong.”

Daphne watched her go hoping to Athena she was right. Finally she stood. Thinking about Beatrice’s favorite foods, she headed to the kitchen to fix her breakfast.

Raven finished her business with the shopkeep without any trouble. She’d bought a few supplies and managed a pleasant conversation with the shopkeep’s wife who was a seamstress. Her outfit, Gabrielle’s outfit would be ready by sundown. She looked at his selection of boots with interest. “These from Athens?” Raven asked, fingering the leather.

“Good eye.” The shop keep commented. “You’re such a nice girl, I’ll let you have ‘em for five dinars.”

“Highway robbery if you ask me.” Raven shot back with a winning smile, “but I’ll take ‘em. Could you throw in a bar of that soap?”

He nodded adding the selected soap to her small bundle of items. She counted out his money- twice to make sure and with a nod headed back into the market square. She would pick up her goods when she came to retrieve her new clothes. Raven glanced at the sky. Xena and Gabrielle would be arriving soon. She needed to find someone to cut her hair and disappear until sundown. She had avoided Xena’s campsite the night before, wanting to get into town and conduct her business before the bard and warrior arrived. As a precaution she’d darkened her hair with bark oil and wore a shawl. Relying on a hunch and tavern gossip, she headed to the stream that she’d noticed just outside the village.

She’d not walked far when the sound of young women singing reached her ears. She took a deep breath and forcibly lightened her step, singing softly to herself to alert the group she was approaching. Before she reached the bathers however, she heard a startled cry.

“Torus, get away from here, we’re bathing.”

“I can see that love,” The enthusiastic male voice replied, more giggles erupted.

“You can’t see me until we’re married.”

“I can’t wait until tonight.”

“Don’t worry Elaine, Seph and I have to take the wash back anyway- we’ll see you later.” A gentle female voice interjected.

Raven watched as two young women left, carrying an assortment of laundry with them giggling all the way. Raven waited until the young man got close to his beloved before showing herself at the stream’s edge.

“Um... excuse me.” Raven said in a timid voice.

The lovers looked up. Torus initially with alarm until he saw Raven’s unthreatening form. “Elaine?” Raven looked at the woman hopefully, “your father the innkeeper sent me. He said you were the best haircutter in the village, he also said you were getting married and some extra dinars to start out with would be welcome.” Raven was relieved at the young woman’s smile. “*So the old buzzard was telling the truth to that drunken sot of a merchant who needed a trim,*” she thought. Inns might be good for little else than information, but they do supply that.

“Do you want your hair cut?” Elaine asked. Torus glared at his betrothed for offering.

“Yes,” Raven managed to blush, “I’ll be seeing my own beloved tomorrow and wanted to look nice- he’s been away for so long.”

Elaine smiled knowingly and gestured for the assassin to join them. “This won’t take long Torus, you can wait. How would you like it cut?”

Raven headed back through town a half hour later, and except for the color, with Gabrielle’s hair. Two young lovers were floating face down in the stream, necks broken most likely the unlucky victims of a bad fall. “*Too bad,*” Raven mused, “*it was a great hair cut.*” But getting one’s hair cut at a streams edge was unusual enough to be remembered. That created loose ends, and Raven never left loose ends. Without giving them another thought she headed to the tavern. Something made her stop halfway across the small village street. A woman approached from the opposite direction,

apparently looking for something. She eyed all the small thatched buildings with interest. It was Raven's instinct to freeze, but a statue in this active street would stand out like a beacon, so she continued on her way, shawl pulled more tightly around her. A red rooster crossed in front of the tavern, right past the door and Raven noticed the woman smile. With sure steps she headed for the door. With a casual glance she smiled at Raven who returned the greeting in kind. She watched for a moment more as the woman greeted other passers by with the same open friendly smile. When the woman was inside the building Raven let out a slow sigh of relief, the woman hadn't paid any particular attention to her. There was no reason to kill her. Besides, she'd killed enough for one day, and she wasn't even getting paid by the body.

Her thoughts were disturbed by the cries of a small child. She turned to see a young boy standing in the middle of the street wailing, three fingers of his pudgy hand in his mouth, tears streaming down his face. Raven looked around the boy, people continued about their business ignoring him. Cautiously she walked over. The boy looked to be about six, his clothes heavily mended but clean.

"What's the matter?" Raven asked, kneeling down to look him in the eye.

"I can't find my mommy." The boy wailed.

"If you stop crying, I'll help you. How does that sound?"

The boy considered his options. He was afraid, but at least now there was someone to talk to. He sniffled loudly, "I guess so." He replied. Raven walked to the nearby well, as she turned her back she didn't see two more figures enter the tavern. Slimy fingers reached up and took her hand. Raven frowned but let the boy hold her hand. When she reached the well she drew up a cup of water and handed it to the boy. She also handed him the corner of her shawl.

The boy took a drink of water and looked questioningly at the corner of material.

"Dip the fabric in the water and clean your face boy, you'll feel better."

Afraid to disobey and lose his only friend on the planet he complied. To his utter astonishment, he did feel a bit better.

"What's your name?"

"Maxar." He replied in a small voice, determined not to cry.

"Okay Max. Where were you going with your mother?" Raven asked, taking the cup back from the boy and finishing the water he didn't drink.

He dried his face on the other corner of Raven's shawl. "Shopping."

Raven shook her head. "I could have guessed that much. Come on Max, think. Was it food? Clothes? Soap? Think about your house, what did you need more of?"

Max blinked. No one had ever talked to him this way before. It was up to him to find his mommy. The nice lady would help but he had to help her. He tried to remember that morning. What had she said? "Duck!" he exclaimed.

Quickly Raven crouched down and looked behind her, turning back to the boy in puzzlement. He laughed at the sight. "We were going to have duck for dinner."

With a wry grin, Raven stood up. Taking the now clean hand in her own, she headed to the poultry vendor. They were only halfway there when a frantic woman rushed up to them.

"Maxar! By Zeus, where have you been!" She hugged him fiercely, checking him quickly for signs of injury.

"The lady helped me find you." Max replied, tugging at Raven's skirt.

"Thank you so much." the woman said, looking up at Raven with tear filled eyes.

"He did all the work, I just listened to him." Raven replied quietly, squeezing Max's hand quickly and stepping away. He beamed at her then turned to his mother.

"Can I be Max?" Was the last thing she heard him say as she headed down the street.

Chapter 3: Bard

Entering the dimly lit tavern Gabrielle sighed. The aroma of spicy food filled her nostrils unhampered by the usual stench commonly found in taverns. The ripe smell of unwashed bodies

was almost nonexistent. Not surprising since the tavern was almost empty, and for a change she did not detect the scent of rancid ale. “Nice place.” She murmured to Xena as they made their way inside.

Xena quickly surveyed the inhabitants of the common room. One man asleep by the fire; another man alone, waiting for someone; a cloaked woman alone in the corner; two men conducting business over a bowl of something steaming; two more gambling; two bar maids behind the bar; one inn keep. Gabrielle walked up to the bar and addressed one of the women.

“I’d like some hot cider and a mulled mead.” The woman looked at her expectantly, then moved to fill the order when she saw Gabrielle put a couple of coins on the counter. “What smells so good?” She asked, picking up the two goblets.

The woman picked up the coins. “Stew, sit down, I’ll bring you lunch.”

Gabrielle followed Xena to the table by the fire. She stared down at the lone man who was studying the door. When he turned his head he was visibly startled by the sight of leather and bronze filling his view. His eyes slowly traveled upward until they reached penetrating blue. He gazed at the warrior for long moments before she finally smiled pointedly at his seat. With a start he realized what she wanted. He grabbed his drink and headed to another table.

“You do that just to be intimidating.” Gabrielle quipped, taking the seat next to Xena.

“I did that to get near the fire, it’s cold out there.”

“I didn’t think Warrior Princesses were supposed to notice the cold.” Gabrielle shot back playfully.

“Oh, we notice the cold alright, we’re just not supposed to show it.”

“Funny,” Gabrielle considered, “you weren’t cold this morning.”

“I don’t intend to be cold this evening either.” Xena replied a slow smile easing across her mouth.

Gabrielle felt herself flush. “*Gods but she’s sexy*” she mused. It was still hard to get used to, this new side to the warrior. She had known Xena had a sense of humor, dry and underdeveloped as it may be, and known the warrior was a passionate, fiercely loyal person, generally speaking. What she hadn’t anticipated was that Xena could be playful. Passionate and playful at the same time. She still smiled when she thought about their first night together as lovers.

The rain storm on their way back from Athens had driven them from the road to an inn for the night. It had apparently driven everyone else there as well. The room was at a premium, only one palate and a small one at that, although she did manage to haggle baths for both of them into the price. Gabrielle had come in from checking on Argo, cold and dripping from the rain only to find Xena relaxing in the tub, curls of steam rising up off of the water.

“How’d that tub get in here?” She had asked unloading Argo’s saddle bags onto the floor and trying to get some of the excess water out of her hair.

“I carried it.” Xena replied not bothering to open her eyes.

“Getting soft, aren’t you Warrior Princess? I could have been a brigand.”

“A brigand with Gabrielle’s footsteps. That would be interesting.” Xena smiled.

Gabrielle frowned, her mood sour from the cold and list of chores she’d already performed. “So do I get the tub next?” Gabrielle asked hopefully, ignoring Xena’s state of supreme relaxation.

“Um hummm.” Xena sighed, which the bard found more than a little unsettling, even as she was irritated. “But you might want to start bringing up your water to heat now, I’m not getting out any time soon.”

“I go stable Argo, check on her hay, unsaddle the beast, bring our supplies up, arrange for our room and bath and now I have to fetch my own bath water?!”

Xena opened one eye, “at least I didn’t make you fetch mine.” She replied closing her eye again.

Gabrielle stormed out muttering under her breath unkind things about warrior types.

Xena had seemed far too relaxed all evening. She’d tried several times to startle, or surprise

the warrior woman. None of them worked. While she could see Xena's weapons always nearby, the usual tension she carried on the road was nowhere to be seen.

Finally that night as they readied for bed Gabrielle stretched painfully, pinching the back of her neck with her fingers. She had not appreciated the requirement of carrying the used bath water back down the stairs in buckets in order to refill the tub with hot water- then repeating the process after her bath. While far from relaxed, at least she was clean.

"So admit it Xena, your whole reason for having me around is to wait on you?" She asked hotly.

"No." Xena replied evenly, "But I consider it a definite perk."

"Mind telling me why you're so blasted relaxed? Or do I have to beat it out of you?"

"Come here." She requested gently, her eyes laughing. Xena was sitting on the edge of the bed. She scooted back, making room for Gabrielle to sit in front of her. With gentle force she turned Gabrielle around and sat her down on the edge of the bed. She carefully began to brush the hair of the fuming bard. "Just so you won't beat it out of me I'll tell you why I'm relaxed."

"Okay." Gabrielle replied, still angry but finding it difficult to remember why with the gentle hands on her hair.

"It's safe here. I know the innkeeper, it's a secure room, a relatively peaceful village and people are nicer in rainstorms. Trouble makers don't relish the possibility of being turned out into a storm. I certainly wouldn't want to make trouble in this kind of weather."

"So you're saying," Gabrielle replied hotly until strong hands began to massage the knots out of her shoulders, "you're relaxed because you can be."

"Mummmm." Xena replied.

"So why aren't you being nicer to me?"

"Gabrielle, I *am* being nicer to you."

Gabrielle realized minutes had gone by and she'd not spoken. "Oh, I guess you are," she replied absently. Coherent thought was almost impossible above the din of her singing muscles. She felt warm, very warm and knew it wasn't just the fire in their room. She wondered absently if Xena could tell. "But it's just because you don't want me to beat you to a pulp."

"Oh, that could happen. I worry about it every night." Xena replied amused.

"Hey," Gabrielle shot back, "you think you're tough, but I could get you off guard if I wanted to."

"Mummmm." Xena murmured slowly bringing her hands to a stop. "Better?" She asked. She smiled at the bard's affirming nod. "Then we'd better get some sleep. Think you can keep from snoring tonight?" She glanced away to avoid the bard's angry glare. She also didn't notice Gabrielle look at the bed approvingly.

Xena began to lay a blanket on the floor by the bed as Gabrielle stopped her. "Ah, Xena I think you'd better sleep with me."

Xena looked at her questioningly. "Bed's not very big."

"Yeah, but it is cold in here."

"I don't feel cold."

"That's because you're a warrior. Warrior's don't get cold, everyone knows it. Bards however do, so unless you want chattering teeth to accompany my snoring..."

"Okay, okay." Xena held up her hand, "makes no difference to me."

"*We'll see about that.*" Gabrielle thought. Xena put on a sleeping shift and climbed into bed with the bard. The bed was next to the wall, so Gabrielle moved close to it. Xena put her sword, chakram and boot dagger within easy reach and laid down on her side, away from Gabrielle facing the door.

"Hey!" Xena exclaimed as she drew the covers over herself. Something cold was resting against her calves.

"My feet will warm up. Remember, that's why you're here." Xena grunted, enduring the chill from the body resting against her own. After a moment's worth of getting comfortable on the

crowded palate, she settled in for sleep.

“You smell good.” Gabrielle commented just as Xena’s thoughts drifted toward slumber.

“Ah, thanks, it’s...” Xena replied uncertainly.

“The bath, I know.” Gabrielle continued. “But generally speaking- you *do* smell good. Faintly of leather, but in a nice way. ‘Night Xena.’”

“‘Night Gabrielle.’” Xena replied, puzzling through the bard’s comment.

About ten minutes later Gabrielle piped up again. “You’re incredibly beautiful too.”

“What?” Xena asked, eyes flying open.

“I said, ‘you’re incredibly beautiful too.’” Gabrielle said clearly, “surely you must know it. It isn’t like you’ve not been told by every warlord we run into.”

“Ah, yeah.” Xena muttered, “I didn’t know you thought so.”

“Of course I think so. Goodness, I’ve told you before. At least I thought I had. If not, make no mistake, you are without a doubt the most magnificent creature I’ve ever seen.”

“Ah...” Xena stammered

“I mean your eyes, alone.”

“What about my eyes?” Xena asked, beginning to suspect the bard was up to something.

“They are the most intense blue I’ve ever seen, almost like lapis. Your hair, like ebony, skin of bronze, muscles of granite and a smile... well it’s beyond words.”

“Mummmmm.”

“It’s only your personality that needs work. Physically you’re perfect. I can see why Hercules prefers...”

“Prefers what?” Xena asked hotly, sitting up and glaring down at the bard.

“To spend time with you in small doses. I mean, I know he enjoys your...ah... company... but not too much of it.”

Recognizing the playful tone of Gabrielle’s voice Xena wasn’t angry, just curious. She wondered where the bard was going. “If there *was* anything between Hercules and me I think I might be offended. But there isn’t, and yes Gabrielle, I am *very* good company.”

“Uh hunh, always boasting. Is that something they teach in warrior school?”

“Gabrielle...” Xena said in a warning tone.

“Yes, many skills, I know, I know.”

Looking down at the bard, Xena was surprised by the fire in her friend’s eyes. Green eyes were practically smoldering with challenge, at this moment she looked simply incredible. “Gabrielle what’s gotten into you?”

Gabrielle sat up, “I’m sorry Xena, I just don’t believe you’re the most gifted lover that’s ever crossed the street. Okay? No hard feelings, I just don’t buy it.”

“Like you would know.” Xena shot back, stung in spite of herself by the bard’s words.

“Oh, you *bought* that virgin act, oh that’s rich.” Gabrielle could see that she was getting a rise out of the stoic warrior. “*Definitely got her off guard,*” she thought. Only this playful teasing was no longer heading where she expected. “*I’ll just wing it,*” she told herself.

“I see.” Xena replied, challenge in her own eyes. “So you’re telling me you’re experienced? With men and women Gabrielle? Or just men?”

The question baffled the bard. “*Great, now what am I going to do?*” She took a guess, “Ah, with both, aren’t you?”

“Oh, of course, it’s part of warrior school you know.” Xena smiled a slow sultry smile. She had her now. “So prove it.”

“What?”

“Kiss me, oh great wielder of worldly experience.” Xena said calmly. “I don’t bite... often.” Laughter danced triumphantly in the warrior’s eyes which hardened the bard’s resolve. “Look I’ll even make it easy for you I’ll close my eyes.” Xena leaned in a bit and closed her eyes.

“*She doesn’t think I’ll do it?!*” Gabrielle seethed to herself. “*I’ll show her!*”

Xena was surprised by the feel of soft lips pressing tentatively against her own. She was even

more surprised by the emotion surging through her veins in response. She waited a moment for the moist warmth to leave, leave her lips and leave her aching, only they didn't. If anything the warm softness pressed against her own was intensifying. The mouth became bolder as she melted under the contact. Sensing the warrior's surrender Gabrielle's tongue made its first forays into Xena's mouth seeking greater intimacy, and finding it. Xena slowly brought her arms up the bard's body, holding her close, even as she felt small hands around her own neck and shoulders. When the kiss broke, Xena felt naked in the gaze of penetrating green eyes.

"Wow," Gabrielle breathed, "that was for real."

"Yes is was." Xena whispered back. Then regaining her composure, moved back from the bard. "Look Gabrielle," She began in a rush, "I'm sorry, I know you didn't mean... I'll sleep on the floor okay."

"No." Gabrielle replied, her eyes still wide and full of wonder. "You're not getting on the floor, and I don't think you'll be getting much sleep."

"Gabrielle, what are you saying?" Xena's voice was thick with building emotion.

"I'm saying Xena, that I *want* you. I think I've wanted you forever and I'm only beginning to realize how much right now. And I suspect you want me too."

"I do." Xena breathed.

"So take me." And that was all the encouragement the warrior needed.

Gabrielle's memory was interrupted by the sensation of a knee, Xena's knee, pressing firmly against her own. She looked up quickly, Xena's eyes intent on someone moving up behind her. Slowly a cloaked figure eased around their table.

"By the Goddess... remarkable." The figure facing Gabrielle breathed.

"What?" Gabrielle asked.

"Your face..."

"What do you want?" Xena asked, her voice full of warning.

The figure quickly turned to face Xena, removing the hood of her cloak in the process. "I'm sorry warrior." She began in a gentle voice. "May I sit down? I would like to explain."

Xena nodded, studying the woman carefully as she sat down.

"My name is Beatrice. I belong to the Oracle of Minos."

"Belong?" Gabrielle asked.

"A slave, Gabrielle." Xena said quietly, nodding to the three rings pierced through the woman's left eyebrow. When Beatrice turned her head Gabrielle saw the tiny gold rings, and nodded. Before she could respond, one of the barmaids approached the table, setting a steaming bowl of stew in front of the warrior and the bard, as well as a small loaf of bread between them.

Gabrielle closed her eyes and smiled, inhaling the complex fragrance of the stew. "I haven't had squash in forever!" She commented looking into her bowl, "and here's carrots and broccoli? I'll have to remember this place." After catching Xena's indulgent glance she shook her head and returned her attention to the newcomer at their table. "I'm sorry Beatrice, you were saying... you're a slave?"

"Yes, " Beatrice continued, smiling at the bard's response to her food. "*So like Daphne,*" she thought, "*always hungry.*" She put those thoughts aside as she addressed the bard and her companion. "I'm a slave in name at least, although I don't really function in that capacity. I'm quite spoiled actually." Gabrielle took a moment to study the woman since she couldn't very well talk with her mouth full of stew. Beatrice was tanned, like Xena and had long brown hair that hung well past her shoulders in soft curls. What was most unusual about the woman, to Gabrielle anyway, was her eyes. They were a vibrant hazel with gold flecks. She looked too beautiful and pampered to be a slave. Although this was the bard's first trip to the city of Minos she was aware the society here accepted slavery, detestable as it was. Now however she was able to see that the rings through the eyebrow not only identified slaves, but apparently classified them into some sort of caste system as well. She had seen people earlier with one ring and at the time had not realized what it meant.

“Here, let me show you.” Beatrice went on, and was about to put her hand beneath the folds of her cloak. With a quick glance to Xena she explained. “Daphne asked me to bring a scroll to show you. It’s in my pocket...” Xena nodded and the slave slowly extracted a scroll case from her garment. Carefully she opened it and slowly unrolled a thin piece of hide. “This is a portrait I painted of Daphne a few months ago. I’m no artist but I think you’ll see...”

She left her words hanging. There was no need to explain. Unrolled before Xena and Gabrielle was a small, exquisite portrait of the bard- or rather of some one who could have easily been the bard. A young woman with strawberry blond hair gazed at the viewer with a smile that radiated amused indulgence.

“It’s amazing.” Gabrielle breathed, setting down her spoon, looking closely at the picture.

“The resemblance...I’ve never seen anything like it.” Beatrice continued.

“Oh we have,” Gabrielle broke in with a laugh, “If you ever meet Princess Diana or her father’s cook Meg...”

“I take it this is the Oracle of Minos?” Xena asked, her voice serious.

Beatrice nodded, “Yes. Not many have seen her. She does not make her predictions in public as the Oracle at Delphi does. We live adjacent to the temple of Artemis. Her prophecies are read by the high priestess there. She had a vision last night, involving an eagle and a raven battling over the death of a sparrow as a vulture watched. She fears,” Beatrice turned to look pointedly at Gabrielle, “you may be the sparrow. Daphne would like to meet with the two of you, and discuss this further.”

“Where?” Xena asked, keeping the bard silent with a glance.

Beatrice scanned the tavern common room before answering. When she spoke her voice was barely above a whisper “there is another village just north of here. Water well, west end.”

“We’ll consider it.” Xena replied.

Beatrice looked as if she were about to say something in response, then changed her mind. Instead she sighed. “Very well. We will be there should you decide to come. There is one other thing though. The darkness Daphne fears will kill your bard is near. I don’t know why, but should you see a child lost in the street, leave him be. It has to do with keeping you out of the darkness’ path.”

Xena nodded once and the slave stood. With a final glance at Gabrielle she turned and left the tavern. Gabrielle looked at Xena who appeared preoccupied with her stew. She knew that this was not the case but left her in silence to mull over her own thoughts. She turned her attention back to her bowl when she spotted the portrait still sitting uncurled on the table. She spun around to see if the slave was out of sight. “Wait, you forgot your...”

“Leave it Gabrielle.” Xena said, “you can return it when we meet them later.”

“So we are going?”

Xena returned her attention to her stew. The food was good but she’d lost her appetite. “I think so. Unless we see a lost child, then I might want to see who else is interested.”

They ate in silence. Xena brooding about Gabrielle being in danger, Gabrielle gazing in rapt fascination at the portrait on the table. “She’s beautiful.” She murmured, unaware she’d spoken out loud.

“Yes she is.” Xena confirmed.

Gabrielle’s response died on her lips as loud cries erupted outside the entrance to the inn. Wails of despair and sorrow ripped through the late afternoon quiet as Xena and Gabrielle headed outside. Two bodies were lying in a cart partially filled with straw, the innkeeper wailing over the lifeless female body. Gabrielle rushed to his side and tried to urge him away from the carnage. “My daughter,” he pleaded.

“What happened?” Xena asked the cart owner.

With a sad glance at the innkeep he shrugged. “Found ‘em floating in the stream. Looks like they slipped on some rocks, fell, broke their necks.”

“My baby, Elaine.” The innkeeper sobbed tenderly stroking the wet black hair partially covering her face.

“Gabrielle, why don’t you take him inside.” Xena urged. The bard nodded, and putting her arm around the innkeeper, and with gentle words led him indoors.

“Tragedy, that one.” the cart owner said looking back down. “Elaine and Torus were to be married tonight. I’m not surprised he’d stolen a visit at the ritual bath, I did that myself when I got married. But Elaine can’t swim. Don’t know why they’d go walking around on those slippery stones.”

Xena nodded, indicating that she was listening to the man, but she wasn’t looking at him. She studied each of the lifeless forms with interest. Easing a hand behind each of the necks, she could feel where the bones had broken. She also noticed patches of discoloration on the forehead of each corpse. Something caught the warrior’s eye and she turned her attention to the front of the dress on the female, Elaine, she reminded herself. Several short tufts of hair clung to the front of the woman’s skirt, near the waist. Several more people rushed over to the cart. Thankful for the distraction, Xena quickly picked up several bits of hair and closed them in her palm.

“Goddess no!” The newcomer wailed. “I saw her not two hours ago.”

“Easy Seph.” The cart driver placed a comforting arm around the young woman’s shoulders. “These things happen, they’re together in the Elysian Fields now.”

“When did you see this woman last?” Xena asked as gently as she could.

“I was with Elaine when she was bathing by the stream. We heard someone approach, sounded like a woman. Then we saw Torus across the bank. He came to visit. Trini and I left with the laundry to let them be... alone.” Her slight frame was trembled with renewed sobbing. Xena felt for the girl, but pressed on.

“When you left, did you see the other woman you thought was approaching?”

Seph stopped her sniveling for a moment and considered the question. “No.” She answered, “we didn’t see anyone. Must have just been Torus we heard approaching.”

Xena nodded. There was nothing else to be gained from pushing so she let her be. With a final nod to the cart driver, she made her way back into inn to check on Gabrielle. The innkeeper was sitting on a stool sobbing uncontrollably. Gabrielle stood next to him, a comforting hand on his shoulder, listening. Shortly, several more people entered the inn, going to the elderly man’s side. A heavysset woman wrapped him in a motherly embrace and held him as he sobbed. Gabrielle made her way back to Xena as the warrior closed the top of the scroll case.

Once outside the inn, Xena unteathered Argo and headed out of town. “What a tragedy.” Gabrielle commented, walking at the warrior’s side. “He lost his wife last summer, now to lose his daughter...”

“His daughter wasn’t lost Gabrielle,” Xena replied, “she was taken. That was no accident.”

“What makes you say that?” The bard asked.

Xena casually looked around before answering. Nobody on the sparsely populated street was paying any attention to them. “The breaks in their necks are not consistent with the bruises on their heads- which makes me think that their necks were broken before they fell. Besides two people slipping, and breaking their necks in almost the same spot? Not very likely. Whoever did this is good, very good.”

Gabrielle shuddered. “How creepy.”

“Did you find out anything from the innkeeper?” Xena asked as they passed the market area of the village, nearing the front gate.

“Not really,” Gabrielle replied. “He was very upset. Elaine and Torus were going to be married. He said that the town joked that the couple would take care of the village from head to toe. Elaine cut hair and Torus was the son of the cobbler.”

“Cut hair?” Xena murmured to herself as their attention was diverted.

“Here she is mommy.” A small voice said, grabbing onto Gabrielle’s hand.

The bard looked down in surprise to a small face beaming up at her. Xena glanced up and saw the woman finish her transaction with the butcher and rush over.

“I’m so glad Maxar found you.”

“Max mom, just Max.” The boy interjected.

The woman nodded, hushing her son, “I just wanted to thank you again for finding him. Please take this,” she said pushing the small bundle into Gabrielle’s hands, “it’s nothing really. Just some sweet meats and stuffed dates, but I had to do something. Maxa... Max is so precious to me.”

“I’m sorry I...” Gabrielle began confused.

“I won’t take no for an answer.” The woman continued, her eyes gentle. “What you did was very kind. Children can get so frightened. Thank you.”

Before Gabrielle could think of an alternative refusal, the woman turned and grasping the boy’s hand was gone. “What was that all about?” She finally wondered aloud, looking at Xena.

“Obviously mistook you for someone else.” The warrior replied, picking up the horse’s reigns once again. “Or someone that looks just like you.”

Both women looked at each other remembering the words of the oracle’s slave. “*Lost child, darkness,*” Gabrielle thought. “Is the oracle a good guy or a bad one?” She wondered out loud.

“We’ll find out.” Xena replied.

Chapter 4: Well

Callisto walked through the dense forrest with careful steps. Pausing a moment, she listened. Only the normal sounds of the forrest assailed her ears. The last traces of a fire already a vanishing scent on the breeze. “Oh, you’re good Raven. Very good. Now show yourself.” She raised her voice for the last command and was startled by the nearness of the response.

“Trying to sneak up on assassins can be very hazardous to your health.” Raven replied.

Callisto snapped her attention skyward to see Gabrielle’s twin calmly standing among the thick branches. With casual grace, she swung down from the lowest branch and with a back flip landed behind the warlord.

Grinning with approval Callisto walked a slow circle around the assassin. “You’ve outdone yourself Raven.” She murmured. “You look exactly like the irritating blond.” The clothes were a perfect match, even the worn detail of the Amazon style fighting staff. In every way she duplicated the bard’s appearance. “Now put out your hand.” Callisto commanded.

Raven did as she was asked and before she could draw her hand back, a dagger flashed in the warrior’s hand cutting a small gash into the palm of the assassin’s hand. “Ow!” Raven exclaimed, drawing her hand back angrily. She was not seriously hurt, but the cut would leave a scar.

“I intend to know exactly who is who.” Callisto explained, although Raven hadn’t asked for an explanation.

“You mean the fact that the bard is the dead one isn’t good enough for you?” Raven shot back, sucking on her bleeding palm.

“Oh, that.” Callisto laughed. “There’s been a change of plan.”

“I don’t change plans, Callisto.” Raven growled.

In a lightning move the warrior unsheathed her sword, flipped over the head of the assassin and held the steel tip to the base of Raven’s back. “If you don’t want me to run you through, you’ll start now.” She hissed.

“When you said ‘irritating blond’ I think you were referring to the wrong one.” Raven muttered with a shrug. “So what is *our* new plan?”

“You are going to take the brat’s place, but you’re not going to kill her. I want her captured. Alive.” Raven’s silence told Callisto all she needed to know about how the assassin saw her plan. “It is not as risky as you think. There is someone else who is going to join my little party. Once I have her and the brat I’ll be ready to properly entertain Xena. I think revenge is a dish best served after a long meal. Don’t you agree?”

Raven turned and stepped into the extended sword, letting the blade nick a scratch in her abdomen, oblivious to the blood. “Revenge is a dish only worth serving if it will be consumed. Your dinner guest may very well decide she does not want to sit for a long meal. Revenge, Callisto, is pointless unless eaten.”

“Oh, Xena will stay alright.” Callisto said, eyes shining in their insanity.

“Callisto, you are a fool.” Raven replied shaking her head sadly.

Striking out with a backhand, Callisto’s fist was blocked. Deftly Raven grabbed her arm and with more speed and strength than the warlord would have given her credit for, she found herself flipped in the air, flat on her back and gasping for air.

Turning her back Raven clearly spoke as she walked away. “I’ve let you mark me twice Callisto, don’t try for a third or I’ll kill you.”

“We’ll see about that little girl.” Callisto growled, getting to her feet.

Calmly, Raven pivoted back. “This disguise is working better than you think Callisto. Remember I am *not* sweet Gabrielle. I kill for a living, and while I have yet to kill an employer... you are defiantly pushing me. I will do your plan your way. But don’t for a moment think you can bully me the way you do Theoradours or the rest of your men. I’ll work for you until this is over, but you don’t own me. Unlike you, I’m used to working alone. Killing in a thick forrest without an army to back me up. You however, while tactically brilliant, are a warlord- not an assassin. Don’t taunt me, show some respect and we’ll get along fine.”

Callisto considered the words, sounding so foreign coming from Gabrielle’s face. Raven had a point, Callisto granted that. “Very well, Raven, friends.” Sheathing her sword she closed the distance between them. “So I take it you’re ready to make the switch?”

“Not quite.” Raven replied. “There are still a few things I think I should practice.” To Callisto’s amazement she had shifted into Gabrielle’s voice. The phrasing, cadence, tone of her speech, it had the gentle warm quality of the bard. “I was wondering Callisto,” Raven/Gabrielle said with a light laugh, “how well can you impersonate Xena?”

“Well enough.” Callisto replied with the flat tone of the Warrior Princess.

“Good.” Raven/Gabrielle said as a sultry smile eased across her face. Easing a gentle hand behind the warrior’s neck she drew Callisto in and covered startled lips with her own. Breaking the passionate kiss Callisto’s eyes sparkled with desire.

“I’m so glad I decided to be friends.” She murmured, drawing the assassin down to the forrest floor.

Raven monitored herself with the attention to detail of a perfectionist. What was clearly fun and games to the warrior was of life saving import to the assassin. Focusing, she was able to clearly see Callisto as Xena. “*Not too much muscle,*” she told herself as she straddled the warrior, trailing teasing kisses down the exposed line of throat. Forceful hands tugged at her top; Raven gently captured Callisto’s hands in her own and after transferring both wrists to her left hand, pinned them above the warrior’s head on the forrest floor. “Not so fast Callisto,” she breathed, “I’m the one who needs to practice, not you.”

Callisto sighed with delight as Raven loosened the straps on her armor with her free hand. Not taking her lips from the warrior’s skin she deftly removed the pieces of leather and chain mail. “*Slower, Raven- tempo’s off,*” she chided herself as she eased her body between Callisto’s legs.

Recalling the intimate details from Xena and Gabrielle’s numerous occasions of love making, Raven concentrated on the subtle nuances of body language. “*Hair over the right shoulder while kissing her breasts, shift to the left side as you trail down the abdomen. Bite at the hip bone and collar bone, little conversation, keep phrases short.*” In her mind, Raven could imagine Xena’s responses. Starting slow enough would have the warrior arching her back against the ground offering the bard luscious breasts. Raven wiggled out of her skirt, while teasing and tasting the fullness of the warrior’s breasts. Resting her thigh between the apex of Callisto’s legs she slowly rose and moved her thigh against warm wetness as she returned to capture the warrior’s hungry mouth.

After several slight rocking motions of the assassin’s thigh Callisto was panting heavily. “Gods yeeessssss,” she groaned, wrapping her fingers into strawberry blond hair. For a time Callisto completely forgot that this was not Gabrielle. “*So this is what it’s like to be Xena,*” she thought. “*Enjoying the pleasures of this flesh at any given whim. I’m so glad I won’t be killing her, right away.*” Callisto rolled her eyes back as Gabrielle’s warm soft tongue made it’s first forays into her center, lapping at

her wetness, feasting slowly. Callisto pictured Xena watching such a display. Her bard willingly feasting on another. The warlord's pulse shot up at the idea. Xena's pain, the torment of watching the betrayal. The very idea sent Callisto to the precipice of climax. She could feel Gabrielle holding her there, not letting her back down, not sending her over the edge. After a blissful eternity of the bard's tongue working miracles between her legs, she was sent over that edge with such force Callisto had neither the will nor the means to stifle her cry of release.

Before Callisto could bring her breathing back to normal, Raven gracefully stood, feet still planted between the warrior's calves. Looking down at Callisto's blissful smile, she allowed herself a moment of professional pride. "Thanks," Raven said simply, stepping away from the warrior and picking up a water skin. "I think I've got the hang of it."

"You certainly do." Callisto agreed.

"I'm going to the stream to clean up- don't follow me."

"But what about you?" Callisto asked, with a seductive smile easing across her features.

"Thanks, but no." Raven replied politely. "*This wasn't about sex you fool,*" she thought to herself as she walked to the stream, "*this is about survival: Mine.*"

Callisto laid back on the forrest floor, smiled up at the trees letting out a light laugh. She felt very spoiled and was enjoying every moment of it. This was a bad time to remember that she couldn't let the assassin live. Still, at the moment she felt too good to let even that dampen her mood.

Beatrice paced back and forth, agitated. The alcove around the well was deserted save for herself and the Oracle, which only served to heighten her stress.

"Please love, you're exhausting me." Daphne remarked mildly from where she sat on a bench across from the well.

"I told her how important this was," Beatrice complained, "I don't know why she wouldn't come."

"They'll be here, Beatrice. Now, please, sit."

Beatrice turned with a retort then changed her mind. "How much longer, then?" She asked.

"Sometimes love I say things, not because I've seen it, but because I assume it." Daphne couldn't help but smile at her lover's look of frustration. "I don't understand why you get so consumed by this. *I'm* the one living with the vision after all."

Now it was the slave's turn to smile. Taking a seat on the bench next to the Oracle, she took her hand affectionately. "So you don't have to live with the vision *and* worry about it. Trust me Daphne, if I wasn't uptight about her absence, I suspect you would be."

Daphne shrugged, "I suppose you're right. You said she was with a warrior?"

"Yes, a big one. Beautiful, but not very friendly looking. Not that they ever are. Most definitely the eagle."

"Did you catch her name?"

Beatrice began to shake her head when a rich voice cut in.

"The name's Xena."

Both women turned to see the Warrior Princess calmly leaning against the water well. Arms crossed confidently across her chest, one leg folded against the stone well.

"Xena! I had no idea," Beatrice gasped.

Both women stood, but only Daphne crossed the short distance to face the warrior. "I'm Daphne." She said simply, noting Xena's look of controlled amazement.

Xena couldn't help but stare. The oracle's resemblance to Gabrielle was remarkable, aside from her clothing which was more affluent, the two could have been twins. "Is Gabrielle here?" Daphne asked after Xena had studied her for several moments.

"Perhaps." Xena replied evenly, a thin smile easing across her face. "I thought we'd talk first." Casually the warrior noted the ends of Daphne's strawberry blond hair. With a small sense of relief, she noticed that it was not freshly cut.

"I see." Daphne replied without offense. "Keeping her from harm's way. It seems I should suspect no less from the reformed Warrior Princess. I trust that the recent stories I've heard do mean you've altered course somewhat, and are not just on a vacation from blood lust?" Xena shrugged noncommittally. She knew the oracle was not deliberately trying to bait her. Unlike Gabrielle, Daphne did not seem too adept at small talk. "Very well," the oracle continued, looking intently at Xena. "You have doubts about me, I can see it. Let's have it, I'd like to know what I can say or do to assure you that Gabrielle's safety is also foremost on my mind. Any suggestions?"

"You're the Oracle."

"I can't believe you!" Beatrice blurted, "she's here at great personal risk..."

"Beatrice, please." Daphne implored. "I'll handle this, love."

"What does she mean 'great personal risk'?" Xena asked, an eyebrow arching.

Daphne shrugged, "I rarely leave the temple because the majority of my prophecies involve death. For some odd reason people think intimidating the messenger eradicates the message. A lot of people are reluctant to meet Hades' sister Celesta." Suddenly she smiled warmly, the simple act transforming her face, causing the air to catch in the warrior's throat, despite her reservations. She so looked like her Gabrielle. "Most but not all of my prophecies involve Celesta," Daphne continued. "I had a vision several months ago about King Gregor, or rather his son Gabriel." Daphne could see recognition in the warrior's eyes of the baby she and Gabrielle had saved. "In time he will marry and his wife will have a daughter. To honor his namesake, they will name the baby Xena. By the time Gabriel is grown he will have heard many stories about the bard he is named after and her warrior companion. His daughter will become the first female ruler of Gregor's kingdom, and do you know what she will be called Warrior Princess?" Daphne laughed, a light lyrical sound, "Xena, Queen of Hearts, because she will be so adored by her people."

"Oh, how sweet."

Daphne turned to the voice coming from a dark alcove off to her side. "Gabrielle?" She inquired gently.

Xena frowned and also turned her attention to the bard slipping from the shelter of darkness. Slowly she approached and stood toe to toe with the Oracle of Minos. "Unbelievable." She breathed and reached out a tentative hand to the oracle's face. Daphne didn't move, but let the bard touch her. A glance to Xena revealed the warrior's hand resting on her chakrum. "Did you really see that in a vision?" Gabrielle asked, stepping around the oracle, studying her from all sides.

"Yes Gabrielle, I did." Daphne replied, "but for it to happen, you need to stay safe and make sure there are stories of you and Xena for the future King Gabriel to pass down."

"Perhaps you could elaborate a little on your vision?" Xena asked in a measured voice. "The unpleasant one."

"Very well, Xena, I'll explain what I can. My visions are usually steeped in symbolism, like most prophecy. I saw three women linked together as if parts of a three sided mirror. I've no doubt now that I am one, Gabrielle is another and someone else, a dangerous someone else, is the third. There is another woman I can't place. I see her as a vulture. Someone who sits and watches, pulling the strings from behind. The dark part of the mirror, the raven, kills the light part of the mirror, Gabrielle who I see as a sparrow. The champion of the fallen lightness, with a dark past of her own, who I can only assume is you Xena, will battle to avenge Gabrielle's death. You will win that fight, but when you do all else will be lost. I suspect you will return to the road of blood and Ares will stand in triumph as you press forward, leaving carnage in your wake."

Xena was quiet for a long moment. When she finally spoke it was to ask, "How do you fit in?"

Daphne shrugged. "I don't play much of a role other than seeing the vision play out. An attempt will be made on my life which will only serve to lure you to the trap set by the vulture and the raven. However I think if I play a larger role, it will completely offset the balance and void the prophecy."

"But what if you are the dark one?" Gabrielle asked, "this could be part of your plan to gain

our trust then kill me.”

Xena looked at Gabrielle a bit surprised. Granted, that had been a concern of her’s, she was just surprised to hear the bard voice it.

Daphne nodded, “That is true. I suppose this will all hinge on whether you trust me or not. Search your feelings Gabrielle, am I the one you need to fear?”

Xena watched with clear blue eyes as the two women studied each other. A glance revealed Beatrice doing the same. Finally the bard nodded. “I trust her Xena. She isn’t the one who wants to hurt me.” With a sigh the slave started breathing again, and Xena realized she’d held her own breath as well.

“What do you propose?” The warrior asked.

After a quick glance to her slave, the oracle answered. “I think Gabrielle and I should switch places.”

“No!” Beatrice pleaded, “Daphne, you can’t. The danger, you could...”

Daphne turned with gentle eyes and approached her lover. She spoke softly but her words were for the warrior and bard as well as her slave. “Love, I think this has to be. I couldn’t be in any better care than that of Xena. Besides, you’re not going to go on a bloody rampage should something happen to me.”

“You’ve known this all along?” Beatrice asked, her voice quietly accusing.

Daphne looked away. “Not exactly, but it is all falling into place now, after seeing Gabrielle and realizing the eagle in question is Xena.”

Tears were beginning to well up in her eyes as Beatrice continued, “you’ve told me you’ve seen my death. Daphne, have you seen yours?”

“How can I answer that Beatrice? I’ve seen my death many times. Had you not happened in my life, I’d be dead already. I see my death as an old woman, I also see it now. I’m an Oracle Beatrice. Every time I understand a strand of fate, the warp and weft of life’s tapestry changes as does my place in it. The answer to your question is yes, this may be my end, but it might not.” Daphne glanced over at Xena. “I trust Xena with my life, as I trust you with Gabrielle’s.”

“What do you think, Xena?” Gabrielle asked as Daphne gently held her softly sobbing lover.

“I think she’s right Gabrielle. You trust her, if what she’s said is the truth, then you would be safer in the temple than with me.” Xena answered absently, strangely absorbed by the sight of the oracle and her lover. Something seemed right about the decision that had been reached, she could almost feel the approval of the Fates. It also added an amount of gravity to the situation that was uncomfortable. She turned to Gabrielle, her azure eyes intense, taking in every feature of the bard. “Gabrielle,” Xena said her name as tenderly as she could, “you’ve never shied away from a fight and it isn’t that I think you incapable of handling this one, but I think you should do as Daphne suggests. I love you more than I’ve ever loved anything, and I want you to be safe.” Xena lowered her voice even further, “I also think Beatrice is going to need your help, whatever the outcome.”

Gabrielle nodded, taking the warrior’s hands in her own. “I know Xena. And for once I agree with you.”

Breaking away from their embrace, but still with a protective arm draped around her slave’s shoulders Daphne walked back to the well. “I don’t know what type of attempt will be made on the Oracle’s life, but it will be a ruse. I think intended to lure you into the city.”

Xena nodded. “What is the chance that our meeting has already voided this prophecy?”

Daphne shook her head. “Until I have another vision with the same or similar symbols I’ve no way of knowing. Anything is possible. For all I know the darkness could have been struck dead by lightning or highway robbers last night and all of this is pointless.”

“Somehow I don’t think we’ll be that lucky.” Gabrielle interjected.

Daphne grinned, “I agree. Still, the real drawback to prophecy in general is the uncertainty of it all. But I’d rather be prepared for the worst even as we hope for the best.”

“When will you make the switch?” Beatrice asked sullenly.

“I’d say tonight.” Xena replied. “I don’t think you should risk another meeting out here.” the

warrior gripped the slave's forearm with a strong hand. "I'll protect her with my life Beatrice. Nothing will happen to her."

Beatrice nodded. "If it were anyone but you Xena, I'd refuse."

The four separated again for a moment of quiet goodbyes. Beatrice started crying again, and Daphne forced a face of bravery that she did not entirely feel. Gabrielle let several silent moments go by before she finally spoke.

"Xena." She said gently, "I know you're uncomfortable. You're torn between wanting me safe, and wanting me with you." Xena looked up into the green eyes that could read her so well. Gabrielle continued, "I'm torn too. I honestly can't think of a safer place to be than in the protection of your arms. But this is right, you and I both feel it. I'm glad you've got the confidence in me now to... protect myself as well as someone else."

"It's not just that Gabrielle." Xena interjected. "I meant what I said. I love you more than anything. Yes I know you can take care of yourself, in many ways better than I can. You're not a little girl any more. Not that I ever really thought you were..."

"Even when I acted like it?"

Xena grinned, the crooked smile that made the bard beam with love. "You were just being endearing." She replied, drawing Gabrielle into a tight embrace.

"I love you Xena." Gabrielle murmured into Xena's chest, as she felt the powerful heart hammer under the leather. She lifted her head to receive her warrior's kiss, and reluctantly broke away.

A quick survey of the alcoves around the well and the two streets leading to the well revealed them all deserted. With a curt nod from the warrior, bard and oracle began to undress.

"What happens if I'm called upon for some Oracle type duty?" Gabrielle asked, minutes later looking down at her new outfit.

"Don't worry." Daphne replied, adjusting the strings on Gabrielle's green top. "Beatrice will help you with anything that should come up. She knows my job better than I do." Picking up the Amazon fighting staff she added, "What's the stick for?"

Xena gently took it from her. "It's a staff, and I don't think you'll be needing it." She smiled at Gabrielle's giggle. "We'll be staying a short distance from the city. We'll be easy to find after the failed... attempt. If nothing happens in three days, Beatrice and I will meet back here to discuss our options. Agreed?"

All three women nodded, "I should have another vision by then if there's been a change." Daphne nodded. After another quiet goodbye both pairs of women departed the village.

That night Xena smiled into her soup. They were camping again, in the outskirts of the Minos fields. Both women were uncomfortable with small talk and without words had agreed to accept it. Daphne was amazed by everything she saw; it was clear she had never been out of the city. Still, it was Xena who was surprised when the oracle presented a fresh picked bouquet of herbs to flavor their soup. "Just because I don't see them in the wild, does not mean I don't recognize them from the kitchen," had been the oracle's dry reply.

With the unspoken concern that someone might be watching them, Daphne kept her comments about her life minimal and vague. "I do so love to watch the stars come out." She said as the sun hid behind the horizon. "We've a balcony... back home... where I'd sit in the evenings and watch the show."

"I've always been impressed by their variation." Xena said, finishing the last of her soup. "I mean at a first glance they all seem like little white points of light, but when you look, really look, they're different shades of reds and yellows as well."

"I didn't think warriors spent much time star gazing," Daphne said with a smile.

"I've been doing more of it recently," Xena replied quietly, a tad embarrassed.

"I know," Daphne said, her voice gentle, "love does that to you." Xena snapped her eyes up causing an even wider smile to grace the oracle's lips. "Don't worry, Xena. I promise not to tell her."

“Very funny *Gabrielle*.” Xena grumbled, causing more smiles and laughter.

“Okay, lets go over this again. I cause a quiet distraction by the river. We assume Xena comes alone, letting Gabrielle sleep. You knock out the bard and take her...”

“Yes and you take her place. What is the problem Raven?” Callisto ranted impatiently.

“The problem is the *assume* part and the fact that a distraction by the river may get my clothes wet and will make it almost impossible to get to the campsite before the warrior. You can’t simply feign sleep after running one hundred yards.”

“Fine! Then what?”

Raven took a deep breath. She needed to find some way to handle the madwoman and soon, or decide to kill her and get it over with. Absently, she looked at the ground and her eyes fell on the map of the area Callisto had brought. A stand of trees near the entrance to the city held her attention. A plan began to take shape.

Chapter 5: Temple

“Wow, would you look at this place?” Gabrielle breathed as Beatrice lead the bard into the temple of Artemis. A small anteroom opened up into the main chamber of the temple. Mosaics and graceful statuary were softly lit by the light from hundreds of candles. They were alone, a fact for which Gabrielle was supremely grateful. “Will I have to do anything here?” She asked quietly as they neared the towering statue of the virgin goddess.

Beatrice shook her head. “No. Daphne consults with the temple priestesses every morning but that happens in a chamber that joins our house to the temple. This way.” Leading the bard by the hand they passed through a curtain behind the marble goddess. Through a doorway and down a narrow hall, another door opened into a comfortable room. There was a small fire place, a low table, two couches and several piles of soft cushions on the floor. “This is where you’ll meet with the high priestess of the temple tomorrow morning. She’ll ask you how you’re feeling and if anything of any import is going on at the temple she’ll let you know. Don’t feel compelled to give her grand prophecies, Daphne is highly irregular in that department.”

Gabrielle nodded, taking it all in. Passing through the next door her breath caught in her throat. Obviously the main room of a private residence, it was elegant but not opulent. Her eyes traveled across the main room slowly. Large windows at the back let in the last of the day’s light, and several candles were lit throughout the room making it light, but cozy. Every where the bard’s eyes landed there was something. A book, scroll, vase, pillow, or statue. The overall effect was cluttered, but charmingly so. “This is so strange.” Gabrielle whispered. “I’ve never seen this place in my life, but it feels so comfortable.”

Beatrice sighed, “I’m not surprised Gabrielle. Daphne did the decorating. It’s her personality you see surrounding you. While she isn’t much for idle conversation, she has other ways of putting people at ease.” Gabrielle absently nodded and was about to step further into the room when a gentle hand restrained her. “If you don’t mind, it’s our custom to take our shoes off before entering. Don’t worry, the floor is quite warm.”

Gabrielle did as she was asked and slipped her boots off, putting them on a stand in the doorway obviously meant for that purpose. To her surprise the stone floor was comfortably warm, as were the eclectic rugs that carpeted the floor. Beatrice followed her into the room and answered her silent question. “Water flows from a nearby hot spring under the floor on it’s way to her father’s palace. In the summer we keep the place cool by diverting the water away from here.”

“What’s it like,” Gabrielle asked, “living with an oracle?” A moment later she blushed. The question seemingly came from nowhere, and she remembered that Daphne might be a painful subject for the salve at the moment. To her surprise Beatrice smiled warmly.

“Speaking to someone else who lives with an entity larger than life, I think you know Gabrielle. But to answer your question, Daphne isn’t an oracle all of the time. She isn’t all knowing, or always right. Sometimes she’s rather thick headed and stubborn.” Gabrielle nodded in agreement,

Xena could be like that too. “But there is no denying that she is different. She has more insight, a quicker grasp of things. Often I feel... well, mundane and ordinary.” Gabrielle nodded again, she knew that feeling too. “Once I asked her why there even were Oracles. Daphne told me that Oracles are the Fate’s way of keeping the Gods honest. Since the Gods cheat, Fate gives special insight to some to compensate and maintain a balance.”

Gabrielle strolled around the room considering the slave’s words. Distracted by an unusual set of stones on the shelf she didn’t realize she was speaking until the question was out. By then it was too late. “Why does she have a slave? I mean, she doesn’t seem like the type.”

Quickly looking at the woman studying her, Gabrielle felt a hundred shades of embarrassment at once. “I’m sorry Beatrice, I didn’t...”

“It’s okay, really.” Beatrice had stepped behind a low counter to the side of the room and began to prepare some tea. “Technically I’m not really a slave. Daphne burned the papers years ago. But the fact is, her father King Minos III, like all of the kings before him endorses the practice. Daphne has argued that it isn’t morally or economically right but she won’t be in much of a position to make changes until she takes the throne.” *If she lives that long*, Beatrice thought bitterly. “People are slow to change their views and they won’t change at all unless pushed, but she has little leverage at the moment. Still, she is not opposed to framing unrelated, unpleasant prophecy in the context of the evils of slavery and some people are worried, but not enough.”

Beatrice made her way back around the counter and handed the bard a steaming cup of tea. Gabrielle inhaled the steam cautiously, eyes brightening in the process. “What is this? It smells wonderful.”

“An odd concoction of herbs that until now only Daphne could tolerate. I think it tastes like swamp water, but apparently I’m in the minority.”

Beatrice showed Gabrielle the rest of the house. They sat together for a time on the balcony watching the stars come out, then returned to the main room. After a brief argument involving who got to sleep on the couch, Beatrice retired to bed. Gabrielle sat up for several hours reading through the writings of someone so different, yet so like herself. *“I wonder what Xena is doing right now?”* She thought as she absently pulled another scroll from the shelf. She could almost envision a somewhat awkward warrior princess trying to reassure an untalkative “bard”. At the same time Gabrielle pondered the slave’s words. She and Daphne were so much alike, yet Beatrice spoke of Daphne’s intellectual quickness and sharp wit with something akin to awe. As if looking at a painting from the back she began to see how she saw Xena, and realized that within her there was something Xena might have found equally as impressive. With a bashful smile on her lips at the thought she turned her attention to the scroll.

“I don’t remember much of my birth. I suppose I should be grateful, I’m afraid if I did I’d be claustrophobic or something. I do remember a bit about the womb though. It was dark. Dark and crowded. Dark, crowded but warm. Quite nice actually. There were two of us. I think I was born first, but as I said I can’t remember. I realize now that the woman I’ve known as mother wasn’t really so. Mother, I imagine was a girl who got herself into a whole heap of trouble with the King of Minos. Or maybe she was a slave, I simply don’t know. Anyway I suspect mother wanted a child very badly so father took one, me, and gave me to her to raise. The other woman kept the other. I don’t know what ever happened to her. Perhaps she had an easier time of it, I don’t know. I suspect someday I’ll meet her again. Life has a funny way of completing cycles.

“Still, people often talk about having someone so like them yet completely unrelated out there. I wonder if that is the case for me too? Is there someone, in a village somewhere with my eyes and my face living a different life? Is she a mother? A crafts woman? Perhaps she seeks a life of adventure? Sometime’s I think my life is one of adventure. Many nights I go to sleep honestly doubting I’ll ever wake up, often hoping I won’t. But then the headaches subside and I’m given another chance to leave some kind of impression on the world around me. What greater adventure could there be than to live one’s life to the fullest? Ah, I know, to live one’s life with someone else to the fullest, that’d have to be it. I think there is an innate redeeming quality to lives lived in tandem. Left to their own devices, isolation tends to bring out the worst in people, while companionship somehow encourages us to be our better selves. But some people, who live alone and isolated ripple with the support of community and others, while some blissfully partnered are completely

alone. I must be missing something.”

Gabrielle put the scroll down. What an odd way of writing she thought. Unedited thoughts, written candidly. Intimate and personal, but not quite a private journal. Clearly these words were intended to be read by others. Gabrielle noticed a date at the bottom of the scroll. Her eyes went wide checking to make sure she read it accurately. No mistake. According to the date listed, if Daphne was the author, she couldn't have been more than ten at the time she wrote it. Selecting another scroll even farther down in the stack, Gabrielle opened it and read. Events of a child's day were dutifully recorded by the child, nothing unusual. She picked up more of the same until she picked one that discussed nightmares. Gabrielle read out loud.

“Last night's dream was terrible. It was funny because there were only women in it. But it wasn't terrible because of that, that part was rather nice. Except for the mean ones. And there were several of those. Two women wore funny outfits; like walking tack shops. Leather and shiny stuff. One was bad, the other sort of bad, but not really. Or not right then, it was hard to tell. They were all grown. No one like me, but several women looked like me, one of them bad as well. The bad thing was, everybody died. One woman, her arms tied up above her head was impaled by a big spear, another had her head cut off and the third, the bad one was killed by one of the tack shop women. It was sad because the tack shop woman had a way to save two of the women, right at her fingertips. But she didn't know it. I hate dreams about death, I wish they would stop.”

Slowly Gabrielle put down the scroll and picked up her tea. After a couple of thoughtful sips she put the mug down and carefully put the scrolls back. Something was nagging at her, only she wasn't sure exactly what it was. “If Daphne saw all of this before,” she muttered to herself, “there should be some clue as to how to end it.” With a grimace she noticed that her back was stiff. She stood, frowning at the loud crunch from her back and walked around the room. With a disappointed sigh she remembered that she left the scroll case with Daphne's portrait in her bag on Argo's saddle. There was nothing to be done about it. She'd have to return the portrait when all of this was over. Again she was drawn to the shelf with unusual rocks. Many of them were egg shaped, made of different minerals. Some she recognized, most were foreign to her.

On another shelf all alone, was an ornate scroll case. Giving in to temptation, she eased it from its perch and opened the end. After carefully unrolling its contents she studied the complex diagrams pictured. Clearly a work of scientific study, the diagrams illustrated a series of angles and projections. Daphne seemed to have many interests. With a shrug, Gabrielle carefully returned the scroll to its case and placed it back on its shelf. After pouring herself another cup of tea, she returned to the desk. Not the least bit sleepy, she decided to read another scroll.

“You're up early.”

Gabrielle jumped at the cheerful voice that greeted her from the bedroom doorway. Shaking her head in disbelief she quickly counted the number of scrolls on the desk. There were seven.

“Have you been up long?” Beatrice asked as she made her way to the kitchen.

“Ah, I got to reading, and forgot to go to bed.” Gabrielle replied, embarrassed.

Beatrice smiled, unsurprised. “Probably the tea. Or maybe because it's a strange house?” She continued among the clatter of dishes, “I quit reading Daphne's writings a long time ago. For some reason every one I picked up somehow seemed to pertain to me. It was too unsettling.”

“I know what you mean.” Gabrielle murmured quietly.

“Well,” Beatrice continued, “why don't you have a bath, if you'd like one. I'll have something for you to eat when you're done. It's still a couple of hours before you're to meet with the high priestess.”

Gabrielle felt relaxed and oddly refreshed after her bath. The light breakfast Beatrice had prepared for her was one of the best she'd ever eaten, she decided as she finished the last of her eggs and fruit. When it was time the two adjourned to the anteroom right outside the main door.

“Ursa, the priestess will come in and sit. Offer her some tea, she's already eaten though so don't offer food. If she accepts the tea, and she usually does, I'll go get it. When I'm gone she may ask if you've had any visions. Just tell her no. If she looks disappointed don't be surprised, and take

no offense. That's just the way she is." Gabrielle nodded. "She may talk a bit about temple news. Perhaps ask your advice on something or other." Beatrice studied Gabrielle carefully and patted her arm affectionately. "Answer however you'd like. I'm sure you'll do fine."

Before Gabrielle could respond the door opened. She sat, trying to appear as calm as possible as a lone figure entered the room. The High Priestess of the temple of Artemis was thin, dressed in a shroud with her face covered. Her eyes quickly scanned the room when they came to rest on Gabrielle, the bard's breath caught in her throat.

"Callisto." Gabrielle said, matter-of-factly, when she could speak.

"Why my dear Oracle, you are good." Callisto replied smoothly, removing the shroud covering her head.

"It's what I do." Gabrielle said simply.

"Get up. You're coming with me."

"You can't be serious." Beatrice blurted, standing in between Callisto and Gabrielle.

"Daphne doesn't leave the... ugh."

"Oh, I'm dead serious." Callisto said as she watched the slave's body fall to the ground. Instantly Gabrielle was over her, checking for a pulse. Callisto had kicked her full in the chest, knocking out the wind and breaking several ribs in the process. If she'd drawn her sword, Gabrielle was certain the slave would be dead. As it was, she was only unconscious.

"Are we ready my dear?" Callisto asked sweetly, slowly drawing her sword, after removing the last of her ceremonial shroud. Petrified Gabrielle nodded mutely and stood. She walked past Callisto as indicated and distantly heard the whoosh of the sword hilt as it came down, connecting with the base of her skull turning her world to darkness.

"It's about time, where in Hades were you?" Raven asked, annoyed as Callisto sauntered into the clearing of trees.

"I had to pick up a package. I'm here now. Where's our diversion?"

"A few people have come by, but not many. Didn't want the blood to dry now did I?"

Raven asked sarcastically. "Look, we don't have much time. Xena and Gabrielle will be here soon." Her patience with the enigmatic psychotic was growing thin. Before Callisto could respond, physically or otherwise Raven cocked her head. Her sensitive hearing picked up the sounds of a horse and wagon. At her signal Callisto shrank into the trees as Raven stepped onto the nearby road. Raven laid down in the road, folding one leg to her side. Sure enough a horse drawn cart came walking around the bend in the road. A woman and man were seated in the front, both exclaiming as they saw the prone figure.

"Nestor stop! She looks hurt."

Eyes partly closed Raven saw the big man approach. When he was in range her hands shot up boxing his ears. He screamed in pain and surprise, a moment later he was silent, his neck broken. Raven rolled the body off of her as she heard the screams of the woman in the cart suddenly silence. Standing, Raven saw Callisto in the front seat of the cart, the woman impaled on her sword. Callisto got down from the cart and proceeded to walk around to the open back end. Abruptly standing up in the straw an adolescent female stood holding a pitchfork. Shaking with terror she held the crude weapon menacingly at Callisto.

"Take our money, but let me and my brother go." The girl stammered. Callisto glanced, and there partly buried in the straw was a whimpering child.

"Take it!" the girl repeated, then stopped. Looking oddly surprised she slowly sank to the straw. Callisto saw the knife point protrude from her neck, just below the chin. As the girl fell forward Callisto saw the rest of the dagger imbedded to the hilt in the girl's neck. Expertly thrown. The wound didn't bleed very much, and the girl's death had been instant. With a glance she looked over at Raven.

"I'm so glad you don't have qualms about killing children." She said.

"Children die like everyone else." Raven replied without emotion. "Now get on with it and

be quick about it.” Callisto shrugged and hopped up into the cart approaching the crying child. Face down, mostly buried in straw, hiding his face with small hands. Callisto hefted her sword and with one swift stroke severed the boy’s head from his body.

“Okay,” Callisto said hoping down from the cart. “What now?”

“Now,” Raven replied, surveying the trees, “we move this cart over there. We don’t have much time so we’ll have to set up the bodies quickly. You’ll have to do what I tell you. I can’t afford to get bloody.”

Callisto nodded and, taking the horse by the bridle, proceeded to lead it into the stand of trees.

Chapter 6: Slave

Daphne woke with a start to the sound of stone grating on metal. Surprised at first by the canopy of sky and branches above her, she quickly remembered where, and who she was. Sitting, she stretched her arms and smiled at Xena who was sitting on the other side of a small fire, legs crossed, sharpening her sword. Daphne was impressed. Always graceful, precise in her movements. Simply magnificent.

Xena noticed her staring and asked, “What?”

Daphne smiled. “You’re completely at ease with who you are.”

Xena shrugged. “Sometimes.”

“I don’t mean your past, I mean your present. Many people with less baggage than you have trouble accepting themselves. But you have. You know who you are and what you’re about. You’re honest with yourself Xena, that is unusual... and refreshing.” Daphne twisted where she sat, popping several bones in her back into place. The hard ground had taken its toll on the pampered oracle. Still, if she was physically uncomfortable, she seemed to Xena energized by the newness of the experience.

Xena ran the sharpening stone along the edge of the blade several more times, thinking. “I don’t have time to play games with myself. I’ve too much to do, to atone for. Knowing who I am and accepting it is... practical.” She finally said.

Daphne laughed. “Far be it for me to accuse you of being deep just for the fun of it.”

Xena grimaced. “And you know who you are?”

Daphne smiled. “Sometimes.” After a moments reflection she continued. “Yes warrior, I know who I am, and what I am. While I’ve no dark past to struggle against, there is the future that chooses to look over my shoulder from time to time. I don’t relish knowing when and how people will die, especially when there is nothing I can do about it. I see, and try to figure out how it all fits together. You my friend are able to act, for good or ill, leaving deep footprints on the planet.”

“Is that what this is about?” Xena asked, sheathing her sword and checking the stew pot she had set near the fire to warm. “Your opportunity to act?”

Daphne twisted her head from side to side, grimacing at the stiff protest of her neck muscles. “I suppose. But this is not something I took on lightly. I don’t have a death wish, but I do know there are things more important in life than my survival. I’m acting here because I have the opportunity, yes. And because I have a duty to do so as well. I think any... practical person would agree that the old Xena is not something we want to see unleashed on the country side.”

“The ‘old Xena’ isn’t coming back!” Xena said fiercely. She turned away, seething. She could feel it, the anger that always churned within her. It was closer to the surface now. It always was in battle, and this was a battle. A battle to keep Gabrielle safe. Gabrielle. Just thinking about the bard brought a sense of calm to her otherwise raging soul. Xena was constantly amazed at the degree Gabrielle was able to read her and provide comfort and joy to a reformed warlord in need of healing and happiness.

“And what if you killed her?” Daphne asked, breaking into her reverie. Xena looked up, eyes dark and dangerous, furious at the intrusion into her thoughts. “That is why I’m here.” Daphne added softly.

The two women broke their fast in silence, Xena still mulling over Daphne's unusual manner. She spoke lightly enough, but all of her words seemed to land on Xena like heavy boulders. For her part, Daphne was absorbed in the experience. It was all so new. The discomfort, the vastness of the countryside and the magnitude of what was at stake. She knew that this could be the last day of her life, and while she wasn't happy about it, she was at peace.

After breaking camp Xena finished saddling Argo. "Would you like to walk or ride?" She asked nodding to the horse.

"Ride? On that?" Daphne exclaimed, stunned.

"She isn't a *that*, she is a she. Argo to be specific." Xena replied patiently and she effortlessly mounted the animal.

"But she's *huge*," Daphne protested.

"Alright, up you go." Xena smiled holding out her hand. "*So like Gabrielle*," she thought.

Daphne sat rigidly behind the warrior, afraid to look down. Afraid to look anywhere but at the dark mane of Xena's hair that was directly in front of her face. She was certain that by the days end she would have aching muscles in places where she didn't even know she had muscles. She tried putting her hands on her thighs, but was sure she'd fall off when the huge animal took it's first step.

"Your arms go here." Xena explained patiently as she put the oracle's arms around her waist. "Hold on to me, I'm not going anywhere."

Daphne nodded as she complied. "Hey! Your armor's cold."

"Not for long." Xena replied, grinning to herself as she urged Argo into an easy walk.

"Uh, where are we going?" Daphne asked when her fear subsided enough to allow speech.

"Originally *we* were heading to Crios. There is a beach there that *you* wanted to see. I don't think it would make sense to hang around and *look* like I'm waiting for something, so we are going to proceed with our original plans."

"We weren't going through Minos?" Daphne asked, surprised.

"No. I avoid cities that trade in slaves whenever possible. We were getting supplies in that village. That was as close to Minos as we were going to get."

"I understand." Daphne replied quietly.

They had ridden most of the day when something caught the warrior's eye. Something strange glinted in the nearby stand of trees, in the forest not far from the city's entrance. She signaled Argo to stop and peered into the trees with keen eyes. A lone wagon sat motionless among the trees without an animal to pull it. Two figures stood near the wagon but their movements were odd. Urging Argo to the edge of the forrest, Xena eased Daphne off the war horse's back. "Stay here."

Approaching cautiously Xena scanned the surrounding forest. It was quiet, the usual chirps and movements of small animals strangely absent. Her eyes studied the ground. The cart had been pulled into the forest by a horse, a rather large one from the looks of the prints, and it was being led by someone in boots. When she got closer her eyes narrowed in anger at the sight. A man stood by the cart, his movements jerky, clearly dead. His weight was supported by thin ropes that had been threaded through his body in several places and tied to the branches of trees above him. A rope around his neck held his head aloft and ropes had been run through each hand as well as each thigh. At the other end of the cart a woman was made an equally macabre puppet. She peered into the cart, azure eyes flaring in fury at the carnage. Putting her anger aside she studied the still corpses looking for a sign as to who or what was responsible for the massacre. A young boy, head severed, most likely by a sword not an axe. The adolescent female killed by a dagger through the back of the neck, it was still protruding from her throat, expertly thrown.

Carefully taking a step back, Xena studied the forest floor. She could see where the horse had been unhitched from the cart and lead away. Hard to believe this gruesome scene was the result of a simple horse theft. Xena noticed two different sets of footprints around the hanging figures. One was the same boots that led the cart into the forest, the second, somewhat smaller made by lighter grade boots. She listened again. Whoever did this couldn't be too far away, the rhythmic

dripping of blood as the heavy drops splashed on the ground proved it. With a calloused hand she touched the cheek of the female figure. She wasn't warm but she wasn't as cold as might be expected. The skin was still too responsive, these people couldn't have been dead for more than an hour. Glad Daphne was not here to see the carnage, Xena decided to return to the oracle. The city guards would have to be notified, and the warrior would feel better with the oracle in her line of vision.

Daphne watched Xena ride off. Horse and warrior moved as one, the grace in their movements hypnotic. "Beautiful, isn't she?" A voice said from the tree above her. Before Daphne had a chance to look up, a figure dropped out of the tree and landed lightly in front of her. "And once again the irritating blond is left behind."

"Hades! Callisto, must you make a production out of everything?" Another voice said from behind Daphne. There was something in the tone of the voice, something familiar.

"Sister," Daphne whispered to herself as she heard rather than felt the impact of sword pommel on the back of her head. She slumped to the ground feeling an odd sense of connection to her assailant.

"She could have yelled." Raven hissed as she stood over her fallen twin. "And that would have undone everything."

Callisto looked skyward, clearly ignoring the reproach.

"At least help me get her on the horse." Raven fumed, stooping to pick up an arm.

The two women positioned the unconscious oracle onto the back of the pack horse, securing the front arms around the animal's neck. "Alright, bring Xena to me this time tomorrow." Callisto said as she prepared to mount the animal behind the prone figure.

"Not so fast Callisto." Raven said quietly, restraining her with a hand on her arm. When the warlord looked at her questioning the assassin pointed in the direction the warrior had gone. "Xena will be back soon, too soon for you to get away without another distraction."

"And?" Callisto urged.

"You need to knock me out. If Gabrielle is injured, Xena won't leave her to chase after who ever killed that family. Hit me here," Raven pointed to the side of her head above and behind her right ear, "hard as you can to knock me out. But try not to do any permanent damage."

"With pleasure," Callisto said cheerfully and drawing back her armored hand, backhanded Raven with armored knuckles. Raven spun from the impact and fell into a heap on the forest floor.

Beatrice woke to a searing pain in her abdomen. She opened her eyes and gingerly touched her middle, gasping at the pain that she caused. She took several shallow breaths and looked around the room. As she feared, the bard was no where in sight. Gasping in pain she got to her knees then to her feet. Standing, she felt a bit better. "Xena," she thought to herself, "I've got to tell Xena." She started for the door then stopped. She wouldn't get outside the city gates the way she felt at the moment. She briefly thought of going to Daphne's father, the King, then thought better of it. Daphne hated consulting her father on anything, especially things he wouldn't understand. Like switching places with the Warrior Princess' companion and heading out of the city without so much as telling him. Heads would surely roll for that. Heading back to the bedroom Beatrice cried out at the pain from opening her dresser drawer. Taking several more shallow breaths she carefully rummaged through the drawer. Selecting a long piece of material, the extra lining from her winter cloak, she wrapped it around herself tightly. While her ribs still hurt, the support provided by the binding eased her pain a little.

Next she headed to the kitchen and in a small bowl began to quickly mix herbs. She put half of her mixture in a pouch and tied it to her waist, the rest she added water to make a thick paste. She spooned it into her mouth and after grimacing at the bitter taste, swallowed. That would dull the pain further, for awhile at least. Finally, as quickly as she dared, she left the temple and headed to the city gates and beyond, in search of Xena.

Raven could feel herself regain consciousness and proceeded with caution. She could feel strong warm hands gently touching the sides of her face, applying a cool moist cloth to her forehead. She was grateful for the soothing distraction from her searing headache. Before attempting to move her eyes, she listened. A slight clink of metal on leather, *"this is Xena alright."* Knowing that, she allowed her eyes to flutter.

"Daphne, can you hear me?" Xena asked gently.

"*Daphne?*" Raven thought, *"who in Hades is Daphne?"* Her body still relaxed Raven sank back into herself. She didn't know any Daphne. *"A pet name for the bard perhaps?"* She didn't think so, Xena had never used the name before. Granted there were plenty of endearments the amorous couple used for each other, but Raven was sure those words couldn't really be spelled. "Have you ever seen the Oracle of Minos?" Callisto's words surfaced in her mind. "There is someone else who is going to join my little party. Once I have her and the brat I'll be ready to properly entertain Xena." Raven began to suspect what Callisto had in mind. "I had to pick up a package." *"That must be it,"* Raven was certain. Daphne must be the Oracle of Minos. *"But if that was the case, and the oracle was with Xena..."* she let the thought go. *"Why would the oracle be with Xena?"* She wondered. *"Oracles see the future,"* she reasoned. Suddenly she began to feel uneasy. If the Oracle knew Gabrielle was in danger, and warned the warrior ahead of time... for the first time in a long while Raven was very afraid. *"Think fast Raven,"* she warned herself, *"you've got to pull it together one more time."*

"Come on Daphne, wake up. You can do it." Xena urged. She touched her neck again, the pulse was strong, but there was no denying the seriousness of the blow she had taken. Again the eyes started to flutter then open.

"Welcome back." Xena smiled.

"My head... what happened?" Raven croaked.

"I was hoping you could tell me."

"I was, ah, standing here where you left me. And something came charging at me from there." Raven weakly raised her hand to point in the direction of the carnage. "I tried to see, but before I knew it something moved past me and... ouch!"

"Don't try to touch it." Xena warned, pulling the assassin's hand from where she tried to touch her wound. "You've taken a bad blow to the head, but I think you'll live."

Raven tried to nod but gave up, grimacing in pain. *"Nice touch,"* she told herself. "Who are you?" She asked quietly.

"Me?" Xena asked in surprise.

"Have we met?"

"I guess that blow is worse than I thought, sometimes it's hard to tell with head wounds. Yes, you know me. My name is Xena and we met last night. Do you know who you are?" Xena asked, looking with concern into the assassin's eyes.

"Well you called me Daphne, so I guess that's a hint. I'm from Minos?"

"Yes," Xena confirmed, "you live near the temple of Artemis."

Raven couldn't hide a smile of satisfaction, but played it off as a joke, "some oracle. I never saw it coming."

Xena brought the waterskin to the assassin's lips. "Drink. Beatrice will have my head if you get dehydrated."

"Beatrice."

"Your lover."

"Of course." Raven replied, trying hard not to sweat. "I can see faces, Xena, but I can't seem to put names to them."

Xena nodded. She'd seen that type of injury before. And from where the blow was located, it was entirely possible.

"It's okay. I suspect your memory will return in time. Try to rest, but don't sleep. I need you to stay awake." From her vantage point Xena had a clear view of the road, and they were far enough

away from the carnage to keep it from the oracle's view. This was as good a place to stop as any. A quick survey of the area around the fallen oracle revealed heavy hoofprints heading back to the road. She would catch up with the butcher as soon as the oracle was safe.

Removing a blanket from Argo's saddle, Xena eased the injured woman to a sitting position and wrapped the blanket around her shoulders. "Drink some more water," she urged, helping the assassin with the water skin. Something about murder scene didn't make sense. She'd checked the cart, a small satchel of money was nestled in a full basket of food. Nothing seemed missing. "*Murder without purpose?*" It just didn't add up. Xena considered returning to the grisly scene to cut down the corpses then thought better of it. The city guard would surely want to do an investigation. Besides, she didn't want to risk letting the oracle out of her sight if indeed the killer was nearby. "*Might that have been the murder attempt?*" she wondered and shook her head. If that blow was meant to kill it was misplaced.

Xena gazed absently up the road. She was missing something, she could feel it. Six murders. Were they related? Someone is playing with you Xena, and you know it. Smoothly the warrior's mind began to calculate possible scenarios. Staging and strategy, the meat and potatoes of military combat. She started with what she knew. The couple in the village, both necks cleanly broken; similar to the man in the forest. The female didn't fit the pattern; the sword strike to the abdomen was messy in comparison. The female adolescent was also unusual. A dagger had been used, but the strike was clean and again to the neck. And the boy. Xena forced back the anger welling within her. Blind rage was of no use at the moment. There was a time for rage and when that time came she vowed to satisfy it, but until then she needed to keep her mind clear.

Xena looked up at the clear sky. Dusk was approaching, soon the sky would be filled with brilliant oranges and reds. Xena was not particularly fond of sunrises or sunsets. She enjoyed the pre dawn sky- the indigo that faded to passionate blue. Sunsets were too much the color of blood, and blood was something she'd seen too much of today. "*Too much of period,*" she thought.

In her warlord days Xena loved sunsets. The coming of night that would make any villager with an ounce of sense fear for his life. How she had been consumed by it: the power, the challenge, basking in fear like the warmth of a burned village. She knew she'd spilt enough blood to fill a river. Those that died by her sword and chakram as well as those that had died by her order made up her own personal Styx where her name was Death. Had she not put a stop to the madness would she still be capable of the atrocities she'd seen today. "*I'd like to think not, but I might just be flattering myself.*" She shook her head sadly. "*What would make someone do this? How can a heart be more cold than that of Xena, the Warrior Princess?*"

"You're awfully quiet." A voice cut in to her thoughts, focusing Xena's attention to the present.

"I'm sorry Daphne, I was just thinking. Are you feeling any better?"

"My head doesn't hurt as much but my memory is still muddled."

"That will pass in time." Xena replied with more certainty than she felt. Some head injuries were permanent, and that one had potential. "I'll start a fire, you should eat something."

Raven nodded. "*If I'm careful, I may even survive this,*" she thought. Relieved that the warrior was so consumed with her own dark thoughts to give her much notice, Raven let her eyes wander to the road. She followed the line of dirt as it disappeared into the distance towards the city of Minos. Her eyes narrowed at the vague shapes like smoke off in the distance. After a few moments of study, her stomach began to sink and her head began to throb anew. Someone was coming.

Beatrice began to cry tears of delight as the form of Xena standing by the road came into view. Barely conscious, she managed to bring her horse to a halt, falling from the saddle and into the warrior in the process. Xena could tell from the pallor of her skin that something was very wrong.

"Beatrice, what's wrong?" Xena asked as she quickly carried the slave to the fire and set her down next to Raven.

Struggling to focus, she replied, "Gab...Gabri..."

“Gabrielle,” Xena urged, “What’s happened to Gabrielle?”

Taking a couple of breaths the slave tried again, “taken... from the temple. She said... Callisto.”

Xena’s eyes narrowed in fury. “Who said ‘Callisto’, Beatrice? Did Gabrielle say it?” The slave nodded, then winced in pain as she grabbed her side. “Did Callisto do this?” Xena asked as she began to peel away the material bound around the slaves ribcage.

After pausing for another slight nod, Xena continued her examination. “What did you take?” She asked noticing the shallow pulse and temperature of the woman’s skin. It was cold and damp to the touch.

With feeble fingers Beatrice tugged at the pouch at her side. Xena freed it from the slave’s belt and inspected the contents. “Good thinking, she said crisply. Is this about how much you took?”

When Beatrice nodded again, Xena handed the pouch to Raven. “Mix up a little of this in that bowl,” she said pointing. “Add a little water, then hand it to me.”

Casually, Raven smelled the pouch as it was handed to her. Henbane, nightshade, some comfrey and stinging nettle. “*Interesting combination,*” Raven thought and got up to retrieve the bowl from where it sat by the supplies. A quick glance assured her that Xena’s focus was on the slave. A small bouquet of cooking herbs sat next to the bowl. Carefully selecting several, she added them to a small amount of the herb mixture from the pouch.

“Did I use enough?” Raven asked as she handed the pouch back to the warrior. Xena glanced at the remaining herbs and nodded. Still keeping the bowl from the warrior’s sight she added water and mixed. “Here,” she said when she finished, handing over the bowl. “*Remember, she’s your lover,*” the assassin reminded herself. “You’ll be alright.” Raven added, as she gently took Beatrice’s hand as Xena steadied her while she drank.

As if seeing her lover for the first time Beatrice looked puzzled. “Are you alright?” The slave asked, unsure as to why she voiced the question. The oracle looked fine to her.

“I took a blow to the head, I’ve lost some memory, but I’m fine.” Raven smiled, in what she hoped was a familiar gesture.

“That must be it.” Beatrice mumbled, feeling very sleepy.

“Rest now, I won’t let anything happen to you.” Beatrice looked into hard green eyes, trying very hard to be gentle and against her better judgement, drifted off to sleep.

Xena watched the exchange, her own thoughts distracted. She now had two injured charges, four corpses in need of burial and justice, and a name to attach to the whole mess. Callisto. Gabrielle was missing, assumed to be in the clutches of the madwoman. Oddly, that gave Xena a measure of comfort. “*Callisto won’t hurt Gabrielle without me there to witness it. She should be safe for now.*” Still, the number of bodies she’d seen in the last twenty-four hours was cause for concern. Murder wasn’t out of character for the psychotic warrior, not hardly, but something about the six slain villagers was.

As she waited for dawn Xena worked through every combination of events she could think of. The end results did not narrow down the possibilities to her satisfaction.

“If Callisto and Daphne are in league with each other it would explain getting Gabrielle away from me to easily capture. But that doesn’t fit, Gabrielle trusts Daphne. Gabrielle could be wrong? That doesn’t fit either, she usually isn’t- about people anyway.

“If Callisto planned to kill Gabrielle all along why did she bother to capture her? So, I have to watch. So where is the ruse? Daphne’s head injury? Doesn’t fit. If Daphne seen that she would not have suggested switching places. Still the non lethal attack was on the oracle. Could Daphne be mistaken in her ability to counter the future?”

Xena glanced around the campsite then closed her eyes. How many times had she won an easy victory by out thinking her opponent? Still, there had been a few battles where she had to rely on swift decisions and instinct because she had failed to outsmart her opponent ahead of time. As a warlord she’d been unbeatable. But she wasn’t a war lord any more. “*Or am I? Commit only enough forces necessary to win but not enough to divulge your strength. Life is not cheap but death is inevitable. Find out what it is they want and use that against them. Know your enemy.*”

Xena opened her eyes once more scanning the perimeter of the fire. Daphne and Beatrice slept side by side. The fire was burning low but warm so Xena left it. She closed her eyes again and went over everything she knew about Callisto.

Chapter 7: Cage

Daphne awoke shivering uncontrollably. She felt warm arms encircle her, gently rocking, providing some comfort. “Beatrice?” she murmured, trying to open her eyes.

“No, it’s Gabrielle.” Gabrielle replied. “You were having some kind of nightmare. I didn’t want to wake you, I’ve heard you’re not supposed to do that. When it happens to Xena I just hold her and she usually quiets down.”

Daphne opened her eyes to the dreary gray of a stone cell. The room was perhaps ten feet wide and twenty feet long, with iron bars across the length. A larger viewing area was on the other side of the iron bars. The only furniture in the room were several dilapidated palettes and a bucket of brackish water. The smell of mildew and rot permeated everything. The only light came from two torches on the wall outside the iron bars, another six feet away, well out of reach.

“I’ve read about dungeons surely, but this is the first time I’ve been in one.”

Gabrielle smiled, “I’ve been in a few, and this one is damper than most. I think we’re near the coast, but I’m not sure.”

Daphne nodded, wincing at the pain the movement caused.

“Try to be still,” Gabrielle urged, “for awhile at least, it’ll take a while for you to get your bearings.”

“How long have I been here? There was a woman...”

The bard nodded, “that was Callisto. Xena’s arch-nemesis. The most evil person I’ve ever had the displeasure to meet. She gave you that smack on the back of the head, then I think she drugged you. You’ve been asleep for hours.”

Daphne shook her head carefully. “She might have drugged me but she didn’t hit me. I think Callisto is about to become the second most vile person you’ve ever met.”

“The darkness you spoke of?”

“Yes, I think she’s my twin sister. Gabrielle, she looks like us.”

As the words sank in a chilling thought occurred to the bard. “Wait a minute. You were with Xena, what happened to her?”

“Oh, isn’t that sweet.” Callisto taunted as she stepped into view, her boots making surprisingly little sound on the stone floor outside the cell. “The look alikes are getting to know each other. And dressed like twins to boot.”

At that moment Daphne noticed that Gabrielle was indeed wearing her customary outfit. “I was wearing this when I woke up.” Gabrielle answered her silent question.

“You’ve got me Callisto, why not let her go?” The oracle asked, looking at the mad warrior with a neutral expression.

“That” Callisto interjected, nodding at Gabrielle “is Daphne, the famed Oracle of Minos. Daphne, meet Gabrielle: Warrior Slut or Bard Brat, take your pick.”

“Charmed,” Gabrielle said keeping her voice neutral. Maybe Callisto confusing them could somehow work to their advantage.

“The oracle is here for the same reason you are, dear Gabrielle. Xena has such a fondness for your face I thought I’d let her have more of it. Lets see if she loves you enough to realize who you really are, and save you and not someone else from certain death.” Callisto gently ran her fingers across the iron bars as she contemplated her prisoners.

“Don’t get too comfy kids.” she added leaving the room, “you’re going to get another roommate.”

When the warrior was gone Daphne spoke in hushed tones, uncertain of their privacy. “Xena wasn’t with me when I was captured. There was something up the road that she wanted to check out. I think she’s fine.”

“So if this twin of your’s took your place, Xena would think she’s you?” Gabrielle reasoned, mostly to herself, “But your twin will think Xena is expecting me.” The bard paced back and forth counting off points on her fingers. “Well I don’t think she’ll be successful in any case. That could help us. For now I think it best if Callisto has us mixed up.”

“I agree, but how were you captured? How is Beatrice?” Daphne asked, tugging on the bard’s skirt to keep her from pacing.

Gabrielle sat down and gently took the oracle’s hands. “I’m sorry Daphne, she was hurt. Callisto came in dressed as the High Priestess, Beatrice tried to protect me. I checked her pulse before I was knocked out, it was strong. She was kicked in the chest.”

“She’ll make it.” Daphne sighed, relieved. “I don’t suppose there is any way out?”

Gabrielle shrugged. “That’s usually the first thing I check for. And no, there isn’t. No windows, nothing but stone and iron bars we’re stuck. I did see Callisto working on something earlier though.” The bard pointed beyond the iron bars across the stone floor to the wall on the opposite side. “See those holes in the stone wall, in between the torches? I think there is a room beyond there with something mechanical. Callisto thought I was asleep and she went back there, I guess there is a door around the corner.”

“What a bizarre pattern...”

“Wha-?” Gabrielle followed the oracle’s line of vision and noticed that there was indeed an unusual patterning of stone on the wall across from them as well as the stone floor up to the point that it met the iron bars of their cage. The floor on their side had the usual rough hewn look of unfinished stone.

“Of course,” Daphne muttered, “the battle, it’s going to take place here. Xena will have to choose who to save, something about that patterning, I think I’ve seen this room before. It’s a trap.”

Xena’s eyes flew open with a start. Dawn was still a couple of hours off, she’d dozed longer than she’d expected. She glanced over at Beatrice, noting the rhythmic breathing of heavy sleep. Daphne was missing; there was no second body next to the slave. Xena listened intently as she scanned the dark shadows of the campsite. The oracle was nowhere to be seen. Getting silently to her feet Xena looked at the empty blankets next to the unconscious slave. She followed footprints from the blanket to the tree where Gabrielle’s staff had been resting. It was gone. The tracks then headed out down a game trail and abruptly stopped. Xena retraced the footprints back to the campsite. She glanced at Argo; the horse was sleeping peacefully. Her eyes fell down to Argo’s saddle and she noticed her bullwhip was missing. On a hunch she returned to where the prints ended on the game trail and looked up. Sure enough, well within the reach of her whip was a sturdy branch.

“Beatrice, Beatrice! Wake up!” Xena frowned as the slave woman groaned and slipped again into unconsciousness. Gently she lifted an eyelid, and rechecked the woman’s pulse. “Blast it.” She muttered. Finding the bowl from the previous evening she tasted the herb residue, spitting out the strong brew instantly. Rummaging through her saddle bags, Xena found the pouch she was looking for, breaking off a chunk of the strong black tea she returned to the fire, thoughts focused on getting the slave awake and fast.

Xena didn’t have to wait too long. The aroma of the strong drink was almost enough to rouse the woman from the arms of Morpheus, once she’d managed to drink several sips, she began to wake up. “What happened?” She asked groggily. I could hear you but I couldn’t wake up.”

“You were drugged.” Xena supplied, “Daphne did something to the pain killer you made. It made you sleep longer than you should have.”

With a start Beatrice looked around the camp site. “Where is...”

“Daphne is gone Beatrice. Any idea of where, or why?” Xena kept her voice even. The implication was not lost on the slave.

“Xena, I don’t think that was Daphne.”

“Well it sure as Zeus wasn’t Gabrielle.”

Both women looked at each other for a moment. “The other one?” Xena whispered to herself.

“That has to be it.” Beatrice agreed. “I can’t believe there are three of them, but that must have been the dark one.”

“We’ve got to pick up her trail. Can you travel?”

Beatrice nodded with more certainty than she felt. Now was not the time to worry about discomfort. Whoever that woman was she was out there, and most likely on her way to join forces with the vulture... Callisto.

Returning to the game trail Xena leapt into the tree. She climbed to the branch she suspected the fake Daphne had used the whip on to climb the tree. Sure enough there were signs on the bark. Xena leapt from one branch to another looking for signs of human passage. Beatrice scouted on the forest floor leading Argo. “What about here?” Xena called down from her latest perch.

Xena had traveled for some distance in the trees, and now the branches were further apart; less accessible.

“No... wait, yes I think this is a print.” Beatrice called back up.

With a graceful flip, Xena leaped from the tree and landed lightly next to the slave intently studying the forest floor. “Good work Beatrice,” Xena smiled, “we’ve got her now. She’s got several hours on us, but we’ve got Argo.”

Beatrice smiled weakly, two broken ribs and the memory of a horse’s gait left her feeling nauseous.

Raven marched up to the heavy wood door of Callisto’s retreat pausing only to dispatch another guard. She’d killed five already, and that hadn’t even begun to take the edge off of her rage. The psycho bitch had played her as a pawn and Raven was furious with herself for allowing it to happen. Once inside the heavy door she eased into the shadows, following the stone hallway. Another guard was encountered and disposed of. Quickly Raven checked her hands and smiled to herself. She had still avoided getting herself bloodied. After checking several rooms and not finding the psychotic warrior she tried another heavy door at the end of an adjacent hall. It opened into a large room separated by iron bars. About two thirds of the room was on one side of the bars, one third on the other. She was standing in the two thirds with the doorway. Behind the bars, looking surprised, were Daphne and Gabrielle. Raven stopped in her tracks, mesmerized.

“I don’t suppose you’re here to get us out?” Gabrielle asked hopefully.

“No.” Raven answered, “Gabrielle?”

“No, Daphne.” Gabrielle answered.

“You sound like Gabrielle.” Raven replied, more sure of herself.

“Well she isn’t, I’m Gabrielle.” Daphne insisted.

Raven shrugged; stupid games. “Okay so you’re Gabrielle. I’m sure you’re all too familiar with this cute little scar on the inside of Xena’s right thigh.” Daphne shrugged noncommittally. “Wrong.” Raven continued, “she doesn’t have one. I don’t care which one of you wants to play whom, but don’t think for a second that you’re fooling me.” She was about to head out the door when she thought better of it. “Still,” she said in Gabrielle’s voice, “if you’re going to play the bard, you might as well do it right.”

Gabrielle gasped in spite of herself. It was so unreal, as if she were watching a twin, identical in every way. Except that this was a murderous assassin. “How do you do that?” Gabrielle asked awed.

“It’s easy.” Raven continued in Gabrielle’s voice. “When you carry on a conversation your voice has an easy rhythm. Unless you get animated about something,” Raven slipped into Gabrielle’s voice in ‘story mode’. With theatrical passion she swept around the room. “Shall I tell you about the time Xena and I fought the Titans?”

“Oh stop it Raven.” Daphne commanded, “we get your point.”

“Aren’t we the mind-reader. How do you know my name?”

“I am an oracle, am I not?” Daphne asked, arching a wry eyebrow. “I’m also your sister, obviously a twin.”

“What about her?” Raven asked nodding back at the bard.

“Sadly, not a family relation, but given the choice I’d much rather be related to her.”

“I’ll bet you would.”

“Callisto is playing you for a fool Raven, I hope you know that.” Daphne continued.

“Callisto’s games are soon going to come to an abrupt halt.”

“I don’t see how you got mixed up with her in the first place.” Gabrielle muttered, more to herself than anyone else.

“It’s simple Gabrielle,” Raven supplied as she strolled further into the room to stand in front of the bard, “I kill people. It’s what I do. I was originally hired to eliminate you. Only your blond friend decided to keep changing the plan until it became doomed to failure.”

“But how can you kill? In cold blood?” Gabrielle demanded, eyes burning with anger.

“Don’t get high and mighty with me, brat.” Raven shot back, “you belong to Xena, destroyer of nations. How many did she kill, in cold blood. And before you go saying that killing in battle changes everything, don’t bother. I don’t push people up against a wall where they have to fight, see their death coming a mile away and feel the fear creep into their soul. No, I kill people instantly, before they even know I’m there. I think it’s more humane. Besides-oh-wielder of the quarter staff, how much permanent brain damage do you think you’ve caused? Killing is wrong but maiming is not?” Raven cocked her head at the speechless bard. “No, dear Gabrielle, I don’t think we’re quite as different as you might like to think.”

“Oh yes you are.” Daphne countered, noting the bard’s distress. “The only reason you kill Raven is because you can. You’re too numb to feel anything, especially your own conscience. Whatever it was that detached your soul from your body, fight it. Fight it and do something decent, help us.”

Raven slowly walked the few feet to stand in front of her sister. She looked into the face beyond the bars so much like her own, and so different. She could see the reflection of her eyes in those of her sister. She could have been a statue for all the emotion given away there. “If a tree is struck by lightning, sister mine, it may live, but it is forever changed. It might sprout new branches, provide shade with it’s boughs of leaves but it is still scorched to it’s core. Everything and everyone dies Daphne. I was destroyed a long, long time ago...”

“Oh isn’t this touching.” Callisto said stepping through the doorway opposite the assassin. “A family reunion. I, of course, would love to have a family reunion, only Xena killed my family.” She briefly glared at Daphne, still thinking she was Gabrielle, then returned her attention to Raven. “You’re early dear. I take it you changed your mind about our plans? Or did you bring Xena with you?”

“This was over before it ever began Callisto. If their death is what you truly seek, kill them now and be done with it. Else, let them go and run as far and as fast as you can.” Raven calmly noted the hand crossbow the mad woman held, cocked and pointed at her chest.

“What are you talking about? Couldn’t you convince her you were the brat?” Callisto asked intrigued, but keeping a careful eye on the assassin.

“I’m saying that Xena has known something was amiss all along. If it had been a matter of replacing the brat we’d be fine, but the bard and oracle had already switched places before I even got there.”

Callisto looked with new appreciation at her captives in the cage. “I’m impressed girls,” she said with a smile. “But it makes no difference. The outcome will be the same.” With that, while still looking at Gabrielle and Daphne, she pulled the trigger on the crossbow. A dart shot out, speeding toward the assassin.

Raven deftly caught the bolt in her hand before it hit, then opened her hand quickly as if burned. She gazed in fascination at the tiny pin pricks of blood now visible on her palm. “I

thought you might be able to catch that,” Callisto explained, “so I set several needles perpendicular to the dart shaft. Pleasant dreams, dear.” Raven struggled against the approaching darkness, but it was to no use. The crossbow bolt clattered to the stone floor seconds before Raven. “Now that was simple.” Callisto continued conversationally as she loaded another bolt into the small crossbow. “Let’s see if this is just as easy.” Taking aim she pointed the weapon at Daphne and fired. Before she could move the tiny dart found its mark and imbedded itself in her arm. Reloading she aimed at Gabrielle and fired. The bard however managed to duck and roll before being hit. The bolt skipped harmlessly across the stone floor. “Shit.” Callisto muttered. “Fine brat, we’ll do this the hard way.” Taking a key from inside the top of her boot she opened the heavy barred door leading into the cell. As Gabrielle dove for the dart, the only weapon now in the cell, Callisto leaped into the air, tucked into a tight spin and landed at the dart just as the bard reached it.

“Not so fast little one.” Callisto said cheerily as her foot came down on the bard’s hand before she could reach the dart, “you don’t want to spoil Xena’s surprise now do you?”

Gabrielle yelped in pain as her fingers were stomped on, and tried to back away from the mad woman as Callisto picked up the dart and threw it out of the cell. Approaching ominously, Callisto backed Gabrielle against the wall, several feet from where the barred door stood open. “Don’t even think about it.” Callisto hissed and closed the distance between them. She was mildly surprised as the bard’s fist flew out and connected with her face. As Gabrielle lunged for the door, Callisto caught her around the waist and pulled her back. Roughly throwing the bard against the stone wall, Callisto leaned in with all her strength, her breath warm against the bard’s mouth. “That was a very stupid thing to do Gabrielle.” Callisto whispered. “Don’t think for a second you and Xena won’t pay for that.” With that she covered the bard’s mouth with her own and while forcing her tongue over the lips of the struggling bard, kneed her soundly in the abdomen.

Gabrielle sank to the floor, gasping for air, abdomen cramping from the force of the blow. The last thing she saw was Callisto’s boot as it connected solidly with the side of her face.

Chapter 8: Trap

A short distance from the main gate of the fortress Xena eased Beatrice from Argo’s saddle. While the salve had fared better than expected on the big horse, she was far from well. After finding a safe, secluded place for the injured woman to hide, continued on to the fortress alone.

Cautiously Xena dismounted from Argo’s saddle. She slapped the mare’s rump sending her off into the trees beyond the perimeter of the fortress grounds. She’d have to travel the rest of the way to the enclosure on foot. She’d silently walked a short distance and was surprised she’d not yet encountered any guards. As she passed the open barn she glanced in and found her reason. One guard lay in a pile of straw impaled on a pitch fork, another sat motionless several feet away, neck broken. A third guard lay just outside the door to the fortress, his hand still clutching the knife in his throat. Xena shook her head at the grim evidence of the assassin’s passing and eased through the partially open door. Two more guards lay motionless just inside. Faces twisted in the grimace of death stared out of sightless eyes. After noting their presence Xena averted her eyes, concentrating instead on the hallway as she moved deeper into the fortress.

Her boots silent on the hard flagstones she stole deeper into Callisto’s lair. Several rooms were open but empty. At one point upon hearing voices she stole into a dark alcove silent as death until the guards passed. They grumbled about their detail of removing the bodies from the entrance and keeping an eye out for the warrior princess. Xena dared not hope that Callisto would not be ready for her.

In time she found the stairs that descended into darkness illuminated by a sputtering torch. She listened for several long moments before descending the stairs. Reaching the bottom she stepped beyond the open door. Her heart leapt into her throat at the sight that greeted her. Straw was scattered all over the floor, obscuring the random pattern of the flagstones. To one side of the room was an enclosure, iron bars separating her from the occupants on the other side. Side by side, three women, all looking like Gabrielle were restrained. On the left one hung suspended by

manacles attached to her wrists, arms painfully bound over head, her feet inches off of the stone floor. In the middle the second knelt on the floor, her wrists bound to the sides of a chopping block, neck bound to it's surface. Attached to the wall a mighty battle axe was supported by a precariously thin rope. Finally the last, this one with a large bruise on the side of her face, was bound hands and feet to the flagstone wall in a spread eagle position. All three figures appeared unconscious.

"Gabrielle?" Xena whispered softly.

Slowly all three women opened their eyes. "Xena?" the two on each end replied in unison. Xena blinked and looked from one woman to the other, unable to tell which was her bard.

"I'm Daphne." The figure in the middle stated, "that should narrow it down a bit." The oracle struggled against the manacles holding her arms to the chopping block, trying to turn her head to look at the woman next to her. "This is Callisto's idea of a sick joke, or revenge. The wall behind you is rigged somehow with traps..."

Xena nodded, her mind racing past the oracle's words, "do you know which is Gabrielle?" She asked.

"Xena, it's me." The one on the left said quietly. "Just tell me how I can convince you."

Xena tore her eyes from Daphne to the manacled woman hanging from the ceiling. The voice was so like Gabrielle.

"Don't fall for it," the woman on the far right cautioned, "she's been watching us and no doubt has heard my stories of our adventures. If you ask her something it had better be something known only by... well, you get the picture."

Xena looked at the woman pinned to the wall. Again the comment as well as voice was just like Gabrielle. At the sound of stone sliding against stone, Xena spun around, her attention directed to a panel that had opened high up on the back wall.

"Isn't this quaint?" Callisto asked cheerfully, from her perch in the wall behind Xena, looking down into the room below. "Xena and the irritating blonds, but one of them is a *bad blond*. Which one shall she save?"

"The only irritating blond here Callisto is you." Xena replied smoothly. "What makes you think I won't save all three of them?"

Callisto smiled a feral smile, eyes narrowing slightly. "Because good Xena does not have that kind of time." At a hand signal from the mad warrior two more panels slid aside. Revealed, in each corner of the back wall a heavy crossbow was mounted, cocked with a flaming bolt aimed at the straw that littered the floor. "Fire isn't your only concern Xena." Callisto taunted. "Behind this wall several arrows are loaded and aimed at the Gabrielle on the left. The fire will surely burn through the rope holding the axe over the Gabrielle in the middle and a rather large spear is aimed at the Gabrielle on the right. I'm afraid your chakram will be of little use- it can't slice through stone after all." She was about to duck back behind the wall when she added, "you surely could save one Xena, maybe even two- but you will not be able to save all three. Even if you did. That third one will most likely kill you."

"Your quarrel is with me Callisto, not Gabrielle. Show some backbone and fight me!" Xena demanded, eyes shining with barely controlled rage.

Callisto laughed, at first a happy sound that quickly lost all traces of humor. "My dear Xena. I don't have a quarrel with you. No, my warrior princess, I simply want to destroy you. I could kill you, but what would that get me? You'd only be dead. No, this way with your heart and soul a crispy pile of ashes, like my family, you will be destroyed." With a smile that lit up her whole face she added a cheery "bye-bye," before leaving. The stone slammed back with a thud, the mad woman gone.

Xena turned back around, eyes scanning the occupants of the cage. Suddenly an idea came to her. "Gabrielle," she called. Two sets of eyes snapped up, riveted on her. "You stayed at Daphne's last night. What does the place look like?" Xena nodded at the oracle.

Gabrielle sighed in relief. "It's really cluttered, but in a nice way. I stayed up all night reading scrolls that she'd written which were stacked on a shelf by her desk. She doesn't wear shoes inside,

the place is heated from piped water below from a near by hot spring.”

Daphne tried to nod emphatically, although her movements were hampered by the collar around her neck, binding her to the chopping block. “That’s Gabrielle.”

Xena nodded. Carefully studying the positioning of the three bodies. If she threw her chakram to free Gabrielle, she could see where the weapon would strike stone then angle back to free Raven. If she threw it to free Daphne the disc would strike stone and angle back up to release the axe. She was not sure the oracle could move out of the way in time. Callisto had been careful enough in positioning the bodies to render Xena’s most powerful weapon useless. “Do you know how I get into the room behind me? I’ve got to stop the arrows.”

Gabrielle shook her head. “No Xena, there isn’t time for that.” She tried to look at Daphne, wincing in pain as she moved her head. “I read something you wrote, a dream you had as a child, it was about his. You said ‘the warrior had a way to save two of the women, right at her fingertips but she didn’t know it.’ In your dream Daphne, we all died. What is it Xena has to do to change that?”

Daphne closed her eyes trying to be calm. “Fingertips, fingertips,” she muttered trying to remember the dream she’d had as a child. Xena glanced up to the burning arrows then back to the cell. The cold eyes of Raven caught hers and she found herself transfixed by such a cold expression on what was ordinarily such a warm face. “It’s right in front of her... face” Daphne continued opening her eyes wide. She noticed Xena looking at Raven through the barred door of the cage. “It’s the lock Xena, you should be able to break the lock. Then you can help us from the inside.”

“It’s a slide out mechanism,” Raven offered. “Take your breast dagger and put the point of the blade at the top of the key hole. Then take the clasp that holds up your breast plate, put it in the hole below and shove the tumbler to the side, pull down hard and the lock will open.”

“Why are you helping us?” Gabrielle asked as Xena followed the assassin’s directions.

“Because I have no intention of dying in here, Gabrielle.”

The lock snapping open Xena’s eyes again found those of the assassin. “That’s exactly what you’re going to do, Raven.” She said evenly, “I saw some of your handiwork in the forest and the village. Getting you out of here is the last of my concerns.”

“We shall see.” Raven said quietly.

Once inside the cage Xena hurried to the part of the cell where Gabrielle was pinned. With a swift strike of her sword she broke the manacles that bound her friends hands and feet. She tumbled to the floor just as the *twang* of a bowstring could be heard from beyond the wall. Several arrows sped to the wall just occupied by the bard and clattered onto the stone floor. Xena quickly grabbed the battle axe hung precariously over Daphne’s head and threw it just as another *thwap* sounded. Letting it fly it connected with the spear heading toward Raven, knocking it from its path to her abdomen. Just then each fiery arrow was released from its bow setting the straw outside the cage ablaze. Xena nodded to Gabrielle, “Try to put that out, I’ll free Daphne.”

Gabrielle headed to the door of the cage, an instant later clawing at the legs wrapped around her neck, gasping for air. Xena looked up with a start at the movement. The assassin’s legs had not been bound, they’d been hanging loose several inches from the cell floor. As Gabrielle had tried to pass the woman she had caught the bard around the neck in a vice-like scissor hold. “Get me down now Xena, or I break her neck. I think you know I can, and will.”

“Oh I know it all right.” Xena said calmly as she finished freeing Daphne. One eye on the spreading fire and the other on the assassin, she approached cautiously. “What do you want me to do?” Xena asked.

“Break the manacles the same way you broke Gabrielle’s. Don’t cut the chain from the ceiling- just break the cuffs. Use your sword and if you think for an instant that you can kill me before I can snap her neck, you’d be wrong.” Xena nodded, knowing the killer before her was not boasting. With a smooth strike of her sword, she freed the woman who fell to the floor bringing the bard down with her. Xena waited for a heart beat as Gabrielle quickly rolled from the assassin’s grasp.

“Gabrielle, Daphne out now!” Xena shouted as she moved her body between that of the

killer and the other women. Both women hurried out the door as Raven's hand closed on the shaft of the battle axe on the floor by her side. The flames continued to spread, now burning the straw inside the cell as smoke began to fill the room. Rolling to her knees Raven swung upwards with the axe, grazing the bronze of Xena's breastplate. Moving back reflexively, sword at the ready the warrior parried and prepared for the next move by the assassin. It was almost impossible not to see the surreal battle as combat with a hate filled Gabrielle. Xena focused her thoughts, remembering that this was not the bard but a demented murderer.

Noting a patch of burning straw in the periphery of her vision, Raven kicked the smoldering mass into the face of the warrior. Xena turned her face, sword still guarding her body but her other arm shielding her eyes from the flying embers. Raven dropped the axe and with a graceful leap flipped over the head of the warrior.

"NO!" Gabrielle screamed as Raven hooked an arm around the warrior's neck, the other hand moving to the side of her head to break Xena's neck. Raven glanced in the bard's direction, for a moment almost thinking she heard her own voice. Xena smoothly reversed her grip on her sword and with a mighty shove to the side moved out of the way as she plunged her weapon into the assassin's mid section. Raven relaxed her grip on the warrior's neck as she looked down in disbelief at the sword protruding from her below her ribs, her blood spilling on the straw strewn floor. Standing next to Daphne and Gabrielle, Raven noticed another figure in the stone room, this one holding a candle. It was Celesta, Hades' sister and she was about to die.

Xena held on to her sword as Raven fell back to the floor, the scent of burning straw filling her fading senses. She could feel the blood begin to fill her lungs and realized she'd be dead soon. After a glance at the growing fire, she realized she would however, not be dead soon enough. Resigned to her fate she looked up at the warrior towering over her. "I would not have let Gabrielle suffer. I have made few suffer." Her voice was hopeful, "Speed me to my destiny in Tartarus Xena."

Xena was about to turn away when Raven added, "Finish it Xena," her expression pleading. "*Please.*" Eyes burning from the smoke as well as something else, Xena took two steps to stand at Raven's side. With a spin of her sword, holding it high over head, she plunged it straight down into the heart of the assassin. Raven's eyes opened wide in surprise then darkened. "Thank you," she whispered with her dying breath. Xena stood eyes riveted on the gruesome sight at her feet, unable to shake the feeling that she'd killed Gabrielle.

"Xena, lets go. It's over!" The sound of her bard's voice drew the warrior from her paralysis. She quickly followed Gabrielle and Daphne from the dungeon. The guards remaining in the fortress were too distracted to pay much attention to the three women leaving. Some were running to fetch water to put out the fire below, others trying to determine if Callisto had in fact left, and if so, what their orders then were. Others were grabbing what valuables they could and fleeing the scene. Despite the chaos, it was necessary for Xena to dispatch several guards as the trio made their way to the grounds outside the fortress. After several attempts to question guards, Xena was certain that Callisto had indeed left her lair, as far and as fast as she could.

Chapter 9: Tartarus

Raven opened her eyes to the dimly lit chamber. The vaulted ceiling above her seemed impossibly high, dominated by massive chandeliers that held dozens of candles as thick as her arm. The rich smells of wood, stone and wax permeated her senses as she lowered her gaze and looked around. Huge embroidered tapestries hung on the walls to either side of her and there, at the far end of the massive chamber, a man dressed in black sat upon an ebony throne.

"Welcome Raven," he said when she made eye contact.

She walked the length of the throne room to stand before the man in black, her booted feet making no sound on the stone floor. Looking at herself she was surprised to find that she was no longer dressed in Gabrielle's clothing. Rather she wore what she felt most comfortable in; supple black leather pants, sturdy boots, black leather shirt and wool cloak. Instinctively she touched the shirt where it covered her heart. Through the leather she could clearly feel the wound that killed her.

“Hades.” She said, looking up at the man on the throne. He nodded, regarding her with eyes that were surprisingly kind.

“That’s right Raven, you’re dead. Not the first woman Xena has sent to Charon’s boat, but certainly the most troubling. I’ve not been looking forward to our meeting.” Hades spoke in a quiet voice his grim duty weighing heavily upon him.

“Funny,” Raven replied with a shrug, “I’d have thought my case would be rather straightforward. I believe it’s called eternity in Tartarus isn’t it?”

Hades smiled a small smile and stood, descending the dias that held his throne, “Trust me, if it were that simple you would not be in my audience chamber. Would you please come with me?” He asked, beginning to walk back the way Raven had come.

The two stepped outside the castle into a huge garden. A variety of wild flowers were in bloom making the air sweetly fragrant. Raven accompanied Hades as he walked by a still pond beneath the boughs of a huge willow tree.

“Is this the Elysian Fields?” Raven asked amazed by the serenity of the place.

Hades chuckled to himself. “No Raven, the Fields are quite far from here. This garden is mine and I’ve spent a lot of time here trying to decide what to do with you.” She was about to respond and he held up his hand silencing her. “The fact is Raven that even as the monster who created you dwells in Tartarus, you yourself have 52 deaths weighing against your soul. Not only those 52 deaths, but the 330 lives disrupted by your actions and the 20 people who simply will never exist because of you. The murder of Thanos does not count against you, since I consider that self defense.” Raven shuddered at the mention of *It’s* given name. “Of the 52 people you dispatched from earth, thirty eight ended up in Tarterus anyway. I compliment you on choosing your clients wisely. However, of the fourteen innocents you’ve killed, six of them were in the past week. I’m rather angry about that.”

“That’s understandable,” Raven agreed.

“I’m fascinated Raven,” Hades said, looking down at the woman who walked by his side. “I’ve had people like you pass through my house, and the first words out of their mouth when they opened their eyes was about how their deeds were not their fault. How others had destroyed them, leaving them to act out of desperation. Even Thanos wailed about the treatment he had received from his mother. Yet I’ve known that you would not utter a single word to absolve yourself of responsibility. Why?”

Raven gazed into the pond for a moment realizing with a start just how rare were the occasions in life that she saw her own reflection. “Why lie to a god?” She asked. “I always knew that the childhood I endured was not my fault, or of my doing. I suppose that understanding made it more tolerable in the sense that I did not follow the tragic example of my brother. But I knew of pain, and often would have welcomed the chance to cross the Styx and have it all end. When you become impervious to the touches that hurt, words that impale and emotions that destroy you also become deaf to the sounds of love and numb to the sensation of comfort.” She looked up, unflinching from the gaze of the god that studied her. “I considered my options Hades, and chose not to feel rather than to hurt. I am prepared to exist in the ramifications of my choice now.”

Hades shook his head sadly, “Raven, you were eight years old when you made that choice. You are prepared to endure eternity based on the choices made by an eight year old that at the time were necessary for her survival?”

Raven shrugged her shoulders, “it’s a little late to change my mind now, isn’t it? I’m twenty-one Hades. In the past ten years I’ve ended the lives of 52 people. Had I been desperate for an alternative path, wouldn’t ten years have been long enough to find it?”

Looking off into the distance Hades sighed. “I don’t think so Raven, apparently not in your case. That is why I find your death so untimely. Frankly, I think in time you might have changed.”

“Why?” Raven asked, “because Xena did?”

Hades smiled. “In part, yes. Make no mistake, the change Xena has wrought in her own life is hard one. She still struggles with it, but slowly is getting better. If you would have asked me years

ago if I thought she could do it, I would have said no, she was so tightly bound to Ares. You on the other hand, were bound to nothing. It should have been easier for you.”

He shook his head and continued to walk. “But what’s done is done and you are dead. Now it is my responsibility to see to it that you endure the afterlife you deserve. It appears that you should endure the standard assignments. You will live each of the lives you ended for good or ill. You will meet with each person whose life you effected, and endure with them the result of your actions. You will also experience the twenty lives you negated from the realm of possibility. Finally there are personal matters you will attend to.”

The color drained from Raven’s face as she considered her fate. It took a moment for Hades’s words to sink in. “Personal matters?” she asked.

“Yes. For starters, your brother Adonis has been in Tartarus for the past eleven years. He holds himself responsible for what you became. Convinced that taking his own life left you no alternative, he exists in a self imposed prison. Your first task is to decide with him if this is just.”

“Of course it isn’t.” Raven replied immediately, “let him go.”

“That is an easy answer Raven, but does he not have a point? If he had lived, would not the two of you been of some comfort for each other?” Hades asked. Raven looked down at the soft grass of the garden, unable to meet the god’s gaze. “Raven, eternity is going to be harder, more difficult and more painful than anything you could possibly imagine. Because you did not feel in life, you will now need to go back, reopen every wound, reexamine every decision and come to an understanding of why everything happened. Your brother is only the beginning. The two of you may decide he belongs here, or in the Fields. That journey of discovery may take years.”

“I guess that’s why this is called eternity.” Raven quipped dryly.

Hades nodded. “When that is decided there is the matter of your mother...”

“She’s dead?” Raven asked stunned.

“Yes she is.” Hades replied, his gaze intent on an unusual flower. “Same method as your brother, after discovering the murdered remains of Thanos. Her own choices became more than she could bear.”

“What do you mean choices?” Raven demanded, “she knew nothing.”

Hades smiled sadly. “Not knowing and choosing not to see are two different things. You will discover with her which it is.”

Raven nodded, with each task set before her eternity seemed to stretch out farther and farther. “And after?” She asked, her voice barely a whisper.

“Your father, who is in the Elysian Fields, has watched your life. The Fields are little comfort to him, so great is grief over what such an innocent child became.” Hades gazed up at the branches of the great willow and to the gray swirling sky beyond.

“But what comfort can I provide him?” Raven asked, realizing that each task before her was more daunting than the last.

“That is for the two of you to discover.” Hades replied and began to walk back to his castle, motioning for Raven to join him.

“Is there more?” Raven asked, afraid of the answer.

“One more,” Hades said, his voice soft, “Thanos.”

“What do you mean Thanos?” Raven demanded, stopping where she stood and angrily turning to face the god.

“He is in Tartarus for a reason Raven. He has watched you grow and become what you are. He has endured all he did to you, from your perspective. Endured every kill you ever made from your point of view as well as that of the victim. He has felt the torment of your brother and your mother. Among many other things, he will have to endure your wrath, as you will have to endure the wrath of those you’ve harmed. You may torture him, talk to him, try to understand him or not. It is up to you. While you might think that an easy task now, it will be a bit more complicated when your own journey is underway.”

God and woman entered the castle; it looked different to Raven. Instead of the grand

audience chamber they were in the longest stone hallway she had ever seen. Doors lined each wall far off into the distance. Hades was silent for a moment as they walked.

“Is the journey ever over Hades?” Raven asked, unsettled by the silence.

“It takes a day to live a day Raven. But it can take years to fully understand that day. Yes, this journey has an end. Some reach it more quickly than others, but compared to the time frame you’re used to, eternity is an apt description.”

Raven nodded, determined to accept her fate as Hades stopped outside a heavy door. “This is your first door. Your brother. Once you open it, you take the first step toward your redemption and begin your torture.” Raven reached for the handle, already missing the god’s kind nature. A black gloved hand stopped her as he turned to look into her eyes, and her soul. “You will see me from time to time Raven, no one exists in my realm alone. At times you will be thankful for my company, other times curse it. I’ve no doubt that you will also experience moments of comfort. However few, there are lives you’ve touched for good. To a little boy named Max you are a hero, you will always have his mother’s gratitude. Perhaps they will think of you from time to time.” He smiled briefly and nodded to the door. “Good luck Raven, I hope you rediscover Alandra.”

“I hope so too,” she whispered as she opened the heavy door and stepped into the darkness beyond. With a final gaze from the kindest eyes she’d ever seen she turned to face her demons letting the door close silently behind her.

Chapter 10: Warrior

The exodus from Callisto’s lair was a silent one. After rejoining with Beatrice the four women continued on to the walled city of Minos. Travel was slow. Gabrielle and Daphne were in little condition to journey after their treatment by Callisto, and Beatrice was still nursing broken ribs. With all four women on foot, what should have taken one day took three. They encountered city guards early on and Xena gave detailed instructions to the massacre in the forest, explaining who the killer was and where the bodies could be found. Gabrielle had hoped that knowing that four innocent people were finally put to rest would ease the warrior’s mood, but it only made the silences more ominous. As if picking up on the darkness around her, Daphne was beset with visions so intense they left her physically ill. Xena and Gabrielle were of little help, and even Beatrice seemed at a loss of what to do for her love. Slowly though, as the miles away from the fortress increased, Daphne recovered.

It was not until the second day that the oracle began to speak about her visions. Working with Beatrice she began to make some sense of the images that had left her reeling. But her vision was not the only worry plaguing the oracle. The silence and isolation between warrior and bard weighed heavily on the fall air. Xena said little, her brooding much more intense than usual. The usually gregarious bard was also quiet, silenced by the darkness of the warrior’s mood.

Making camp the second night, Daphne finally asked Gabrielle what was wrong once the warrior was out of sight. “I don’t know.” Gabrielle replied, choking back a sob. “She’s never been this bad before, even when we first met. She’s just gone into herself and shut the door.” Gabrielle took Daphne’s hand grateful for the support, “I know I need to talk to her, force the issue. But now isn’t the time. I’ll know when.”

Daphne nodded, she knew Gabrielle was right. Beatrice joined the two women, trying in vain to get Daphne to eat. “I just can’t. Strange for me I know.” The oracle smiled grimly, “maybe when we get home, but not now.”

“What did you see that was so upsetting?” Gabrielle asked, then averted her gaze. “That is, if you don’t mind my asking.”

Daphne laughed, the first such sound heard by any of the women in a long time. “Gabrielle, after what we’ve been through... I don’t think you could ask anything of me I wouldn’t gladly answer.” She shrugged her shoulders composing her thoughts. “As for my vision. Well, a few things became clear and it’s a hard thing to accept. Raven and I are, were twins. I saw it all, our birth, separation, everything. Our father was a farmer, indeed the father she knew until he was killed in a

farming accident. Resources were scarce, and it was a bad winter. My father, the King, offered to take one of the babies.

His wife, my mother, had been unable to conceive. Ravens parents decided to sacrifice one of the children, send it into a life they doubted would be as nurturing as the home they could provide. That was me. The irony of thinking of Raven, Alandra, as she was named, as the protected child makes me sick.”

“You can’t blame yourself for the life she had.” Beatrice chided the oracle gently.

“No I can’t.” Daphne agreed, “but I can feel quite sick about it. Were it not for a simple twist of fate, I might be the one in Tartarus now, examining a lifetime of transgressions one by one.”

“You’ve seen her?” Gabrielle asked.

“Oh yes I’ve seen her.” Daphne confirmed, “as I’m sure I’ll see her from time to time for the rest of my life. I never knew that person, yet I can’t let her go through Tartarus alone. Something binds us together.”

“But there is more to it than that?” Beatrice asked. “You’re sick from knowing more than the fate of your twin.”

Daphne nodded, noting that Xena had returned to their camp. “I have to confront my father. I have lived a lifetime on the assumption that I knew who he was. I suppose I always knew my mother was not my birth mother but I was always certain that my father sired me. He should have told me. I’ve just found out I had an older brother as well, another casualty of the brutality that created Raven. As much as we disagree, I know my father loves me. You don’t keep that kind of information from people you love. He has a lot of explaining to do and I do not look forward to that conversation.” Daphne met Xena’s eyes as she spoke and held the radiant blue for a long moment. For a moment she thought she saw the warrior’s expression soften, but only for an instant.

Xena stared gloomily into the fire. She desperately longed for the two things she could not have: time and solitude. She could feel the old rage so close to the surface, held back by only the sheer force of her will. What she knew and what she felt had never been so opposed. Again without warning the image flashed into her mind. Gabrielle on the end of her sword, blood spilling over the warrior’s hands. “*It was Raven,*” Xena screamed to herself, “*Raven.*” But the dark thoughts continued. If all three women had been gagged, would she have been able to spot the killer? Xena glanced at Gabrielle then stalked off again into the woods. “*I might have lost her,*” she brooded, “*I might have killed her.*” As the night before, she would not sleep. She well knew what nightmares would haunt her slumber, and feared the person she might be upon waking.

The rest of the journey to Minos was uneventful. Beatrice and Daphne escorted Xena and Gabrielle to their home but did not join them inside. “We’re going to talk to my father right now, before I lose my nerve. I doubt we’ll be home until tomorrow morning, if then. Please make yourselves at home. We’d like to say good-bye before you leave the city.”

Xena nodded. They were right, Gabrielle was in no condition to travel, she’d already done enough of that without proper rest. She would tolerate Minos for the day or so of recuperation they were offered.

Gabrielle strolled into the living room drying her hair with a large towel. She found Xena where she’d left her, sitting on the balcony, watching the stars. “Xena, come take a bath.” She urged, joining the warrior.

“Later.” Xena replied, not looking at her.

“No, Xena. Now.” Gabrielle moved to block the warrior’s vision. “You smell like smoke, the fire. It’s bothering me.”

Xena looked at Gabrielle as if she’d been burned. “I’m sorry Gabrielle, I wasn’t thinking.”

Bard followed warrior to the bathing tub. After shrugging out of her leathers Xena climbed into the tub oblivious to the solace of steaming water. Gabrielle shook her head and picked up Xena’s clothes putting them into a small tub of soapy water she’d prepared for the purpose. She cleaned the leather garment then rubbed it with a special compound, finally putting it next to her

own clothes to dry. When she turned back she noticed Xena hadn't moved.

"Xena, what are you thinking?" she demanded, moving once again into the warrior's line of sight.

"It's nothing Gabrielle." Xena tried to smile, "I'm fine."

"Don't tell me it's nothing. I know you better than anyone, and for the past two days you've been a complete stranger."

"I can't explain it Gabrielle, let it go." Xena's voice rose in response to Gabrielle's elevated tone. Her words *"let it go"* were laced with unmistakable warning.

"Can't or won't Xena? Which is it?" Gabrielle shot back angrily. Xena tried to get out of the tub, but Gabrielle pushed her back roughly into the water. "Don't shut me out Xena, not now, especially not now."

"You can't understand Gabrielle," Xena countered, her voice almost pleading.

"Not unless you let me try." She replied softly.

Xena took a deep breath, the oracle's words filling her ears: *"He has a lot of explaining to do and I do not look forward to that conversation."* "Gabrielle," Xena began, trying to calm the racing of her pulse, "I see it constantly. The blood, your face, me killing you. I close my eyes and it's there, you falling off of my sword..."

"Xena," Gabrielle replied patiently, "you didn't kill me."

"But it looked like I did. She looked just like you, and I remember my rage, the times I've lost control. Gabrielle I could hurt you." Xena shook her head disgusted with herself. "Knowing that makes me sick."

"Xena." Gabrielle tried again, more forcefully this time. "I have to live with that memory too. Your sword sticking out of someone who looked just like me. But it wasn't me. I also have to live with the memory of someone who looked just like me a moment away from ending your life. How do you think that makes me feel?" She demanded.

Xena smiled, "Gabrielle, you could never hurt me."

"Sometime's I've wanted to." Gabrielle replied with a small smile. "Xena I know your rage, I've seen it, been hurt by it, but I'm still here. I know you will never kill me. I trust you completely with my life, with my love. If you can't trust me to make that type of choice, we've got a big problem here. I don't want you trying to protect me from your darkness. Let me do that, I'm better at it then you are."

"Is that so?" Xena asked, with half hearted sarcasm.

"Xena, many are the nights I've stayed up with you, holding you through the nightmares. I've been doing it for over a year. When you have those dreams Xena, you talk. You talk about things you've done and the things you've seen. I've never heard the same story twice, so I hope that means someday we'll get through them all."

The color drained from the warrior's face as she listened to Gabrielle's confession. "What are you saying?" she asked, her voice a dangerous whisper.

"I'm saying," Gabrielle explained, gently touching Xena's cheek with her finger, "that before we ever became lovers, I'd gotten to know Xena the Warlord. I love all of you Xena, all of you. If I can believe that you won't hurt me, then why can't you? I've been with your darkness and I'm not afraid. Show a little back bone and stand up to it yourself."

With that Gabrielle gracefully stood and left Xena alone. The warrior stared after her for a few moments the conversation slowly sinking in. "She knows?" the warrior whispered aloud. Then, from a combination of embarrassment, rage and fear, silent tears fell unheeded from the warrior's eyes, spilling off graceful cheeks and splashing into steaming bath water.

Some time later, dressed for bed Xena silently walked into the living room. Gabrielle sat, mug of tea in hand, absently watching the fire she'd built in the fire place. It wasn't until Xena had moved fully into the room that Gabrielle noticed her presence. "Gabrielle, I'm sorry." Xena said quietly.

"Sorry for what?" the bard asked puzzled.

“For not trusting you enough to share my fear.”

Gabrielle smiled warmly at her lover, her warrior. “Xena, I don’t expect you to do that. It isn’t in your nature. I do however expect you to be a little more forthcoming when I try to drag it out of you.”

Xena smiled, emotional exhaustion evident in her features. “Why didn’t you tell me about sitting with me... talking to...”

“Warlord Xena?” Gabrielle offered as Xena joined her on the couch.

Xena nodded, blue eyes searching the bard’s face for answers.

Gabrielle shrugged, “I didn’t see any reason to. I knew it would embarrass you, make you self conscious. Anyway, I consider them private conversations between me and the warlord. Still, I don’t see why you didn’t figure it out yourself. All those mornings I had a hard time getting up, what, you think I just like to sleep? Besides, on the rare occasion that you feel like talking, who am I to say no?”

Xena shook her head roughly pulling the bard into a warm embrace. “Is there anything else going on while I’m unconscious that I should know about?”

Gabrielle thought a minute, “I guess that’s between me and your unconscious, isn’t it?” Xena laughed, the first time she had in a long while and held Gabrielle tightly. They were quiet for long moments, each lost in her own thoughts, but comforted by the company of the other. “This is going to bother you for a long time, isn’t it?” Gabrielle finally asked.

“Yeah Gabrielle, it is, even knowing that it wasn’t you. I would have preferred not to have killed Raven. I think Daphne would have preferred it too.” Xena spoke softly into Gabrielle’s hair enjoying the sensation of the wet strands against her face.

“Yes, but she knows as well as I that you didn’t have any choice. How many broken necks have we seen in the last week? You were almost killed Xena, and I find that more disturbing. She was a professional killer Xena. I’ve still got bruises on my neck...” Gabrielle shook her head trying to ward off the returning dark thoughts. “Look, can we talk about something else?”

Xena smiled. As usual her bard had a point. She was tired, physically and emotionally. It was time that both of them tried to put this down and let it go. It would take some time but they had to start moving on. “Bruises you say?” Xena asked, her voice a throaty whisper as she nuzzled the bard’s neck, placing gentle kisses on the soft flesh.

Gabrielle trembled, her body responding to the sound of the warrior’s voice. She tilted her head back, exposing the graceful line of her throat. “Yeah, several,” she whispered. “I’m sure they’re quite serious and in need of immediate attention.”

“Uh huh.” Xena murmured into the bard’s ear, nibbling on the delicate lobe. “Maybe I can do something to distract you from the pain?”

“That sounds good.” Gabrielle agreed as Xena’s hands began explorations of their own.

With a smile full of promise for the things to come, Xena lifted Gabrielle from the couch and carried her to the cozy bedroom. As she gently released her into the soft cushions, the bard’s face frowned with an unasked question. “What is it?” Xena asked as she settled herself on top of the bard’s body.

Gabrielle glanced away afraid to meet the warrior’s gaze. “Before you got there, I spoke to Raven. She started talking like me and it was so eerie. I mean I had a hard time convincing myself it wasn’t me. If Callisto’s plan had worked and she had replaced me... do you think you...” She left the question hanging, trying to do battle with tears that threatened to fall.

“Would I be able to tell?” Xena asked gently. Gabrielle nodded, Xena sighed and rested her head on the bard’s breast, thinking.

“I don’t know Gabrielle.” She finally answered looking into green eyes once more. “Just talking to her, I might have been fooled at first. She seemed to know what she was doing. But after awhile? I doubt it, certainly not after touching her.” Xena shrugged hoping that it was answer enough.

“How can you be so sure?”

Xena gazed into the face of her lover as she gently played with strands of strawberry blond hair. “Gabrielle, something happens when you’re near, when you touch me. I feel my body respond. There has been some kind of connection between us since the day we first met. It isn’t just your face or your voice that sends my heart to racing, it’s something undefinable.” Xena thought a minute more, then shook her head. “Or maybe it is. Maybe it’s your face, your voice, your eyes, your hair, the way you smell, taste, feel and are that makes me respond the way that I do. Someone might be able to duplicate parts of it, but no one would be able to replicate all of it. Gabrielle, you are absolutely unique.”

Gabrielle looked back up at Xena, profound sadness evident in her face. “But Xena, I couldn’t tell the difference between Meg and you.”

Xena laughed, remembering the ordeal. “You suspected something was wrong right away. Besides, if we’d been lovers then, don’t you think you would have known?”

“Well, she did have the hots for Joxer.” Gabrielle agreed as Xena trailed light kisses across the length of her collar bone.

“My point exactly.” Xena said nibbling the bard’s breasts through the fabric of the shift.

“So you’re absolutely certain about who I am?” Gabrielle asked, finding coherent thought difficult.

Xena gently cupped a breast with each hand, pressing her face between and inhaling the fragrance of the bard’s clean skin. “Gabrielle, I’m absolutely certain of it.”

With growing insistence Xena caressed the writhing bard beneath her. Passion flared like fire in their veins as they struggled out of clothes for the delicious feel of skin against skin. Xena tried to take her time, to put reassurance and love into gestures without words; feeling confident in the former and inadequate in the latter. But Gabrielle would have none of it. With moans of delight and the judicious placement of her hands and mouth, she drove the warrior past tenderness to wanton desire. Xena did not have much time to feast on the bard’s breasts before the hands reaching for her thighs became insistent. Xena looked up from what she was doing and was startled by the fire in Gabrielle’s eyes. They burned with hungry passion. Xena did not have time to react before a ravenous mouth attached itself to her breast, teasing and tasting her with abandon.

Gabrielle shifted her attention to the warrior’s other breast as she positioned Xena over her hips. With her hands and her body she urged the warrior princess forward, delighting in the wet trail left across her abdomen and chest as she complied. When Xena was where she wanted, she released the ravaged nipple and began her descent as she scooted under the warrior’s upright body. She smiled as she reached her goal, beneath the apex of the warrior’s legs. With hands and arms strong from months of mastering the staff, she held Xena tight as she pressed her mouth to the warrior’s center. Gabrielle’s insistence had Xena soaked before she even touched her. She used the warrior’s readiness to her advantage as she quickly brought her to the brink then backed off, slowing the pace of her tongue to gentle explorations. Xena groaned in pleasure and frustration as she gripped the bed’s headboard for support, glancing down to the crown of red gold hair beneath her, green eyes locked onto her own. Often, that sight alone was enough to send her over. But Gabrielle was cautious, she knew the warrior’s body well and continued to bring her to the edge then pull her back. Finally when Xena’s hips bucked out of control, the warrior’s body covered in a thin sheen of sweat, Gabrielle again drove her forward. This time holding her at the edge for a blissful moment before sending her beyond with the full force of her passion. There were things Gabrielle knew only she could do for her warrior. By taking Xena to her places of utmost vulnerability then sending her beyond on a wave of climax, she felt reassured that the warrior did indeed know who she was.

“Gods Gabrielle,” Xena panted as she struggled to stay conscious. It took several moments before she could move, freeing the bard trapped beneath her. Slowly Gabrielle withdrew her tongue from Xena’s center, placing a gentle kiss on dark curls before rolling the warrior over to nestle on her stomach. Xena touched her mane of strawberry blond hair absently as she struggled to find words. Gabrielle didn’t need words however, the powerful beating of the warrior’s heart told her all she needed to know.

“I love you.” Xena whispered when she could finally talk.

Gabrielle smiled as she shifted her body to peer into impossibly blue eyes. “I love you Xena.” She said, and giggled as she saw the tranquil blue ignite with passion once more.

Daphne and Beatrice escorted Xena and Gabrielle to the gates of the city. “So your father took it well?” Gabrielle asked, delighting in the feel of warm leather against her arm as it rested around Xena’s waist.

Oracle and slave walked next to her, holding hands as Daphne answered. “Took it well? I don’t know. He took it, and that is all I was really hoping for.”

“He’ll brood about it for a few months then decide he’ll talk about it.” Beatrice interjected.

“Sounds like someone I know.” Gabrielle observed, reaching up with her free hand to caress the one wrapped lovingly around her shoulders.

“She must be talking about you.” Xena said to Argo, who walked patiently beside her.

“Will you be going after Callisto?” Daphne asked as they neared the city gates.

Xena nodded. “She has crimes she needs to answer for, especially here in Minos. It might take a while, but we’ll find her.”

“Just remember warrior, that finding and holding are two different things.” Daphne smiled, clearly debating how much to say. “Take some free advice from an oracle, your paths will cross with Callisto’s again, soon enough. For now I’d recommend taking that trip to the beach where you were headed to in the first place. I hear the shells are lovely this time of year.”

Xena smiled considering the thought. “What about you Daphne, plan to do some traveling?”

Beatrice nodded her head emphatically. “Yes, when my ribs are better. We figure that as long as she says she’s Gabrielle, no one will bother her.”

“You’d be surprised.” Gabrielle observed. “Still, if Xena gets on my nerves, I might drop in, fill in as oracle for awhile.”

“You just do that, Gabrielle.” Daphne said with a smile. Outside the gate, the four women exchanged hugs good-bye, then Xena and Gabrielle continued on away from the city.

“What are you laughing at?” Gabrielle asked, noting Xena’s satisfied smirk.

“I was just thinking, ‘Oracle Gabrielle,’ it has an... interesting ring to it.”

“Well it’s nice to know I have options.” Gabrielle smugly replied.

Xena nodded good naturedly. “Options.” She considered the word. “I hear Daphne’s cooking is wonderful, I guess I have options too?”

“Not in the slightest Xena.” Gabrielle replied seriously. “Come to think of it, I bet the job of oracle is overrated anyway.”

“Most likely,” Xena agreed through her smile.

“So where to?” Gabrielle asked when they reached a divide in the road. “We back track to catch up with Callisto’s trail or go west to the beach?”

Xena considered her options, smiling broadly she headed west. “I know better than to argue with a red head.”

The end...