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This story is set to immediately follow the episode INTIMATE STRANGERS.

Minor Adjustments

By

Bat Morda

Bat Morda@aol.com

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We've been walking in silence for hours. I wonder, does she feel as awkward as I do? How can she not? I only have to look at a different face — she has to look through a new set

of eyes, feel with a new set of senses. How strange it must be. Of course, of all forms, why her, why Callisto? I keep these questions to myself. A tacit agreement has settled around us to try not to dwell on this. It's so hard though, a woman I love so much, trapped in a body I despise. Of course, it's not like Xena knew of my love before...

"Gabrielle, Argo's walked enough for one day. I think we should set up camp."

"Sure, Xena." My thoughts are interrupted by her voice, Callisto's voice. I force myself to call her Xena. I must remember she "is" Xena, so I repeat the name to reassure us both. I can't help but stare, and she knows it. She endures my cold eyes, begrudging me nothing. I wonder, would I fare as well, receiving the same icy stares from her? It hurts so much. It seems I've spent so much time recently hating Xena, being angry with her, and none of it is her fault. Meg put me in the dungeon, toyed with my mind with a "plan" that did not exist, treated me like a child. It was Xena who finally let me out, and as is so her, did so without apology. Then the taunting. Again, it was Xena's body but Callisto's twisted mind that had me strike out in anger at someone I love more than I've ever loved anything.

Xena even listened patiently to the dreadful story my sleep deprived, emotion wrought mind put together. "I sing a song of Perdicus..." what was I thinking? Still, there is no doubt that this is indeed Xena. Argo walks patiently by her side. She strokes the mare with gentle caresses. Callisto could never be this gentle. Looking back now at Xena, I realize I should have known it wasn't her. She touched me, and the familiar racing of my pulse at the slightest contact from my friend didn't happen. How could I have been so blind?

We are sitting now. Xena is building a fire. She has not offered to go hunting for us tonight, nor will I ask. She looks tired. I break out the bread and cheese. It's enough. I'm not hungry anyway. I don't think she is either. It's early for us to stop, but Argo is still on the mend. I think Xena is, too.

"Are you okay?" I ask, noticing a slight grimace as she reaches for wood for the fire. She smiles at me; it looks so out of place on Callisto's face.

"Let's just say that Callisto's body is not in nearly as good shape as mine. I think I pulled every muscle she had in that last fight." She shakes her head and I can see the frustration she has tried so hard to conceal. "I don't know who designed her armor, but aside from being impractical, it's uncomfortable."

I had to laugh at that. "You're just not used to it, that's all. I'm sure Callisto had just as many complaints about your body."

"Oh really?" she replies, amusement lighting her eyes. "Such as?"

"Well, you're taller," I begin, setting the food between us. "I'm sure she's hitting your head on every low doorway she enters. Your hearing is better, so she's probably going crazy from the din. You're stronger, no doubt she's breaking everything she picks up. And you're so much more beautiful..." Oh Gods, why did I say that? I had Xena smiling up until that last part. "Oh, Xena, I'm sorry I didn't mean..."

"It's okay, Gabrielle," she says, her expression soft, "and thank you."

How could I have ever believed that the monster goading me into attacking was the gentle woman I'm sitting next to? Xena never would have said such things to me. "Stupid, stupid."

“What?”

Had she not spoken, I would not have realized I had spoken out loud. “I’m just so frustrated with myself, Xena,” I admit. “How could I have mistaken Callisto for you? The things she said, made me do. You two are so different.” Xena smiles at me, understanding, yet still sad.

“There was a time, Gabrielle, when Callisto and I were two sides of the same coin. While it might not be who I am now, it is who I was. I can’t run from that. I’ve been thinking, it may be why I’m wearing her body now. I have a past I must atone for. This may be part of it.”

There is so much darkness in her eyes now, sorrow and hurt just below the surface, making me sorry indeed I brought it up. She puts her piece of bread down, uneaten, and stares painfully into the fire. I put the food away and sit by her. Her brown eyes are strangely beautiful. Beautiful in a way that is uniquely Xena. “There is a bright side to this, Xena.” I say softly.

“Humm?” she asks absently, continuing to gaze at the glowing embers.

“I think I broke one of your ribs when I hit her with the staff.”

She smiles now, and I feel my heart pound in response. “Good for you, Gabrielle,” she replies, then softly adds, “let’s just hope it heals before I get my body back.”

We’re left looking into each other’s eyes for a moment. Xena’s eyes have never been this close. Callisto is only slightly taller than me. It’s strange, but nice. “Do you need help with your armor?” I ask, and again am rewarded with a warm smile.

“Yes, Gabrielle, I do. I’ve got no idea how this stuff is put together.” She turns her back to me and I examine the series of buckles and straps that keep the black leather and chain mail in place.

“Okay, I think I’ve got it.” I try one strap and hear her grunt painfully.

“I think that tightens it.”

“Sorry.” I try another. “This is new to me, too.” I see her nod and I continue, this time finding the right strap. Unlike her armor with metal independent of the leathers, these pieces of metal and leather are attached. Straps loosened, the front and back pieces fall away exposing... well, everything. “Uh... I...” I stammer, not knowing quite what else to say.

“It’s okay, Gabrielle,” she says, immodest as ever. “I’ll put a shirt on when we’re done.”

She offers me her arm, and I set to work removing the complicated structure shielding her sword arm. My eyes travel to her breasts. I’m distracted. Callisto’s breasts, I remind myself, but it doesn’t help. With her free hand she is unlacing her boots, unaware of my stare. She jumps and I freeze. Did she notice my gaze?

She sighs patiently. “Could we do this without tickling?” she asks.

“Sorry,” I reply, “I didn’t know Callisto was ticklish.” I try to suppress a grin and fail miserably.

“Well, I am. If it’s me or this body, I can’t tell you. I just know that it tickled.”

“Xena, I’ve taken your armor off of you dozens of times and you’ve never once jumped. That can only mean one thing. Callisto is ticklish.” She glances into the fire, her face unreadable. I fear what I’ve said has injured her in some way. “When you get your body back I’ll try that again, and see if you jump.” It’s all I can think of to say. I think I helped.

“Promise?” she teases dryly, trying to lighten the mood. I nod, sliding the armor from her arm, my fingers gently sliding down her skin as I do so. We’re left staring at each other again. She is feeling something powerful, I can see it in her eyes, but she won’t tell me what. I never knew brown eyes could be so beautiful. Not knowing why, I reach out my hand to touch her face. Her eyes close as she turns her cheek into my palm, gently kissing the inside of my hand. As I watch, she lifts her hand, gently enveloping my own and suddenly I see it all. All of the things Xena hid so carefully from me are present on the features of this foreign face.

“Why did you let me marry Perdicus?” I ask, my voice a whisper.

“It’s what you convinced yourself you wanted. You did love him, Gabrielle, you’d known him your whole life. When someone like that tells you that you’re his salvation, that you’re all that’s keeping him alive, how could I step in and tell you that was not a good enough reason to get married?”

I can see it so clearly now. And I feel like such an idiot for not having seen it sooner. “But you love me.” I didn’t ask, just gave voice to the words so present in her features. Callisto’s features.

“Yes, Gabrielle, I do. I love you so much I won’t get in the way of what you want to do. Of going after the things that you think will make you happy. Your dreams, your desires, I want all of those things for you Gabrielle. Because I love you.”

Of all the times I’ve dreamt of hearing these words, pictured the setting, imagined my response — it was not like now. Now, I was angry.

“When I left for the Academy in Athens, you loved me?” She nods. “When I went home to Poteidaia?” Again she nods. “And you let me marry a man who loved me for the wrong reasons, because I loved him for the wrong reasons.” For once I’m sorry I’m not holding my staff. It’s just as well because I’d really kill her this time. “Did you ever stop to think that these things might not have happened if you’d *told* me that you loved me? Did it ever occur to you that I might love you as well? That I’d been hoping against hope that you might feel enough for me to object to my leaving? Maybe not give me your blessing to do something stupid?” Her eyes are wide with surprise now, she doesn’t know what to say, so I continue. “Don’t you know that my skin is on fire every time you touch me? I tremble whenever you look at me? That the blue of your eyes keeps me warm when we’re camping in a godsforsaken thunderstorm? That your smile makes twelve hours of trailing behind Argo worthwhile?” My voice is choked with tears now, but I don’t care. I spin away from her, and arms wrapped around my knees, I sit, staring into the fire. I’ve cried so many tears these past months, what are a few more?

I feel her now, next to me, behind me. She puts her arms protectively around me, rocking me. I feel the soft curls of her hair as it brushes against my cheek. She whispers to me, her voice slightly higher in pitch, but still Xena. It’s easier this way. When I don’t have to look at her... it is Xena.

“Gabrielle, I am so sorry.” She sighs, her breath warm against my ear. “I admit it. I

was blind. I was also arrogant." I had to turn my head at this. This was an unusual admission even for Xena. I gazed into gentle brown eyes framed by soft blond hair. She smiled gently as she continued. "I was afraid that if I told you how I felt, that you'd have felt obligated to me in some way, or worse, afraid of me. That you wouldn't feel comfortable just saying no, that you weren't interested, and staying anyway. I didn't want to risk losing you, so I decided that I could endure loving you silently more readily than I could endure the chance of you leaving me angry."

"Oh, Xena," I whisper, half a sob. What can I say to her? How can I tell her that my anger with her subsides as soon as it ignites? That she is the most noble, genuine loving creature that I have ever met? And that I would spend an eternity in Tartarus if it meant never leaving her side? I have no words for that, so I show her.

I reach for her, my fingers shaking as I touch the side of her face, as tenderly as I can. I pull her in and close my eyes as I feel soft lips on my own. My blood ignites into fire as I feel the impossible softness of her mouth moving against mine. She is so gentle. I can feel her hand now against the side of my face and neck. Light fingers against my throat. I part my lips, inviting her in and she responds with the sweet caress of her tongue. As my heart pounds furiously, I am wild with anticipation and frightened at the same time. No kiss has ever affected me so, elicited such a craving in me, such desire. I told Perdicus that after our wedding night I knew what love was. I knew I was lying as I said it. I won't say such words to Xena, although they would be the truth.

Much too soon she pulls away from me. I look at her frantic. What if she has changed her mind? How could she have missed the unspoken invitation of my mouth? Does she not know I offer her my soul? Does she not care?

"Gabrielle," she says, and I've never heard my name said as gently, with such promise of devotion. "Are you sure? You've been through so much these past months... I don't want to rush..."

"Xena," I cut her off, not wanting to hear words that have no meaning here. "I have never been as sure of anything, or wanted anything as much in my entire life." She believes me. I can see it in her eyes. She wants me just as badly as I want her. She kisses me again, ardently this time. Her tongue searches out the depths of my mouth, hungry. I respond in kind, thirsting for more of her. I wrap my arms around her and feel the nakedness of her back. For a moment I forgot I had removed her armor. With my eyes closed I could almost believe it is Xena's mouth. But not now. My hands splay over shoulders not quite wide enough. I pull her to me and feel arms not quite strong enough. I delight in the feel of hair not nearly long enough.

None of this matters. It is to the soul that I make love to now, and that soul is Xena. I can feel it by the way she moves. How she lowers me to the ground next to our fire. The tenderness with which she removes my clothing as well as the rest of her own. I am glad the fire, unattended these past minutes, has slowly burned down. Nothing more than glowing embers now; it casts little light. There is only a sliver of moon left in the sky and we are blissfully surrounded by darkness. I am able to touch her now and envision Xena's body, although my hands tell me otherwise.

Tenderly she covers my body with her own. We both sigh at the delicious sensation of

skin sliding against skin. I think we both smiled. I know I did. She continues to kiss me, now trailing down my throat. Light nips where my pulse is beating like a drum against my skin. My whole body tingles in response. Nowhere do I feel that response more evident than the flood of moisture between my legs. A part of me is puzzled. I've made love before, or so I thought, but all of these sensations are new. Can one woman make such a difference?

I slide my hand from her back now to cup her breast. I hear her gasp with delight and realize I crave that sound. Oh, how I want to hear her make more sounds. I lift her up off of me, surprisingly easy until I remember that this is a much smaller body. I draw her up until I can put that breast in my mouth. Ambrosia! Another sound. That was a low moan; I think I will like her moans the best. I tease her nipple with my teeth. I'm rewarded with a throaty, "Gab...rielle".

I feel her shift above me. "By the Gods, Xena!" I cry out as I feel her lips descend upon my breast. Tongue swirling around my nipple, light fingers on the other. I can feel her lips smile against me. After a trail of kisses across my sternum as she switches places. I feel my head slam against the ground as my abdomen contracts in a pant. My breathing is ragged now, I have no control. I have no thoughts now save for the powerful responses to what Xena is doing to my body. Xena knows this, she is slow and loving, not hurrying anything, driving me wild with everything.

Long fingers descend down my thigh as soft kisses make their way across my abdomen. Hands that have trailed down my legs are now moving back up and I ready myself. As I feel delicate fingers on the inside of my thighs, I know where she is going. I steel myself for the pain. Perdicus hurt like Hades after all; I am breathless when there is no pain.

In its place, the most magnificent sensations cascade through my body like a waterfall. Xena's mouth is at my center, her hands supporting my hips. As she kisses me ardently, I hear myself cry out. She does not smile this time. No, her mouth slides, suckles, explores and entices in ways far beyond my wildest dreams. Her tongue responds to every movement, slowly at first then faster as my breath comes only in short gasps. Oh gods, she has found the place, and even as my world spins out of control, she stays with me. I close my eyes tight and call her name into the night air as the delightful spasms rock through me. Waves of pleasure repeatedly crash upon the shore of my soul and for the first time in my life, I feel truly sated.

I want to cry, but I feel too good. I gasp instead, and try to catch my breath as I pull Xena up. She covers my body with hers. It is no trouble to hold her weight on me. She can't weigh much more than I do. She buries her face in my neck whispering "I love you." I do cry now, it's just too much.

"I love you, too." I say as I take her face in my hands and kiss the lips that have just worked miracles. I think if it had been Xena's own eyes she would have cried. I don't think Callisto's eyes have tears.

She looks at me with such love, and I know what she's thinking. She is afraid that there will always be a barrier there — Callisto's face keeping me from loving her completely. I smile up at her. There is a softness in her expression, the way she holds those beautiful brown eyes that make me melt. This might not be Xena's face, but it is not Callisto's face any longer. I can't help but grin, a stupid grin as I feel my apprehension vanish like ashes and smoke. No longer hesitant, I reach for her, intent on my own plans to see how many pleasurable sounds she can make. For she is Xena, I am in love, and I will not be denied.

The end...