

Bonds Of All Time  
Book 2 of 5  
by DK Ward & Melissa Smith

# **Bonds Of All Time**

The days since Darian Redmond returned to her future time were long- even longer for Xena than Gabrielle. Xena noticed Gabrielle ate less, wrote in her scrolls less, even talked less. The experience of which, was strange and disturbing. Xena didn't know what to do with a quieter Gabrielle. Now those long silences of the past seemed to stretch on for days without Gabrielle's constant chatter to make them appear shorter.

Everything was all wrong. They were supposed to have joined together. That was Aphrodite's plan; to make them realize they were just wasting time by stalling their union. But the moon had risen 30 times and still they slept together, but alone, each to their own sadness.

*I've got to do something*, Xena realized. She couldn't stand to see Gabrielle in this much pain. She had lost count of how many times she considered slipping under Gabrielle's furs in the night and making love to the bard... waking the woman with so much pleasure she would have to forget Dari. But somehow that didn't feel right to Xena. No, she wanted her companion totally free of any sadness, of any longing for another woman. Only Dari wasn't just any other woman, was she? How could Xena ask Gabrielle to forget her soul mate? After all, Dari's soul was Xena's. But Gabrielle didn't know about that. And now Xena had waited so long to tell her that she wasn't sure Gabby could separate the two of them in her heart.

"Aphrodite got us into this; she can very well get us out of it." Xena finally decided.

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"Quick zip in, quicker zip out. The three of us sit Gabrielle down and explain why she's fallen for Dari, and everything will be fine." Xena had been thinking a lot about that plan.

“So why not tell her here?” Aphrodite really didn’t see the need to visit the future, especially not if it meant she had to join them.

“I’ve considered that. But it’s no good; Gabrielle must decide where her heart lies. We have to go to the future so Dari can speak with her, it’s the only way.”

"But Hon, Dari is you."

"We share the same soul, but we are not the same person. Each separate life adds its own karmic energy." Xena could tell from the glassy-eyed look on Dite's face that this was way out of the Goddesses’ realm of expertise, but she had to make her understand. "Aphrodite, I know Gabrielle loves me, but I can't take second place in her heart, not even to myself."

Aphrodite sighed heavily. She may not completely understand what Xena was trying to explain about karmic energy, but she knew Xena and Gabrielle were destined to be together in this life first and foremost – she was the Goddess of Love after all. And if it meant taking a trip to the future to straighten out this mess, she thought to herself, shaking her head, then so be it.

The 21st Century; it couldn't be beat. Dari came to that realization after she'd been back home for close to a month. It had been strenuous not being able to confide in Sondra the events of her extraordinary adventure with the two warriors. Time had stood still, or rather, Aphrodite had made it stand still, and when she returned home, she was safely placed far enough into the very woods she had escaped from just minutes before the lightning had claimed her.

She considered telling Sondra of her travels with those two extraordinary women. But would Sondra not try and commit her? Deciding Dari had completely lost her mind for whatever reason. The conflicting desires tore at her heart; she hated keeping anything from Sondra, but somehow knew, no matter how much Sondra was schooled in the fine art of psychotherapy, the tale she had locked inside her would be even too much for Sondra's brain to digest and accept.

She reflected on their years together, on their passions, their highs and lows, and with each came the understanding that she'd made the right decision in fighting so hard to come back from that past time.

"I love her," she spoke aloud and skipped a rock over the surface of the lake beside which she had parked her jeep. She noticed in the past month she'd spent more time outdoors, at places like this. She tried to bring Sonny with her, but she understood that she did have a career, with a new book in the works, and she didn't want to disturb her creativity. Sondra give up her time when she could, and Dari was thankful for that.

*"I love her!"* she shouted the declaration this time and smiled when the birds perked their heads and turned a flustered look her way. She even laughed at the joy of it.

But her eyes soon clouded over with memories of the torn Gabrielle she'd left behind. She loathed not having resolved the situation. She should have just told her who she really was, and then Gabrielle would have seen that the love the bard was feeling was really all for Xena.

"Damn it all," she cursed and skipped another rock over the still lake.

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"Mmmmmm," Sondra crooned when she opened the front door to their beach house to get the paper and was greeted with a passionate kiss. "Now that's the only way to start the morning." Sonny grabbed the paper nestled in Dari's left arm and stepped aside to let her enter.

"And just where do you think you're going?" Dari circled her arms around Sondra from behind. They stood in the open doorway like that with Sondra resting her blonde head back against Dari's shoulder.

"I was going to pick us up some donuts and mocha lattes. But now..." she turned in the coil of Dari's arms, letting the now-forgotten paper fall, and planted a deep one on her lover.

"For some reason, the idea of donuts being better than this," she kissed Sondra again to make sure she knew what "this" was, "is just inconceivable." She lifted Sondra up in her arms and kicked the door closed.

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Gabrielle had been a nervous wreck all day after Xena dropped the news that they were going to visit Dari.

"I'm not ready for that," she said to Argo while Xena was off catching their lunch from a nearby stream. But despite her lack of readiness, she couldn't honestly say that she didn't want to see Dari again. And she was very curious about the world where she lived.

She even had an unexplainable urge to meet this Sondra person. In spite of her nervousness and drifting thoughts, Gabrielle was aware that Xena was taking longer than

usual catching lunch. She stood up, brushed her backside of leaves and twigs, and went to check on her warrior.

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Xena skipped a rock over the stream; she had already caught their lunch, but took some time away from Gabrielle to think. Could she be doing the bard more harm by bringing the two of them together again? Or was this the best plan to get Gabrielle to see reality? She tried to assure herself that it must be the latter.

Gabrielle caught site of Xena near the stream's edge, as well as the pile of fish beside her. *She's done. Why hasn't she come back?* she wondered. She stood against a tree and watched Xena. *I do love her*, she knowingly admitted to herself as her breath caught in her throat. *I've loved her in every lifetime*, she mused. She knew it. She could feel it. There was no mistaking their being soul mates. *Then why can't you just let this crazy love for Dari go?* she asked herself. For that, she had no answer.

Xena scooped up her mess of fish and turned, ready to head back to camp, knowing Gabrielle may become worried at how long she had been gone. She stopped in her tracks when she eyed Gabrielle leaning against a tree, her eyes locked on Xena's form. But her gaze was distracted by inner thoughts. That was plainly obvious to Xena when their eyes met and Gabrielle didn't react.

Xena walked right up to Gabrielle without evoking the slightest reaction from the bard. She even stooped down so their faces met, nose to nose. She smiled as the soft minute hairs on Gabrielle's nose tickled hers.

"Boo," she whispered.

Her warm breath knocked Gabrielle into the present. Smiling and blushing at the same time, Gabrielle's eyes remained locked on Xena's, their noses still touching ever so lightly.

"Don't do that, Xena," she playfully chastised.

"A dinar for your thoughts," Xena reflected and whistled. She stood back up to her 6-foot height and grinned down at her bard.

“I was thinking about you...” She turned abruptly and started walking. Gabrielle found she could be a lot bolder now since Dari left. She found herself thinking bolder thoughts, looking more intimately at Xena when she wasn’t aware, and even when she was.

“Is that so?” Xena’s long legs caught up to her in no time so they walked side by side, Gabrielle staring ahead, Xena looking at Gabrielle askance.

“Mmm hmmm,” Gabrielle nodded, hands clasped behind her back.

Xena wondered if she should press for details or throw down the fish she carried, grab Gabrielle, and cover her in the kisses she was dying to share. *All in good time*, an inner voice told her. *All in good time*.

“There you are!” Aphrodite called, appearing from wherever it was she appeared from.

Gabrielle and Xena suddenly stopped walking and stared at her, brows narrowed. “We need to go. Zeus is huffing and puffing about this whole idea, and if we wait, he may decide it’s too foolish and not let me do it,” Aphrodite explained, breathless, with much more drama than necessary.

“Go? Now? But...” Gabrielle stuttered and stumbled, her thoughts a whirlwind of disorder.

“Sweetie,” Aphrodite said in her melodious tone, “We don’t have time for ‘ifs’ and ‘buts.’ We need to go, *now!*”

“We were just about to have some lunch.” It was all happening a little too fast for Xena as well.

“We can eat in the future!” She laughed at that. “Ohhhhh it’ll be so much fun!” Aphrodite’s previous doubts had withered away. She thought about the escapades she could have in this future time, and that was all she needed to improve her attitude toward the whole affair. *Affair . . . hmmm*, that reminded the Olympian Goddess that she still had some work to do. She snapped her fingers, and with a poof, they disappeared.

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“That ditz of a sister of yours just brought them to her temple. She’s taking them to the future. Of all the hair brained ideas.” Discord was livid. She pranced around Ares’ temple in disgust.

“Is she now?” Ares eyes gleamed as a plan began to form. He would watch how things developed and for now, bide his time.

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“Ready?” Aphrodite asked the two, not waiting to see if they were. She started the process that would take them to the future, and the fates be darned if anyone had any qualms.

Gabrielle's arms clung tightly around Xena’s waist, and Xena returned the embrace, smiling assuredly down into her bard’s worried eyes. “I won’t let you go,” she promised just before a scintillating green light transported them from their familiar existence into the unknown territory of the future

The three travelers appeared in what looked like a huge forest. And if they hadn't known better, they would have sworn it was the same place they'd just left. Except they were no longer in Aphrodite's Temple- in fact the Goddess's temple was nowhere to be seen.

Gabrielle glanced around, saw some strange kind of boards on poles, but couldn't read the odd writing. "What's that say?" she asked Aphrodite.

Aphrodite remembered the language barrier and snapped her fingers. A hot pink ball of light engulfed the heads of the bard and warrior princess, jolting their minds as they were filled with many different languages. Unfortunately, Aphrodite wasn't at all sure which one it was they needed to know to communicate so, better safe than sorry.

It was all too much for Gabrielle; first that mind numbing transport from her time to the present, and now this. She had to sit. She thought about just collapsing on the ground then and there, but she made her way to what appeared to be a strange seating apparatus. The individual planks of wood were all connected to metal supports, forming one long seat with a backrest. Once the dizziness subsided, she noticed that similar seats were all along a strange pathway, made of something she'd only seen buildings made of back in her own time. It appeared to be a kind of stone.

"Aphrodite, we can read the writing, and we understand the words, but we don't know what they mean." Gabrielle stated.

“Sorry, Hon, that’s the best I can do for ya.” She shrugged. Who knew why her powers worked let alone how they worked? Gabrielle rolled her eyes, and they came to rest on her tall companion.

Xena was taking the whole experience a bit better. She didn’t need to sit, but she wouldn’t have minded having something in her stomach to ease the turmoil brewing inside it.

Aphrodite and Xena joined Gabrielle on a park bench and just looked around in awe. “It’s just like home,” Aphrodite observed. “I don’t know why you two were such worry warts.”

“We’ll see,” Xena said, knowing better. She’d spent long nights listening to Dari’s tales of her world and the chaos it could breed.

“Oh, phooey!” Aphrodite wouldn’t let Xena’s skepticism ruin this adventure. She stood and took in a deep breath of air, then spastically coughed. Xena and Gabrielle couldn’t stop a laugh.

“Hmmm, ok, so the air’s a bit . . . *different* than in our world.”

Something whizzed past Gabrielle, and almost whacked Aphrodite in the face if not for Xena’s lightening fast reflexes. She shot out a quick hand and caught the offending flying object.

“Way kewl,” Aphrodite crooned, staring at the disk like device.

“Hey, sorry about that,” a teenage boy called. “Can ya toss my Frisbee back, please?” He was surrounded by a bunch of other staring teenagers whose faces were screwed up in confusion by the sight of the three visitors.

Xena stared at the unusual disk, and then as if she was throwing her chakram, she gave it a healthy toss. The group of boys watched, mouths agape as their once normal Frisbee turned into something that resembled a flying saucer with the speed of a small jet engine. It dipped and rose, clanked against tree bark, fences, and even a light post before it came to rest on the grass at the boy’s feet.

Xena was just about to go and ask them where they were, when Gabrielle’s hand clamped on her arm.

“By the gods, Xena, look, your flying parchment!”

Xena and Aphrodite both turned and stared upwards at a bright red object flying overhead. Xena's eyes followed the string tied to it downward until she was gazing at a small child who held tightly to the other end of the twine.

She was about to go over and get a closer look, but Gabrielle restrained her again, this time with a hand on her shoulder. "We'll have time for that later." She just knew Xena would get sidetracked somehow.

"Yes, you're right," Xena reluctantly conceded, yet she couldn't take her eyes off the thing sailing so gracefully through the air. It was a lot slimmer than her flying parchment, and less burdensome. The child barely had to exert any energy flying the thing. She was impressed.

"Where does Dari live?" Aphrodite asked, drawing their attention back to her. "Somehow we have to find out if we're even in the right place." She didn't tell them she was worried she had sent Dari back to the wrong year. The warriors had enough to worry about, no need to add more to their mental meltdown

Gabrielle took a slip of paper from her sack and unfolded it. Dari had given it to her in the hope she and Xena would eventually come visit her. "Suppose she's not even there any more? Do they travel like we do, Xena? She could have moved on days ago, and then what will we do?"

"Ok, ok, don't let that imagination of yours run wild just yet. Remember, this time is not like our time. Just because it looks the same, doesn't mean they do the same things we do. My mother has had her inn for years in Amphipolis; and your family, have they moved recently?" Gabrielle shook her head "no," feeling somewhat reassured. "Ok then, let's not get all worried over things until we know for sure..."

The child had spotted the three strangely dressed women near the bench and was staring at them in wonder.. His mother, who noticed her son had become distracted from his kite flying, walked up to the boy and asked him what he was doing.

"Over there, Mommy, look"

And look the woman did, nearly laughing at the scene she witnessed. *Costume party?* she wondered and started to lead her child back to their picnic site.

"Excuse me," Aphrodite called, as the three hurried after her.

“Yes?” The woman held her son tightly, wishing her husband hadn’t left for more charcoal.

“Can you tell us where this might be?” Gabrielle held out the slip of paper.

“Lost, huh?” the woman asked as she took the offering. “Hmmm, this is a few miles out, towards the coast. It’s actually on the beach.”

“Beach?” Xena was confused; she understood the word, but not the meaning. Dari had forgotten to mention what a beach was in her world.

“Are you new to this country?” the woman asked, noting the slight accent. She couldn’t quite place it.

“Yes,” Aphrodite chimed in first. “How would we go about getting to this... *beach?*”

“Do you have a car?”

“No.”

“Then how...” the woman decided to leave well enough alone. They hadn’t attacked her, nor tried to steal her purse, or abduct her or her child. She should just give them directions and let them be on their way.

Gabrielle quickly scribbled down the directions, not that it did any of them any good. They were still “lost” as it were, with no idea how they would get to this beach.

“Where is the closet town?” Gabrielle was proud she remembered what Dari had called them.

“You’re in a town. Right now, you’re standing in a town.”

Their confused looks were almost funny. “Ok, where is the exit from this town?”

The woman was beginning to become as confused as they looked. “Do you want to leave the park?”

“Park?” Gabrielle queried. That’s what those cars did that Dari mentioned. They parked them. They drove them. “No, we have no car.”

The woman decided they were all crazy and she didn’t wish to spend another moment with them. She just pointed to the path that lead to the exit and quickly strode away pulling her son in tow.

“I think we unnerved her,” Xena declared. “Let’s go, we’ll find someone else who’s more helpful.” They followed the path to where the woman had pointed and came out to a huge lot filled with automobiles.

“Taxi!” A cute, sporty-figured woman standing by a yellow car called to the three of them. Her eyes were a soft brown, her smile even gentler. She wore the same kind of clothing in which Dari had appeared in their world. But her leg coverings were of a lighter shade of blue, and she wore an unusual shirt, its pattern some sort of hatch design, totally unlike the plain white tee-shirt Dari had been wearing. Over the shirt was a sleek leather jacket with a lot of metal gadgets hanging from it. Without hesitation, they quickly moved in her direction.

The driver’s lips creased with a deeper smile as she hurried around the other side to open the backseat door as the three drew closer, and with her came a rush of rich smells. Gabrielle smiled; she knew those scents, musk, and some jasmine, and maybe a touch of patchouli. And of course, leather. Dari had smelled somewhat similar to this woman, except for that one perfume she’d mentioned. Maybe, if they had time, she’d pick up a flask or two of it to take back home. “You ladies need a taxi?”

“Yes!” Xena’s relief was plainly evident. Dari had told her about taxi cabs, and their purpose. “We need to be taken to this place.” She handed the paper to the driver.

The driver’s brows knitted. “That’ll be some hefty fee, Miss.”

They looked at each other. *Money*, they forgot money! How would they pay the fee? “Dinars won’t work in this place,” Gabrielle reminded her companions in a whisper, knowing she had a sack of them in her bag.

Aphrodite knew too. She winked and reached for Gabrielle’s bag, which the bard handed over without question. Aphrodite dug deep inside ‘til she came upon the small sack. Inside it were golden coins, American golden coins. “Will this do?” She held them out to the driver.

“Hmmm.” The driver didn’t quite know what to make of it. “That’ll do.” She handed Aphrodite back the sack and kept one of the coins. “Watch what ya do with those, Miss, some people in this world can’t be trusted.

“Name’s Thea, but friends call me Teddy.” She vigorously shook each of their hands, and in an instant they knew this person was kind, helpful, and wouldn’t con them,

as Dari had warned some people did in her world. “Costume party, eh?” Teddy asked as she shuffled them into the back of the car.

“We’ll need some suitable clothing,” Xena whispered after the other two squeezed in beside her.

Aphrodite went to snap her fingers to outfit them all in something more suitable to this new world, but Xena reached across Gabrielle and grabbed her hand.

“Not *now*, Aphrodite!” She released the hand and sat back. “We’ve caused enough confusion today. Let’s just get to where we need to be, and then worry about clothing.”

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The scenery to the beach was truly awesome, and Gabrielle wished they had more time to stop and appreciate its beauty. The images flashed by way too quickly for her liking.

“So, I take it you’re all new here?” Teddy’s gaze met Aphrodite’s in the mirror. Her teeth shone in another dazzler of a smile when she saw Aphrodite grinning back at her.

“You could say that,” Gabrielle put in.

“Never been to the *house*, eh?” She whistled low and long. “It’s a beaut, I tell ya. It sits on the beach in a rather isolated community, and the house is backed by privately owned forestland. At one end of the beach is an estuary where you can spot everything from herons to seals to eagles. At the other end of the beach is the majestic north side of Muse Cape.

“The house itself has been completely remodeled, with hardwood interiors, lots of skylights, and vaulted ceilings since Dari and Sonny bought it some years back. The huge master bedroom -- king-sized bed . . .” she turned and winked at the three of them. “Offers a stunning view of the woods through the floor-to-ceiling picture windows that make up three of its walls.” She took a quick breath and continued, “There’s also a second bedroom with a queen size bed, and the living room has a double hideabed.”

She peeped behind her again, nodded at the look of awe on their faces and noted there was some confusion, too. “Yep, you’ll enjoy yourselves at *Muse House*. That’s what we locals call it. Dari never did name it, but we all kinda took it upon ourselves to adopt it with a name a few years back.”

“So you live around there, then?” Gabrielle seemed to be the only chatty one on the drive, besides Teddy, of course.

“Yes, ma’am!” She shot another pearly white at Gabrielle. “Just a few miles down the beach from Dari’s. Oh, my place isn’t as fancy and doesn’t have a name yet, but it’s gettin’ there. I bought it a few years ago. The previous owners were old folks, getting on in years, and they kinda neglected it. Then they went and passed on, and their ungrateful children didn’t bother taking a peek at the place in about five years. A beach environment can eat away real fast on a house not kept up. So I bought her for a steal and try to fix it up as money allows.”

“It sounds wonderful.” Gabrielle placed her hand on the arm that was resting along the back of the front seat and squeezed. Teddy felt pleasure at the warmth.

“If ya’ll are gonna be around for a while, you’re more ‘n welcome to come on by for a visit. I also run the fairest taxi in the City.”

“You own this taxi?” Xena finally perked up.

“Sure do, a whole fleet of ‘em.” She laughed at their expressions. “Wondering why I drive one myself, eh? Boredom, pure and simple.” She giggled, as she saw the gullible looks of belief on their faces. “Naw, I’m kiddin.’ I just plain love driving, and taking people around our beautiful city makes for some entertaining days ‘round here.”

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After a very long and basically event-free drive, the cab finally came upon the road leading to Dari’s beach house. It was Gabrielle who first identified the house. It wasn’t so much that she saw or knew the numbers on the house; it was more of an intuition that Dari was inside it. And that presumption would be correct, she learned

when Teddy pulled the cab into the driveway of a house with an address on the mailbox that matched the numbers on the piece of paper she clutched in her hand.

“It was a pleasure, ladies.” She gestured with a small bow, another smile spreading across her full lips when she straightened to her full height. “Now, you call if you need a ride somewhere and Dari’s off with that jeep of hers, ya hear?” She slipped Aphrodite her card.

“We will.” They beamed smiles back at her; they couldn’t help it, her kindness and bubbly personality were infectious. She was as fast in actions as she was in mouth; before they knew it she was back in the car and speeding off.

The three stood watching the taxi fade into the distance. Then they turned and looked at the building before them. It was quite impressive. It was just as Teddy described, except for one little thing she hadn’t mentioned -- it was two stories high! When Xena went exploring, she discovered the porch surrounded the whole house, and there were two stairways, one leading up to the entryway in front, and one in back. When she went around the massive structure, she caught sight of the shore and called to her two friends who came quickly.

“Just like home,” she said and gestured to the massive body of water, gently waving back and forth over the clean sand. They enjoyed the vision of what they now understood was the “beach” for a few minutes, and then decided it was time to find Dari. They spotted a jeep in a carport below the colossal porch, and Gabrielle ran a gentle hand over its surface.

“Nice,” Xena commented nonchalantly as she passed by, taking Gabrielle’s arm and tugging her up the steps. Aphrodite followed closely behind; still clutching the card Teddy had given her.

Xena went to try the door handle, and Gabrielle stopped her. “We can’t just walk in on her. We should at least let her get ready for us.” She knocked a few times. When there was no answer, Xena gave her “the look” and turned the knob. Surprisingly, it was open. The three stepped quietly inside.

There was music coming from every direction, some sort of stringed instrument, the best Xena could tell, and be darned if there wasn’t a small fountain in the center of the main room. Its loveliness drew Gabrielle to it like a moth to a flame. She sat along its

base and reached her hand toward the water. She noticed there were coins in its waters, and smiled when Xena stepped up beside her.

“Well, I am impressed.” Xena said, nodding. She watched her bard for a few seconds as Aphrodite decided to explore the other rooms.

“What if she’s not here?” Gabrielle worried, standing, brushing her wet fingers down her skirt.

“Then we’ll wait until she is here.”

They heard a happy squeak, that could only have come from Aphrodite, issued from a room on their left and went to check it out. They entered what seemed to be a huge kitchen. The counters glistened, the metals looked freshly polished, as if untouched by human hands since their creation. There was a rack of some sort above what looked to be a cook stove in a central island. Hanging from it were dozens of pots and pans.

“Your mother would die if she saw this,” Gabrielle laughed and went to explore the many items along one of the counters. She poked and prodded until one of the items, a blender, turned on with a flick of her finger. She jumped back in shock.

Xena raced to her side, moved her from harm’s way, and did her own poking and prodding until it turned off. “Stop that!” she admonished the young blonde.

From behind them, someone yelled, “Dari!”

They turned in unison and spotted a woman who could only be Dari’s own bard, Sondra McDowell.

“It’s ok, Dari knows us!” Xena tried to assure her, but the woman wasn’t taking any chances. She grabbed the closest thing to her, a book, and held it as if she’d use it as a weapon.

Gabrielle couldn’t help smiling. “There are better uses for that than as a weapon.” Her eyes locked with Sondra’s golden gaze. Dari had many a time gone on and on about her lover’s eyes, and how unusual their color was. Now she understood why. The feeling of trust emanating from Gabrielle’s own eyes caused Sondra to falter in her stance just a bit, but enough for Xena to lunge at her and take the upper hand.

“Xena!” Gabrielle was exasperated by the warrior’s action.

“Hey, wait!” Sondra wrestled with Xena but found the taller woman much more powerful than herself. She gave up, flopped limply on the floor, her chest heaving.

Xena stared down at her, eyes narrowed. There was something . . . She blinked and turned her head in Gabrielle's direction, her gaze was met by Gabrielle's angry one. *Oh boy...* she smiled sheepishly and stood, reaching out a hand to Sondra.

"Dari hasn't told you about us?" Gabrielle asked, somewhat disappointed that she wouldn't have told her partner, if indeed she hadn't. *And why the heck hadn't she? Didn't she and Xena mean anything to her in her world?*

Sondra reluctantly let Xena help her up, and then she took a hasty step back from the towering body. "No. Who are you? And what is it you're wearing?"

"Is Dari here?" Aphrodite asked, making Sondra's eyes leave Gabrielle's painful stare. "We'll let her explain it to you. We've had a long morning, they haven't eaten yet," she gestured to the two mortals, "and this day keeps getting more and more bizarre as it goes on."

"She's sleeping."

"This late in the day?" Gabrielle shook her head in disbelief.

"I'll be right back." Sondra made to exit, actually, to flee up the stairs, but Xena wasn't taking any chances. She grabbed Sondra's arm.

"Just hold on there. I'll go. Where is she?"

"What is this? You think I'll call the police? I have a mind to. You break into our home, two of you dressed like some warrior wannabe's, and you," she motioned to Aphrodite in her see-through nightie, "I don't *even* want to know what *you're* trying to look like . . ." She took a deep breath and finished, "and then you attack me!" She glared at Xena, "Sure, I should call someone, but I won't."

"If it's all the same to you, I'd rather you stay here where they can keep an eye on you."

"Xena," Gabrielle admonished her companion, attempting to get her to see reason.

"Fine, you go find her. Dite and I will keep the bard here with us."

Sondra knew arguing with this woman was a waste of time. "She's up the stairs, third door on your left." She threw Xena another golden glare. "And I prefer the term *writer*, not bard."

“Whatever.” Xena had to stop herself from smiling; the woman had spunk, that was for sure. The warrior princess placed a hand on Sondra’s shoulder and firmly motioned her into the adjoining living room.

The carpeting on the stairwell leading up to the second floor was the color of dry sand, and so plush Gabrielle was tempted to remove her boots and walk barefoot on it. She held the balustrade as she climbed, not for balance, but for its feel. The wood was polished to absolute perfection. It was a deep mahogany in color, reflecting the sun coming through all those windows, almost blinding her.

Third door on her left, Sondra had said. Before she reached it, Gabrielle came upon the first door. Inside were shiny, reflective metal sculptures and perfectly square-shaped pieces of stone inlaid into the floor and walls. Beautifully set into the floor was a sunken tub. She stood at the opening and gazed in further, straining to see around the door. There was an oddly shaped contraption sitting across from her left. It resembled a chair, but without armrests, and there was a hole in the middle where the seat should be. There was a wicker-shelving unit above and behind it. She was curious as to what the contraption was and wanted to enter, but stopped herself. She had a more important mission ahead of her.

She continued on her way, at first quickly glancing into the second room on her left, and then entering, intrigued by what she saw. This was a darker room. Having been to Athens, she knew this was the library. Bookshelves holding hundreds of books with multi-colored jackets lined nearly every wall. Being a bard, the urge to linger in this room became even stronger than in the last. As she reluctantly began backing out of the library, she noticed a huge desk in the center of the room had a strange box-like item sitting on top of it. Well, she'd ask about it later. For now, her objective was the third door where Dari awaited.

\* \* \*

“Can I get you two something to drink?” Sondra’s hostess skills weren’t at a loss, even though her mind nearly was.

Xena stared up at her... She couldn’t quite put her finger on it, but she knew this woman from somewhere. Those eyes... bedroom like, moody, and their color, she couldn’t decide if they were gold or yellow. She’d have to get closer to inspect them. She was slightly taller than Gabrielle; that Xena learned when she’d pounced on her earlier. She felt a momentary pang of guilt over that, not just for maybe causing the woman harm, but also for causing her own bard distress. She’d come to the future to relieve Gabrielle’s anguish, not cause more.

“Water would be fine, thank you,” she finally found her voice. She stood up to follow the woman with those unusual eyes and stopped abruptly when Sondra turned and glared at her.

“Are you going to follow me everywhere I go?”

Xena’s eyes flashed to Aphrodite. Dite was grinning back at her. *No help there.* “No, I wanted to see how you got the water.”

“From a spring, where else?”

Xena plopped back down on the plush couch and watched Sondra walk quickly away. Their trip had taken its toll on them more than they realized, and when Sondra brought the water to them, Xena downed hers in one gulp.

Seeing how her guest had finished off the water, Sonny asked, with her hand reaching for the empty glass, “Would you like another?”

Xena was still thirsty but decided their host had gone through enough trouble. “I can get it,” she stated in her usual abrupt fashion.

“Be my guest.” Sondra waved her hand in the general direction of the kitchen.

Five minutes later Xena turned when the door swung in and Sondra appeared. She smiled crookedly at her and lifted her shoulders. “Ok, I give, where is it?”

“Where’s what?”

“The spring?”

Sondra laughed. "That was a joke."

"Oh." Xena narrowed her eyes.

Sondra went to her, took the glass, and filled it from the tap at the sink. She was smirking when she turned to hand the glass back to Xena. "Would you rather have some milk? The cow's right out back."

"Pfft!" Xena turned on her heel, stomping back to the other room. Sondra followed with gleaming eyes and a playful smile.

\* \* \*

Finally, Gabrielle was at the third door. It was slightly ajar. She lifted a hand and silently placed it on the dark wood, pushing the door further inside. Her hand went to her mouth when she spied an immense bed directly in the center of the room. There was a lace canopy over it, and lace curtains hanging down on each side. The bottom curtain had been lifted and pinned to keep it out of the way. She saw a lump in the center of the bed and knew it was Dari.

Taking slow, small steps, she entered the room. If it was possible, the carpeting in here was much more plush than what had been on the stairs. And this time she did kick off her boots to luxuriate in the feel of it under her feet, between her toes. *Heaven, sheer heaven*, she almost moaned.

She explored the room with her eyes as she made her way to the foot of the bed. The room was a bit dark, mostly because of the heavy hunter green drapes hanging from the floor to ceiling windows Teddy had mentioned. She gazed up and noted there were several openings in the ceiling, the sun shining through their darkened glass.

She bumped into the footboard and gasped. Her eyes flew to the body in the bed. She smiled when Dari just grunted and rolled onto her back. There were quite a lot of pillows, a sweet burgundy color, with a satin like texture to them. She'd bet they were made of the actual fabric.

Her mind calculated the number of dinars everything must have cost as her eyes roved over the room one last time. She shook her head as her gaze finally came to rest on the figure in the bed, by far the best looking thing in that room. Gabrielle smiled, thinking

this woman for whom she held such an attraction was even softer than any of the carpets, or bed coverings, or even of that big bed itself.

“Dari?” she whispered. Of course that wouldn’t wake Dari, she knew. But Dari was sleeping so peacefully, she half wanted to let her stay that way and just wait ‘til she woke herself -- not. Deciding she wanted Dari awake now, Gabrielle moved to the side of the bed, parted the drape, and went to sit on the edge. She totally didn’t expect the mattress to move, or to be filled with some kind of liquid. She tipped off balance and sprawled straight across Dari.

Dari sprang awake, blinked to gain awareness, and then rubbed her eyes when she saw whom she thought it was lying across her upper body.

“Hi.” Gabrielle beamed.

“Gabrielle?” Dari truly believed she was dreaming, and she cupped Gabrielle’s cheek, fully expecting this vision to disappear in a puff upon awakening. But the manifestation remained, and the touch warmed her to her marrow. “It’s really you!” Dari gushed and grabbed her in a fierce hug. “But how? When? Is Xena with you?”

Gabrielle laughed and hugged her back, knowing later would be time enough for explanations. For now, she wallowed in the enjoyment of being with Dari once again.

“Ahhhh...” Gabrielle positioned herself so she was lying beside her, truly content, at least with the fact that they’d found Dari and she was safe and sound. Gabrielle’s shoulders rested against Dari’s strong arm, and she shared the happiness expressed every time Dari squeezed her from pleasure, or just simple happiness that she was there.

“So tell me the how, who, when and where.”

Gabrielle talked so fast it was a wonder Dari could keep up, but keep up she did. And when Gabrielle came to the part about Sondra, Dari’s smile grew bigger, and she leapt from the bed. Gabrielle was impressed with that feat when she found out what an effort it was just trying to get off the bed the normal way.

“This *thing* won’t let go of me,” she grunted, unable to ignore Dari’s smirk. “And quit looking at me like that. I’m just not used to it. What *is* it, anyway?”

“A waterbed.”

“Hmmm.” Gabrielle managed to get her legs over one side of the bed, but noticed they hung way above the floor. She heaved herself upwards and off the bed. “So that’s how you get so strong, just manipulating yourself around that hydra.”

Dari laughed and circled an arm around Gabrielle’s waist as she came astride her. “Here let me show you the rest of the upstairs.”

When the tour was over, Gabrielle was no less in awe of it all. She was really looking forward to a soak in that wonderful Jacuzzi. And maybe if Xena needed to relax some, they could share their time in it. The mere thought elicited a tingling sensation.

They descended the stairs together and saw the three below were seated on the L-Shaped sofa; three coffee cups sat on the two-tier crystal coffee table.

Xena was torn. First there was her joy at seeing Gabrielle’s eyes lit up with life again, and then there was the reason they were. But for now, her bard was happy, and that’s all that mattered to her.

“This place is incredible!” Gabrielle beamed and plopped down beside Xena. She leaned closer to the woman, joy spreading up and outwards at the contact of their bodies.

Xena laughed and bumped herself gently into Gabrielle. “Yes, Sondra was showing us around while you were talking Dari’s ears off.” She ducked a play punch Gabrielle threw at her arm and stood to grasp Dari in a strong hug. “And you!” She squeezed her extra tight for a moment longer and then released her. “It’s good to see you again, Dari.” The words echoed in Xena’s head with uncertainty.

Xena and Gabrielle watched as Dari lit a fire in a colossal fireplace that nearly took up one whole wall, the only one in the room without windows.

Dari stood and brushed her hands together. “There, wait’ll you three see this place after the sun goes down.” She re-joined her mate on the other part of the couch and draped an arm over the back of it, around Sondra’s shoulders. Dari had ordered Chinese from her and Sonny's favorite take-out place.

“While we wait for dinner to arrive, I think now would be as good a time as any for you to explain this whole situation to me.” Sondra was eyeballing her lover.

“Yes,” Dari beamed at her. “About that-”

“Why haven’t you told her?” Gabrielle was still slightly bitter. Xena patted her knee to quiet her, and she relented and sat back into the luxurious cushion.

“Well you see...” Dari began and stopped when Aphrodite stood.

“Hold it, here let me.” She bent over and reached out to Sondra’s head. “Calm down, Sweetie, I’m not gonna hurt you, I’m just going to take a detour to what may turn out to be a very long story.” Her smile seemed to calm Sondra, and she stopped trying to climb up the back of the couch. She let Aphrodite touch her head, then her eyes widened as images flew from Aphrodite’s hands to her mind.

The lightning... pain... bones being put back together- Ares- Gabrielle close to Dari- soothing her- sleeping face to face with her- and Xena, ever watchful off in the shadows- Dari haunted by Aphrodite’s fake Alti induced dreams- Dari dressed head to foot in animal fur. ‘Fetching’ she mused.

She smiled when she saw Dari get on a horse, and then laughed when Dari tumbled off of it just as quickly. There was Xena's mother, *and what a lovely woman she was.*

All through the memories so far she'd noticed the landscape, totally unlike any she'd seen, well none in the city they lived in anyway. Maybe if you went to New Zealand you'd see those vistas...

Now that war person - God, or whatever he called himself - was taking Dari. She was impressed at seeing her lover's fighting ability, as impressed as Ares had been. Then Xena came to the rescue.

She also picked up on how close Dari and Gabrielle had become, and how Gabrielle was falling in love with her mate. That made frown lines appear around her lips. Not so much for the fact, but for poor Gabrielle and how bad she was hurting over it. And then they were at the end; Aphrodite had revealed her plan to the merged bodies of Gabrielle and Xena- Dari was kissing Xena, and seeing who they were to one another. Sondra almost moved her head from Aphrodite's hands at that revelation. But she needed to see it to the end. And to the end she did see.

Aphrodite stood when she was done and then went back to her seat in a cushy lazy-boy chair. She just loved how the bottom part swung up so you could rest your tired legs.

"Well?" Dari's voice was all of a squeak.

"Interesting..." Sondra stood and walked across the room. Four pairs of eyes followed her, waiting. "Ok, I buy it. There's no reason I shouldn't believe that someone can put their hands to my head and allow me see a past life, right? I mean, you can't fake something like that..." she turned to Xena. "So what do you want now?" She knew what she wanted, Xena wanted it out in the open, and then the strangers could be on their way.

Xena stood and walked over to her. "They need some rest," she said of her bard and Aphrodite. "If you could direct us to some inn, we can get settled after dinner and come back early tomorrow to hash this all out."

"Oh, I think it should be hashed out now, Xena." She strode from the room and Xena sighed and followed her, sensing the woman's need to talk in private.

\* \* \*

“She’s in love with Dari! You want her to suffer another 24 hours so she can *rest*?”

Xena closed the door behind her and leaned against it. “That *was* my idea, yes. Gabrielle’s endured enough today. I don’t want to put her through more stress, and besides, I think it should be she and Dari who do the talking.”

Sondra was quiet, thinking. Xena could almost see the gears turning. “Ok, you’ve got a point there. I don’t think she’d want her feelings flashed in front of a bunch of people. Tell you what; you three stay here tonight. If she and Dari wish to have a conversation about... *things*, that’s even better; if not, tomorrow some time. In the meantime, I’ll fix you guys up with some clothing so you look more at home here, and I suppose we could teach you a little of our world since you were so hospitable to Dari during her stay.” She recalled the thought of earlier in the evening and Xena’s ignorance for their modern world, and a smile broke out across her lips. “No more ‘cow’ jokes,” she promised.

“Thank you.” Xena tried smiling warmly at her, but something about this woman unnerved the warrior. Maybe it was because they had gotten off on the wrong foot at the beginning. Maybe if she spent more time with her they could become great comrades, maybe even friends. Xena shook her head as they walked back to the front room. Why did she think that? They weren’t going to be around long enough for her to get to know Sondra.

While they were having their tête-à-tête in the den, Dari had taken Gabrielle onto the porch and they watched the sun setting in silence.

“Gabrielle?” Dari decided it was time to ask.

“Hmmm?” Gabrielle turned towards her, leaning against the balustrade, arms about her midriff, hugging herself.

“I know I left before we could resolve things between us, and I’d like to know if that is the reason you’re here.”

“It was Xena’s idea... She seems to think I was so far down in the dumps there was no other way to bring me out of them. She was kind of right.”

Dari’s face displayed her pain. “So how do I make this right? How can I even try to make it right?”

“I have no idea. If I knew, I’d have worked through this by now. I’ve spent a lot of time thinking over the past month. We’ve still not united... I thought for sure Xena would have come to me by now, but she hasn’t. I don’t know what she’s waiting for. She has to know how much I love and want her.”

“Have you told her?”

“No, but-“

“Gabrielle,” Dari placed a hand on her shoulder. “How can she know? She still thinks you don’t want to be with her because of all that happened with Hope, and Solan.” Gabrielle opened her mouth to speak, but Dari continued without pause. “And yes, she told me all about it. That’s the real reason she hasn’t come to you, not because she doubts your desire for her, or doesn’t know about it. I’m sure she’s pretending she doesn’t so it’s easier on the both of you, but is it really? I’m not even sure if she’s aware of how much that part of your past is affecting your future.

“But if you don’t go to her, let her know what’s inside here,” she tapped on Gabrielle’s heart, “then she’s left in the dark. This isn’t about falling in love with me, is it? Not entirely anyway. There are issues between the two of you that you need to resolve that go beyond the sexual.”

“There’s also my love for you, Dari...” Gabrielle had to let her know.

“You know why you love me like you do? Look at me, Gabrielle.” She walked away a few steps then turned and stared deeply into her eyes. “I *am* Xena in this lifetime, Gabrielle.” She waited for the outburst of disbelief, but there was none forthcoming. “I kissed Xena the day I left, thinking you were still inside her, and I saw it, and she saw it, our memories of each others lives, past and present. So you see, you do love me, that’s true, but what you love in me is the karmic impression that your warrior princess has left behind. You, my dear friend, love the *Xena* in me.”

Gabrielle was stunned into silence. Could it really be? Was that it? She felt relief ebbing into her unlike any she’d ever known, and she began to cry.

“Aw, Honey...” Dari went to her and wrapped her in a warm, tight embrace. “Don’t cry...”

“No Dari, I’m happy, these are happy tears.” She leaned her head back and grinned up into Dari’s confused stare. “By the gods, I thought I was losing her, and all along it was her!” She was so delighted; she broke from Dari’s arms and danced around the deck.

Dari laughed, and the two in the den watching smiled with her. Xena looked at Sondra... “Well, looks like they’ve talked ‘things’ out.”

With a gentle laugh, Sondra nodded, “Indeed they have. I need a drink!”

Just then the doorbell rang. Xena, unfamiliar with the sound, turned quickly, her warrior senses on alert. “Calm down,” Sondra spoke softly, not wanting to startle her any further. “It’s just the delivery guy.” Xena didn’t understand, and her face showed it. “It’s the food, Xena. There’s someone at the front door with our dinner.” Sondra placed her hand on Xena’s forearm, as she patiently explained. Xena found the gesture oddly comforting, her touch was soothing and gentle, almost like . . .

“I got eats,” Aphrodite burst into the kitchen, all smiles.

“Aphrodite, how did you pay for the food?” Gabrielle asked, as she and Dari entered the room from the porch.

“I gave him one of those gold coins, like we gave Teddy for driving us here,” Aphrodite stated while investigating the contents of one of the small paper boxes. “He seemed quite pleased to accept it as payment. Or maybe the look on his face was because I answered the door wearing this,” upon which she struck her most alluring, *Goddess of Love* pose.

“I’m certain he was thrilled, on both counts,” Dari laughed and the group laughed with her. She couldn’t believe that the three people she loved most in the world were here, in her world, together. She planned on enjoying it for as long as was possible.

Xena and Gabrielle had to admit they were a little disappointed with the food. Aside from the tiny pieces of paper in the triangular shaped cookies, they could have eaten a similar meal at Falafel’s new tavern in Corinth, “*A Little Taste of Chin.*”

Or maybe it was the fact it had come to a point that neither of them could wait any longer to be alone. They both gulped down their dinner, anxious at the thought of relieving the aching need that unexpectedly consumed them both.

\* \* \*

They stood in the doorway together eyeballing that large sunken tub. Dari had already filled it for them; all it required was some needing bodies to take advantage of it. “Shall we?” Gabrielle asked, a twinkle in her green eyes.

“We shall...” Xena smirked at her and entered the room, slipping out of her clothes. She sighed as her body sunk deep into the wavy water. Her eyes found Gabrielle still standing in the doorway watching her. “Come on, get in here!”

Gabrielle laughed and pushed herself away from the doorjamb. She slipped from her halter-top and skirt and oohed and aahed as she, too, sank into the water.

“There’s nothing better than this...” Xena said and turned to face her bard.

“Oh yes there is.” There was a sly gleam in Gabrielle’s eye. She placed her hands on Xena’s shoulders, drawing her closer as she attempted to knead away a month’s worth of tension. “I’m sorry for all the trouble I’ve been-”

“Shhh.” Xena wouldn’t let her take anymore blame. And she told her that. “Listen, Gabrielle, from here on out, no more naming blame. We’ll take each day as it comes, go with Dari’s ‘flow’ as it were, and whatever happens, happens!” She moved closer to the smaller woman, and rested her chin on the top of her bard’s head. “Say it aloud,” she whispered.

Against her neck, Gabrielle whispered, “I love *you*, Xena.”

Xena’s eyes closed, and a lone tear fell from one of the corners and slid down her cheek.

They jumped at the knock on the door and turned to see Dari standing there with a big cat-eating grin on her face. She cleared her throat. “Hurry up in here, we’re taking you three out for some fun and dancing, and I won’t take no for an answer. There’s plenty of time for... for whatever... so let’s get busy!” Then she was gone and they were

alone again, except for her last warning called from somewhere in the hall. “In this lifetime, if we want privacy, we *close* the doors.”

Gabrielle laughed and stepped from the Jacuzzi. She drew one of the plushy robes around her body and waited for Xena to join her. Xena looked like she was moments away from pouting. “Hurry or ‘Drill Sergeant Dari’ will come back for us,” she teased her slower friend, recalling the name Teddy had fondly called Dari on their drive to the house. She handed a robe to Xena when she finally emerged from the tub.

When she helped her warrior into the robe, she laid her hands on Xena’s shoulders for a minute longer than normal, her face close to the broad back, eyes closed. Xena leaned back; nearly losing her balance she was so lost in the emotion.

“*Whoops!*” Gabrielle laughed and pushed Xena back to a full upright position again. She dropped her hands, fingertips trailing down Xena’s back and almost touching the rise of her backside before they fell away. She circled around to face Xena and saw a slight red tinged flush heating up the warrior’s neck and cheeks.

“Any day now!” Dari called from one of the rooms down the hall. Xena rolled her eyes and took Gabrielle’s hand, leading her towards the source of their frustration.

\* \* \*

Sondra and Dari stood over them like hawks as they sorted through each of their closets for decent clothing. Gabrielle and Xena, still dressed only in robes, sat on the edge of that monster waterbed, trying to keep their balance and watch the chaos.

“This!” Dari said and withdrew black jeans and a white, button-down, billowy shirt from her closet. She reached for a pair of her black loafers and brought the outfit to Xena, setting it in her lap. “Go on.”

“I don’t know...” Xena was nervous. In her lifetime she’d hardly experienced nervousness, and certainly never over what to wear. *Well...* she reminded herself, *there was that one time in India...*

“This’ll do,” Sondra finally found an outfit for her smaller friend and turned with a cheesy grin on her lips, one similar to Dari’s. She held it up by the neck of the hanger to display a one-piece, green bodysuit.

Gabrielle actually liked it. She stood and went to her, reached out a hand to feel its fabric. "Is this real silk?"

Sondra nodded. "I couldn't resist it when I laid eyes on it."

"Hmmm... It's beautiful."

"For a beauty!" Dari chirped in and smirked when Sondra growled at her playfully.

"Ok, off with the both of you..." Sondra shooed them both away.

\* \* \*

Dari whistled when Xena emerged in the outfit she'd accurately picked out for her.

"Where do I put my chakram?" was all Xena wanted to know.

"You don't *put* it anywhere." Dari hopped up and grabbed Xena's shoulders, turning her towards a full-length mirror. Xena had to admit she looked *good*. "And to top it off, we'll just slide this on ya..." She started threading a gold linked chain through the belt loops. "There!"

"Nice," Sondra voiced, then caught sight of Gabrielle entering the room in her new outfit. The writer's eyes took on a more appreciative expression. Yes, the bard did indeed look good in her new bodysuit; the clothing hugged every part of her slim form, emphasizing the muscular frame beneath.

"These clothes aren't very conventional for our needs." Gabrielle noted, bending over to see where her Sais would work into the seam of the pantsuit. They wouldn't.

Xena's eyes were on her bard's backside. "But they do have their good points."

"Dari," Sonny whispered, while Xena and Gabrielle grew accustomed to their new attire, "we didn't give them any under things."

Dari looked at how the 21st Century fabrics molded themselves to the lean and taut frames of her non-21st Century friends, and replied, "Definitely a plus in this case." To which Sonny sunk a not-so-subtle elbow jab into Dari's ribcage.

“No really!” Aphrodite insisted. “I’ll be fine. I’m going to go visit with Teddy.”

Were her eyes gleaming? Xena and Gabrielle wondered. Hmmmm. Maybe, in the end, this trip would be good for all three of them.

“Well if you need a ride home . . .” Dari started to offer, but Aphrodite waved it off and raised a well-manicured hand.

“I’ll be fine. Enjoy yourselves.” She took one final appraising look at Xena and Gabrielle. “I couldn’t have picked you two better outfits myself!” And with that she snapped two pink-polished fingers and disappeared in a cloud of fuchsia sparks.

“What just happened?” Sonny inquired, eyes as wide as the golden coins Dite had paid Teddy with earlier. The other three couldn’t help but laugh at the expression on Sondra’s face, as they walked toward the front door.

“No, seriously, what just happened?” Sonny was still asking as they walked out of the house toward Dari’s jeep.

\* \* \*

Dari decided to leave the top off the jeep. The evening was calm, not too chilly, a perfect evening for love. She inhaled deeply as she held the door for Gabrielle. “Up ya go!” She assisted her in, and then winked at Xena as the warrior followed Gabrielle into the back.

“Sorry about the space back there, I know how cramped it can be for us long-leggers.” She laughed and hopped up front beside her baby.

Xena re-positioned herself so she was facing the passenger seat at an angle, and Gabrielle could lean into her more. Of course, it wasn’t mostly legroom she was concerned with; she wanted the bard close to her.

Gabrielle shivered as she settled back against Xena, hugging herself, and she smiled when Xena's arms came around and over her own. Xena gave her a little squeeze, pulling her upper body even closer. It was slightly different, no, that wasn't true; it was a lot different to feel Xena through her new clothing. Most of the time hugging her was a hazard in its own right, always having to watch to avoid being poked in the eye with that sword, or gouged in the forehead by her breastplate, and her Chakram . . . well, Gabrielle wasn't even going to consider that! But now, the armor was gone, and she could feel a strong, hard -- yet amazingly soft -- body beneath her own.

Dari flipped on the radio, and the two in the back jolted a bit when the announcers voice came blaring out at them from a speaker right behind Xena. "Sorry," she called and lowered it. They settled back down, Gabrielle shifting a bit for a better position, closer to Xena if it were possible. And then she froze. From the radio came the gentlest musical score she'd ever heard.

"Oh Dari, can you make it louder? It's so beautiful..." Gabrielle tilted her head back and looked up at Xena. Yes, she too loved the song.

"Oh this?" Dari grinned and took a peek at them in the mirror. "I have the CD in the glove box." She nodded towards it and Sondra was put to the task of locating it. "Thank you, Love." She winked and took the CD from her and slid it into the console. "It's "Lady Soul," by The Temptations," she announced to them, but they were lost in the song, and in one another. And they didn't know who the Temptations were anyway. She smiled inwardly at that, and reached for Sondra's hand. They clasped hands tightly, and Sondra leaned over a bit so Dari could rest their hands on her thigh.

The stretch of road was amazingly beautiful, lined with trees, and beach houses set a mile apart from one another. Light was casting out into the night from some of them, adding to the magnificence of the evening. There were hundreds of stars out, and the moon was at its fullest, it's beams casting a blue-hued light over the four women below it riding along wordlessly in the jeep. The song was the only thing heard as they drove, it's musical beauty seeming to float out and up towards the heavens.

Xena was absentmindedly stroking gentle fingers up and down Gabrielle's arm, chin on the top of her head, eyes closed, just feeling, listening, and putting the words of the music to their lives together.

She brushed her lips over Gabrielle's shining, golden hair, pressed her cheek to it after, drawing her closer with a firm embrace. She wanted to express all that she felt, all that she desired from her body into Gabrielle's, and when Gabrielle looked back and up at her, she knew she had.

A tender smile broke out on both their mouths, and just as they leaned in to kiss, the jeep hit a pothole and jarred everyone out of position.

"Oops." Dari glanced in the rearview mirror and noted the menacing look crossing Xena's face. Gabrielle, however, was more amused by what happened.

"Oh please, turn it up more, Dari," Gabrielle pleaded softly, settling back against Xena. She didn't know how people kissed, let alone made love in automobiles, as Dari had told her some people did. What with all the jarring, and wind, and cramped spaces, it was a wonder mortals could drive the cars, let alone attempt to do anything amorous in them. There would be later though, she thought, a pleased smile tracing her tender mouth.

Hitting the pothole actually hadn't been too bad, Xena mused, for now she was cheek to cheek with Gabrielle. Eyes closed again, she moved her face gradually, just barely against Gabrielle's, their skin brushing ever so gently. She moved her head back some, so her lips were at Gabrielle's ear, letting her breath warm it, and then whispered, "I love you." She touched the delicate lobe with the tip of her tongue, and when Gabrielle didn't move -- she didn't know Gabrielle was frozen to the spot by desire -- she trailed it unhurriedly down behind her ear and over the strong cords of her neck.

Gabrielle groaned loudly, forgetting everyone, forgetting where she was and whom she was with except for Xena. Dari and Sondra must have heard her exaltation, but if they did, they made no notice of them in the back. They knew what the women were experiencing, finally realizing their unity... Maybe they couldn't perform the full act of total union right there and then, but they could come pretty darn close... emotionally if not physically.

"Better than mom's cream puffs," Xena whispered, savoring the taste of Gabrielle's skin. Now *that* was a compliment. Gabrielle's face beamed and she laughed, taking a peek back at Xena to share the connection deeper with a look. Xena returned the look with gleaming love-filled eyes.

\* \* \*

“Well, hello there!” Teddy greeted Aphrodite. She looked her up and down, smiling her approval. “I see you’ve raided Sondra’s closet.” She stepped back and allowed Aphrodite into her home. “Welcome to my abode, pretty lady...”

Aphrodite giggled and strutted past her. “It’s lovely!” She clapped her hands together. The house wasn’t nearly as grand as Dari’s, but it had its own charm. Teddy’s was more wood, like a cabin than an actual beach house. There were vaulted ceilings, and three steps down led to the sunken living room area.

While Dite was examining the house, Teddy was giving her a once, and a twice over with her eyes. She looked spiffy in Sondra’s beige suit. Sondra wore that type of clothing mostly when meeting her agent, or a publisher, but Aphrodite had taken to the outfit immediately and decided she’d give it a whirl and see what Teddy thought.

“So what do you think?” Aphrodite spun around, showing off.

Teddy was all smiles. “I think it looks beautiful on you!”

“Hmmm...” Aphrodite smirked at her and flopped down onto a settee closest to where she was standing.

“Coffee? Or something stronger?”

“Coffee, I’ve taken a liking to it.” Aphrodite leaned her head back and watched Teddy disappear into another room.

Teddy ground her own beans but she was fast about it. She had the pot ready to brew in minutes and rejoined Aphrodite on the settee. “So what brings you here this evening? Miss me already?” She giggled.

“*Actually...*” Aphrodite grabbed Teddy’s shoulders and kissed her. And in that instant, when their lips made contact, she knew what she’d assumed was correct. Teddy was she, a slightly more rugged-looking and acting her, but *her* nonetheless.

“Hey!” Teddy leapt up, staring down at her. “What did you do?”

“Don’t worry, Sweetie, I wanted to find out something, and I have.”

“What was that I saw?”

“One of your past lives, darlin’. Don’t we look pretty in pink?”

\* \* \*

“Just a few more minutes and we’re there,” Dari called back to them. “You’re going to love this place, it’s where Sondra and I went for our very first date.” Her eyes connected with her lover’s, and in that moment they remembered that sweet night.

“What do we do there?” Gabrielle's curiosity was in overdrive, along with a few other biological urges.

“Hang out, dance, listen to music, play pool, enjoy being with others like us, free to be who, and what we are, without prejudice or reprisals.

They didn’t understand the last part, but the dancing caught both their interest. They’d give a pretty dinar to dance with one another right at this very moment.

“It’s not your normal women’s bar. This one was made out of someone’s beach house. Wait’ll you see it, two stories of hardwood, fireplaces, carpeting in nearly all the rooms but the ones with the dance floors, skylights, and everything. And closer to summer you can even go swimming! But walks along the beach certainly aren’t unheard of until then.”

“It sounds stunning.” But Gabrielle just wanted to be with Xena, the *where* didn’t really matter. She’d sit on Bacchus' horns if it meant being next to Xena.

Sondra opened the door to Krystal & Shabba Ranks “Twice My Age,” a splendid little reggae number blaring from five floor-to-ceiling length speakers situated around the main room in each of the four corners, with one hanging directly above them.

It was loud. Gabrielle winced a bit, but the beat of the music did touch her, and she found her shoulders rocking to it as she followed behind the three of them.

They entered a second room off the main one, where in there the music was a decibel lower than the other room. Xena was glad for that; she could enjoy the song and not suffer injury to her ears later. Dari led them to a corner booth and they each sat beside their designated loves.

“What’s your pleasure?” A tall, slim woman appeared from nowhere, pencil and pad in hand. Her eyes moved over Xena’s immaculate face, to Gabrielle’s, and back again.

Xena was just about to say “Gabrielle” when it struck her that’s not what the woman was alluding to, but the thought made her smile.

“I’ll have an ale,” Gabrielle put in.

“One ginger ale-“

“No, just plain ale, thanks.”

Dari laughed, knowing what Gabrielle wanted wasn’t what she would be served. “Bring us a pitcher, draft please, Belle.”

“Gottcha.” With a wink, she slipped the pencil behind one ear and disappeared as fast as she had appeared.

“Would you two like a tour?” Sondra asked. She was feeling a lot better as the evening progressed. From being tackled earlier in the day, to playing dress up, to now,

seated in such wonderful company, it was as if the worry and stress melted away minute by minute and she could be her self again

Gabrielle shook her head. It was all too new, and she wanted to savor the sights and sounds room by room for as long as it took to burn each into her memory.

“Sure, why not?” Xena stood and waited for Sondra to slide her way from the booth. It wouldn’t hurt to take a look around. In case trouble brewed, she’d have a pretty good understanding of the layout.

After they were out of sight, Dari’s gaze fell on Gabrielle and she could only smile. She wondered if she’d ever smiled more in her life than she did when Xena and Gabrielle were around. Gabrielle was taking a great liking to the music of this life, Dari noted, watching the bard looking around the room, taking it all in, all the while moving her upper body to the beat of "A Love Bizarre." For a being from so far ago, she had some pretty good moves.

"What?" Gabrielle queried when her eyes fell on Dari’s piercing ones.

"You," Dari laughed, reached across the table and took her hand. It was an automatic gesture, one she'd easily do with Sondra no matter where they were. "I take it you like this version of the world?"

"So far, yes. The automobile could have been better thought out before its creation, but everything else has been superb, especially your music. This could be a Xena: Warrior Princess theme song," She laughed, pointing to the speaker over Dari’s shoulder that was booming another groovy tune. Gabrielle wondered where the real band was.

Dari laughed with her. Yes, it sure could have. "That's Snap's, "I've Got the Power" Great dance hit back in the 80's."

"As in the years?"

"You're catching on mighty fast, Miss Gabrielle." She patted her hand and released it.

\* \* \*

Xena poked her nose into the reading room, clearly baffled when she glanced at Sondra. "How do they read with that booming overhead?" she asked, nodding to one of the speakers still banging out her "theme song"

"Normally, when there are people really reading, the door's closed; it's sound proofed. Right now those people are just hanging out, away from the main crowd. Come on, wait'll you see the pool." She took Xena's hand, unaware of it at first, until she saw the expression on Xena's face. She dropped the hand, looking away. "Sorry, habit... you're so like her..." She walked away, leaving the sentence in mid-air.

Xena stuffed her hands into the front pockets of the jeans and followed behind smiling that stupid smile like she did sometimes around Gabrielle. She felt it the second it began forming on her face. She hadn't minded Dari's bard -- *Writer*, she corrected herself -- taking her hand, she just found it incredibly odd of the woman to become so intimate so soon. But she was Dari; she had to keep reminding herself of that fact.

The pool was off the back deck. They walked through the crowded porch to get to it. Sondra blushed once when she heard someone call out, "Hey, Sonny, did you finally dump that sexy cop of yours?" Followed by a wolf whistle, which was obviously for Xena.

Xena didn't get it, but she did see the blush on Sondra's face when she was standing at the door waiting for her to catch up.

"Ignore 'em," Sondra said, holding the door open for her taller companion. "Beautiful, isn't it!" She beamed at Xena, glancing sideways at her.

"Wow, a pond in your very own yard." Xena nodded her approval.

Sondra chuckled. "Well, it's not exactly a *pond*, it's much smaller." She thought about it for a moment, deciding Xena was nearly right. "Yeah, it is kind of like having your own pond."

Xena walked around the large circle to the other side, and then leaned on the railing. She sighed, watching the tail end of the sunset. "You have a beautiful world," she said when she felt Sondra come up beside her.

Sondra leaned her arms on the railing, too, tilting her head to look at Xena. "From those memories I saw of Dari's time with you, I'd say you had a pretty appealing world of your own."

"I guess." Xena looked at her, stricken by how the colors of the moons' light reflecting off the waters hit Sonny's eyes. Gold, her eyes were gold, she saw finally. Realizing how close their faces were, she looked down at the floor quickly, standing up and away from Sondra. "So what else is on this tour?"

Sondra stood up, trying to think of the word that best described how she felt when she was near Xena. "The upstairs."

"Lead on, Mc Duff," Xena quoted Dari, and they both laughed.

\* \* \*

"Oh what a difference in tone and beat..." Gabrielle crooned when the song came to an end and a much slower, sadder tune started to play.

"It's a classic Roberta Flack -- 'The First Time I Saw Your Face,'" Dari quoted easily.

"Wow, you're just your own library of musical artists." Gabrielle was impressed. She settled back into the booth to listen to the words. And with the beginning verse, Xena came around a corner and their gazes locked...

Xena halted in her tracks, bedazzled by the music, but more by Gabrielle's stare. Her look beckoned Gabrielle towards her, and Gabrielle went.

"...I thought the sun rose in your eyes," were the words of the music as their bodies came together snugly, and completely.

"I did, too," Xena said, of the lyrics. "I still do..."

Gabrielle cupped her warrior's left cheek with one hand; the other arm was around her shoulders, hand intertwined under the hair at the nape of her neck. "I was awake that morning," she whispered close to Xena's lips.

"Hmmm?" Xena didn't catch her words.

"That morning after Discord melded us, when you were bathing . . ." She looked down, then quickly back up, remembering her vow to be more brave with Xena, "I ... was... I was awake."

\* \* \*

Sondra plopped down besides Dari, humming and singing "HMMMM HMMM ever I kissed your mouth," and watching as Xena bent her head to kiss Gabrielle at the same moment. "Ah, love," she sighed and turned to face her own love. "Shall we give them the master bedroom tonight?" She chuckled and rested her head on Dari's shoulder as Dari's arm came around her. *I know!* It finally came to Sondra -- that word she had been looking for. She experienced the same feeling when she was with Dari that she'd been experiencing the entire day together with Xena. *Tranquility*, that's what she felt around the two. Absolute tranquility.

"They're so beautiful together," Dari whispered into Sondra's hair.

"I have an idea..." She cupped her hand to Dari's ear and whispered it to her. Dari grinned, and Sondra watched her slide around the circular seat and hop out of the booth on the other side, heading for the DJ's booth.

\* \* \*

"I want to go. Right now," Gabrielle was insistent, body afire, mind spinning in all directions, lips glistening from their kiss. She could still taste Xena's tongue on the tip of her own.

"Yeah," was all Xena could muster as an answer. Kissing Gabrielle sapped her strength more than fighting the whole Persian army single-handedly.

They turned toward their table and saw it empty. Xena glanced around, spotted Dari talking to some woman who was up above her in a small box with something strange over her ears. Sondra was nowhere in sight.

Dari was grinning like she'd just won a gladiator bout when she stepped up to them, then her brows came down and she frowned. "Where's Sondra?"

Xena just shook her head.

"She was gone when we..." Gabrielle thought she could answer, but found she was unable. She smiled shyly up at Xena.

"Arg!" Dari groaned and went to search out her woman.

TWANG!! TATATATATATAT. . .Gunshots rang out around the room, plaster fell, light-fixtures shattered, and bottles of liquor burst upon impact.

Xena grabbed Gabrielle and dropped them both to their knees, the force of her action sliding them nearly all the way under the table of their booth. Xena reached for her weapon, but when cold metal didn't come in contact with the palm of her hand, the warrior realized she was weaponless. She cursed at her own short-sidedness and glanced at Gabrielle, first and foremost, to make sure she was okay, then quickly peered around the room, looking for the assassin and for Dari. She spotted Dari just running back into the room and shouted, "NO!"

The first bullet clipped Dari on the shoulder, the second hit her in the stomach, the third and fourth pierced her legs and she went down hard.

Xena had slapped a hand over Gabrielle's eyes, but the smaller woman ducked out of her way, moved around Xena, and tried to stand, but Xena had a strong hold on her waist.

*"By the gods! Xena!"* Gabrielle fought with her friend for release, but Xena was not having any harm come to her bard. She cupped a hand over her mouth and roughly shoved her back under the table. She'd be damned if she'd let one hair on the woman's head be harmed.

"STAY HERE!" Xena ordered her, glaring fiercely; this time there was no misunderstanding that she was to be obeyed.

Slowly, like a cat on all fours, Xena crept across the floor. She could hear strange noises off in the distance, and heard someone say the police were on their way. But would it be too late? She reached Dari's side and saw her eyes were closed, her body limp, still...

All that trouble to save her life one short month ago, only to have it end in a split second was too much. Xena reached out to check the extent of her friend's injuries, trying to will her hands to cease shaking. Blood was beginning to pool on the dance floor around Dari's motionless body, and Xena began to cry.

And the music played on... "The first time, ever I saw... your face... your face... your face... your face..."

Xena held Gabrielle tightly to her as the big, square automobile carted Dari away with a blare of sirens and flashing lights. The waitress came up beside them, her mourning showing clearly on her face.

"She'll pull through, if I know Dari . . . and I do. It'll take a lot more than bullets to keep her down." But despite her bravery, the tears were streaming down her face.

"You guys need a lift somewhere?"

Xena couldn't think. For the first time in her life, she felt brain dead. Numb, yes that's what it was. Numb to everything but Gabrielle.

"Yes, back to her house," Gabrielle was able to answer for them. "We have to find out what happened to Sondra. She needs to know."

"One of those men got her," Belle answered, perking up as the memory flooded in fast and hard. "I was just bringing the drinks, Dari was at the DJ booth, you two were dancing, and Sondra had gotten up, headed for the ladies room, at least it looked that way. And then someone grabbed her, and shots rang out. After that I just dropped to the floor and rolled to safety." She sighed deep and hard. "I better tell the detective. I'll be right back."

Xena led Gabrielle to a table; she knew they both needed to sit. "We have to get to Aphrodite, and I need my weapons." She felt totally naked without them.

"Yes," Gabrielle agreed, missing her staff and Sais. She would have tossed her Sais at those bastards for what they'd done to Dari. And now they have Sondra... Rage burned brightly in her eyes. "They'll pay..." she whispered.

Xena's look turned painful as she watched Gabrielle's face. "Now listen to me, Gabrielle, you saw the destruction those men can cause. You let me think before you go off and do something I'll regret."

Gabrielle didn't answer, or look at her. This couldn't be happening, she tried to tell herself, two people she'd grown to love, one over a month ago, the other in just a few hours . . . no their lives couldn't be ended so easily. She wouldn't permit it. She didn't know much of this world, but she didn't need to, she'd get Aphrodite to help. Those goddess powers of hers had to be of more use than for causing trouble, maybe she could blink her to where they had Sondra and then...

"Stop plotting!" Xena demanded, knowing the scheming that was going on in her bard's mind. "Gabrielle, I know you sometimes don't listen to me when I tell you things for your own good; but this time, please, *listen*. We're not dealing with a local warlord; we're dealing with crazy men, with 21st Century weaponry, weapons that we may not be able to fight against with our own. Just give me some time, I'll come up with something, I promise." She pulled Gabrielle towards her when a flood of tears broke from Gabrielle, and kissed her head. "Shhh. I'll make it right, I promise you, I'll make it all right again."

She went to stand, and Gabrielle grabbed her wrist and pulled her back into her seat. "What?"

"Xena, what are you doing?"

"Gonna go find her!"

Gabrielle smiled through her pain. "And how are you going to do that? You're a great tracker, back in our time, but this isn't our time Xena."

"I know that," Xena narrowed her eyes at the smaller warrior. "But I have to find her, Gabrielle."

"Yes, we do. But what you want to do is impossible. You don't know how they took her away, or in what. How are you going to track down a car? By its scent?"

Xena jerked her arm from Gabrielle's grasp. She was becoming greatly frustrated being reminded of her limitations.

"Xena..." Gabrielle took her hand this time, interlocking their fingers together. "Just think, ok?" She stroked her cheek with her other hand, oblivious to her surroundings. "Tracking Sondra like you would in our time isn't going to work. Why don't we wait to see what Belle has to say after she speaks with those men," she pointed to the waitress who was talking to two men in suits. "And then we'll go from there."

Xena knew she was beat. She hated it, but she had to accept it. She sighed and stared up at the stars overhead. She made a vow, then and there, to find Sondra for Dari; and to anyone that harmed that woman; there'd be Tartarus to pay...

"Hey look, I'm sorry, but they want me down at the station for my report. I've called a taxi for you guys, ok?" Belle was back; worry lines etched around her mouth.

"Thank you," Xena said, her voice shaky. She had to pull herself together, and quickly. She couldn't let Gabrielle see her in this state, at least not for much longer. She had to be strong for her, or she knew Gabrielle would go off and get herself hurt, or worse.

\* \* \*

"It's ok, you can wait here," Teddy said when Aphrodite started to follow her out to the cab. "I'll just be a few minutes, something awful happened at "Let's Be Inn," that bar Dari took your friends to."

"What!" Aphrodite grabbed her arm. "What happened?"

"I'm not sure. Belle, a waitress there, said someone came in and shot the place up. Dari was rushed to county hospital, and she said she had what looked like two waifs there needing a ride because she had to go down to the police station. I'm sure she was referring to Xena and Gabrielle."

"Are Xena and Gabrielle alright? Where's Sondra?" Aphrodite hated chaos, well, violent chaos. She much preferred it when lives were turned upside down over love.

"I don't rightly know..." Teddy fumbled with her keys and noted her hands were trembling. She so hated violence. The world would be a much better place without it, and her dear friend, Dari, shot, several times, barely hanging on to life. She wanted to cry, knew it would be ok to cry, but she didn't. She'd cry later, after she helped in whatever way she could. "I'll be back." She plopped into the front seat and went to swing the door closed.

"Oh, no, you don't," said Aphrodite, nearly pouting as she hurried around to the passenger side. "I'm coming too. You can't just leave me here!"

\* \* \*

"Xena! Gabrielle!" Aphrodite boomed when she spotted them. She and Teddy hurried over to them, and the four hugged instinctively.

"Here, let's get outta this place and get you two back to the house." Teddy led them to the taxi. "I'm real sorry you all had to go through this your first day here. Normally, this kinda thing doesn't happen. It's a quiet place, that's why so many of us are here..." She slammed the door and took a look back at the bar. Some very crazy person or persons had done a real good job of making the place look like a hunk of Swiss cheese.

"Go to the hospital, Teddy, please. We want to see how she's doing." Gabrielle could only speak in broken sounds, her voice too filled with tears.

\* \* \*

Teddy took them to the hospital, where not much could be done but wait. Dari had been rushed to surgery shortly after her arrival, her condition critical, according to a kindly nurse who had taken pity on the four after seeing the extreme duress on each of their faces. "They're doing everything they can to save her. She's in good hands. That's all I can tell you at the moment. Her family is being notified."

Family? Xena hadn't even considered that. Dari had a family, or Sondra either, for that matter. How would they explain why they were there to Dari's family? Xena went over to the desk leaving the others in the waiting room. "Where is her family?" she asked the nurse.

"Hmm, let's see, Dari's parents are divorced, her mom moved to the west coast, and her dad is still here on the east, I think. At least he was the last time Dari was here for that gunshot wound to her side. She told me about her dad, but you know how the mind can go on you sometimes..."

"Huh? She's been shot before?"

"Oh Dari's a regular here. We all feel like her family, she's here so much. Always coming in with some injury. Never been this bad before though," the nurse said with

somewhat of a pained expression on her face. "Looks like she used that body of hers as a shield this time."

Xena's mind replayed the entire scene again, forcing her to close her eyes tightly. She didn't want to keep seeing it; it was like seeing her own death over and over. But it was a small pain compared to knowing it was Dari's life that it had happened to.

"I'm sorry dear, I didn't mean to cause you more grief. Please, have a seat in the waiting room, and I promise as soon as I can find out anything, I'll come let you all know."

\* \* \*

"It's taking too long," Xena bellowed, startling Gabrielle, whose head was resting on the warrior's shoulder. "It's been hours."

"Patience, Xena. No news is good news." Gabrielle placed her hand on Xena's thigh and gave it a pat.

"I'm sorry. You know that just isn't one of my virtues."

Gabrielle chuckled softly. Xena saw the need for sleep in her bard's eyes and suggested, "Here," slapping her lap with the palms of her hands. "Lie down and rest while we wait." Gabrielle readily accepted the invitation and placed her head on Xena's thighs. Sleep overtook Gabrielle quickly; but it wasn't a peaceful sleep.

*She awoke with an intense feeling of nausea and a jackerhammer, playing the Anvil Chorus, in her head. What happened? was the only coherent thought in her mind, and she tried to will herself to remember.*

*"Oh my God, Dari!" The voice that spoke wasn't Gabrielle's, but at the same time was familiar. She sat up quickly; too quickly she realized as a riptide of blackness overtook her and she plunged into oblivion again.*

Gabrielle inhaled deeply, jarring Xena. "Are you all right?" Worry cast its dark shadow on the warrior's face.

"Yes, yes, I'm fine. I just had the strangest dream.

\* \* \*

Finally, the nurse came in to tell them that Dari was out of surgery and in the recovery room. She said that all the bullets had been successfully removed, the bleeding had stopped, and if she could survive the night, she would survive more days to follow. Shaking her head as if she couldn't believe it herself, the nurse told the foursome, "I have no fear at all that Dari won't survive this. Remarkably, she's in pretty near stable condition. That woman's recuperative powers are amazing."

Relief was the biggest emotion in the room. Suddenly exceptionally thirsty, Teddy and Aphrodite went to get them all sodas. Xena stayed with Gabrielle, holding to her tightly. The four decided to stay there a few more hours, 'til the sun was up, to see if Dari improved; then Xena was taking her bard home for some rest.

For the time they were there, hardly anyone spoke. They each were thinking their own thoughts, some planning and plotting, and some just zoning out until the nurse brought them more news about Dari's condition. And so they waited.

\* \* \*

At 7 a.m. the nurse was off her shift. She felt bad for the four women still sitting vigil in the waiting room. "Listen, I'm off and on my way home, but I've told Blair, and she'll take care of you." She winked. "Family means those close to you 'round here, not who ya grew up with." She gave them her number in case they needed anything and was on her way. A few minutes after she'd left, the woman named Blair came into the room. She was in her middle 30's, wore glasses, but had the most startling gray eyes. She emitted a friendly presence, and they liked her immediately.

"Hi," she extended her hand to each of them in turn and shook hands. "I'm Doctor Blair Carlson, head resident here at Lerrette County. Mrs. Worth told me the situation.

I'm really sorry to hear what happened to Dari. I'm on my way up to see her now. When I'm through, I'll come back and let you all know how she's doing, ok?" She smiled and was gone and off to the elevator to the fourth floor to see how Dari was doing.

\* \* \*

After reading her chart, taking Dari's vitals, and talking with another doctor on staff, Blair was relieved. Dari would live another day – and many more if she learned to stay out of trouble. "Got into it pretty deep this time, huh?" she said to her as she peered into one blue eye. She moved her pen light back and forth, saw the pupil dilate, and let the lid down. She shook her head, *of all the jobs; you had to be a cop.*

The four waiting downstairs were delighted with Blair's positive report. However, despite the good news, they wanted to stay until Dari woke up, even though Blair told them that might not be for days.

Around 4 p.m. that afternoon, Blair knew she'd have to be firm with Dari's friends. They hadn't slept for quite some time, and probably hadn't eaten either. If she had to toss them out so they could get some sleep, she would. She didn't need four more bodies to look after.

"Tell you what, you all go on home, have a rest, some food, and I'll call if anything drastic happens. But I doubt anything will. She's looking real good, considering... I promise, I'll call you and let you know. How's that sound?"

Xena looked at the others. They looked like a bunch of rag dolls that had been tossed around by a waterfall, all except Aphrodite, who had held up considerably well. Xena took pity on her other two friends and relented. "Call as soon as she wakes up, ok?"

"You have my word!" Blair shook her hand and with a flashy toothed smile, left them.

\* \* \*

The ride back to the house was a lot different than it had been away from it the day before. Xena and Gabrielle held one another, not for pleasure this time, but to share comfort in one another.

"Anybody else hungry?" Aphrodite grumbled from the front passenger seat. She sat absent-mindedly rubbing her stomach.

"I thought goddesses didn't eat," questioned Xena from the back of the cab, suddenly remembering how much Mugu Gy Pan, Dite' consumed at dinner.

"They don't, but I am. Is that ok with you?" She scowled, arms folded.

"All right, Dite." Xena guessed that the events of late had even taken their toll on the Goddess of Love. "More like the Goddess of *whine*, if you ask me," Xena mumbled under her breath.

"What was that, warrior princess?"

"I said *fine*, I guess we could all use some nourishment."

Teddy pulled into the nearest fast food place she saw and slowed when the cab reached the drive-thru menu. The voice of what sounded like a teenage girl asked for their order. "Xena, did that box just talk to us?" Gabrielle inquired, suddenly alert.

"No, Gabs, it was a three inch person inside the box." Xena broke out into as big a smile as possible, considering, when a look of utter astonishment momentarily crossed her bard's face.

"Oh, Xena," was all Gabrielle could manage as a comeback.

After downing a Big Mac, an order of fries, and a large vanilla milkshake, Teddy noticed that Aphrodite's spirits seemed to lift, but she couldn't say the same for the two in the back seat of her cab.

After their meal, Gabrielle and Xena began to relax and enjoy the rhythmic swaying of the cab and the gentle music coming from the radio as they traveled the coastal roads back to the house. Gabby even began to drift off.

*The fog slowly started to lift from her eyes, and the reality of the situation began to take hold. Memories flashed through a fuzzy mind.*

*The bar, Xena and Gabrielle dancing, an idea she whispered to her love, then someone grabbed her, dragged her out, gunshots, seeing Dari fall just as a cloth was placed over her nose and mouth, forcing her into the abyss of unconsciousness.*

*"Dari?!", panic was rising up from her soul. No, no she had to remain calm. She would never get through this if she didn't keep her senses about her. If being a writer all these years had taught her anything that was it. Calm in a crisis, that was Dari's motto. And now it had to be hers.*

*She forced herself to look around, trying to ignore the blinding pain in her head and the waves of nausea crashing in her stomach. She had learned her lesson about sitting up. She knew that it had to have been chloroform that was used to knock her out, and that drug had some nasty, but short-term, side effects. Her vision was blurred, so the only thing she could make out was the cot she was lying on and that the room she was in was small, very small.*

*There were no windows and one door. She looked down at the floor and discovered a wastebasket by the head of the cot. How thoughtful, her captors didn't want her throwing up on the clean metal floor. Metal? It was just then she realized that not only was the floor metal, but the entire room was made of it. There were rivets on the surfaces, holding the sheets of metal together. It looked like every submarine movie she'd ever seen . . . SUBMARINE . . .*

*No... No... She was letting her imagination run away with her, again. If only she had the strength to get up. It wouldn't hurt to try, if she was careful. She began to raise her body, very slowly. She made it to her elbows, then her breath hitched and she found she was very glad to have that trashcan after all.*

"Almost there," Teddy called from up front. They didn't see her hand clasped with Aphrodite's.

Teddy's rather loud announcement awoke Gabrielle with a start. She could still feel the faintest trace of pain at her temples and a swirling pool of sickness in her belly.

"Well I'll be Morpheus, himself." Gabrielle bolted upright. She understood what the dreams meant.

"Teddy, pull over, *now!*"

Teddy swerved, barely missing a mailbox and the corner of a gilded fence.

"What! What's going on?" Questions appeared from all sides as Gabrielle jerked the cab door open and ran toward the beach.

"What in the name of Hades is going on?" Xena stated the sentiment of the three left behind during Gabrielle's mad dash.

"I'll tell you exactly what's 'going on,' my Warrior Princess." Gabrielle was out of breath, as much from excitement as from fatigue. She flung her hands skyward and then flung her entire self at Xena, knocking a very surprised warrior off balance so they fell to the sand.

"She's lost her mind," Aphrodite stated it as simple fact.

Xena and Gabrielle righted themselves, and the bard began her explanation of her unusual behavior. "I'm Sonny."

"Care to run that by us again, Gabby." Dite' still had suspicions that her friend had flipped.

"I'm Sonny," Gabrielle repeated. "And Sonny is me." It wasn't sinking in. She took hold of Xena's shoulders and shook her slightly, "Like you and Dari, Xena . . . Sonny is my reincarnated soul."

The impact of Gabrielle's words hit Xena harder than a lightning bolt from Zeus. *Of course*, it made perfect sense; they had found each other in this life. But why wouldn't they? They were destined to be together forever. What difference did a body make?

The tears that had pooled in Gabrielle's eyes fell over her cheeks as she explained the dreams and their significance. She could see through Sondra's eyes when she was asleep. Somehow a connection had been made between them that allowed her access to Sonny's mind.

"She's alive, Xena. She's alive and safe and uninjured." The relief was so overwhelming that the four of them wept, laughing and joyous.

\* \* \*

Teddy pulled into the drive, shut the engine off, and hurried out to open the doors. Xena was already out before she reached her door, so she ran around to help Aphrodite out.

"Do you think it was that gang that was chasing Dari when she was brought to us?" Gabrielle had been thinking a lot on the drive back, after her revelation.

"Maybe," Xena answered, leading her up the front steps. "I'm gonna go through that big desk upstairs. It's Dari's. She has to have something in there about that man, Lutheran, and his band of badies." Gabrielle nodded and followed her friend upstairs. Xena stopped her, "You go get some rest. I can handle it."

Gabrielle gave her a look, and Xena knew no amount of arguing would get Gabrielle to sleep now. "Fine, but we'll just take a look around, and *then* you're going to sleep!" She didn't wait for a reply, just turned on her loafered heel and marched up the stairs, knowing that a beautiful, but infuriatingly stubborn blonde wasn't far behind.

"I'll make some coffee," Teddy called up to them, then turned her sad eyes on Aphrodite. "I sense that Xena will get herself together, real fast, but Gabrielle..." She shook her head. "She's much more tenderhearted. This is gonna hit her a great deal harder within the next few days."

Aphrodite nodded. "She's got spunk though, at least she's gotten plenty more since she's been with Xena." She felt blame hit her hard. If she'd just left well enough alone, eventually they would have gotten together, and Dari would be alive, and living her life with a still present Sondra. She could just kick herself. All her fault, everything was all her fault.

Teddy went to her when she saw the first of Aphrodite's tears begin to fall. "Hey now, what's all this?"

"It's all my fault, Teddy, I had to meddle in their lives, and look what's happened. I should just leave these mortals alone, go bug Ares or something, maybe go find Herc a new wife that Hera won't blow up. That way no one gets their feelings hurt, or their lives uprooted, or holes in their bodies."

"Don't say that." Teddy shook her head. "If not for you, they'd have never known about Dari and Sondra. And the way Dari lived, working on that damn police force, something like this was bound to happen, and where would they be without those two

here? They'd be waiting for some slow arse detective trying to put together a case, then dropping it after a few months when the leads got cold. So don't you go blaming yourself, Hon. Fate does some strange things, but I know it's for a reason."

Aphrodite wanted to take comfort in her words, but couldn't. "Either way you look at it, Teddy, it's still my meddling that got us where we are."

"You take that," Xena nodded to indicate a tall filing cabinet, "and I'll go through the desk. Let me know if you find anything that looks like it could be connected to what happened tonight, ok?"

Gabrielle nodded affirmatively and dug in. The cabinet was a lot taller than her, but she wasn't intimidated; after all, she had an affinity for six-foot tall objects. She grabbed one of the chairs in front of the desk and stood on it. Then she set out to find every morsel she could that would help them find Sondra and take care of those men that had shot Dari.

As Xena searched, she noted all the photos, as Dari had called them, of Dari and Sondra, in happier days, and she felt tears rise. She should have never had Aphrodite take them to the future. Now Dari was laid up in a hospital, possibly dying, and Sondra... Who knew where to even begin looking for her? And what was the writer's fate to be? Gabrielle had assured her that Sonny was safe, for now, but for how long? She shook her head to clear those painful images. No, she had to trust in Gabrielle, believe that Sondra was alive, and would stay that way. There was hope, and hope was all she needed.

\* \* \*

They were still at it an hour later. Xena had been through every single paper, drawer, nook and cranny, in and on Dari's desk. Nothing. She bit her lip and went to the other cabinet beside Gabrielle. Their coffees were sitting atop the desk, having already turned cold at being left untouched. They were determined to find something.

A half an hour later, Gabrielle found the first of a long line of clues to their puzzle. "Here." She handed over her find, and Xena left off her search to take it from her. It was a newspaper clipping.

Xena read the headline, "12 dead at local movie theater." Xena quickly skimmed through the article relating the incident until her eyes reached the information she was seeking. "Sheriff's deputies are looking for a man who approached the theater in a red Grand Am on Sept. 1 in North Lerrette. He is described as 6 feet tall with a medium build, mustache, and short brown hair. He appears to be between 30 and 45 years of age with an old scar on his left cheekbone."

"Here's another, Xena!" Gabrielle was excited, and she read, "A Lerrette County man was arrested Sunday after allegedly intimidating two women with a knife and threatening to kill them after they refused to get into his car." The end of the clipping stated that Lutheran Ingalls was released on bail bond Thursday pending a hearing at Lerrette Court on the 27th of June.

"That's it!" Xena hugged her bard happily.

"Find anything?" Teddy poked her head in.

With great jubilation, Gabrielle held out the clippings. "Yes!"

Teddy smiled tiredly. "Whatcha got?"

"Has Aphrodite filled you in on who we are, Teddy?" Xena asked, helping Gabrielle down off the chair. She dropped an arm around her shoulders as they walked out into the hall.

"Pretty much. Kinda hard to believe, but, well, I believe it." She remembered Aphrodite's hands on her head, and all those images that filled her brain to overflowing.

"Good," Xena was relieved; she really didn't wish to go through the whole story. "So Dari was running from this gang when she was taken to our time. I believe the leader of that Gang is Alan Lutheran Thomas Ingalls, known simply as 'Lutheran'."

Teddy paled. They all stopped walking. "Oh boy, I hope he wasn't involved." She visibly shivered. "Now, that is one evil man. Dari's been trying to get him locked up for good. She's kinda obsessed with him, took a needed month break away from it when she came back from being with you all. I think she was just getting too frustrated with the whole thing."

"Well, I hope it was him. We don't have much to go on here, Teddy." Gabrielle knew it was him, could feel it was him. She wouldn't believe anything else. They continued down stairs where Aphrodite met them with fresh cups of coffee.

"So, what did ya find?"

"A beginning, I hope," Xena chimed in. "but we've been over that office with a fine toothed-comb, and these two clipping are it. I know there's more up there. Why can't I find it?"

"Maybe 'cause you're looking too hard, Sweet Pea" Aphrodite decided these two needed some major girl time, get their minds off their problems, and relax a little. She wrapped an arm around Xena and Gabrielle's shoulders and turned them back toward the staircase. "Both of you need some rest. Thanks to Gabby's new insight, we know Sondra is safe as a bug in a rug, and Blair promised she'd call if there was any change in Dari. Now off to bed with you two."

"But Aphrodite, Xena and I aren't sleepy." They each had a renewed vitality after the discovery; Gabrielle from her find of the newspaper clippings, and Xena from the thrill of the expected chase.

The Goddess of Love sent her two charges up the stair with final push, "Who said anything about *sleep*?"

Gabrielle made a quick stop near the stereo, pressed the play button the way Dari had shown her, and she watched the CD spin around in its tray. Art of Noise's "Moments in Love" resonated from several hidden speakers around the room. She smiled. What a nice thought, she mused, thanking Dari mentally as she walked over and sat on the foot of the bed. Music had always calmed her, put her in some zone where she could just be her, and let all the other cares in her world disappear. But this time, she was nervous. Although the music was slow, and beautiful, and most relaxing, and should have calmed her troubled mind, it hadn't yet.

Finally alone together, that's what it was. Gabrielle mentally kicked herself for being nervous. It was silly really, they slept alone together every night, they bathed together every day, they ate most of the time just the two of them.

After all that's happened, after all these years, you're acting like a teenager with her first crush. Just look at her! A little voice said in the back of her mind. What is there to be nervous about? She looked up, turned her head and watched Xena as she stood by the window, bathed in moon glow. Breathtakingly beautiful, were the only words that could describe her warrior at that moment. But Gabrielle knew so much burdened those strong shoulders, and she wanted to comfort her, or was it she that wanted Xena's comfort? She wasn't so sure at that point.

"Anything interesting out there?"

Xena looked back over her shoulder, managing a small smile. "Not really, just thinking, that's all." She finally noticed the music. *But how...*

"Think over here?" Gabrielle extended the invitation with an elongated arm, and held her breath waiting for Xena to accept it. She didn't have to wait long.

Xena's smile broadened, "All right," she said softly as she moved from the window. Eyes in shadow, she stared down at her bard, but Gabrielle could see the love and desire as clearly as if she were standing in the sunlight. She saw in Xena's eyes the intensity of their blue, penetrating deep down into her soul. *This* is the connection between them that let her know, without any doubt, that she and Xena were going to be partners forever. There was no more confusion, no more worry.

Gabrielle's arms went around Xena's waist, and she pressed her cheek to Xena's stomach. She could hear the perpetual turmoil that existed inside her love's body and smiled. The warmth that radiated from her warrior had no equal, and she looked forward to having all of that heat surrounding her. Now to just get rid of these clothes; she looked up at Xena silently and started pulling the shirttails from her jeans.

Xena was holding her breath, but didn't realize it. Gabrielle had helped her into and out of her clothes more times than she could count, but never like this. Her eyes remained fixed on Gabrielle's the entire time as the bard tugged the shirt from her jeans, slowly undoing each button, starting with the last and ending at the first. She waited for her to slip the shirt off her shoulders, but Gabrielle didn't. Instead, she traced the path of exposed skin from Xena's collarbone to her waist, using only her fingertips. Gabrielle's hands delicately undid the snap to Xena's jeans, then slowly, ever so slowly, she started sliding the zipper down. Xena finally let out the pent up air in her lungs and it ruffled the top of Gabrielle's head.

Gabrielle, still sitting on the edge of the bed, held Xena's hips and pulled the woman toward her, pressing her face into her stomach. She immediately felt the muscles contract as she pressed a kiss to the hot skin just above her navel. She stroked the fabric of the jeans with the flat heels of her palms, up and down Xena's thighs, feeling how taut the muscles grew with her touch, and she smiled, moving her hands down once more over Xena's jean clad legs and up again, then around back, cupping one firm, round cheek in each hand. She touched the tip of her tongue to Xena's navel, dipped it in, kissing the opening as if it were Xena's mouth...

"Let me sit," Xena gasped.

With a final, teasing lick, Gabrielle stood, turning them, and with a little shove, Xena fell back onto the bed and stayed there as Gabrielle moved over her and hovered there.

"Never doubt my love, Xena," Gabrielle whispered hoarsely, "Never doubt my desire for you, or my devotion to you..." she continued, her breath fanning Xena's slightly parted lips. She leaned down and they kissed for a second time since that night they shared their first real kiss, and then they kissed a third time, and a fourth....

\* \* \*

The bed looked like a camp of Centaurs had trampled over it; the sheet had been torn from it's moorings and now lay crumpled up under Gabrielle's body, a body which was now partially arched, just her torso and head touching the satin that lay beneath it. She had strong legs wrapped around Xena's shoulders, the heel of one foot running up and down the hollow of that broad back, as she gripped the sides of the mattress caddy-corner to herself, gasping for breath.

Xena still had her clothing on, although it was in much more disarray than earlier, and she was quite content. She'd found nectar she knew she'd not tire of easily, and she drank it down as fast as its lovely bejeweled waterfall produced it. She was cradling Gabrielle's finely shaped buttocks in her hands, pulling her closer and closer as the bard's body swayed and shook.

Gabrielle felt so nice in her hands. Xena was consumed by a hunger so great she had to keep conscious of not being too rough, biting too hard, scratching too deep. She did everything to Gabrielle she had been aching to do, kissed and cherished every part of her she had been yearning to. She wanted all these different feelings, sensations, smells, and tastes. She loved Gabrielle's erratic breathing, the deep moans, the erotic looks when Gabrielle would lift her head and stare down at her.

Gabrielle was swept along in a profoundly timeless, sexually intense, eroticism with Xena. The ecstasy was beyond boundaries of mere lovemaking; Xena elevated her out of her own mind, her own body. They weren't two beings, but a unified whole. . . ineffably one.

Far off in the distance she heard a ringing noise, but that didn't concern Xena. Giving Gabrielle every ounce of pleasure she could was on top of the list of her priorities.

Teddy burst into the bedroom calling out, "She's awake..." and nearly stumbled over her own feet when she saw them, lying diagonally across the bed, with Gabrielle in the middle of what could have only been described as a mind-shattering climax. Teddy's eyes dropped but not before the images burned themselves into her mind.

The room was filled with the aroma of their passions; the sweet scent hit her as soon as she'd opened the door. She had never expected them to be... they'd looked so tired walking up the steps; sleep was the most logical destination, to which they were headed -- even with Dite's little comment.

Gabrielle's voice was a mere gasp, a breathless whisper, but she called out to her, "Teddy go..."

Teddy quickly retreated to the hallway, hands immediately going to her face upon feeling the rise of heat. *So that's what blushing feels like.* Teddy sprinted to the bathroom to get a look at herself in the mirror before it permanently subsided.

Xena hadn't even noticed the sudden and unexpected company. She was too transfixed on Gabrielle when she felt the waves of ecstasy cascading through her lover's body. Gabrielle had said something softly, then Xena faintly thought she heard a door close before feeling a hand entangle in her hair and Gabrielle groaning, "Don't stop! Please, Xena, don't ever stop!"

"Did you wake them?" Aphrodite asked when she spotted Teddy trotting back down the stairwell.

"Not exactly..." Her face was still a lovely shade of rose. Aphrodite took her hand and pulled her down to sit beside her.

"Well we should be celebrating then!" Aphrodite said. With a nod of her head, a bottle of wine along with two glasses materialized on the table.. "To new and fruitful beginnings," she toasted after she'd poured them each a glass full. "And to Dari's awakening." They clinked glasses and drank.

\* \* \*

Fifteen minutes after Teddy had burst through their door, Xena and Gabrielle came downstairs. Their clothing looked a little ruffled, but no worse for wear. As they strolled into the living room, Teddy didn't -- couldn't meet their eyes just yet. Xena and Gabrielle shared a slightly shy smile with each other, and then sat on the sofa together, side-by-side.

"Ahhhh, my favorite girl group," Aphrodite nearly sang it. She chuckled when Xena looked her way.

"So, Blair made good on her promise?" Xena asked, getting right to it or she knew Aphrodite would be a whirlwind of blabbering about everything from she and Gabrielle's lovemaking to Dari's waking up. She wanted to avoid that first topic.

"Yes, she did!" Aphrodite beamed at them, scrunching up her shoulders and wrinkling her nose. "Aren't you two so cute together!"

Xena rolled her eyes. "*Focus*, Aphrodite."

"Oh, phooey." Aphrodite just knew Xena would ruin her joy at their finally getting it on. "Ok. Ok, yes Blair called; said Dari woke up about ten minutes earlier. She was groggy, but she was awake! And guess what Teddy and I came across?"

Xena's fingers were idly stroking Gabrielle's shoulder, stopping once she finally noticed. She needed a clear head right now. She promptly set her hands on her own lap; catching the smirking look Gabrielle shot her way. "What?"

Aphrodite held up her prize. It was Dari's service revolver.

Xena sprang to her feet, her body shielding Gabrielle's. "Put that DOWN!" she ordered. Aphrodite dropped the gun on the couch, eyes large and rounded. "Aphrodite, after what happened yesterday, how could you even hold one of those murderous machines?"

"I just thought it could come in handy. They have guns . . .you have a chakram. Somehow I don't find that reassuring, Xena."

"I don't care. I don't want any of you touching that gun again! Got it?" She looked at Teddy and Aphrodite. They nodded in agreement, and then she turned and stared down at Gabrielle. "Got it?" she asked a bit softer.

"Yes, Xena." Gabrielle had no plans on touching it; she had her weapons. She was skilled enough, she believed, that she could sneak up on those men and whack 'em over the head and not have need of a gun at all.

"Good." Xena picked the gun up by its metal snout and took it to another room to hide. Just in case...

When she came back, she returned to her seat, plopping down beside Gabrielle. "I guess we should head on out to the hospital."

"The doctor told us not to come 'til morning," Teddy put in, eyes still averted from Xena's. "I suppose you want to go hide this, too." Dite' held up a tan folder.

"Maybe, what is it?" Xena asked, reaching across Gabrielle for the item.

"It's all the info on Lutheran you could ever want to know." Aphrodite glowed with pride.

"And then some." Teddy added.

Gabrielle hugged her friend and inquired, "Where in the name of the Fates did you find it?"

"The same place Dari hid her metal noise maker."

"And just where was that?" Xena knew that Aphrodite was dragging this out on purpose, but decided to let her bask if she wanted, while she went through a thick file of what she would soon learn was the exact thing they had been searching for.

"I thought about where Gabs had found those two clippings, in the office, partially behind the filing cabinet. So Teddy and I went up there, and there it was." Dite' knew she was slowly losing her audience, so she asked Teddy to finish up their tale.

"Dite and I were just lookin' around when it hit me that Dari had mentioned she had a safe installed when they first moved in." Teddy continued the story after explaining what a safe was, "So I checked the walls, and sure enough, the one above the filing cabinet had the safe behind it. And opening it was no problem with a goddess around."

Xena and Gabrielle both turned their attention back to Aphrodite. "Don't look at me. That's the Goddess you need to thank for getting it open," she said, waving a hand in Teddy's direction.

*At least I can be of some use*, Dite reflected, still not at ease with this not being all her fault, even with the reassurances from her friends that it wasn't. And it didn't help that she couldn't just zap them to where Sondra was being held. Being a goddess really sucked when your power had limitations.

\* \* \*

Together they began to go through the wealth of info Dari had collected on the man over the course of six years. The articles dated way beyond that, and it appeared that it wasn't just Dari's town in which Lutheran conducted his dirty work; it was in several other towns, states, even over seas. The group also learned he was a drug lord, and that Dari had been involved in the destruction of over \$42 million dollars worth of heroine when a bust went bad because of one of the officers involved being a member of Lutherans gang. The drugs were reportedly sunk into the deep waters off Lerrette's coast and never located. A suitcase reportedly containing \$10 million dollars was also lost that same evening, and reporters presumed, as did the police, that it sunk along with the drugs.

"That sure would piss 'em off," Teddy said when Gabrielle read the story aloud. "And would give him reason, at least in his sick head, to go and shoot up that place, mainly aiming at Dari. There's no love lost between those two. After Dari was gone that time with you all, Lutheran went on a rampage. 'Course the local police couldn't do a thing cause they had no proof, but we all knew who it was."

Aphrodite continued for Teddy, after they shared a smile. "This Lutheran, he's a real sicko, Xena. He's toyed with so many women, raping them, murdering them for the plain joy of the act. Even dressing them up in costumes before he kills them."

Xena wasn't surprised to hear this. Her only surprise was her sheer lack of emotion. "Ok, since Dari's awake, but the doc said to come in the morning, I think we should get some much needed sleep and begin our search for Sondra tomorrow, after we visit Dari.

Gabrielle found Dari's own personal notes on a pad of bright white paper. "Here, you can understand her scribbles," Gabrielle said with a smile and handed the pad to Xena, who actually could read Dari's sometimes hurried scratched ramblings with much ease.

"These are addresses?" Xena held up the pad to Teddy.

"Yes, ma'am, that they be."

"Good, we can start at the top of the list. Where can we get an automobile of our own?"

"Right here," Teddy pointed to herself and grinned. "I won't take no for an answer either, and that's it. Besides, I'm no auto instructor, and I know you don't know the first thing about driving."

Xena relented. They did need transportation, and it would help a lot if they had someone along who knew the area, not to mention how to drive. "Sounds like a plan. Thank you for all your help," Xena stated earnestly and shook Teddy's hand. "Both of you," she said, letting go of the cabbie goddess' grip and smiling into Aphrodite's tender eyes.

"My pleasure!" Teddy winked at her, and then turned to the task of helping Aphrodite look for more clues. She'd gotten her second wind after reading through all of

the news clippings, and a new energy filled her. Together she knew they'd right the wrongs, and everything would be ok.

*Tomorrow the hospital first and then head on out to those addresses, Yeah, that was good.* Xena prayed that Gabrielle's intuition was right and Sondra was safe. "It'll be a long day, and I hate to admit it, but I'm starting to feel the effects of the past two." She stood, pulling Gabrielle up with her. "I mean it," she said over her shoulder when she didn't hear Teddy getting up. "Go get some sleep, Teddy. Aphrodite you do whatever goddess's do during the night."

Aphrodite laughed. "We plot and meddle," she joked. Her outward smile dropped when she met Xena's steely gaze. "Night, Xena. Night, Gabrielle.

Gabrielle just waved over her shoulder. Her body felt like it had been "hit by a cement truck," and indeed it had. Sleep sounded very good to her. She circled an arm around Xena's waist as they climbed the remainder of the stairs.

They crawled into that big bed, clothes and all, wrapped their bodies around one another, kissed one last time, and dropped quickly into untroubled sleep.

\* \* \*

The next morning, the two warriors were up bright and early to begin their adventurous day. Gabrielle couldn't wait to take her first 21st Century shower, and she raced into the bath to do just that. She tried to remember how Dari had gotten it to work, and after a few futile attempts, she was successful. She gladly discarded the clothing of the previous day in a clump on the indoor bush and stepped under the powerful spray. Wow, what a difference from the showers she was used to back home. Somehow after this, she had a hard time imagining herself going back to standing under a caldron with holes in it.

She was happily soaping up her tired muscles when the water pressure changed and rather than a nice warm flow, it was searing hot.

Xena heard her lady's shriek and went running into the bath. She hurried to her when she spotted Gabrielle backed up against the farther side of the shower, trying to get as far away from the water as she could.

“Gabrielle!”

Gabrielle let out a little laugh. “Sorry, I’m fine. It just changed temperature and pressure on me, and I didn’t expect it, that’s all.” She felt foolish now, flat up against Xena’s body, her wetness getting the front of Xena soaked. “Sorry,” she said and gestured to Xena’s clothing.

“It’ll dry.” Wet clothes were the least of her worries. “I thought Luth. . .“

Gabrielle put fingers over her lips. “Don’t even say it. He didn’t and won’t. Besides, I have my big strong warrior to protect me, even if she looks kinda soggy at the moment.” She smiled and poked Xena in the stomach. “Why don’t you come on in here with me?” Her look turned sultry, and the smile deepened.

Xena stared back at her, always marveling how when wet, Gabrielle could look like she was a mere teenager. Another mystery of the world, she mused. Of course, the more her eyes dropped, the less and less she looked like a young girl. Xena looked away. “I don’t think that would be wise. I’ll never get out of her today.” She turned, not wanting to chance looking at Gabrielle’s beauty and thereby just jumping into the shower with her and repeating last night’s scenario.

“You mean *here*?”

Xena finally noticed her slip up and flushed, closing the door behind her without looking back. She could clearly hear Gabrielle’s laughter through the closed door.

\* \* \*

They’d each raided Dari’s chest of draws and closet and were wearing new outfits when they finally sauntered back downstairs after their showers. Xena was wearing blue jeans and a white tee shirt with a red superman symbol on its front. Gabrielle had found a very comfortable pair of Dari’s sweats to wear. They hung on her a bit, but she looked “adorable” in them Xena had told her when she caught sight of her. Their brown color emphasized her light green eyes even more.

The house was quiet. Gabrielle headed to the kitchen to hunt for something to fill their bellies, while Xena looked for Aphrodite.

Gabrielle found the kitchen stereo Dari had told her about, and she fiddled with it until she managed to turn it on. Soothing music came forth, and her face lit up with a smile. In her time, she didn't have these luxuries, and she intended to take full advantage of them whenever she could while she was here. With that done, she prepared to find some form of breakfast for her warrior princess.

The tall fridge intimidated her somewhat, but she was determined. The light inside intrigued her, and she spent a minute opening and closing the door wondering if the light stayed on all the time in there, and if so, why?

She shook her head and continued her investigation of its interior. She found eggs, butter covered in an odd wrapping, and milk. Upon further exploration of the kitchen, she was surprised and delighted with sliced bread.

Armed with the beginnings of a breakfast that at least wasn't caught in a lake, or slaughtered only minutes before, she brought it all to the cook table in the center of the room and sat everything down. She laid her hands on her hips and contemplated the pots above her head. So many frying pans! She wouldn't know what to do with herself if she was Dari and this was her supply of cookery.

\* \* \*

"Aphrodite? Where are you?" Xena was looking outside the house now, having searched the entire inside for the love goddess. She chewed on her bottom lip when Aphrodite didn't reply. How were they ever supposed to get started with Teddy and Dite gone?

She heard a car and raced around front to see Teddy and Aphrodite pulling up in the cab. "Aphrodite, where have you been!?"

"With Teddy, Duuuuh." Aphrodite stepped out, and apparently she'd raided someone's closet because she had changed her clothes too. This morning she was dressed head to toe in denim. Denim jacket, jeans, and even her tee shirt had denim patches on its white front.

"Good morning, warrior lady!" Teddy could finally meet her eyes a lot easier that morning, and she flashed her a dazzler of a smile. "We went to get some breakfast. I don't

reckon you all are too familiar with kitchens, so this'll be way easier." She lugged out two bags from the trunk, and Aphrodite reached in and brought out two more.

Xena smiled as she passed, and when Aphrodite came up to her and was about to move around her, too, Xena grabbed her arm and leaned in, asking, "Are you two..." She knew Aphrodite would know what she meant without actually saying it

"No, Xena, Teddy's me! Ewww! That would be like doing it with my sister!"

"Teddy's you?"

Aphrodite giggled. "Yes, isn't it bitchin'! She's me in this lifetime. I was going to tell you when the right time came, but with all the other things you have on your mind..."

"How's that possible, you're immortal?"

"Oh yeah, tell Strife that. Callisto took care of his immortality, toot-sweet. And even we immortals have a soul." Aphrodite looked thoughtfully down at the ground for a moment, then looked up into Xena's eyes and smiled.

Xena let her hand drop off Aphrodite's arm, permitting her to continue to the house. "Things just keep getting more interesting each and every day," she said to herself as she followed her inside.

\* \* \*

The three of them stopped at the kitchen door taking a deep breath of Gabrielle's breakfast before entering the room, their faces exhibiting their complete amazement.

"Surprise!" Gabrielle said, gesturing towards the table. It had been set for four, and on the stove were pots and pans filled with food. "I was just gonna make eggs, and then I found this cabinet full of these canned things with food in them, and with the help of a trusty knife..." She laid her hands on her waist and lifted her brows. " So... Just gonna stand there gaping or are you gonna come try everything?"

Xena smiled going to her bard. She dropped an arm over her shoulders. "It's all very tasteful looking; not sure if we'll be able to eat it all though." She led Gabrielle to a chair. "Sit. *You* cooked, now *I* serve."

Teddy and Aphrodite exchanged a look and grinned at each other. "Awwwwww," they both crooned at the same time.

"Oh, please..." Xena rolled her eyes and looked back at them. "Sit!"

Gabrielle smirked, staring up at Xena. She patted her tummy. "Let's eat!"

And they ate, relishing in all the delightful tastes and smells and textures. While they ate, Teddy explained to Gabrielle what a can opener was and how much more useful it was to use to open cans instead of a knife. Gabrielle was enthralled. She also offered an explanation about what a few other necessities around the house were.

\* \* \*

Three bodies were sprawled out on the L-Shaped couch, and one was on the lazy-boy recliner. Emitting from them were groans of pleasure, and of remorse for eating so much.

"Oh, Gabrielle, my stomach's going to explode," Xena moaned.

The bard could only groan back at her. She and Xena were laying head to head along the longer part of the L, she on her stomach, Xena on her back, and she reached up and caressed the warrior's cheek, then let her hand fall to her shoulder where it stayed.

"We have to get going soon," Xena reminded them. She shielded her face with her hands, blocking the pillows thrown at her for that reminder. "*Stop it!*"

Gabrielle sat up leaning on her elbows and looked down into her soul mate's eyes, which were twinkling up at her. "Listen, Warrior Princess..." She had on a serious expression, but a smile was slowly forming. "Just because you have an iron stomach . . ." Xena bopped her on the head with a throw pillow, and that was all Gabrielle needed; she pounced on Xena, wrestling the offending item away from her.

"Ok, enough!" Xena grabbed the pillow away from her bard, giving her a loving blue glare. "Gimmy that!" It took them a minute to untangle themselves from one another, and when they had, Xena stood, finally back on track. They had a beautiful golden-eyed bard to find "We should get going now."

\* \* \*

"'On the road again!...' Teddy sang as they were doing just that, riding along towards the hospital.

"Can't wait to see her," Gabrielle said. She took in the scenery as they road along, once again in wonderment at the height of the buildings, and of the houses. You could fit two of her family's home in some of the smaller ones.

"Dinar for your thoughts," Xena said. She wasn't watching the scenery. Seen one beach house, seen 'em all. She'd much rather feast on watching her bard's enjoyment in taking in the surrounding vistas, houses, buildings, and just plain nature. It all made Gabrielle's face light up with pleasure.

"You can have them for free," Gabrielle referred to the dinars. She turned to look at her friend, and now lover, and patted her thigh. "The way Dari explained it, it seemed ugly in her world, but this place, it's so..." she searched for the word.

"Exquisite? Beautiful? Creative? Adorable? ... Tasty?" Xena asked, although she wasn't talking about the same thing, and Gabrielle knew it.

She blushed. "Xena..."

A small, throaty laugh came from Xena, and she reached out and ruffled Gabrielle's hair. "Go on, finish your thought."

"Well, now I've forgotten what I was saying, thank you very much."

"Hey, Xena?"

"Hmmm?"

"You didn't see a cat back at the house did you?"

"No, can't say that I did."

They were all piled in the hospital elevator on their way up to Dari's room. Teddy was standing at the controls and overheard Gabrielle's question and intervened, "Their cat passed on during Dari's stay with you all." Her eyes showed the sadness she felt, not just for the cat, but also for the present condition of her owners.

"Oh, no," Gabrielle was shocked. Dari had loved that cat almost as much as she loved Sondra.

"Tough break," Xena said.

Gabrielle forgave the warrior princess her aloofness. The bard knew what Xena thought of bonding with something you were probably going to eat when a winter became lean enough, and the pangs of hunger grew too great to ignore -- a foolish endeavor.

"Here we are," Teddy, said as the doors swished open. It was quite unsettling having the doors open and close like that, on their own, on some unseen tract. Perhaps it was the feeling of helplessness that Xena had coursing through her that made her mind compare the present situation to a set of sliding doors, but either way, she still preferred the open, solid archway of a cave entrance, any day. They each hurried to Dari's room, anxious to see her, to see those sparkling baby-blues open again.

"Hi," Gabrielle whispered, peeking her head in the door. Dari was sitting up, her arm, stomach and legs were all bandaged. She was smiling though, and it spread when she saw Gabrielle.

"Hey, you."

They all stepped into the room and surrounded her bed, then engulfed her with hugs.

\* \* \*

They hadn't been there two minutes when the subject of Sondra came up, and Dari's spirits crashed like a tidal wave. Until then the medicine they'd kept her drugged up with was a nice mind-numbing alternative to thinking of her lover badly hurt and afraid, or worse, raped and dead. Even with the news that Gabrielle was to Sonny, what Xena was to her, she couldn't keep her mind from taking her into the darkest places imaginable.

"Teddy called the police station this morning, there was nothing new." Aphrodite patted the mortals' hand, trying to give what comfort she could.

Xena, wanting to reassure Dari that all possible would be done, told her, "Don't worry, we're going to take that folder you have on Lutheran and start with that list of addresses . . ."

"NO!" Dari yelled at Xena, cutting her off in mid-sentence. "I won't have any of you getting involved with that monster. Do you hear me?"

"Ok, calm down, Dari." Xena rested a hand on her shoulder, pushing her back against the pillows. "We just thought . . ."

"Well don't. Lutheran isn't your concern, and I'm not losing anyone else to him. Just forget any plans, or "Missions" you two may have come up with." She glared at Xena and Gabrielle, but it wasn't as fierce as she normally would have looked. She loved these two women, and it was her love that they saw when she stared at them, not her anger.

"All right, ok - you don't have to pound it in. We got it." Xena glanced at Gabrielle, and the bard knew she was lying. She averted her eyes from Dari, afraid she'd see the deception, and went to get some more water as a diversion.

They visited for a while longer, talking of the past, the present, and future. Teddy, Gabrielle, and Aphrodite had taken seats by the window, Xena stood on the other side of

the room, leaning against the wall closest to the door. She had her arms crossed over her chest and was silent for a long time as Gabrielle related to Dari tales of their visit so far, and her theories. Xena tuned out the words and just let the sound of her voice in. In the years she had known Gabrielle, she'd perfected the act of pretending to listen to Gabrielle's stories, theories, and anything else she babbled on about. The other three didn't have that advantage.

Xena was so into not listening, she missed the part where Gabrielle finally shut up. At one point, she felt eyes burning into her and looked up to find Gabrielle staring at her with such intensity, Xena felt as if Gabrielle was standing right there in front of her, scorching her body with her touch like last night. She smiled, also remembering, which caused a heated blush that started on Gabrielle's chest and ran up her neck to her cheeks where it pooled in a lovely shade of pink. Unable to keep eye contact, Gabrielle looked away, smiling shyly to herself.

Aphrodite had been telling Dari of her outing with Teddy that morning when she noticed the exchange of looks between bard and warrior and nudged the cab driver with her knee. "Well, I think we should be off," she said and stood. "You need some rest after all those stories . . ." she glanced at Gabrielle, "and I think these three could use some more, too, even though they'll object." She glared at Xena, who was still smiling.

"Yeah. Ok." Dari gave them all hugs goodbye. "I'm sorry for messing up your evening," she said to Gabrielle when the smaller woman leaned down to kiss and hug her.

Gabrielle whispered near her ear, low enough so only Dari could hear, "You didn't..." She pulled back and they shared a sly smile.

\* \* \*

Once outside, "Well now what?" Teddy asked, while leaning against the cab.

"We go to that first address..." Xena yanked the back door open and waited for Gabrielle to get in ahead of her.

"But . . ." Teddy glanced at Aphrodite, who shrugged her shoulders.

"I've learned it's best to just do what Xena says, Teddy."

\* \* \*

They'd gone to each and every address on that entire list, and nothing. Xena felt her spirits sinking as they left the last one. It was the same as all the others, deserted property.

"He's like a worm digging back underground when the birds come to feed." That thought started her thinking in a totally different direction. "Let's go back to the beach house, Teddy. We're done for now."

\* \* \*

While traveling back to the house, Xena noticed Gabrielle kept drifting off to sleep, then with each jar of the cab, she woke up, blinked, and tried to stay awake, but failed each time.

"You need more sleep, my friend." She pulled Gabrielle closer and let her lay her head on her shoulder.

"I'm fin . . ." She drifted off to sleep before she could even finish the sentence. Xena smiled and caressed her blonde head.

*Sonny was fully awake now; the effects of the drug had mostly worn off. She had searched the room she was in, and as she suspected, it was made completely of metal . . . steel or lead, the best she could tell. The only entrance to the room, the one door, reminded her of a vault door, heavy, with a wheel in the middle. She had tried to turn it, but it wouldn't budge.*

*She didn't bang on the door, or yell for help. She knew that was a useless waste of time and energy. "It'll be all right," she told herself, aloud, needing the comfort of a human voice, even if it was her own. "They'll find me, they'll come get me." Sonny rocked herself slowly, arms folded around her waist, as she sat cross-legged on the cot.*

"That you can count on," Gabrielle mumbled, still asleep in Xena's arms.

\* \* \*

Smoke curled above a dark head; Lutheran clicked off the camera monitor that gave him direct feed from the room where Sondra was being held. A wicked smile formed on full lips, as long, tapered fingers held tightly to one of Havana's greatest products. After savoring another drag, a gravelly voice hissed, "I can't wait."

\* \* \*

An idea was forming in Xena's mind, and now with Gabrielle unable to stay awake even on that bumpy ride back, it would be a lot easier to act upon.

\* \* \*

"You get some sleep, I'll be downstairs," Xena urged her bard, giving her a little shove towards the stairway.

"Come with me." Gabrielle tugged on that strong hand, and Xena could only follow her lady's command.

"Now what's going on in that head of yours?" Xena asked when they entered the bedroom.

Gabrielle smiled, saying, "I owe you," and reached up to kiss her. She walked Xena backwards towards the bed, and when they bumped into the bottom, Gabrielle gave her a small shove. With a happy laugh, she fell atop her warrior.

Gabrielle broke off the kisses, forcing herself upright. She reached out and stroked Xena's lips with her thumb. Xena reached for her bard, longing to eradicate any physical distance between them, but Gabrielle brushed her hands away.

"Patience, my Love. I've been dreaming of ways to touch you all day -- and for many years before today." She began to lift Xena's tee. "Today..." she whispered, lifting the shirt over Xena's dark head, "my dreams come true." She tossed the piece of clothing over her shoulder.

Xena blew out a slow, long breath, staring back up into glittering emeralds. She wanted to roll them over like last night, take over, but her body wouldn't allow it. It wanted Gabrielle's tender touches, wanted release of its pent up aches.

Gabrielle ran shaky hands over Xena's stomach, making wide circles outward as she reached her breasts, the circles becoming increasingly smaller, Gabrielle's hands aching to reach their peaks. Xena's nipples burned in anticipation, "Please, Gabrielle," her hips began to rock involuntarily. "I need . . ."

"Shhh... I know..." Gabrielle cooed, fingers locking with Xena's, her hot breath engulfing a swollen, dark orb. "I have exactly what you need."

She locked her mouth onto Xena's skin, sucking gently at first, flicking the tip of her tongue across the sweet bump. Xena's entire body shuddered with pleasure, and she groaned; "Harder . . ." Gabrielle complied, willingly, increasing the pressure, dragging her teeth over Xena's skin, occasionally nibbling at the tender flesh.

Xena began to sway, as Gabrielle slid her legs down the length of Xena's body to lie on top of her warrior, never losing her lips' luscious hold.

Gabrielle nudged Xena's legs apart with her knee, then lunged upward, bringing her strong, sculpted thigh in contact with the source of Xena's frustration.

Xena cried out from sheer desire.

Gabrielle rhythmically began to thrust against Xena. She could feel the body writhing beneath her, knowing her lover's climax was growing. Xena's lust and love-glazed eyes searched for Gabrielle's in the dim light.

Their eyes locked as waves of electricity rippled from the warrior's core, outward through her entire being. "Gabrielle . . . I love you," were the only coherent words Xena could utter before the liquid in her body became hot, molten lava, melting everything but Gabrielle out of existence.

\* \* \*

Xena lay staring up at the underside of the lace canopy; her body was still pulsating in certain areas her bard had ravaged even though it had been a while since

Gabrielle touched her. She glanced over at her bard and saw that she was sound asleep. Smiling, Xena leaned over and softly kissed her cheek.

"I love you, Gabrielle," she whispered. Afterward, she rolled out of the bed, standing there in all her naked glory. She stood for a long moment just staring at the nude woman in the bed worrying about tricking her the way she had when it was her turn at loving Gabrielle, and then she leaned over and pulled the satin cover over her. It was for the best this way.

\* \* \*

Teddy's eyes rounded when she saw Xena come down the stairs. She was dressed in her warrior outfit again, complete with sword and chakram, and by now, even Teddy understood, that meant trouble.

"Let's go," she ordered and didn't wait for Teddy's response.

Just as she'd suspected, there was a steel door buried under some hay in the barn of the first abandoned farm that they had visited earlier that afternoon. Xena exerted most of her strength lifting it, cringing each time its rusty hinges squeaked in protest. Its state of decay had her wondering if this was indeed an older hideout of Lutheran's and she was just on a wasted mission, but once the door had been pried fully open, she could hear noises coming from below.

No, that good ole Xena sense was still in effect. Not many times had it failed her. She dipped her head into the opening, straining down further to get a better look below. It was dark, but that was to be expected. She held her weight on her hands and lowered her body down to the first stair that was at least 6 feet away from the opening. Yes, Lutheran knew what he was doing. She could almost respect him if he wasn't such a sleaze.

\* \* \*

"So, Dari's little love..." Lutheran snarled. He was an attractive man, tall, built, and lean. He had a quiet step, mostly practiced over the years so he could sneak up on his prey with them totally unaware until it was too late. He had chocolate brown eyes that lightened considerably when the sun, or any other light source, shone in them. They could be called beautiful eyes, if they weren't part of such an ugly soul.

He was holding a gun, running its barrel around and along his jaw, studiously studying the prey that stood before him now, or rather, that hung before him from chains embedded into the wall behind her.

Sondra's golden eyes just bore into his, not giving him the satisfaction of seeing her tremble under the weight of his stare.

"You're a spunky one, I'll give you that, but so many are all face, and no backbone. Which are you, Sondra?"

A moment later there came a whirring noise, and something ricocheted past his ear. He ducked, eyes snapping around the room, trying to follow the disk's path. It was incredibly fast, and immediately upon standing, he came eye to eye with its owner.

"Release her."

"Ohhhhh, a new toy." He was genuinely happy; it was on his face, in the bounce of his step when he started walking towards this most interesting creature.

"And just what are you wearing?" He asked, eyes taking in her unusual clothing. "Not that I mind, understand, I'm just curious...."

Xena caught her returning chakram with her usual verve and slipped it back onto its hook. She drew her sword as he came up the steps slowly, eyes never leaving hers.

"Stop right there!" Xena ordered him and pointed the tip of her sword at his throat. "Release her *now*!" she ordered two of the guards standing on either side of Sondra.

Sondra nearly fainted with relief when she saw Xena, and it was at that moment, hearing that unmistakable authority in her voice that the tears finally fell. She went limp in her bindings as her legs gave out.

"Well just hold on there Ms... I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name."

Xena snarled at him, poking him with the sword when he attempted to take another step toward her. "Xena, and you must be the scum lord Lutheran."

He actually laughed. *Xena . . . that name.* A look of excitement, mingled with confusion, hung in those eyes. He shook his head to clear out the unpredicted reaction.

"Well, I see you've heard of me. Now why haven't I heard of you? Hmmm?"

"I said to stop where you are, and release her!" Xena wouldn't say it again. She would slit this man's throat as if it were a fish.

"Buck," the inhuman man before her called over his shoulder. "Let the woman go," he instructed.

"But boss!"

"I *said* let her go."

His orders were not to ever be disobeyed, and the man hurried to follow them. He growled as he released Sondra and she fell to the floor.

Xena stared straight at Lutheran, somehow knowing that taking her eyes off of him for even a fraction of a second would be a fatal mistake. She kept Sondra's form in the periphery of her vision, a trick she had learned from years of practice. "Sondra, *STAND UP!*" she yelled.

Sonny found strength she didn't know she possessed and stood. She took a few tentative steps in Xena's direction, got her balance, and ran to her, dropping into her arms at the last moment before she fell to the floor again.

Xena had a flashback, one of the times she'd rescued Gabrielle. She stared down into those tender eyes and knew without a doubt she was holding the 21st Century Bard of Potadia in her arms. Her eyes filled with tears, and she hugged the shorter woman to her body tightly, and then remembered . . . *him*.

She had relaxed her sword a bit as she had the flashbacks, but now, she was of clear mind, and she lifted it with a straight arm and aimed it at his heart. "Get out of here, Sondra."

Sondra shook her head. "I'm not leaving you here with this . . ."

"I wouldn't say what you're going to say about me," he advised. "If you would, please tell this kind lady no harm came to you from my hand during your stay here."

Sondra glared at him, then spit at his face. She felt a renewed strength, didn't know where it had come from, but she wasn't complaining. She held Xena tightly around the waist, and the strength seemed to grow even more. "You bastard! Torturing Dari for the past six years. You're nothing but SCUM!" She went to slap him, but Xena caught her hand. They stared at one another. Xena shook her head.

"Don't," Xena whispered, and caressed her cheek. "You're better than this...." She smiled through her tears.

"Oh, how lovely." Lutheran chortled at the display of affection. "And just *what* are you supposed to be? Some kind of warrior?" He smirked up at Xena.

"That's Warrior *Princess* to you, you son-of-a" Xena clamped a hand over Sondra's mouth, but her own was tipped at the corners with the slightest of smiles. If that outburst didn't convince her this was Gabrielle, nothing else would.

"Go, Sondra." Xena released her slowly.

Sondra shook her head. "No."

"*Do as I say!*" Xena barked at her, and like Dari earlier, her anger stemmed from love and nothing more or less.

Sondra's eyes widened, and she backed away from the warrior. She started to speak again, but Xena cut her off.

"*GO!*"

She turned and ran

"She *ordered* me, Gabrielle, and I know you know how she can be!" Teddy felt miserable when Gabrielle had come down searching for Xena only to be told what they'd done, and now she was feeling the guilt ten-fold.

Gabrielle was livid, to put it mildly. She had already changed into her warrior clothes, now gathering up her Sais and staff for the ensuing battle. Her Xena sense kicking in yet again, she knew something was off when she awoke and her warrior wasn't beside her.

"And you *LEFT* her there!" Gabrielle didn't wait for an answer; she shoved Teddy from her way and stormed towards the door. Sondra bolted around the corner and they slammed into one another, going off balance. They both fell backwards, sitting down hard on the floor. In that instant of impact, memories washed through each of them and they stared at one another, their mouths rounding out in identical O-shapes. Simultaneously, they reached out a hand to one another, helping each other to their respective feet, their eyes never leaving the others'.

Gabrielle knew she and Sonny were the same soul, but hadn't known what it had felt like for Xena and Dari when they had kissed until that moment.

Before Gabrielle could ask, Sondra replied, "She's in trouble; she demanded I leave." Gabrielle knew only too well how that scene went. "I have faith in her," Sondra continued, "but she's not dealing with some jerk in her world, she's in this one, with weapons she doesn't have any defense against."

Gabrielle nodded. "That Daughter of a Fury..." she hissed, remembering Xena's pleas. "*Again, Gabrielle, just once more,*" she'd said, after each and every time Gabrielle's body quaked with an orgasm that afternoon. Gabrielle knew Xena enjoyed

her, that was plainly obvious that first night, but she still stewed over it. She now knew why Xena had tired her out during their second time making love -- she wanted Gabrielle nice and exhausted so she would sleep for hours, and then Xena could go off and do what she wasn't supposed to do, at least not without her! "Deceptive Daughter of Echidna!" she cursed again, shivering with anger. She jabbed her Sais down into her boots and looked up at Teddy. "Take me there!"

"Jeeps, all this ordering around..." Teddy complained but did as Gabrielle asked, holding the front door open for the smaller woman.

"Sondra, stay here with Aphrodite, I'm used to this kind of thing, I can handle myself."

Aphrodite snorted at her; Gabrielle ignored it and let the door close on any further ridicule from Dite'.

\* \* \*

"Poor, poor, Warrior Princess..." Lutheran sang, gazing down into the ice coffin in which he'd just placed Xena. *Warrior Princess*, the words echoed inside his mind.

Turning the tables on her had been easy; just one press of a secret button, and the floor under Xena had given way. The fall had knocked her unconscious. The rest had been child's play; drug her up a bit so she was manageable, but still able to walk. And now he intended to have some fun with this Warrior Princess.

She was just barely conscious, but she could hear him, could see him through the ice lid of the coffin. The cold was seeping through her skin and deep into her bones, and her teeth began chattering.

"Do you like my cooler? The previous owners built it; they couldn't afford to make ends meet, so they improvised. They stored all their slaughtered animals down here, the meat keeping for years, I would imagine... Ironic I came across it to begin with. You see, I killed them, and when I was hiding their bodies, I found this little gem. It's proven quite the trophy in view of the effort it took to make all these coffins..."

Disbelief, like the ice cold, pierced Xena's veins. Could it be true? Were there dead mortals in there with her? She shut her eyes, not able to even contemplate that

thought any further. She had to keep her mind sharp and thinking of some way to get out of there.

"Boss, a car's comin.'"

"Not now!" Lutheran was not happy. He sighed and patted the coffin lid. "Well, I have company, so I have to leave you for now, dear Warrior Princess. But have no fear, I will be back, and hopefully you'll still be alive to hear the rest of my tale... I usually don't get such a captivating audience."

His laughter trailed behind him as he went through a secret door and up the back stairs.

\* \* \*

"Gabrielle! I can drive!" Teddy complained when Gabrielle was barking for her to go left, and go right, and was there a faster way they could get to Xena. She nearly took the wheel at one point.

Teddy was so unnerved; she skidded out and nearly lost a tire to a deep concave in the grass about a quarter of a mile from the farm's front door.

"Gabrielle, just sit. We're here, now stop it or you'll make me run us off the road again, and then how are we gonna help her?"

"You're not helping any further after you let me out. You go back to the house. If we don't show up, we're either dead or taking the long way home."

"That's not funny." Teddy narrowed her eyes as Gabrielle slid from the front seat.

"It wasn't meant to be." She slammed the door and stomped towards the front door of the farmhouse. She should have talked with Sondra about the layout and where they had Xena. Son of a Bacchea! She could have kicked herself for not thinking of that sooner. Now what happens if she got lost and in the mean time they killed Xena? She would never forgive herself.

"And you must be? What, the Warrior Princesses' *knight in shining armor*?" Lutheran had swung the front door open so abruptly Gabrielle was nearly sucked inside.

Teddy had her cab parked at the side of the road, clearly defying Gabrielle's orders, and she watched as the taller man took Gabrielle inside. Teddy chewed her lip. Oh Aphrodite, whatever do I do now? she whispered to the heavens.

"You stop staring at the sky and praying to me as if I was some kind of god . . ." she stopped talking and shook her head after, "Wait, I am a god." She giggled.

"Not now Dite!" Teddy grabbed her hand. "He's got 'em both now. What are we gonna do? We're not equipped for this kinda thing. The worst thing ever happened to me was Dari's cat dying, I dunno if I can take this."

"It's ok, Sweet Pea. Have a little more faith in Xena and Gabrielle. You saw the memories, how much they've been through together; let's just see what happens? And if something bad looks like it's gonna happen, then we'll go get the cops."

Teddy didn't know. She had a feeling they should have already called the police, or at least Dari, who knew what to do in these types of situations.

"I strongly advise you against doing this, Ms. Redmond." Blair was back on call that night and had been beeped by her pager for an emergency.

"Oh, now I'm Ms. Redmond?" Dari scowled at the woman.

"Ok, *Dari*, this is foolish, you and I both know it. You haven't recovered enough to go traipsing about so soon. Now please, just go back to your room and stop this nonsense."

Dari handed her things to Sondra and shook her head. Not after what Sonny had told her happened was she about to spend one more minute confined to that damn bed, doing nothing.

"Sonny, please make her see reason..."

Sondra laughed at that. "I'd have better luck getting toothpaste back in the tube." She smiled weakly at Blair and hurried to brace Dari as she stepped from the wheelchair.

"You do realize you're doing this *against DOCTOR'S* orders, Dari."

"Yeah, so?" She grabbed the crutches leaning on the chair arm and started hobbling towards the automatic doors. Blair knew she wouldn't see her again until she was wheeled back in, bleeding from another stab or gunshot wound.

\* \* \*

Xena was still conscious, but barely breathing. She could sense, more than see or even hear that Lutheran was back, and he'd brought a prize with him. Gabrielle's face was pressed up hard against the ice lid, and Xena would have cried if her eyelids weren't nearly frozen.

Lutheran tapped on the lid. "Still alive in there? Good! Guess who's come to visit -- your little sidekick. But have no fear, my queen, she's not going anywhere..."

Xena struggled to turn her head and she saw through the ice out the side of her own casket that there had been another placed next to it. She wondered when that happened. Had she been blacking out and not even known it? Surely she would have heard that much commotion.

Gabrielle struggled, but Lutheran was prepared. He stabbed her in the arm with a hypodermic syringe, and she fell limply against him. He laughed as he scooped her body into his arms and laid her gently inside the matching coffin.

Three men had to slide the lid closed over her, and then they quickly left their boss to his prizes.

"I'd love to stay, ladies, but there's a few things that need my attention. Seems Dari has just signed herself out of the hospital..."

\* \* \*

Days, or maybe hours had passed, Xena didn't know which, but she did know that far above her, the ceiling caved in and fell, bringing with it, light... bright sunlight.

She guessed it was in the middle of the day from the positioning of the sun, and that meant at least one moon had passed. She was the worse for wear, but the sunlight shone directly on her casket, and she could breathe a little easier mentally if not realistically as the sun began to melt through the ice.

The minutes seemed to crawl by as Xena waited and waited for the ice to melt enough. Finally, simply tired of waiting, she gathered what strength she had left and smashed a hand through the fragile top where the sun's rays had done the most good. She was free!

But she wasn't out yet. Drawing from deep within, she mustered all her might and slammed her hand up through the ice over and over until half of the lid was no more than shards of ice, scattered along the sides of her coffin. She just kept remembering the song "Lady Soul" that was playing on their way to the bar that night, and how Gabrielle felt in her arms, and how she'd made such tender love to her bard afterward, kissing the flesh of

her chest, whispering how she'd longed to touch her there like that, how pure and clean her skin was, and how badly it had taunted her every waking moment. And haunted her dreams, as well. She'd whispered many secret desires that night to her, some Gabrielle replied to, some she was too stunned at to breathe, let alone speak.

Hours had gone by with just her touching the flesh of Gabrielle's shoulders and chest, her stomach, arms, and legs, and when she'd moved her mouth over where her hands had traveled, she could have died then and there and been the happiest woman ever for it.

Obsession... Yes, she had it, and this time it wasn't Aphrodite spraying her with some emotional perfume... She was obsessed with Gabrielle's youth, with her beauty, with her zest for life, her determination to never leave her side, and with the entire bard herself.

With one final "SHHHHEEEAAA," she kicked her boot through the bottom part of the coffin and she was totally free. It was colder outside the coffin than it had been inside, and her teeth that had been steadily chattering before quickened their clacking as she climbed from near death, thanking whatever deity had given her the strength.

She stumbled over to Gabrielle's coffin, wiped away some of the ice crystals that had pooled over her face and she stared through it for a moment at her love. The sun hadn't shone on Gabrielle's coffin, and she doubted she had the strength to punch through this lid. Then she turned her head, almost at her wits' end, and there they were, albeit frozen, her chakram and sword, positioned by Lutheran she guessed, to resemble a cross or a shrine to the two of them.

She hobbled over, grabbed her sword, and with a painful yell, lifted her arms way above her head and brought the sword down with all her might. It stuck in the deep ice. Yanking it free, she again raised her arms and down came the sword once more, splitting the lid of Gabrielle's coffin in half.

Relieved, she pushed half of the top off and reached in for Gabrielle. She was stiff as a plank, but she was alive. As Xena lifted her, Gabrielle called out in pain, shivering when her wet flesh met freezing air.

"Wwwwhh- ttt ... hha app nnnd?" Gabrielle could barely understand her own words, she didn't know how Xena was going to, but Xena understood, she always had.

"He drugged you." She held the bard to her, knowing her own body was giving off little if no heat at all, but she didn't care, she wanted her close. She brushed her hands over her face, her hair, smiling and crying at the same time. "Why did you come after me? Oh, Gabrielle, you nearly got yourself killed..." She kissed the top of her head, her forehead, her cheeks, the tip of her nose.

It was a simple answer really, but so powerful. "I love you, Xena; wherever you go, I go." She dropped her head to Xena's chest and cried.

"He slipped through here somewhere," Xena said, her teeth still chattering. It was considerably colder now than it had been at any other time during the past day when she'd been locked down here in Lutheran's human freezer. She and Gabrielle had found the bodies, all 102 of them. It sickened her, and she vowed if she came face to face with that evil demon again, she would use her sword and not think twice about it.

They had been searching a couple minutes for a way out. The sun shining through the opening in the ceiling had helped her escape the coffin, but her body still too frozen to react in her normal warrior fashion, it was way too high for her to actually use as a means for their complete escape. So they were still pawns in that man's game.

"Iii - Thhhinkkkk Iiiii Ffffooundddd Som. . ."

Xena hurried to Gabrielle, realizing her love seemed to be affected a lot more by the cold than she was. "Shhh," she whispered, caressing her cheek with a tender touch. "That's my girl!" she praised and smiled. Then she looked at the door Gabrielle had found behind some large crates, the contents of which Xena had no desire to investigate. Her main focus was getting them away from that cold tomb.

She grabbed at the door handle and jerked at it, knowing that it wouldn't budge. Oh well, so much for luck. She looked around for something to pry it with and found only her sword. She could get another if it snapped, she thought and stabbed at the frame. She then pressed her sword handle towards the wall. Many splinters, groans, and moans later, she had the door open about a foot wide.

"Good enough," she said and slipped her sword back into its scabbard. She took Gabrielle's arm, and they squeezed through the opening, finding themselves in another room. This one had a stairway leading up to another floor, much higher.

They hurried towards it, nearly racing up those stairs because they saw light, and light meant freedom.

They reached the second floor, only to discover steel bars on the windows prevented their escape. And the light they had thought was from outside was a bare blue bulb hanging just inside the next empty room.

Gabrielle sat down hard on the closest box she saw and hung her head. It was warmer in this room, but the fact of it was, they were still trapped. She sighed and looked up to see Xena staring at her.

"I'm sorry, Gabrielle..." Xena's eyes filled with tears.

Gabrielle saw them clearly in the dim blue light shining through the slatted window. She went to her, and taking Xena's cheeks in her numb hands, she reminded her, "No more blame, remember?" She smiled, wishing to give hope to her love.

Xena closed her eyes. "I didn't mean to trick you that afternoon. I really was enjoying myself..." She looked up at her shyly, and a small smile creased her lips.

Gabrielle only stared at her in the gloom. She was still sort of mad about that, but how could she not forgive Xena anything?

"I promise not to use that trick ever again," Xena whispered, needing forgiveness. "If I sneak off, I do it when your back is turned, not after I've loved you to exhaustion." She realized that statement probably wasn't about to help her out one little bit.

Gabrielle felt a twang deep in her stomach, remembering. She shook her head to clear it. "No more sneaking off at all, Xena, do you hear me? We're a team, even more now than before. I know you want to protect me, to keep me from harm, but there's just some things you have to accept, and that's one of them."

Xena dipped her head, and a fresh flood of tears coursed down her cheeks. "I'm sorry -- I just want to keep you safe... I love you. I have you, and I don't want to lose you, Gabrielle." Her words were broken . . . filled with tear-stained honesty.

Gabrielle reached up and brushed the tears away. "And just how would I have felt if I had gotten here a day late? You don't want to lose me? Well do you think I wish to lose you? It works both ways here, Xena. Let's just stop treating one another like glass, ok?"

Xena lifted her head and stared down into her bard's beautiful face. The blue light gave it the most wonderful glow. "Deal," she whispered and held out her hand, offering to shake on it.

Gabrielle pulled on her hand, and Xena went willingly into a tight embrace. This was all she wanted, her bard near, her bard loving her and being loved in return.

\* \* \*

Xena resigned herself to being locked up another night. She found some old coats and made a makeshift bed for her and Gabrielle and they laid together, warming each other, giving and taking comfort in one another. She stared at that blue light as her bard slept in her arms, every now and then emitting a small sigh of contentment. Even during all this turmoil, she could find peace in her dreams...

Xena smiled and kissed her forehead, hugging her closer. A day or so ago, she'd heard a song playing on Teddy's car radio, and it came to her again and she began to sing gently...

"Baby mine, don't you cry... Baby mine... Dry your eyes. Rest your head... close to my heart, never to part... baby of mine..." She couldn't remember some of it, but she clearly recalled the one part that had struck her when she heard it and continued.

"...From your head...down to your toes, you're not much... goodness knows, but you're so precious to me. Sweet as can be, Baby of mine..."

She sighed and closed her eyes. She hadn't been aware that Gabrielle's eyes were open, nor the faraway look in them, or their emerald shine as they brimmed with fresh tears filled with love. .

\* \* \*

"She's probably on her way with the swat team," Lutheran mused, stroking his mustache. He cursed under his breath and decided, "Start packing, looks like we're moving out."

\* \* \*

"We have to do it by the book, Dari," she was told for the hundredth time it seemed. She had originally wanted to rush to that farmhouse and barge in on Lutheran, ending his sadistic little games once and for all. But during the drive, she grudgingly admitted to herself her condition really wasn't up to par, and she knew somehow, something would go terribly wrong. Then where would she be? Dead, with Sondra, Gabby, and Xena taken down with her. So she plotted and planned, and by the time they were at the stoplight and had to make the determination to head toward their home, Lutheran's farm, or the police station, she asked Sondra to take her downtown to headquarters.

There she'd been sitting, and stewing for hours. The only way she managed to survive it was Sondra's constant attention, her caring and devotion to her lover. So Dari waited until the judge was contacted, all the warrants were issued, the feds were called, plans made and finalized, and everything double-checked and triple checked.

And finally, they were ready to go arrest Lutheran, once and for all putting an end to his madness.

\* \* \*

Teddy was tired of waiting. She wanted to be of some help. She'd seen the men all packing up their gear and hurrying to and fro from the house. It looked like they wanted to get out of there fast, and that wasn't good.

"Let's go see if we can find 'em, eh?" she looked at Aphrodite, who was lying on the hood of her cab, sunning herself.

"Teddy..." Aphrodite groaned. "Sondra and Dari will be here any moment with the police. We were told to wait here and watch, NOT get involved. Believe me, I want to march in there and zap some well-placed fireballs myself, but my powers seem to be draining daily. I need to conserve what I have left if we're to return home."

"Well I'm not waiting around anymore!" Teddy said and stomped off. Aphrodite squeaked, and hopped off the hood, running after her.

"You're gonna get us in trouble!" Aphrodite complained when she finally caught up to her. "Ohhhh, YOU!!!" She bellowed her frustration when Teddy ignored her.

Teddy was so determined, she neglected to watch where she was going, took a step in the wrong direction, and fell forward and down a hole. Aphrodite screamed and jumped to save her, but she just missed a handhold on her shirt, and Teddy slipped right from her grasp.

"*TEDDY!!!!*" she shouted as she watched her future self falling and falling and falling into that dark hole.

\* \* \*

"Xena, did you hear that?" They had been searching the lower room again for another way out, and Xena stopped short when she could have sworn she heard Aphrodite. Now how could she hear her in that icebox? Then she remembered, the *hole*! And she raced into the other room.

Gabrielle hurried after her, and looked up to see something dark was falling towards them. She watched as Xena lunged forward and caught the heavy bundle that was Teddy.

The weight and force of it caused Xena's knees to buckle and she fell, but she'd caught the woman in her safe embrace, and Teddy could only stare at her savior in amazement.

"You ok?" Xena asked, releasing Teddy and rolling to her feet. She held out a hand and helped Teddy to her own.

"I was a gonner!" Teddy boomed. "Oh my goodness, my whole life flashed before my eyes." She looked up at Xena, "Thank you, warrior lady, I owe you my life, literally."

"Teddy!!!" Aphrodite screamed into the dark hole.

"Aphrodite?" Gabrielle called back.

"Gabby? What are you doing down there?"

"Looking for the Golden Fleece! What do you think we're doing down here?"

Xena smiled at her bard's back. Gods she loved that woman. "Zap us up there, Aphrodite."

"Xena," Gabrielle turned to her, "that might take the last of her powers." Her look was sad and worried. "There's four of us now. I'm sure we can figure something else out."

Xena nodded, and then looked up at the opening. "Aphrodite, can you toss me a rope?"

"Teddy?" Aphrodite called.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Xena caught me."

Aphrodite sighed, and then asked, "Do you have a rope in your taxi?"

"Fraid not, never found a reason to keep one." Teddy craned her head back so she could look up at the sound of Aphrodite's voice. "Flag down Dari when she comes."

"Dari's out of the hospital?" Xena picked up on that immediately.

"Yeah, I'm surprised she stayed as long as she did. She doesn't like hospitals much, despite the fact she's always visiting them for one thing or another."

"Sounds like some other stubborn person I know," Xena heard her deep-voiced lover mumble and shoved her shoulder. She met Gabrielle's look with a smile, and then moved around her. She had to find something to toss up to Aphrodite, the cold was starting to seep into her skin again.

"Lutheran and his men cleared outta here a while ago," Teddy updated them as they all began to search.

That wasn't a good sign, and Xena knew it. "We need to get out of here, and fast."

"Hey, Xena?" Aphrodite called from above about two minutes later.

"Yeah?" Xena shouted back at her. "Did you find a rope?"

"No, but I did find some strange box in the house. It's stuck to the wall, so I didn't want to tug it off. It has bright red numbers and they're blinking."

"That's a clock, Aphrodite." Teddy rolled her eyes. "When ya zapped our language into your heads, why didn't you zap the meanings too?" She giggled.

"This doesn't LOOK like a normal clock, Teddy. It's not counting the numerals forward, it's counting backwards."

Xena frowned. "Do clocks do this?" she asked Teddy.

"No..." but then her eyes widened in realization "But *bombs* do. No wonder they were beating a trail outta here." It dawned on her, "They're gonna blow us to kingdom come!"

“Ok, just remain calm,” Xena ordered before everyone started screaming like a bunch of banshees. She asked, “What exactly is this bomb thing? And how could it possibly blow us anywhere?”

Teddy stared at her, mouth agape. “Bang! Boom! Kapowie! You know, explosion, big ball of fire! Blowing us to smithereens!” She frowned. “Ok, this is us, before the bomb,” she gestured to the three of them. “And this is us, AFTER the bomb,” She pointed to the coffins lining the walls of the freezer. “Only we won’t be so lucky as to remain in one piece.”

After Teddy's little tirade, Xena was beginning to understand. It was like the time when she was seven, playing in her mothers' kitchen, mixing together whatever she could find. When the pot began to bubble and smoke, she climbed down from the chair and stood back in the corner, then came a loud POP and finally, SPLAT . . . everywhere. Who knew such a mess could be made from the things found in a kitchen? Ok, she got it. They had a dilemma on their hands. . . “Aphrodite, any sign of Dari yet?”

Aphrodite stood, shading her eyes, and turned in a complete circle as she looked around. “Nothing,” she reported.

“Snap us out of here, Aphrodite!” Gabrielle didn’t see any other way.

Xena’s lips turned down for a moment. “This could affect us getting back home Gabrielle,” she reminded her.

“So would our deaths.”

“You’ve got a point there.” Xena looked up. “Do it, Aphrodite.”

“Are you sure, Xena? I dunno about this...” The concern wrinkled up her forehead.

“Aphrodite, just do it.”

The goddess sighed, and then snapped her fingers. She waited a second. Nothing. “It didn’t work.”

“Put more *back* into it Aphrodite!” Teddy hollered up to her.

Aphrodite shut her eyes hard, made two fists, and said a mental chant to whatever higher power was listening, then snapped again, using both hands.

She slowly opened one eye and saw the three appear before her in glittering outlines of shimmering golden lights. She squeaked and clapped her hands happily.

“Yeehaw!” she cheered and hugged the three of them all at once.

It was a little too much for Teddy to bear, and she fainted dead away. Xena caught her before her body touched the ground. She hefted the smaller woman onto her shoulder, and then looked at the other two. “Where’s her cab?” she asked Aphrodite.

Aphrodite pointed a finely shaped finger towards an old battered barn. “She hid it there while the men were running about.”

“Let’s go!” Xena charged off, not waiting to see if they followed, she knew they would.

She sat Teddy in the back of the car, resting her head on Aphrodite’s lap after Dite had jumped in to help her position their overwhelmed friend, then drew her torso out and looked over the hood at Gabrielle. She smiled, to be alive, to be in love, to be in love with that woman across the way looking back at her with as much love or more in her own eyes. “Get in, Love,” she requested with much more patience than she was feeling at the moment. Xena dropped down into the front seat and swung the door closed. She waited until Gabrielle was inside and then looked at the many buttons, dials, and those two pedals down on the floor of the car at her feet, and finally, with a raised eyebrow, at Gabrielle.

Gabrielle laughed. “It does look rather imposing, doesn’t it? But then again... so do *you* sometimes...” She patted Xena’s hand. “I have faith in your many skills,” she assured her.

That was good enough for Xena. She put a hand to the key still in the ignition and turned it, as she'd watched Teddy do the many times they'd ridden with her. She was a bit confused about that gearshift thing, and the pedals, so she tried each combo until she hit one that worked, and then they were on their way.

Although it was backwards, they were still on their way.

A few yards away from the farm, they felt the ground began to quake and watched in horror as the farm exploded. Not merely the cavern of death they had just escaped from, but the entire property went up and out in a huge torrent of smoke and flames. Wood and metal flew out from every direction. Xena slammed her foot on the brake, then just as quickly, slammed it onto the gas pedal, causing ground rocks, rubble, and dust to fly as she beat a hasty retreat as far away from that mess as she could. "Let's get the hell outta here!"

\* \* \*

"I think at some point we need to be going in the same direction as the other automobiles," Gabrielle said a few minutes later. She smiled sweetly when Xena threw her a frustrated glance.

"You want to drive this infernal contraption? I think we're doing rather well considering. Let's not push our luck." Xena was more than happy to drive backwards. Her driving skill may not be one of her many, but she had gotten them far enough away from the bomb to prevent anyone injury. And she was actually beginning to like it. She met Aphrodite's twinkling eyes as she looked through the back window. Good thing Teddy kept the car up. The rear windshield was crystal clear.

\* \* \*

"What is that?" Sergeant Walker asked, pointing up the road ahead of him at the speeding cab coming headlong at him in reverse. He, as well as the line of cars following his, saw the explosion, with the thick black clouds billowing up into the heavens.

Dari and Sondra leaned over the backseat and squinted to see where he was pointing. When they both finally recognized what it was, they sat back, looking at each other and smiled.

\* \* \*

“I think we’d better stop, Xena,” Gabrielle said for the second time after she’d spotted the cars coming at them, their speed a lot faster than the backwards cab’s, sirens blaring, lights flashing.

“Think that’s Dari?” Xena asked, not slowing down just yet. She had to be sure. For all she knew, Lutheran was behind one of those dark windowed cars and ready to finish what he’d started.

“Ow, my head,” Teddy was conscious, finally. She sat up; rubbing her eyes, then dropped her hands and looked around. “Um, Xena?”

“Hmmm?”

“Why are we going backwards?”

Aphrodite giggled and gave Teddy a hug. “Hi, Sugar, I was so worried about you.”

Teddy smiled, hugged her back, then leaned over the front seat; she reached for the gearshift, saying, “Press on the brake for a second.”

Xena looked down at the two pedals, then at Teddy staring at her over her shoulder. “Which is which?”

Teddy rolled her eyes. “Brake equals *STOP*. It’s the pedal to your left, you *DO* know which is your left, eh?”

Xena huffed then did as Teddy requested, and in a few seconds they were driving forward. “I don’t want to go back that way,” she said as Teddy sat back down.

“We think that’s Dari,” Gabrielle said, turning in the front seat to face them in back. She pointed past Teddy’s shoulder to the throng of cars following them.

Teddy glanced behind her and smiled. “Oh, thank Heaven! Xena, pull her over, that’s the posse!”

“The *what?*” Xena wasn’t going to take any chances.

"The posse-- the cavalry -- the guys in white hats." Oh for goodness sake!  
"They're the good guys, like your friends . . ." What were their names again . . . Hercules  
and Ioalus."

"Well, why didn't you say so." Xena slammed on the brakes, throwing them all  
forward in their seats. "Getting a simple explanation out of you 21st Century people is  
like pulling a Cyclops's teeth." With that, they sat and waited for the *posse* to catch up.

It seemed like days before they were all allowed to leave the police station after the questions had been posed, and answered, asked again, and answered several more times.

Five exhausted women dragged themselves out to Teddy's car and Dari's jeep and just stood there a moment, letting it all sink in.

"I'm going to sleep for days!" Gabrielle proclaimed, slumping against her taller friend.

"Good idea, give me a chance to rejuvenate some powers." Aphrodite slipped into the cab, her choice for her ride back to the house.

Xena helped Gabrielle up into the back of Dari's jeep and hopped up in after her. Explaining their dress to the police had been rather easy. Lutheran was known for dolling his victims up in many different outfits, and when she was first asked, the lie had come easy to her. She simply said it was Lutheran's sick idea to dress her and Gabrielle up as some kind of prehistoric warriors and bury them. The police had believed it and continued with their many other questions.

The explosion and fire had destroyed any physical evidence that could have been obtained from that hideout, but the authorities now had the testimony of five witnesses to hold against Lutheran when they finally captured him.

\* \* \*

Gabrielle and Xena changed into sweat suits and came back down to the living room. They hoped to share their remaining days with Sondra and Dari by garnering from

them as many memories as they could of the experience to take back home to remember. It had all happened so fast - too fast. And now that it was nearly over, it seemed like they had been on two ships passing in the night, taking diminutive, rapid glimpses of each other through blurred portholes, then going back to their own worlds, leaving an echo of their time in passing behind. Xena came to the realization that after this visit, the likelihood of seeing Dari and Sonny ever again was almost nil. And that thought depressed her more than any others.

So when Dari wanted to show them a movie later that evening, said it would be a wonderful new experience for them, Xena had agreed, even though their bodies were tired, and their minds were nearly fried.

Settling down close together wouldn't be such a bad idea. Especially since they had the whole couch to themselves. Xena laid down on the longer part of the L-shaped sofa across from the fireplace and expected Gabrielle to take the other end. But the smaller woman smiled down at her, and promptly laid her body alongside of Xena, her back cuddling into the front of the longer contours behind her.

Xena's eyes twinkled, and she drew the cover over them both and settled back, pulling her bard closer. Gabrielle laid her head on Xena's outstretched arm, pulling her other arm more snugly around her torso and over her breasts. She pressed Xena's hand to her heart, covering it with her own hand.

Xena slung a leg over Gabrielle's hip, letting it dangle over her little warrior and breathed a contented sigh. There was something to be said about the comfort of the future.

They were alone for a few minutes while Dari and Sonny made some popcorn in the kitchen for the flick they were about to watch. Gabrielle closed her eyes, tilting her head back some. "I'm going to miss this."

"Yeah, me too." Xena was looking down at her face, loving the sculptured lines of her profile, the swoop of her nose, the jut of her chin. She traced the full outline of those pink lips with her eyes, then looked at her neck, and that was all Xena could stand. She leaned down and started kissing the Amazon Queen.

Startled, Gabrielle giggled, opened then shut her eyes, parting her lips for Xena's exploring tongue. She released Xena's hand to put her own to the back of Xena's head,

pulling her closer. Her heart fluttered as Xena's kiss grew stronger, deeper. Gabrielle began moving her head, matching the rapid beating of their hearts.

Xena rocked against her, hand slipping down from where it had been sitting against Gabrielle's chest, and she trailed her fingers along the bard's stomach.

"Ok . . .cut that stuff out, we're about to watch a movie here!" Dari was standing by the sofa, bowl of popcorn in hand.

The amorous pair broke apart, startled, having forgotten all about Sonny and Dari. Gabrielle dipped her head down, unable to meet Dari's laughter filled eyes. From Xena, Dari received a heated glare, letting her know her timing stunk.

Dari smirked at her, not at all daunted by facing down the tough warrior. She set the bowl on the small table at the end of the couch, and then settled her battered body into her favorite lazy boy. Sonny joined her a few seconds later, carrying their own bowl. She winked at the two on the couch and plopped down next to Dari in her own chair.

Dari grabbed up the remote and pressed a button, the wall behind the fireplace rose and behind it a big screen appeared.

"Wow," Gabrielle had finally gotten her bearings back. "That's the TV?"

"Yep, looker isn't it?" Dari grinned at her then looked back at the screen. She pressed a few more buttons and the screen came alive. It was a spectacular display of lights and images, and the two warriors blinked when Dari aimed another remote somewhere above her head and the lights slowly dimmed until the room was filled with just the illumination from the television.

"I hope Aphrodite and Teddy don't stay out too late."

"Oh stop worrying Xena," Gabby looked back and up at her. "Let her have some fun. As long as she's not meddling, she can't do any harm."

"I suppose." Xena grudgingly relented to her bard's persuading words. She wanted to be kissing her again, but accepted that may not be an option for a while. Sulking, she rested her head back on the arm of the couch, bringing her hand back up from Gabrielle's stomach to her chest again. She smiled when she felt the skin on the tip of her breast harden under Gabrielle's shirt when her palm grazed against it. And she stopped right there, sending the warmth of her hand into Gabrielle's breast.

She was feeling naughty, and dejected because of Dari's untimely interruption a few minutes ago. Her body had been on such a high, the blood in her heart pumping out erratically into her bloodstream to the veins of her neck where a lone vein thrummed a chaotic beat. And then she'd been slammed into reverse, much like Teddy's cab had with Xena behind the wheel. It was quite painful as her pulses slowed, and her breathing came back to normal.

Xena's hand grew bold, and she started stroking Gabrielle through the thick fabric of her shirt. She had her eyes closed now, head still back on the couch arm. She could care less about this movie Dari was so excited to see. But being able to touch Gabrielle this way made the situation bearable.

Gabrielle couldn't take it. There was no way she was going to lay there while Xena played with her body and watch a movie. It just wasn't happening. She whispered, "Quit it."

Xena whispered back, "Ok." And stopped for a heartbeat. Then she started again, running her nails over the ever-growing nipple, as it strained to its hardest and fullest.

"*Xena...*" Gabrielle issued a low, guttural warning, trying not to let those two across the room hear her.

"Ok." Xena said and stopped once more. She giggled when her fingers began playing again and Gabrielle not so gently bumped her in the groin with her backside.

Gabrielle had to take her mind off Xena's play. She asked, "So what's this called anyway? What's the plot?"

Dari looked from the screen to the pair lying on the couch. "It's an HBO special, semi-follow up of the first "If These Walls Could Talk" The idea was to set three stories - - each with separate casts, writers and directors -- in the same house, which happens to be occupied by lesbians in 1961, 1972 and 2000. The first story will break your heart, you being a romantic mushball and all..." She gazed at Gabrielle and burst out laughing when Gabrielle threw a pillow at her.

Sondra said from her chair, "I prefer the third story with Sharon Stone and Ellen DeGeneres."

Dari chimed in, "But then again, Chloe Sevigny in the second episode ain't bad either." She laughed when Sonny threw popcorn at her from the other direction.

“Don’t even start on her eyes again, Dari,” Sonny threatened.

“But she *DOES* have gorgeous eyes!” Dari giggled, catching more popcorn in her mouth when Sonny tossed it at her. “It’s a movie about love, you’ll like it. Then I have a great film, *Desert Hearts*, and-“

“Ok Dari, one at a time,” Sondra smiled at her lover. “Let ‘em see this one first,”

Gabrielle tried -- *really* tried -- to ignore Xena’s antics, but she found it impossible. She growled low in her throat at the slippery warrior behind her and finally put her hand over Xena’s to still its teasing play.

“You’re such a . . .“

Xena squeezed her nipple and Gabrielle jumped, turning her body around so she faced Xena. Face to face, the warrior princess opened her eyes and innocently smiled at her.

“I’m going to make you lie on the other part of this couch if you don’t quit that,” Gabrielle threatened her.

“Ok, I’ll be good.” Xena promised, smiling for the ultimate effect.

“You’d better.” Gabrielle turned back around, grabbed Xena’s hand before it could come anywhere near her torso, and held it firmly in her own. She felt Xena’s chest shaking and knew a silent laugh was rippling through her.

When Gabrielle and Sondra went to make a second helping of popcorn, Xena took advantage of her time alone with Dari to quiz her about the fate of Lutheran.

“So what happens to him now?”

“Same as every other time,” Dari released an aggravated breath. “That man is a pimple on the ass of humanity.”

Xena couldn't help but snicker. “He's no Mystic Stone from the Temple of the Heavens, you can say that again.” She glanced at the door to the kitchen then back to Dari. “So you plan to continue your quest in bringing him down?”

“As usual-” Dari nodded. “The day I put this to rest is when they have *his* body in a pine box buried six feet under, or *mine*.”

Xena bit on her bottom lip. How could she and Gabrielle just leave things like this? It just didn't sit well with her. After all, she was a defender, a cop of sorts, in her world. She couldn't turn her back on such an outrageous evil that was Lutheran. And she couldn't let Dari handle him alone. But Dari would never let her “help” on her own. No, if Xena were to do something that would bring that man to justice, she was going to have to go solo again. As those thoughts ran through her mind, Gabrielle appeared from the kitchen and their gazes locked.

Xena looked away. She'd have to go back on her word again, but it was for the good of them all that she did. Yes, Gabrielle may get a little mad, she laughed inwardly at that, get a lot mad- she amended, but in the end she'll see that I had to do it my way.

The next step: how did she get away from them without detection for a few hours? The other two would be easy to slip away from, but Gabrielle, forget it; she'd be on the lookout for Xena to try something again. The warrior would have to be very careful. Gabrielle had always been able to pick up on all the nuances, those in her voice, in her glances, even in her gestures. But now, since the physical barrier was no longer between them, Gabrielle's sense of her was . . . amazing, frightfully so. She would know right away she was planning something this time. The reason it worked the first was

because it blindsided her, she never saw it coming; but this time, Gabrielle was sure to be more aware.

“Dinar for your thoughts,” Gabrielle said, plopping down. She sat up this time, resting her back against Xena’s stomach, and she looked down at the warrior’s averted eyes. “Xena?”

“Hmmm?” Xena was nervous there for a moment. Had she hid the feelings from her eyes before Gabrielle had seen? She finally lifted her eyelids and met that green, questioning stare.

“Ok, a sack of them then.” She laughed and stretched an arm out, her hand brushing Xena’s black bangs over her forehead. “Talk to me...” she whispered.

At that moment, Xena was tempted to reveal the whole plan, at least what she knew of the plan so far, to get Lutheran. Tell her every single doubt she harbored about going home and leaving Dari and Sondra to that man’s evilness, but she couldn’t. Telling her meant Gabrielle wouldn’t let her out of her sight unless Xena allowed her along for the trip.

So she lied. “Just thinking about the movie.” She took Gabrielle’s hand and pulled the woman into her arms, drawing the cover over them again when Gabrielle lifted her legs up and stuffed them down under it. “Let’s just enjoy the rest, shall we?” She wrapped her arms securely around Gabrielle, maybe for the last time, depending on how this whole thing turned out, and sighed.

\* \* \*

Gabrielle was asleep, and Xena knew her one chance was then and there. Dari and Sondra had begged off earlier in the evening and had gone to bed. Xena knew they weren’t going to “sleep” at all. They were going to do what she and Gabrielle had just finished doing the past few hours.

Xena traced a lazy finger over Gabrielle’s naked torso, following the muscular lines of her shoulders, her collarbone, down the dip in her throat, and between her breasts. She inhaled deeply and started to pull away, when Gabrielle slapped her own hand over Xena’s and her eyes opened.

“Where ya going?” the bard inquired, smiling knowingly up at the startled warrior.

“You’re supposed to be sleeping.”

“Right, with you touching me like that?” She laughed at the expression on Xena’s face. “So, where are you headed?” The smile remained on her face. She knew she had caught Xena doing something, or about to do something, she could feel it in her bones.

“The little warrior’s room,” Xena playfully replied, the white of her smile spreading as her lips did.

“Hmmm...” Gabrielle didn’t buy it. “Ok, hurry back.”

Xena mumbled to herself while walking across the grand bedroom towards the bathroom. “I’ll fix her wagon,” she said to the empty bathroom and closed the door.

Gabrielle waited for her return, idly counting the time as it passed by. “Did you fall in?” she called to her friend.

Xena opened the door, smirking at her. “We’re so funny tonight.” She was just a tiny bit bitter that every single window in that bathroom was sealed shut! And she couldn’t very well have slipped out of the window naked. *Dueling Driads*, she cursed inwardly and threw herself back into the bed beside Gabrielle.

Well, she had no other choice. She would have to do what she swore she wouldn’t and suffer the consequences later. But for now, she had hours and hours of pleasure ahead of her; a good deal no matter what way she looked at it. Gabrielle would be steaming mad when she woke to find Xena had gone again, but Xena would have been one content warrior on her way to find Lutheran and put an end to him once and for all, and this time, there was no chance of Gabrielle getting caught, or Dari shot, or Sonny kidnapped. It would be all her doing; she alone would deal with that madman.

“Oh no you don’t!” Gabrielle blurted when Xena rolled over and on top of her. “One full night of sleep, is that so much to ask for?” she pleaded as Xena began kissing her neck, taking small bites here and there of the heated flesh. “Xena... *please*...” She was certain her body wouldn’t be able to withstand another of the warrior’s attacks. “You may as well toss me down into the abyss of Tartarus, the result would be the same, a broken body... every muscle aching...” *but aching so pleasurably*... she didn’t say the last part aloud, feeling it would only have fueled Xena’s quest.

Xena began a trail of kisses downward, ignoring her young mate's pleas. She was on a new mission now, Lutheran the farthest thing from her mind. For some reason, when she started making love to her bard, her mind cleared of every problem imaginable, and bringing Gabrielle ultimate pleasure replaced her every waking thought.

The radio talk show host, *Delilah*, crooned from the speakers, "...Aw that's a beautiful story, here's some Gwyneth Paltrow & Huey Lewis, and let's hope you're going to be "Cruising" with your beau come next month..."

Xena started to hum with the song. It had played frequently since their time there; so much so, she knew the words by heart. She smiled through the words as her lips moved over Gabrielle's heated flesh. And when she started singing the lyrics, Gabrielle's futile attempts to get her to stop decreased, in force and impact...

*"So ... Let the music take your mind, just release and you will find..."*

"Xena... Arrrrrrggggg..." She closed her eyes, arching her neck, her head pressing deep into the pillow.

*"You're gonna fly away, glad you're going my way..."* kiss, touch, lick.

"Xena, "Destroyer of Nations"? *Ha!* Destroyer of Sleep is more like it!"

With laughter in her voice, Xena continued, *"I love it when we're cruising together..."*

"That's not fair . . .you know what your singing does to me."

Gabrielle groaned, twisting and turning, knowing all along no matter how much she complained and pleaded, Xena wasn't about to stop now. Not when there was such a prize at the end of her tormenting.

Xena continued to sing in a whisper to her bard, tantalizing her skin with love bites and more kisses. She slipped sneaky hands between Gabrielle's thighs, embedding her fingers in warm silk...

*"And inch by inch we get closer and closer... to every little part of each other... oh baby... yeah..."*

"Don't you *dare!*" Gabrielle ordered her, but it fell on deaf ears. Xena boldly stared up into the bard's fierce gaze as she entered her. Xena could see the need, too, in the green depths of her stare and continued with her pleasurable torment.

Gabrielle turned her head into the pillow and bit into it. She growled when Xena started a slow and steady hand pumping action, her fingers doing amazing things inside, and outside her body. And her mouth... *What exactly is she doing down there?* Gabrielle wondered and released the pillow to look down. *Bad idea*, she thought when their gazes connected and a bolt of pleasure struck her lower region. Her head flopped back onto the pillow.

*“Oohhhhh... Baby let’s cruise... let’s flow...”* Her tongue tip slid back up to Gabrielle’s navel and she kissed the flesh just below it as she drew out the word. *“...let’s gliiiiiiiiiide.”* She parted Gabrielle’s legs even further with tender, wet fingers . . . *“Let’s open up...”* and sank her body down between them *“...and go... inside...”*

Gabrielle released a long, slow, shaky breath. Her hands flew out and she grabbed a handhold of sheet in each one, her toes curled and uncurled, and her legs started trembling. She finally surrendered, and oh what a delightful surrender it was...

*“I could just stay here beside you and love you baby,”* Xena sang, shifting her body so she was comfortable, after all, it *was* going to be a while before she moved from that lovely place. *“...Just release- and, you will find, you’re gonna fly away, glad you’re going my way, I love it when we’re cruising together...”* her words faded as her mouth occupied itself with a much more enjoyable task.

*“Oh the agony of defeat...”* Gabrielle breathed... the last coherent words she would say the remainder of the night.

*“...I love it. I love it. I love it...”*

*Damn it!* Sondra yelled inwardly. She was stumped, sitting atop a black, muscular mare she'd swiped from her neighbor's stable. "Now where have you gone?" she said softly, looking around the quiet forest for the Warrior Princess.

\* \* \*

Sondra didn't know what had awakened her that night -- early morning really; she just awoke, slid her feet into a pair of soft satin slippers, and padded her way downstairs. She'd passed the guest bedroom, noted the soft snoring coming from within, and smiled. Then she made her way silently down the long stairwell and caught sight of Xena standing in the darkened living room, dressed in her warrior outfit again. She was standing in front of the glass wall just staring blankly out into darkness. Sondra had immediately stopped on the stairs, unwilling to allow herself to disturb the woman, and just watched her.

Xena had been lost in thought, that much was apparent when she didn't even hear Sondra approach. She fulfilled one mission, render her little Amazon lover helpless, and now she was preparing for the second, find and kill Lutheran.

Sondra knew after watching her for a few minutes that Xena had something planned. There was no way she was awake at four in the morning, dressed in full leathers and armor, weapons included, and there not be a plan. Gabrielle wasn't the only one in the house who knew something about a warrior on a mission. She, herself, had woken up many-a-time to an empty bed, Dari responding to some kind of emergency.

Xena and her own love were two-of-a-kind, two of the exact same kind. Well not this time. She was tired of being left in the lurch, not knowing- not being allowed to know- what was going on. She snuck back up the stairs, hurriedly slipped on jeans and a

tee-shirt, grabbed a brown leather jacket of Dari's off the back of the door, and remembered her sneakers after she'd nearly gotten to the stairs again in bare feet. She cursed and raced back for her Reeboks.

By the time she returned, Xena was just slipping out the front door. Sondra took the stairs two at a time, praying she didn't miscalculate and fall head over heels.

Following Xena was easy, especially since the Warrior had too much on her mind to notice Sonny's clumsy attempts at trying to remain an inconspicuous 10 yards behind her.

The night before, Sondra had spoken to Xena and Gabrielle of the horse ranch down the road, and how much fun it was during the summers to race the horses along the coast. For some reason, Sondra knew that was exactly where Xena was headed. She was fixing to steal herself a mare.

Xena jumped the railing around the main property, and ducked down low as she made her way across the yard to the stables. She didn't even need to pick a horse out; the minute she appeared inside the barn, a golden Arabian mare to her left whinnied at her and shook its proud mane, stomping the ground a few times to make sure it had caught her attention.

Xena prepared the horse for their journey, grabbing a few extra things she'd need and was out of there in minutes, galloping across the lawn. With a little warrior yell of glee, she and the horse cleared the top of the fence easily and were off.

Sondra ran to the barn, grabbed the first horse she saw, and went after her, stopping to open the fence rather than leap over it as her braver friend had done.

\* \* \*

And now she'd lost her. *Damn it to hell!* She'd followed Xena for hours, taking all the wooded area's they came across to remain incognito. Sondra pretty much guessed where the woman was headed, especially when she had viewed Xena tucking a white, legal pad back into one of her saddlebags during one of the few times she had actually stopped the horse. She was going to one of Lutheran's hideouts, that was a given, but which one?

“AIAIAIAIA!” PLOP! Before Sondra knew what had hit her, something dark dropped from a tree branch above her head and landed behind her in the saddle.

Xena wrapped her arms around Sondra’s midriff and tilted herself so she could peer over Sondra’s shoulder and look her straight in her honey-colored eyes, “Just WHAT do you think you’re doing?”

“Well . . . I . . . Umm . . . You left. And I . . .“

“Mmmm Hmmm.” Xena didn’t need her explanation; she knew exactly what the writer was doing. “You’re just like her!” she accused.

Sondra laughed, agreeing, “Well, *yeah*.” She shrugged.

“Arg!” Xena knew if she told Sondra to go back, she wouldn’t listen. She’d do exactly what Gabrielle did; disobey an order, even if that order was birthed from love. *Blasted bards!* “Now what am I supposed to do with you?” she asked, waiting for a reply from Sondra.

Sondra chuckled. Now she could see why Gabrielle’s eyes just shone with love when they laid themselves on this dark beauty. “Let me come with you?” she asked in a trembling voice. She waited for the outburst, the order to take herself right back home. . .

Xena snorted, lunging straight up, off the saddle, and threw her left leg over, climbing down off the stallion. She grabbed the reins from Sondra’s grasp and led the horse to where she’d hidden her own.

“Pretty sneaky. . .” Sondra said, and then clamped her lips firmly shut when Xena tossed a look up at her.

“Ok, you can come, but you LISTEN to what I tell you, understand?”

Sondra nodded. This was the least she could do. The very least . . .

\* \* \*

Slowly, stretching her whole body, Gabrielle came awake. She murmured pleurably and rolled over onto Xena. Her body fell flat and she opened her eyes to an empty pillow. Quickly, she sat up, glancing around the dimly lit room. “Xena?” she called gently, then more firmly, “Xena?”

Nothing.

“You can’t even sleep in, in the 21st Century,” Gabrielle mumbled. She rolled out of bed groaning, and stood. *May as well shower and dress.*

Fifteen minutes later she was back in the room, dressed in only a thin, lavender towel. She’d been all over the house, with the exception of Dari and Sonny’s master bedroom, and still no Xena. The more she looked, the more Gabrielle knew she wouldn’t find her.

“I’ll strangle the she-demon!” she vowed when it finally began to dawn on her that Xena had went back on her promise. “Ohhhhh *that, THAT!*” She was beside herself with anger. She threw the towel off, grabbed her warrior outfit, and struggled into it, nearly ripping some of the dangling tassels off in her urgency.

And then she saw it. One of her new scrolls she’d taken with her to jot down their experiences was lying on the dresser. How had she missed it? She rushed to the scroll, had to sit to read it, knowing inside would be bad news. And it was.

It began...

*My Love,*

*I know I promised. I realize when you wake up, you’re going to be so angry with me you probably can’t speak, and oh how I would love to be there to see that. But I had to do it this way. I would rather this world be without me in it, if it would save your lovely life. So here I am writing this, and regretting it at the same time.*

*The only thing that will get me through this ordeal is knowing despite my faults, you love me. And will always love me, for I will always love you in return.*

*Please don’t follow me. Let me end this story so everyone involved can live their lives in the knowledge that there is at least one less monster in the world.*

*And If I never see you again, know that I breathe your breaths, I hear your music, and I dream your sleep. Until the day I take my last breath, I will savor the sweetness of and that is... you... I love you.*

## X

There was a kiss imprint on the paper, and Gabrielle's stomach went for a loop several times as she read and re-read the note.

Of course she was going to go after her lover. Gabrielle remembered her words when Xena pulled her from that ice coffin... *Wherever you go, I go.* And so she collected her things and left the house.

\* \* \*

"Sonny?" Nothing. "Xena?" More Nothing. "Gabrielle?" Dari walked through the empty rooms of her house, feeling a darkness falling around her heart, gripping it tightly. She went to the phone and rang Teddy.

\* \* \*

Teddy and Aphrodite had come in around 11 that previous evening. She had shown Aphrodite the sights now that she could enjoy them and savor them to take back home with her. And they had chatted all night about their lives. They knew it was a matter of days and they would never see each other again, and in the short time they had been together, even before they knew who the other really was, a bond had formed

So when the call came, Teddy offered it to Aphrodite to receive, beaming at her as the Goddess cooed and hopped up, totally into this new chic thing that was answering a "phone". She asked, "Hello?" as she'd heard Teddy do and chuckled, scrunching up her shoulders.

"Aphrodite?" Dari frowned. "Where's Teddy? Put her on please."

"Right here." She held the phone out to Teddy. Her excitement vanished. Just like how Xena could take away her jubilation in a blink of an eye. Nope, no doubt there that Dari and Xena were one in the same. "It's Dari, she wants to speak with you."

Teddy watched her sulk off towards the kitchen and she couldn't help a smile. "Yeah?" she said into the phone.

“Are Xena and Gabby there? Or Sonny?”

“What would Sonny be here for? No, no one here but Dite and me, why?”

Dari explained what she had gotten up to that morning, and Teddy said she'd get Aphrodite and they would be on their way in a few. She hung up, worry lines creasing her forehead. “Oh no, not again...”

It was late afternoon by the time Sonny and Xena stopped. They had gone through a good deal of the list of Lutheran's known hideouts. It would have taken less time, but Xena refused to allow Sonny to help her in checking things out. She insisted that Sondra hold the horses at a safe distance, and stay out of sight until she returned. Sonny wondered if she was this protective of Gabrielle when they went out together on *missions*.

The horses were beginning to lather from the intensity of their workout, and the writer who now traveled with the Warrior Princess was growing hungry.

*Funny how some things never change*, Xena mused silently as Sondra talked of her hunger and the fact that she had missed breakfast that morning.

"You wouldn't have if you hadn't been so nosey." Xena gibed.

Sonny sat back on the black stallion that was her other traveling companion with arms crossed, glaring at the back of Xena's raven head. The warrior glanced back upon feeling a pair of golden eyes boring holes into her.

"All right," she caved and she knew it. "Quit pouting."

"I don't pout," The writer retorted, however unconvincingly.

"Whatever you say." A smile unseen by Sondra curled around Xena's full mouth.

"Humph," Sonny sounded, but bit her tongue, knowing she had won a small victory.

Xena found a brook near the wooded entrance to the last property she had investigated. She began the process of catching lunch while Sondra unsaddled and rubbed down their horses. Sonny walked over to the waters' edge after their beasts of burden had

been properly attended to. "What are you doing?" she asked, having never seen anyone catch a fish with their bare hands.

"This," was Xena's reply as she hoisted her prize out of the sparkling water and launched it through the air, in Sondra's general direction. The slithering fish landed on the toes of Sonny's Reeboks causing her to jump back from surprise.

"What's the matter? Afraid of a little fish?" Xena would have never spoken this way to someone she had known for such a short time, but Sonny wasn't a stranger. She carried within her the soul of the person Xena knew better than herself, and loved more than she thought capable.

Sonny saw the emotion in Xena's topaz eyes and knew that it was meant for Gabrielle, but she couldn't keep herself from blushing anyway.

\* \* \*

The sun set, the moon rose, and Gabrielle tracked Xena as she would have if she'd been in her own time, with a lot more ease than she had expected. Xena had gone for the horses, she knew that, and she was able to follow her trail right to the very stall from which she'd taken the horse.

By the time she got there though, the people were awake and wondering what happened to two of their prized animals. She paid them the last of the golden coins Aphrodite had blinked into the sack and asked to "rent" another of their horses, promising she would return the other two along with it.

The elderly couple had taken to her warmth, her sincerity, and the look of complete desperation in those pretty green eyes of hers. They even gave her a coat she could use if the nights got too cold, being it was April and all, and snow could be an expected occurrence.

So she was at it another night, chasing after Xena. After having made a fire, she clasped the coat around her tightly and stared up at the moon, seeing Xena's smiling image in it, loving her, missing her, needing her, even if she pulled that "sing as she loved Gabrielle's body" trick again. Gabrielle shuddered, *Oh, but it was delectable*. She

decided she could forgive her warrior that – mostly -- if she just always had her to lie beside at night to keep her safe, to keep her warm, to keep her feeling loved.

She wrote all this down in her scroll and intended to give it to Xena when she finally caught up with her.

\* \* \*

During their time together, Sondra learned a lot about surviving out in the world, or at least the wooded area of the world. It seemed like a totally different place all together. She'd gone camping before with Dari, but they had taken the essentials along as any normal camper would. But this, this was so very different than what she had ever experienced. She ate things she didn't even know existed a day before. With all of Xena's other skills, she was an expert at survival. Of course, she'd have to be, living as she and Gabrielle had, in their world so long ago.

It was nighttime now, and the air was getting chillier. Sondra knew if she was freezing in her coat, then Xena must have been close to being frost bitten, but the tall warrior didn't complain once. She simply set out to make a fire to warm them.

Sondra watched her skilled hands as she worked, simply awed with this creature. It was outstanding that two beings could be so similar and yet so different as Xena and Dari were. Yes, Dari carried the soul of this woman, but her personality was born of a newer world, a more technologically advanced world.

Unlike Xena, Dari wasn't born into simplicity, where you fed off the land and lived off it. No, Dari's' was a complicated world where you had 200 choices of this one kind of fruit to eat, or that vegetable. Thinking of their two worlds, she wondered when it all became so complicated? If she'd been home, she'd not even think twice about turning on the heat to warm herself, but here was a woman who lived every day of her life without that comfort, that ease. She had to fight to survive. She shook her head and looked up to find Xena watching her with a strange expression on her face.

Sondra blushed and looked away. "Thanks for the fire," she mumbled, at a loss for anything else to say.

Xena shrugged. “No big deal.” She missed the furs she normally would have had in Argo’s saddlebags, and the bread and cheese. But most of all, she missed her bard. The sadness drew her lips down a bit. “We’ll have to camp here tonight. Horses need rest and so do you.”

Sondra looked at her then, “And you, too.”

“Nah, I’m fine. Actually more at home here than I was at the house.” She smiled to take away any insult Sondra may have gotten from her words.

“I admire your bravado, Xena. I’m awed at how you and Gabrielle live.”

Xena shrugged again. “When you only know of one world, it’s not so bad. Reverse our situations, and I’d be sitting there wondering about you like you’re doing about us.” She patted Sondra’s jean clad knee. “Get some sleep, we’ll be heading out at sunrise.”

Sondra did as told, not wanting to cause Xena any more stress than what she was already going through. She settled down on the hard grass, taking a bit of time to find a position where she was even somewhat comfortable.

Xena smiled, watching her from the other side of the fire. *Poor Sonny*, she thought, here she was, some hip “chick” from the 21st Century missing her comfortable bed, and the warm body of her lover beside her. She could turn that onto herself as well. Except for the first part.

After a while, Xena got tired of watching Sondra toss and turn. She went around the fire, lay down, and waited. Soon enough, Sondra turned over and wrapped herself around Xena, head lying on her chest, taking relief from the added warmth. She sighed in her sleep, content finally. Xena smiled, closed her eyes, and joined the futuristic bard in her slumber.

\* \* \*

An hour or so into that contentment, Sondra started to dream of the night Dari was shot, and seeing her lover falling to the floor, absolute shock breaking out on her features. Sondra began crying in her sleep, and at one point her body jerked, and it stirred Xena from her slumber.

Disoriented, thinking she was back in her own time, with her own bard, Xena held the smaller woman tighter to her body, whispering soothing words to hush her whimpers.

“Oh, I just had the worst dream,” Sondra said, her lips covering Xena’s, beginning to kiss the still confused Warrior. But the moment the kiss turned deeper, Xena’s mind cleared, and she knew this wasn’t her bard, but Dari’s.

Gently, she held Sondra’s face and drew away. Sondra opened her eyes, sleep but a slight haze in their honey depths, and she flushed hard and hot, rolling out of Xena’s arms and away.

“Oh, Jesus, I’m really sorry, Xena!” She couldn’t believe she’d kissed her.

“Hey, no big deal.” Xena sat up, staring at her back. “I thought you were Gabrielle at first.” She smiled, always the memory of Gabrielle bringing joy to her mind and heart. “I won’t tell if you won’t?” she offered. She saw Sondra’s shoulders shaking a bit and knew she was trying to hold in a laugh.

“Oh boy, I’m so embarrassed.” There was a slight trace of laughter in her voice. She took a look at Xena and flushed even redder when she saw that beautiful smile.

“Come on, back to sleep with you. We have a long trek later today.” She bodily made Sondra lay down beside her again. Then she wrapped her arms around the smaller woman. “I’m not stupid, it’s *COLD!*” Xena said when she knew what Sondra was thinking.

Sondra laughed and her shame started sliding away. What the heck did she have to feel guilty about? she chided herself. Xena was just the very, very old version of Dari who she was holding like this.

\* \* \*

During the night, Gabrielle had fitful dreams, waking up, and then forcing herself back to sleep. The last dream she was to have that night before the sun rose was mildly confusing. She was walking through a forest, similar to the one in which she was now camped, and there was smoke drifting in clumps, and some thin patches all around her. She was looking for something, which was obvious, and suddenly she heard hooves and turned, totally surprised when she saw Xena gallop towards her.

Xena came to a stop, staring down at her bard, and they had a conversation. Try as she may, when Gabrielle awoke the last time before hitting the trail again, she couldn't recall the words she and Xena had exchanged. However, as she packed up, the end of the dream came to her and she smiled. She and Xena had ridden off together on the horse, and she knew, no matter what, that was how this chapter in their story would end.

Dari was brooding in the back of Teddy's cab. They had been to five of the addresses she had on her list, and so far nothing. It was a good thing she had kept a copy of it around, just in case. She had been tempted to get the police involved, but decided to wait until she was sure at which hideout Lutheran was in. She talked little, and plotted much, planning how many pieces she'd hack him into if he so much as touched one hair on Sondra's head. The same went for either Xena or Gabrielle.

Like Xena, she was dressed in her armor- badge, bulletproof vest, and her ever-trusty baretta set snugly under her left arm in its holster.

Every so often, Teddy or Aphrodite would look back and see how she was doing. She'd answered each time with a glare and they'd quickly turned back to face front. She wasn't in the mood to be consoled, nor humored.

She had hoped it would have ended by now, and she would be the one to take Lutheran out after Xena and Gabrielle had returned home. But Xena intended to steal that little hurrah from her, and Dari wasn't about to let that happen. Too much blood, sweat, and tears had gone into the past six years that she had been hunting that madman.

Gabrielle was on her mind a lot. She wondered if she were with Xena, or with Sonny chasing Xena. She hated to be so not in touch with what was going on. Just a few nights ago they all sat and laughed, and cried, as they watched the movies, Xena not even hinting that this was on her mind. And in the space of a few hours, she'd managed to turn Dari's world upside down. So she had a pretty big bone to pick with that dark beauty once she saw her again, and she would see her again, she felt it in her marrow.

\* \* \*

The tracks were newer, Gabrielle noticed, bending down to finger a deep gash in the soft earth. Xena had been through here not more than an hour ago. And that made Gabrielle smile. She had tracked her for a long time, and to be this close, she didn't even let herself feel the pleasure of it. She just climbed back on the horse and continued on her way.

She had only traveled about ten feet when she felt something sharp pierce her back. She managed little more than to turn and look, seeing cold brown eyes glaring at her, before she slumped on the horse and slowly tilted off of it, landing with a thud on the sodden ground.

"Bull's-eye!" Lutheran cheered and handed one of his men the tranquilizer gun. "Get her in the car, I have two more prizes to hunt down." He gleefully clapped his hands and strode away from the four men heading towards Gabrielle's limp body.

\* \* \*

"What?" Sondra questioned, seeing Xena stop up ahead.

Xena waved at her to shush, and then honed her senses in even more. She didn't know what it was, or who, but something, or someone was following them.

"You ride on up ahead, Sondra, I'm going to trail behind." She walked the horse towards her, and when Sondra wouldn't move, she slapped its hindquarters, making it gallop away.

"Gabrielle?" Xena called softly, looking in each direction. "If you've followed me..." *Oh what a double standard*, an angry voice in her head threw at her. *To be angry 'cause she disobeyed you, and what did you do to her? Something that you promised you'd never do again!* Xena ignored the inner torment and continued to search for the "thing" she felt was tracking her and Sondra.

"If it isn't my *Warrior Princess*..." *He* said from behind her.

Xena jerked, turning the horse to face him. "If it isn't the scum lord..." she returned with a sweet smile.

Lutheran laughed at that. "I'm not surprised you escaped." He shook his dark head. "Nope, not one bit surprised. I actually hoped you would." He leaned in towards her, as if to share some secret, "See, the last time we met I didn't spend nearly a fourth of the time with you that I wanted, what with Dari being such a nuisance and all. But now, now we'll have ourselves a grand time, you and I." Then he recalled, "Oh yeah . . . you, me and... *Gabrielle*."

Black anger ravaged Xena's face, and she charged him on the mighty steed. He snapped his fingers, and a rope sprang up in front of Xena and the horse, snapping her back off its backside and to the ground, knocking the wind out of her. Before she could regain her equilibrium, he and his men were on her, tying her hands and feet.

"All in a day's work," he said as they hefted the woman onto their shoulders and carried her off the path and through the woods to his latest hideout.

\* \* \*

Sondra had witnessed it all, and rather than go in there headlong, she thought before she acted. And then she fled. She raced through the forest on the horse, breaking free of it minutes later, finding herself on a quiet highway. *I'll be damned*, she thought, she'd been with Xena for so long she actually forgot there was another world beside the one they had lived in the past couple of days.

She was so into her thoughts she didn't see the yellow cab coming around the bend. But fortunately for her, Teddy was a very skilled driver, and very attuned to her driving, and the road, or the obstacles that could cause her an accident. She slammed her foot on the break; steered around Sondra and the horse, and yelled, "*Get down!*" when her car sped over the road and dove nose first into a ravine.

“Like it?” Lutheran turned his chocolate eyes on Xena when his men dragged her into his new hide-a-way. He gestured to the Roman like features around the grand room. “Makes ya feel right at home in that getup, eh?”

Xena took in the room, but tried not to let him know she was. The man was sick, that much was very apparent. She was privy to a deep part of his psychosis, where the root of his evil stemmed from.

He had crucified 30 or so men and women, and had placed their heads on poles around the room, which was obviously what gave it the reeking odor that slammed into her when his henchmen, now dressed as Roman guards, had first opened the doors.

“Let’s play a little game, shall we?” he grinned. Her expression remained stoic “I know it’s rather crude, but your little Gabrielle told me all about who you are and where you’re from, and all I’m trying to do here, Xena, is make you feel at home. Please at least *try* to enjoy yourself?”

She believed he truly and honestly wanted her to be pleased at the effort he had gone to, to reproduce this ghastly scene for her. “You’re sick!” She couldn’t contain her revulsion any longer.

“Now, Xena, you’ll ruin my fun if you’re so difficult this early. And I have so much more to show you, to *do to* you.” He snapped his fingers and a curtain to Xena’s right dropped, and with it, Xena’s heart.

Gabrielle’s eyes met Xena’s and they started to tear. He had strung her up on some form of circular apparatus. She looked unharmed, though, and Xena was relieved to

see that. But she knew he had plans for her, for them both, and if she didn't think of something soon . . .

“Chain her up!” Lutheran blurted, cutting into her reverie.

Gabrielle watched them drag and pull Xena towards a row of pulleys hanging down from the high ceiling.

They clamped a cuff on each of her wrists and two on her ankles, the latter attached to two shorter chains bolted into the concrete floor. Another thug off somewhere where the eye couldn't see started to turn a large wheel and the chains began to rise, extending Xena's hands farther and farther upwards. There was no pain for a minute, and then she began to feel the bones and muscles in her arms and shoulders begin to agonize against the pull.

“*STOP IT!*” Gabrielle shouted, unable to stand it any longer.

“There, there little one, she can handle it.” He looked at Xena, smirking at her. “Can't you?”

Xena spat at his face, tried to kick at him, but her leg would only go so far. “Now that's not nice, Xena...” He wiped his face with an expensive scarf. “Ok boys, stop, she's good for now.” He turned away from the warrior and faced Gabrielle.

From the look on his face, and the smile on his mouth, Gabrielle could see what was about to happen wasn't going to be pleasant. She pulled at her restraints, jerking, and even though it was fruitless and pained her enormously, she had to at least try.

\* \* \*

“Dari!” Sondra dropped off the horse quickly and ran after the cab. She felt her heart stop as she watched it tip front forward and slide off the side of the road and vanish before her very eyes. The horse forgotten, she pumped her legs faster, nearly falling over the edge herself. She managed to stop in time and stood there looking down at the tangled wreck.

She jumped, tossing all caution and consideration for her own safety to the wind. . The car groaned when she landed on the trunk, but safe she was. Relieved, she scurried off the car and around it, tugging and ripping at the door handles to get at her life.

“Sonny!” Teddy beamed up at her. She had turned around in her seat and was now lying along the dashboard. With some maneuvering, she managed to twist herself around. She saw Aphrodite was all right, and then glanced in back.

“Oh, geez,” Teddy groaned when she spotted Dari. She had hit her head on something awfully hard to get that deep cut on her temple, and the blood was flowing freely. “Sonny, Dari’s hurt!”

That’s all Sondra needed to hear. With every ounce of strength, and a bitten bottom lip, she yelled and yanked the door off its severed hinges. A puff of breath came from her when she saw her lover, and she reached in, attentively taking Dari’s head in her hands.

“Oh, baby,” she whispered, kissing her lips tenderly. She was unaware that Teddy and Aphrodite had squeezed through the busted front windshield and were now standing behind her, ready and willing to offer their assistance.

“Here, Sonny, let me see,” Aphrodite tapped on her shoulder; giving the woman a smile when she turned wet eyes her way. She winked at her, “It’ll be ok, just let me in there.”

Sondra kissed Dari once more and reluctantly released her to Aphrodite’s care.

\* \* \*

Gabrielle screamed, unable to watch it any more, “Please! She’s had ENOUGH!” She couldn’t bear to see Xena in such pain. The man had been ruthless, turning from her in the end to go back and torture Xena some more. He’d whipped her, ordered the man at the wheel to turn it until his muscles gave, and only when Xena passed out from the pain had he ordered him to stop. And when Xena had regained consciousness, he started on her again.

“Oh, such emotion...” He looked at Gabrielle. “What? You love this *bitch*? Is that it? You slut!” His face curled in a snarl. “Maybe if she had some . . .”

“SHUT UP!” Gabrielle’s eyes lit on fire, and for the first time in her life, she wanted to kill. Wanted to rip that man limb from limb for what he’d done and what he was saying.

“Oh, you’re no fun at all.” He walked up onto the podium and stared at her. “Ok, I’ll stop for your lover, but how about you? You want some of what I gave her? Is that it? You’re jealous because she’s having all the fun?” He slapped Gabrielle across the face and she saw lights behind her eyes for a few minutes afterward.

\* \* \*

Aphrodite withdrew from the back of the car grinning at Sonny and Teddy. “Ta dah!” She winked and gave Sondra a hug. “There ya go, Sweetie, all better.” She stepped from her way so Sondra wouldn’t run her over getting to Dari.

“Baby?” Sondra asked, gathering Dari into her arms. She held her face, staring at it until her eyes opened.

Aphrodite led Teddy away to see how they were going to get back onto the road again. She spotted the horse standing at the edge of the road feeding on some overgrown grass.

“Baby,” Sondra crooned again, hugging and kissing Dari over and over. “God, I thought you were a gonner there.” She laughed and cried all at the same time, unable to look away from those baby blues. Sighing deeply, she drew Dari to her tightly and shivered. They stayed that way for a few minutes, just Sondra rocking her mate, saying a hundred silent thank yous to the heavens above.

“How are your powers holding up?” Teddy asked, helping Aphrodite up the side of the ravine inch by inch.

Aphrodite frowned, “I may have used them all up on that last action, but I’d say it was worth it.” She smiled at her future self. “Besides, it isn’t so bad here. If we’re stuck forever, we could have wound up in a worse situation huh?”

“True.” Teddy grunted as she tugged Aphrodite up and over to freedom. “Listen, I’m gonna take a ride down the road, get to a phone, the radio was busted, so I can’t contact anyone. You stay here and keep an eye on them, eh?”

Aphrodite saluted her in true sailor fashion -- she’d seen a couple of sailors do that the night before when she and Teddy had been painting the town pink. Teddy

laughed and climbed onto the back of that tall mare. She kicked its flanks and whistled. They were heading down the road at an easy gallop moments later

“I hope she doesn’t expect a tip,” Dari growled, finally fully conscious. Sondra laughed and kissed her.

“Have I missed that...” Dari said softly, staring into Sondra’s eyes as she kissed her again. She loved watching their expression as her mouth moved over Sondra’s. It was quite a turn on for her, but most often, it was just to see the passion her lover felt towards her.

“You’ll get plenty more where that came from,” Sondra promised. “First we need to get you out of this tin can, and get to Xena. *He* took her.”

The pleasure on Dari’s face and in her eyes fell away quickly. For a few gratifying moments she’d forgotten all about why she was in the cab in the first place. “Let’s go.”

“Just take it easy, Baby,” Sondra said, her voice strong. If she learned anything from Xena over those few days, it was how to boss someone around really well with a touch of love and caring. “We’ll get the police.” She held up a hand when Dari started to argue. “I don’t want to hear it. I am NOT letting you get tangled with that madman anymore. I’ve had it! Do you understand? HAD IT! I want my partner back, totally, one hundred percent, and I won’t accept less. You’ve been obsessed with this man for years, and it’s time you let go.”

She was right, of course. This was no longer a case; it hadn't been that in years. Dari knew what was between Lutheran and herself was beyond hatred. Even Dari didn't understand what it was. All she knew was that there would be no peace, no way to live her life in peace, until it had ended. And it was about to end, one way or the other.

\* \* \*

"So lovely," Lutheran stroked Gabrielle's cheek with the back of his hand, resting an index finger on the bard's lower lip. "I can see why she keeps you around." Regaining her senses from her first round of *play*, Gabrielle opened her mouth quickly, capturing Lutheran's finger between her teeth, and applied as much pressure as she could. The salty

taste of blood scorched her tongue, not knowing if it was her own or the insane man's she now held in her pearly grasp. Her question was soon answered when Lutheran let out a rather high-pitched scream. Gabrielle's blood ran cold. *I've heard that yell before . . . But it's not possible . . . It can't be.* Gabrielle released the man who stood before her and shook her head at the impossibility.

Across the room, Xena had regained consciousness only to see Gabrielle white as a lily, furiously shaking her head, blood trickling down her chin. "Leave her alone, you bastard. I'm the one you want."

"You're so wrong, Xena. I want you both. I owe you both. And both of you are going to pay." Lutheran's voice was different now, higher, as if the years of cigar smoking had suddenly no effect. But it was something else, too. Something Xena could not decipher. So she decided to play along. "What are you talking about? We owe you? Gabrielle has done nothing to you but try to rescue me that day on the farm."

"Oh, she's done more than that. Haven't you, my sweet?" Turning to the bewildered and disbelieving bard, taking her head in thin, sculptured hands, he whispered in her ear, "You should have let her drop me into that pit when you had the chance. Would have saved us a whole lot of history."

Gabrielle willed herself to come out of her shocked stupor and spat blood between a pair of all too familiar amber eyes. "Najara?" The word came on trembling lips.

\* \* \*

Teddy had found a small grocery store only about half a mile from where she had left her friends and what used to be her cab. The stallion's reins in her hands, Teddy phoned the police and explained the situation the best she could. After finally getting Sgt. Walker on the line, all Teddy had to do was mention Dari and Lutheran's names in the same sentence, and she could hear the Sergeant ordering a small army in the way of back up. Teddy relayed their location and hung up the pay phone. She was more relieved than she thought she'd be and began to make her way back to the others.

Just as she was trying to figure out how to get astride the 15 hands high stallion that seemed to not want any more riders on its back, Teddy spotted a black BMW convertible parked off to the side of the store. Finally, the horse allowed her to straddle it. Sauntering over towards the car, as casually as was possible for anyone on a horse, Teddy noticed that the car's owners had left the keys in the ignition after she slid off the beast's back. Her gaze fell upon the horse, and then the automobile, then back to the horse. "If I explain to them after this whole thing is over and done, I'm sure they'd understand. Don't you?" The stallion whinnied, and that was agreement enough for the cabbie.

\* \* \*

Teddy roared up to the crash site, much to the amazement of the threesome by the roadside. "Just where did you get this?" Dari raised an unsure eyebrow.

"If I told ya, you'd have to arrest me." Teddy winked and revved the engine. "Don't ask any questions. Just get in. We have friends who need rescuing." The three jumped into the car, Teddy hit the gas, and they headed off to find Xena and Gabrielle.

“*Najara?*” Xena's voice echoed the shock on Gabrielle's face.

Lutheran looked at Xena over his shoulder. The knowledge that he was this *Najara* person had come to him slowly, but come it had; and with this insight, the presence of something else inside him. He couldn't explain what it was, but it felt like there were two minds inside his head. When he had realized there was another presence inside him, and not just the usual non-descript voices, bitterness grew, anger and hate multiplied ten-fold compared to what he had originally felt towards the human race in the beginning. It was all clear to him now what his mission in this, and many previous lifetimes were, to rid the world of its evil.

Women were nothing more than cheap whores ready to give of their bodies to anyone who paid the highest price; and *men*, they were worse beasts than the female of the species. They preyed on the weak and feeble-minded, cheated on their mates, lied, murdered, whatever it took to suit their own ends.

It all had to stop.

Growing up, Lutheran had been to many psychologists, “head shrinkers,” he liked to think of them. They tried to shrink your head, compress your thoughts and ideas, and he would have none of it. He didn't need someone with a degree telling him he was nuts. He wasn't *nuts*. *They* were the ones who didn't understand, didn't believe. No, nuts wasn't the word to be compared with his ideals.

Xena saw the turmoil inside him, could feel it churning. Maybe the man and the spirit we're battling for supremacy. But it gave her hope. Maybe, if she could get to him, she could beat *Najara* once and for all. At least in this lifetime.

“It's not too late,” Xena said to his back. “You can still change.”

Gabrielle's eyes flew to her lover's. *What in the name of Zeus is she doing now?* She couldn't believe the words she heard coming from Xena's mouth. After all that man - - Najara -- had done to *her*, to them: Dari, Sonny, and all those poor women. And now Xena was trying to *turn* his life around?

Lutheran turned toward the Warrior Princess and began to pace, hands in his pockets, eyes brooding, face concentrated, glancing back between Gabrielle and Xena. "Change? Is that what you wish for me?" Looking at one, then the other. "No, really, come on? Change? Don't you wish to see my head sitting atop one of those poles?" He chuckled.

Xena watched him, seeing the same expression of nothingness she'd witnessed when he'd ordered his men to bullwhip her. She wouldn't let his insanity or Najara's, get to her. No, she had to outwit both of them.

Lutheran saw the stern look of resolve on her face, in the hard line of her jaw. "Why don't I intimidate you, Xena?"

"Intimidation is fueled by a fear of the unknown," She replied in smooth, even tones. "I know you . . . knew you . . . there is nothing left for me to fear."

Angry, dark eyes searched Xena's intelligent blue ones for a moment, and then he asked, "So you *know* me?"

"I know you're disturbed, and in bad need of some help. You don't have a friend in this world Lutheran. You can't make a friend, and you're too obsessed with evil, Lutheran." She made sure to stress his name, ignoring Najara's karma inside him. "But if you let Gabrielle and me go, we'll be your friends. We'll see you get the help you need."

"Anyone can make a good friend, not everyone can make a good enemy." He laughed heartily at that, eyes coming to rest on Xena slowly. "And we've certainly become that, haven't we Xena, great battling enemies."

"That was all in the past, Lutheran. This is a new world, a new life, and it's not too late to turn back. I did it, so can you."

He shrugged. "Most things are anti-cathexis to me Xena, my life consists of innately controlled sequences of developmental changes that I'm dealing with. I surely don't need you to tell me what I already have known, nor do I need any more lies from

you today. There is almost no limitation to the madness consuming me, Xena, and if I lose the few holds I have, then I don't have *me* anymore."

Xena's eyes narrowed and she took a ride through Lutheran's eyes, straight to his brain, and saw the chaos inside. The beast ready, moments away from chewing up what little bit of rationality he did have left. She pulled out quickly, wincing in the aftermath.

Lutheran smiled, coming toe to toe with her, eye-to-eye, and whispered... "Did you hear it? In me, muffling me, quieting you: the pulse of pressure's push? If you want to form around me- as thin as we can; where and how becoming all, because in here there is no room for breadth. Thinner and thinner I'll make survival sense and even sometimes spread and build two dimensions into four where maybe you can come to visit."

He walked in front of Xena, continuing, "I fight to keep it from not ever coming out. I battle with it every day, Xena, and I fight myself to keep fighting it. Today is testing my patience-- this act of yours is testing my patience, albeit a nice gesture." He whirled around, making Xena jump slightly, and added, "But you can't help me, Xena; you don't know how. We can sit here all evening 'talking' about it, and I'd still leave where I came in." He moved even closer. "You're too much a goody-goody now, Xena. Where's that ass kickin' warrior woman that we all knew so well?" He walked away from her again, jumping off the little platform she was dangling above and then turned. "Come on, don't tell me you don't enjoy walking in the edge of the abyss, even now from time to time. You've been where I am, Xena. You turned your back on it, but you were there once, and know just how *good* it can feel..."

"You need help, Lutheran."

"I'll deal with my demons, Xena, and you deal with yours." Then one of his demons turned its attention to Gabrielle.

“That has to be it, it’s the last house on this road, there’s nothing else but beach,” Teddy realized, pulling up slowly onto the shoulder, turning the engine off and then twisting in her seat to look back at Dari.

Dari pushed the door open and stepped out onto the concrete. She studied the house over the hood of the car. He was there, and so were Xena and Gabrielle. She felt it in her bones. Now, how was she going to get in there without Sonny raising all kinds of hell in protest? And then there was Teddy and Aphrodite; for all Dari knew, Aphrodite could just snap those fingers and, poof . . . she’d be back sitting in that car, or worse, tied up sitting in that car.

“Get in here!” Sondra grabbed her waistband and tugged at the front of Dari’s black jeans. “Dari...”

“I’m just looking Son...” Dari poked her head down into the door to smile at her beloved. “I promise.”

“Mm-Hm.” Sondra knew better. “You’re halfway to that house already in your mind, Dari. You’ve figured out how to get around me and are still wondering if Aphrodite has enough of her powers to zap your sexy butt back here where we can keep an eye on you. Am I wrong?”

Dari laughed, shaking her head. “You never cease to amaze me, Love.”

“I’ll give you *amazing* if you don’t get your behind back in this car right now. The police are on their way. At least have backup before you go storming in there on his fruity ass and get yourself pumped full of more holes. In case you didn’t notice, I like my partners in one piece.”

Dari relented and flopped back down into the seat. Ok, maybe she should listen to reason, and if not reason, the person who could deny her some good loving if she disobeyed her again. “Fine, but when they get here, I don’t wanna hear another word outta you.” She slammed the door closed to finalize her point.

\* \* \*

It was with haste the entire police department made its way up the winding road towards the huge estate called Beacon House. Its previous owners had abandoned it a little over a year ago, and except for the Realtor, not another sole had stepped onto its grand lawns. Until now.

\* \* \*

“Are you sure they’re in that house?” The sarge wasn’t taking any chances. Who knew what an old abandoned building held in its darkest corners?

Sondra nodded, and Dari voiced a strong affirmative. If they were wrong, then both be damned. Sgt. Walker nodded, then grabbed his microphone and started speaking into it.

\* \* \*

“They gots the place surrounded boss,” Lutheran was told, “There ain’t nothin’ but that beach down there over the cliff to escape to, and bet they gonna have that covered soon too.

Fortunately for him, he had all he needed. “Go get the two whores,” he ordered.

\* \* \*

Gabrielle had been knocked out and taken to some kind of cell down in the depths of the massive structure. And only slowly did she become aware of her surroundings, and of the fact she knew in the deepest recesses of her being that Xena was there with her.

She stood, stumbling a little, and looked behind her. There, on a cot, was the love of her many lives, bruised and bleeding.

Xena heard a noise, more a puff of air really, and turned her head to gaze up at a vision of Gabrielle.

Gabrielle went to her, slowly, afraid the air she stirred would cause her partner more pain. She knelt down beside her, looking over her badly bruised body, holding back the tears with great effort.

She heard a muffled noise, Xena heard it too, and they looked instinctively towards the door. The sound came again, like a human voice, but magnified. "The posse?" Xena mused, remembering Teddy's phrasing.

Xena reached out to Gabrielle's shoulder, grabbed a hunk of cloth and started pulling herself upwards. Gabrielle quickly went to assist her, not knowing where to put her hands to minimize causing her warrior more damage.

Xena sat up, moaning deeply. Her body felt raw, as if someone had taken a blade and ripped her flesh with it and then poured salt in the wounds.

"Xena..." Gabrielle whispered, standing before her now, staring down at her, losing the fight to hold back the flood of tears that wanted free.

Xena opened her eyes, lifting them at the same time to stare up at her. "Don't cry, Gabrielle." She used what energy she had to softly wipe the stray tears from her loved one's face. "We've been through worse than this, and come out on the other side."

"But never unscathed." Gabrielle's tears ceased flowing, at least momentarily.

"I have to say something, while I have the chance."

"Xena, don't talk that way . . ."

"Please, Gabrielle, I've waited too long as it is. This must be said." The bard waited for some unknown revelation to escape through Xena's parted lips. Unsure of what it might be.

"Gabrielle," Xena took her little warrior's hands in her own. "We've never talked about it. I'm not certain why." Then she thought, "That's not true, I've always known why."

Gabrielle watched, and listened, beginning to understand where this conversation was headed. "Xena, you don't have to . . . It was so long ago . . . We both did and said things-

"We have to- need to get this out into the open, into the light where it can be seen for what it is . . . was." Why did it always have to be like this? Why did the words never come? Cursed be the Fates. No, it wasn't the Fates, or the Furies, or any of the Olympian gods that made her into what now sat before this blonde beauty. Xena couldn't even blame Ares for this one; she knew this was all her doing.

"I'm sorry, Gabrielle," the Warrior Princess could barely speak, voice choked with emotion and memories.

"For what, my Love." Gabrielle urged, taking Xena's strong face in her tender hands. Forcing her to look her in the eye.

"For turning my back on you when you needed me the most. For blaming you when I asked the unthinkable. But most of all," Xena's tears spilled onto her cheeks, unable to hold back the hurt and guilt she had felt for so long. "For the pain I caused you. The physical, emotional pain, I can never take back- undo."

It was too much for Gabrielle to stand. She looked away, not because of her own pain, but for the sheer agony she saw, felt ebbing out of Xena. Then she looked back, and began.

"Ok, if we're going to do this, we might as well do it right." She took a deep breath, releasing it slowly. "When you told me Hope had to die, I refused to believe it. I saw her only as a child, my child, not the spawn of evil that she was." The words burned her throat. "I wanted to believe that some small part of me was inside of her, and if given enough time, maybe it could be found and harvested. But it was selfish.

"No, Xena, it was." Gabrielle stopped Xena's resistance before it could start. "I thought, 'Look how I helped Xena: Warrior Princess. If I could show her another way, even if only slightly, then maybe, maybe I could show my daughter the right path, a path toward goodness and light. It was arrogant and foolish. But she was my daughter, Xena."

There were no tears this time; only an emptiness that she knew would always exist for what could have been.

Xena knew the emptiness as well. "We both made mistakes, Gabrielle. One of mine was not admitting that I had made one. I treated you like you were one of my soldiers, expecting you to follow blindly; to take my word as law. I never thought with a mother's mind.

"When I was pregnant with Solan, I hid it from my troops, afraid they wouldn't follow a leader great with child into battle. I didn't allow myself the joys an expectant mother should feel." Xena's eyes glazed over at the memory of her past. "I didn't even have him an hour before I turned Solan over to the Centaurs. I know it was for the best, for *his* best, but I've never been a mother, Gabrielle. I've given birth, but there's a mountain's worth of difference between birth and motherhood." She took a shallow, ragged breath and then continued.

"You were a mother to Hope. For a short time, yes; but you couldn't have loved her more. Even the act of her death was born out of love and a longing for her to find some sort of peace." The words still hadn't been spoken yet; the ones that she needed Gabrielle to hear.

"You didn't kill Solan, Gabrielle. It wasn't your fault." Gabrielle began to sob, for the children lost, for the time wasted, and for the joy she felt at finally hearing those words. "Forgive me for allowing you to think that it was?"

"I forgive you, Xena." Gabrielle sobbed into her chest, and then pulled away, gently, from Xena's embrace. "Will you forgive me? For just hearing your words and not the meaning beneath them, when you tried to explain what Hope was? And for also not being there when you needed me the most?"

"Of course, I forgive you, Gabrielle." Xena encircled her tattered arms around her life. "I love you, Gabrielle. Now and forever."

"I love you, Xena. Today and always."

\* \* \*

The two warriors, adventurers, lovers stayed in each other arms, until a draft wafted through the cell. A loud creaking noise caught both Xena and Gabrielle's attention, and the cell door slowly parted from the frame around it. "It's not locked." Both shouted simultaneously.

"I think we both need a refresher course in 'Warriors: 101' when we get home," the smaller and blonder of the warriors chided.

Xena looked into Gabrielle's emerald eyes. "Save yourself, go now."

Gabrielle shook her head. "No, I'm not leaving you here to that..." She caressed the sides of Xena's face, brushing her hands down and over her ebony hair, causing more tears to flow. "I love you so much, Xena. If we're to die, then so be it, but I will not leave you to die here alone."

Xena heard them coming, knew it was just a moment between Gabrielle's escape and certain death. "Go, Gabrielle... Please, I can't bear the thought of you dying again because of my actions."

Gabrielle continued running her hands over Xena's hair, cupping her face, tears falling freely now. "You never caused my death, Xena, I never blamed you for that, and I'm certainly not blaming you for what's happening now."

"Come out with your hands up!" Sgt. Walker bellowed from the bullhorn. "We know you're in the house, Lutheran. You and your men, send out those two women, then turn yourselves in and no one gets hurt."

"Do you really think a madman like Lutheran is just going to give up without seeing bloodshed?" Dari jerked on the sarge's arm turning him around to face her.

"Dari, calm down. I'm following procedure. You know that," he tried to reassure the injured detective.

"That maniac has two of the people I love most in the world in there!" Dari released her co-worker's arm. "I can't be 'calm' about that."

"They're doing everything they can, Love." Sonny placed a supportive hand on her partner's lower back. "Xena and Gabrielle will be fine. I just know it. They have to be." The writer didn't know if she was trying to convince Dari or herself more.

Dari smiled down at her 'rock' and nodded. "I know they're doing what they can; it's just not enough."

Sonny knew what was about to happen; she had seen that stubborn look of determination before. "Oh no you don't. Do you hear me? You are in no condition to go in there and play hero."

"I don't *play* hero, my Angel."

\* \* \*

Two of Lutheran's baddies entered the cell where Xena and Gabrielle were being held. "Come on yous two, da boss wants ya."

Gabrielle placed her arm around Xena's waist and supported her so she could stand. Their talk had drained them both, more emotionally than physically, but under the circumstances, one was almost as devastating as the other.

"Come on, come on, we don't got all day. Cops ain't very patient."

"Roscoe, shut ya yap," spoke the smaller, and obviously brighter, of the two. "Ya always shootin' ya mouth off. Dat's why ya stay in trouble all da time." The 'advice' man cleared a path for Xena and Gabrielle. The big guy walked in front of the pair, and the smaller one behind.

"Where are you taking us now?" The warrior bard asked.

"We told ya, the boss wants to see ya."

"Isn't he worried about the police?" she inquired again, trying to find out anything that would kick her, or Xena's mind, into *plan* mode.

"Nah, da bossman, he don't worry 'bout no uniforms. He works for a 'Higher Purpose'. Ain't that what he says, Karl?" Roscoe looked over the two, back toward his comrade.

"Yea, that's what he says." Karl agreed. "Whatever that means."

Xena and Gabrielle looked at one another. They knew what it meant. They knew all too well.

\* \* \*

"It's taking too long." Dari paced back and forth, behind the car. "In a hostage situation, timing is critical." She spoke to no one in particular, more to get the thoughts running through her mind in some semblance of order. "He won't let them go, that's not on his agenda." She stopped abruptly, turning toward the crowd of three that watched. "I have to get in that house."

"We've already had that discussion, Dari. Your body is in no shape for it," Sonny argued, but feared her partner was beyond listening to reason.

"But when Aphrodite healed me, I think she took care of more than the gash on my forehead." Dari took Sondra's hands in her own, "I know you're scared for me."

"Terrified is more like it."

Dari dropped her hands and held Sonny's face. "I have to do this, Hon."

Sonny released an exasperated sigh, knowing one battle had been lost. "All right, go in the house if you feel you must, but I'll only agree under one condition." Her honeyed-amber eyes shone brightly.

Seeing the light that was glowing from her lover, she was afraid to ask, but did anyway, "What?" almost wincing at the word.

"I go in with you."

\* \* \*

Lutheran stood waiting for them by an alcove that led out to the side of the house, which overlooked the bay.

*No way for anyone to launch an attack from here*, Xena thought as they stepped outside. Her body may have been battered, but her mind was still at the top of its game.

The same realization passed through Gabrielle, as they stood across from an old enemy, once thought of as a friend. "Why are we here?"

"Excellent question, Gabrielle." Lutheran turned his back to the pair and pulled a drag off a Havana. "Excellent question, indeed. But then that always was your strong suit. Talking, that is." The same expression passed over his face that Najara used to have when she spoke to, or of, the bard. He took a couple of steps closer to the blonde, momentarily forgetting about the brunette who stood next to her. "I've missed our talks, Gabrielle." He extended a hand, as if to touch her cheek.

A sudden blur passed in front of Gabrielle's face as the hand of the Warrior Princess wrapped around the wrist of the walking insanity in front of them. "Touch her and die."

"My, my . . . as protective as always." He pulled his wrist away from Xena's grip, trying not to alert her to how much discomfort it had caused him. "How sweet." He was surprised by the amount of strength it took to release himself from her hold. Forgot just how strong you were. Won't make that mistake again.

A fire burned in Xena when she saw the emotion that had shone clearly on that monster's face when he looked at Gabrielle. If the warrior didn't want him dead before, she certainly wanted him that way now.

Gabrielle saw the darkness looming over her lover, the deep concentration on her face not taking her eyes off Lutheran's form. She placed a gentle touch on Xena's back, hoping to break the spell. It worked. Xena glanced down at Gabrielle long enough to see the concern and the love in her eyes, and the small upwards curl at the ends of her mouth.

The depths of love she felt for this woman never ceased to amaze Xena. Somehow, Gabrielle carried the ability to pull her from the blackness of her own soul. For that, she would eternally be grateful.

\* \* \*

Aphrodite worked her charms on the uniformed officer that had been assigned to watch one of the side entrances to Beacon House. While they had their chance, Dari and Sonny stealthily slipped through a clearing and entered the door.

After Teddy signaled her that the two were inside, Dite said, "Thanks, Sweetie." and pinched the patrolwoman's dimpled cheek.

"For what?" she asked, as the Goddess of Love sauntered away.

"Just for being you," was her reply, blowing a heart-shaped kiss in her direction, knocking her off balance when it made contact with a flushed cheek.

"Dite, you're supposed to be reserving your powers, remember?" Teddy scolded.

"I am." She giggled enthusiastically when she realized what had Teddy's panties in a wad. "Silly, that's not a power, that's a perk. A girl's gotta have *some* fun."

Teddy just chuckled and shook her head, as she and Aphrodite walked back to the car.

\* \* \*

"PUT YOUR HANDS UP!" came the shrill of the megaphone along with the same request as before.

Lutheran ignored the order, and the 40 or so officers surrounding the house. He knew he was outnumbered, but he had an ace in the hole. Or rather he had *TWO* aces in his favor. He held up a hand, in it was a small metallic device.

He coyly winked at the two warriors in front of him and proceeded to announce, rather loudly, so as not to miss a single ear, “In case anyone's interested, I've wired these two lovely ladies with enough explosives to blow another hole in the ozone.”

\* \* \*

“Oh my god, Dari! Did you hear him?” Sondra grabbed her arm, shaking it.

“I heard 'em,” Dari reached for her gun, taking Sondra's hand in her other, as they crept towards the door through which Lutheran had just taken Gabrielle and Xena. “You stay down, no matter *what*, do you *hear* me?”

Sondra nodded. “Yes, *Xena*,” she he quipped, then she stopped suddenly and pulled Dari into her arms. “I love you, Dari,” she murmured into her chest, then pulled her head towards her own. “Be safe, Baby,” she whispered, kissed, then released her love.

\* \* \*

It all happened in the shimmering of a God, Xena wasn't sure just who did what, or who pounced on whom, but she and Gabrielle were standing there one moment with hated looks aimed Lutheran's way, and the next, she heard a loud POP, and a piece of Lutheran's shoulder, along with the metallic object he had been holding, sailed through the air. When she looked back, Dari was there, wrestling him to the floor.

Xena untangled the mess of explosives tied around both she and Gabrielle's body as carefully as she could, one eye still watching Dari and Lutheran battling it out. The more they fought, the closer they got to that little gray box, and if Lutheran reached it first, Xena knew certain death would follow.

Lutheran shoved Dari away from him, and she stumbled over a garden hose and went down hard, loosing her grip on her weapon. He stomped up to her and swung an

angry foot into her ribcage . . . again and again. Finally satisfied, he wiped the side of his mouth where blood had pooled, then spat it at her. Quickly, he turned away from her fallen body, his eyes skirting here and there, trying to locate the trigger device.

Sondra, seeing, and feeling every hit, stormed through the door, madness clouding her eyes. She went at his face, nails first, and scraped the manicured tips from his forehead to his chin before he knew what hit him.

The diversion was all Dari needed to get her wind back, and she sprang to her feet, attacking from behind before he could retaliate against Sonny's actions.

\* \* \*

Xena and Gabrielle had only one way to run, towards the cliff. Xena gave Gabrielle a little shove in that direction. “Go now, I’ll help Dari with him, but I want you safe.”

“Xena...” Gabrielle wondered when Xena would, if ever, accept her as an equal in their fight against evil.

“Sorry,” Xena cast guilty eyes downward. She would never not want to protect Gabrielle.

“Xena!” Aphrodite waved, spotting the two women from a position high up in an old elm she and Teddy had taken.. Teddy was still reeling from the sudden disappearance and reappearance of her body from safe ground to this unstable tree branch.

Aphrodite beckoned them with an impatient hand. “Oh, that outfit looks simply *terrible!*” Dite critiqued the remnants of the explosives still attached to Xena and Gabrielle's torsos. Disapproval screwed her face into a pinched knot.

Teddy glanced at her alter self, finally shaking her head. Then she looked back at Xena and Gabrielle, “Let’s GO!” she hollered, seeing their hesitation.

Xena ignored her, looked at Gabrielle, and smiled. “Ok, let’s do this... *Partner.*”

If the circumstances hadn't been what they were, Gabrielle could have cried.

They were all in Dari and Sonny's kitchen. Gabrielle was seated cross-legged on the counter across from Dari, watching as she prepared their morning meal. Sondra and Xena lounged along a bench each, at the breakfast nook to Dari's left. Teddy had arrived early that morning to take Aphrodite on a little outing.

Sondra played commentator as Dari attempted to imitate one of the "*Great Chefs of Chicago*." She had them peeling with laughter as she poked fun at her mate. "She slices. She dices. She's a human knife!" Sonny blew Dari a kiss when those hooded baby blues shot her way.

Despite the playful atmosphere, Gabrielle and Xena couldn't help but be astonished with Dari's culinary skills. She was quick with that knife; in a blur of chops, she had the onions, peppers, and tomatoes julienned within seconds.

Dari caught Gabrielle's look of awe and boasted, "I have many skills."

To which Sondra just as fast blurted, "Everyone, Duck! Her head's about to explode!"

Gabrielle giggled, eyes shining brightly. To look at her, it would have been difficult to imagine that just a week ago a madman, and the embodiment of his past self had mauled her. The young bard kept the memory from her mind as much as possible.

Her warrior companion, however, found that a lot harder to do. Nearly every night before she went to bed, Xena saw the end of that horrible experience in her mind's eye. And more often than not, the frightening memories followed her into Morpheus' realm.

\* \* \*

She and Gabrielle had charged at Lutheran, to the startled looks of the legion of policemen and women who had rushed to the scene. Their plans met with a temporary snag when his henchmen came out to assist their boss. But with little effort they took care of them too; a couple of quick roundhouse kicks, along with a few right crosses, and the two warriors had Karl and Roscoe on the ground faster than Joxer during a tavern brawl.

During the ensuing battle, Lutheran managed to free himself from Dari's clutches. Xena and Gabrielle's backs were to him after their round with his "associates." He saw an opportunity and took it. Encircling one arm around her waist, he seized Gabrielle, startling the smaller woman when he pounced on her, quickly drawing a knife to her neck.

"Get BACK!" he ordered Xena when she went into position to execute a front flip in his general direction.

Xena had stopped in her tracks, her heart frozen with fear as the knife's serrated edge bit into her bard's flesh and a trickle of blood slid down that slender neck.

Sondra and Dari were also standing there watching, waiting for him to look away or become distracted. Dari waited for the moment to make her move, but it never came.

Lutheran backed himself and Gabrielle to the cliff's edge, not even glancing behind him to assure his footing. He had already determined he would die that day. It would be impossible to finish *the plan* now.

Damn Xena. Damn her to hell. Why did she always have to come between them? Well not this time. It was better this way. Gabrielle was far too pure a being for this polluted world. The light still shone brightly on her beautiful face. Looking at her was the only time the possibility of peace seemed conceivable. And nothing was going to take her away now, nothing or no one.

Gabrielle kept her eyes locked to Xena's, waiting for any sign from her warrior. There was none forthcoming.

Teddy grabbed Aphrodite's arm and shook it, whispering, "DO something Dite!"

Aphrodite, already worried about the drain on her powers, pondered the effect zapping Lutheran would have on them, but Gabrielle's life was at stake, so she didn't take long to make that difficult decision. She aimed a perfect yellow beam of light at Lutheran's head. His steps faltered; the feeling of perfect love consuming him for a

moment. That second's hesitation was not lost on Xena, who ran at him, knocking all three of them off the cliff and into the deep waters below.

As they fell, Gabrielle reached for Xena, and their hands came together. She smiled, mouthing the words, "I love you."

Xena looked below at the rapidly approaching ocean, then back at Gabrielle. "I'll love you forever," she shouted just before their three bodies slammed onto the surface.

"Dari, *No!*" Sondra yelled at her lover's rapidly receding back as she ran toward the edge and plunged herself over the brink.

The three bodies that the water had claimed first struggled to the surface. After Xena saw her bard was safe and sound, she dove under, heading straight for Lutheran.

His mind was a little clouded by the love spell still tingling around the edges of his heart, but he was the harbinger of too much evil for its effect's to last long. When Xena grabbed a handful of his shirt, rage began to boil in the pit of his stomach

*No matter what, I will not die alone*, were the only thoughts in his head as he plunged that long knife at Xena. He sliced it across her upper arm, catching her left thigh with a downward stroke. But before he could continue his attack, Dari suddenly was there, maneuvering the weapon from his hand and into her own. Treading the water, with one hand on his shoulder, Dari drove the blade upwards into Lutheran's chest. She watched the life-blood drain from those cold brown eyes through the blur of bloodied water, then released him. He floated away from her, his eyes coming to rest on a light that played upon the ocean's surface. A smile momentarily passed over his pale lips as he reached toward its radiant brilliance. "Gabrielle," was the last word uttered from those cruel lips, at least in this lifetime.

Xena winced as the salt water stung her old and newly acquired wounds, yet heedful of Dari, her vacant stare fixed on Lutheran. Their eyes met, and after a moment's reflection, they smiled at one another.

Xena had brushed up against something metallic when she dove down to catch up to Lutheran. She scanned the clear water, and at the very bottom, an unnatural reflection caught Xena's attention. She squinted to see what it was. When she couldn't make out the cause of the light, she swam down towards it, finally coming upon what looked like a suitcase enclosed in metal, lodged between some rocks. She tugged to no avail, releasing

only when she had to resurface for air, but she felt a need to investigate that object further.

The second time she went down, Dari and Gabrielle followed her, their curiosity piqued. And together they managed to get the case unstuck. When it slipped free, they swam up towards the light, breaking the surface at the same time, gasping for air.

Sondra stood at the very top of the slope watching, her heart in her throat. When she saw the three women pop out of the turbulent water, relief flooded her. She looked down at the outgoing tide and saw Lutheran's lifeless body bob into view. She could already hear the sarge shouting orders to go after it.

Teddy and Aphrodite climbed down a ladder that the kindly, dimpled policewoman of earlier had set against the tree for them. They didn't want to risk using any more of Aphrodite's powers, and Teddy wasn't about to voice a complaint. She'd much rather have two feet solidly planted on the ground at her own pace, rather than Aphrodite's quick snapped finger approach.

Dari and Xena helped each other wade towards the shore. They crawled from the clutching waters and collapsed beside one another, chests heaving in a synchronized beat.

Gabrielle came running from the short distance away where she had reached shore, falling to her knees beside Xena's prone body. After assessing her warrior's wounds, she gently started dabbing at her bloody body here and there with the end of her sodden sleeve. She released a sigh of contentment as she stared down at her love.

Gabrielle's medical attention hurt worse than accidentally squatting in a thorn bush, but Xena wouldn't tell her that. She opened her eyes and smiled up at her warrior bard.

Gabrielle glanced at Dari, saw she was sitting up, and smiled at the both of them. "We did it," she whispered.

Dari winked at her, then looked above, saw Sondra, and waved, letting her know all was well. The metallic case finally caught her attention and she got on her knees to examine it. By now, Xena had carefully moved Gabrielle's caring hands off her injured body and they joined Dari, scrutinizing the box. None of them quite knew what to make of it.

\* \* \*

Xena was brought back to the present as Sondra continued to make fun of her lover, causing the other two to laugh at her antics. Dari growled at them all, then asked Xena to go see if the paper had come. Xena was rather excited to perform this task, never having gotten a paper in her lifetime. She returned to the kitchen soon after, reading, “Madman Lutheran finally put to rest last Wednesday.”

The chatter stopped all around her, and Xena looked at each of them in turn before she continued the article. She was smiling when she came to the end of it, “The 10 million dollars that was recovered has been put into a trust fund for the grieving families of Lutheran Ingles’ over 200 hundred known victims.”

Sondra clapped, cheering. “*Woo Hoo, we rule!*”

The two traveling warriors stayed with Dari and Sondra for a month following that day. Their rationale for lingering was to learn more about this world, but they knew the real reason for their detained visit was, simply, a reluctance to leave. However, they had decided even though the charms of the 21st Century were a wonderful temptation to get them to stay, they had a home, together now, and they wanted to get back to it.

And so they planned their trip back, hoping Aphrodite's powers had strengthened enough so they would return as they had appeared, without a hitch.

Teddy was in a blue funk the entire month. She didn't want to lose her newfound friends, but especially she didn't want to say goodbye to Aphrodite. Even though her alter self preferred the company of men, for the most part; Teddy didn't mind Aphrodite's crooning over this man or that man. She accepted her as she was, and that was it.

So when the big day came, she had reached a decision. She had already told Dari and Sondra what she planned to do, and even though they didn't agree with her, she was her own woman with her own mind, and she made her own decisions.

"Ready?" Aphrodite called to her two friends.

Xena and Gabrielle nodded. They were in jeans and tee shirts, having wanted to take something tangible "back" with them. They wrapped their arms around one another, each taking a glance back up to the first floor of that big house where they could see Sondra and Dari watching, tears filling their eyes.

Aphrodite looked around for Teddy; she couldn't believe she would allow them to leave without a final goodbye. *She'd at least want to see me one last time*, the Goddess pouted and exhaled deeply. "Phooey," she mumbled and extracted a long golden chain

from her ample cleavage. Attached to the necklace was a tiny, triangular-shaped green stone, resting on a golden base, inscribed with words from a long dead language.

"So that's where you hid it." Gabrielle exclaimed.

"Can you think of a better place?" Dite smiled playfully, twirling the miniaturized Cronos Stone, and added, "After all, what's a girl without her baubles?"

"Let's do this, Aphrodite," Xena was growing impatient at the prospect of returning. Dite held tightly to the stone and began the thought process that would send them back.

Unbeknownst to the three, Teddy was crouched behind Dari's jeep. She waited until she saw their bodies become transparent, nearly completely disappearing, before she raced around the automobile and vaulted herself toward them.

Aphrodite, thrown by the surprise, lost her concentration, and her mental hold on Xena and Gabrielle.

Teddy smiled, taking the goddess's hand, her eyes reflecting the beautiful colors that shimmered around her. And in that moment she knew she had made the right decision. She squeezed Aphrodite's hand and they both looked towards Xena and Gabrielle, whose faces were disintegrating before them.

The bodies of Xena and Gabrielle were mere outlines now, and they flickered in and out, all the while being carried further and further away from them.

Teddy found she couldn't speak while in that state, the look of horror on her face was all Aphrodite really needed to express her own look of mingled shock and fear.

But she couldn't do anything about it; her body, along with Teddy's was floating through time in one direction, as Xena and Gabrielle's were being pulled in the opposite.

Perplexing thoughts ran circles in Aphrodite's mind; where were they headed, or perhaps more importantly, *when* in time were they headed? And how were Xena and Gabrielle ever going to get back home now?

Aphrodite suddenly smiled at Teddy through the confusion and worry.

Teddy looked puzzlingly at her friend, then the thought hit her, from the Goddess of Love's mind to her own, and it all became clear as a bell. Excitement beamed throughout the translucence of Teddy's face, and she sent these words back to her, "*Oh, boy! Another adventure!*"

But that's another story...