

## **Disclaimer & Notices**

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**Violence:** There is violence in this story.

**Subtext:** Any subtext becomes main text here.

**Summary:** This dramatic epic opens up to Xena and Gabrielle's childhood when they are best friends with an growing friendship. One day, Gabrielle's hometown is attacked while Xena is visiting her. Xena tries desperately to protect Gabrielle but ultimately fails. Xena will not stop believing that Gabrielle is alive, and she hunts for her friend. Along Xena's journey, things become darker and lead her further from Gabrielle and the memories. Meanwhile, Gabrielle is taken into slavery but it isn't for some time before her luck comes back. She meets a very caring master, who sends her away to be schooled as a bard. Later, Gabrielle befriends a very unusual girl, and the girl claims to be an Amazon. It isn't long before Gabrielle discovers how real the Amazons are, and that she's fated to be more than just a slave.

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Started: March 33, 2003

Ended: April 24, 2007

Series 9: **Destiny of Mine** – Story #1

## **To Find What was Mine**

By Red Hope

### *Prologue*

“Yes mother, I know,” muttered Xena under her breath.

Cyrene raised an eyebrow at her daughter momentarily. "Alright honey, as long as you remember that, then you can stay there for the next couple of days."

Xena smiled at that. "Thanks, mom."

"You're welcome, sweetie." Cyrene leaned forward on the Xena's bed; she placed a gentle kiss on her young daughter's cheek.

"Mom," grumbled the teenager.

Cyrene chuckled while pulling back. "Pretend with your mother for once."

Xena grinned and leaned over, she gave her mom a kiss on the cheek as well. "There," she stated.

"Thank you, sweetie." Cyrene stood up from the small bed. "Now you think you can go get your brothers for me?"

"Yes, mother."

"Good... have them come into the kitchen to help me cook."

Xena nodded her understanding and slid out of the bed. She quickly left her room in search of her brothers.

Cyrene listened to her young daughter's footfall down the stairs. After a heavy sigh, she left the small room and into the tavern. She went directly into the kitchen to begin dinner for herself and her children.

"Hey Toris!" yelled Xena, she came around the corner of the tavern to the backyard.

"What?" barked Toris. He lowered his wooden sword.

Then Xena's younger brother, Lyceus, peered around his big brother towards Xena. "Mom wants us huh?"

"Yup," confirmed Xena. "Your two's turn to make dinner with her," she taunted.

Toris huffed. "I don't get why we have to do a girl's job," he grumbled while walking towards the tavern.

As Toris neared Xena, she stuck her foot out once he was close enough.

Toris tripped and growled after he recovered. "Don't do that," he warned.

"Then don't talk about mother like that."

"I wasn't," stated the young man.

Xena put her hands on her hips. "She's only trying to help you."

"How's that?" Toris raised an eyebrow. "If I need food later in life that's what I get a wife for."

The young girl glared. "If you can find one that'll take your crap."

Toris shook his head and decided not to fight anymore. “Whatever.” He brushed past her.

Lyceaus neared his big sister and whispered, “Why you always pick on him?”

The teenager huffed and crossed her arms against her chest. “He needs it, Ly.” She started shaking her head. “He’s always tough on us all.”

“He’s just going through that stage, mother says.”

“Yeah well, he’s not much older than me and you don’t see me going through it.” She then added, “Or you.”

“Yeah I know,” uttered the boy. He swung his wood sword in his hand a little then asked, “Mother want me too?”

“Yes.” Xena shrugged. “I’m going to set the table... do the dishes.”

Her baby brother smiled up to her.

Xena just returned the smile and said, “Come on.” She rested her hand behind his back and led him into the tavern.

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Xena swayed back and forth in the wagon. She slowly opened her eyes and gazed about the area as a yawn escaped her. She quickly realized she was coming into town. Straightening up off the side of the wagon, she looked to her mother at the front of the wagon. “We’re in Potidaea?”

Cyrene glanced back at her daughter briefly then focused back on where the horses were going. “Yes, honey we are. How did you sleep?”

“Pretty good,” replied the teenager. She then started studying the village and all the people.

“We’ll be at the market in a minute,” promised the mother.

“I know,” responded Xena. Her stomach turned in excitement again just like it had very early this morning. Her mother had awoken her before sunrise so she could prepare to travel to Potidaea and stay for three days.

Cyrene directed the horses to an open spot at the entrance of the marketplace. She pulled the reins to make them halt. She carefully then climbed out of the wagon.

Xena, on the other hand, had sprung up and jumped out of the wagon. “Mother?” she asked.

“Don’t worry, I’ll take care of everything this time.” Cyrene smiled softly. “Go on.”

The teenager came up to Cyrene and kissed her quickly on the cheek. “Thank you.”

“Scoot,” urged the mother.

Xena grinned then broke into a run across town.

Cyrene watched her child run off, it simply made her chuckle.

The teenager came up to the other side of town. She directly went to rather well-built house and went rushing up the steps. Rasping for air, she furiously knocked on the door. After about the fifth knock, somebody finally came to the door.

“Well hello, Xena.”

“Hi, Hecuba. How are you?”

“I’m fine. Yourself?”

Xena tried catching her breath then replied, “I’m great.” She took a deep breath again and asked, “Is... is Gabrielle home?”

“Yes, dear. Come inside... she’s in her room.” Gabrielle’s mother opened the door more and stepped aside.

The teenager entered the small house. “Thank you.”

“You are welcome,” replied the mother. “Go ahead.” She grinned then added, “I know you both have missed each other.”

Xena smiled and repeated, “Thanks.”

Hecuba laughed quietly. “Go ahead, dear.”

The teenager nodded and hastily walked down the hallway of the house to Gabrielle’s room. She took a shaky breath but then knocked on her friend’s door.

“Yeah come in,” called a girl.

Xena grinned to herself and entered her best friend’s room. She didn’t say anything as she noticed Gabrielle was sitting in the middle of her bed, head down, and writing.

The girl was biting on her lower lip as she sat there writing her story. “Hold on, sorry...”

“Its okay,” replied Xena.

Gabrielle threw up her head at the familiar voice. “Xena!”

“Hi.”

The little bard tossed her scroll off her lap with her quill; she bounded off the bed after her friend.

The next thing Xena knew was she couldn’t breathe from the enormous hug she received.

“Oh gods, I’ve missed you so much, Xen.”

The teenager tried laughing a little between the hugging. She then finally felt her friend’s squeeze loosening up but she had yet to let go of her. “I’ve miss you too, Bri.”

At hearing her nickname, Gabrielle gave one more tight squeeze then let go of her best friend. “You been okay?”

“I’m a lot better now,” confessed Xena.

“Me too,” agreed the little bard. “How long can you stay?”

A huge grin broke out across the teenager’s face. “Mother said three days. She’ll be back then to pick me up.”

Gabrielle’s face just lit up at the good news. She again engulfed her friend in a gigantic hug.

Xena was so happy that she took hold of Gabrielle and spun each other in a circle.

The younger girl laughed when her feet touched the floor again. “I love your mom.”

“Yeah me too,” teased the teenager. She then released the smaller girl and asked, “What were you writing about?”

“Oh.” Gabrielle brightened up at the mention of her latest story. “I’m writing a new story.”

“What about?” inquired the teenager. She sat down on the edge of the bed.

The little bard jumped onto the bed, landing on her stomach next to her friend. “It’s kinda silly actually.”

Xena felt a grin pull at her lips. “Tell me.”

“Well...” The girl considered for a moment.

“Please,” begged the teenager.

“Okay.” Gabrielle chuckled then started explaining her new story idea. “Well it’s a bit about us.”

“Oh?” Xena raised an eyebrow at this.

“Sorta,” explained Gabrielle, “but when we’re older and like we’re partners.”

The teenager laughed softly. “And we’re not now?”

“Oh I know but what I mean is... we’re well...”

“Yes?” urged Xena, she read the title aloud, “The Warrior Princess?”

“Yeah.” Gabrielle grinned and snatched the scroll from the larger hands. “You’re a warrior right?”

“Uh huh.”

“And so am I but not as good as you since I’m never as good at things as you are.”

“Gabrielle, you’re a much better bard than I ever could be.”

The little bard shrugged. “But I could see where you’d be some great warrior.”

“Go on,” teased the teenager.

“Okay so you’re a warrior and I’m your partner. So together, you and I travel through Greece...” she stopped but quickly said, “the entire known-world even. And like we meet all these new people and we help people.”

Xena chuckled at her friend’s idea.

“I’m serious!” roared the girl. “You think its funny.” She put her scroll aside while her friend was laughing. “Xena!”

The teenager was shaking her head as she laughed. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not funny!” Gabrielle playfully growled and rapidly sat up. She knew her friend wasn’t going to stop laughing, so she threw herself into Xena.

“Aaaah!” yelped Xena, she fell off the bed but not without taking Gabrielle with her. She made sure though to land on her back and with her friend directly on top. She felt the wind get knocked out of her and she started coughing.

“You okay?” asked a worried little bard. She lifted herself up off her best friend

Xena just nodded but took a deep breath. “I’m okay,” she whispered. She then gradually wrapped her arms around her friend’s waist and forced her to lie back down.

Gabrielle sighed and rested her head on the large chest under her. “You really think its funny?”

The teenager smiled to herself. “No, I like the idea.” With her right hand, she began rubbing the other girl’s back. “I just don’t see us as warriors... and traveling all over the known-world.”

“But wouldn’t it be fun though?” whispered the tiny bard.

The older girl thought about the question then finally replied, “Yeah it would be. Just you and I...”

“Right the wrongs,” teased Gabrielle.

“Bri, you know how dangerous that would be?”

The smaller girl shrugged and closed her eyes. “You’d protect us.”

Xena felt a smile shaped her features. “I’d try my best, yes.”

Gabrielle lifted her head and lowered her chin onto Xena’s chest. “And I know your best is like... better than anybody else.”

“I don’t know about that,” countered the teenager.

“Sure it is, Xen.” The little bard now lifted her arms up and folded over top of Xena’s chest. She lowered her chin onto her arms now. “I mean, you’re clever, talented, really smart... you’d make an amazing warrior.”

“Glad you think that.” Yet Xena shrugged. “But I don’t think I’m going to be a warrior or anything like that.” She grinned. “As nice of a fantasy as that might be.”

Gabrielle chuckled. "Never say never." For emphasis, she freed one hand and poked the nose in front of her.

The teenager grinned back. "I think though you'd make a wonderful bard later on." She studied her friend as a question came to her mind. "Still thinking about going to the Academy for bards?"

"I really want to," admitted the tiny bard. "But I think I have awhile before that happens."

"Well..." Xena considered a few things. "You probably could go when you're eighteen if not sixteen."

"I've heard they let some sixteen year olds in just because they're so good."

A huge grin developed on the teenager's lips. "I bet if you tried, you could get in when you're sixteen."

"I would... gee that means in four years."

"Less even. Your thirteenth birthday is this coming spring," reminded the older girl.

"Oh gods, yeah in like a few months." Gabrielle laughed in surprise. "Wow... I'll be a teenager." She then suddenly shot a smirk at her friend. "A teenager like you... must mean I'm getting oooooold."

Xena groaned and rolled her eyes at the comment. "At least I have more rights as a seventeen-year-old than you," she taunted.

Gabrielle huffed. "True." She then turned her head to one side.

"You okay?" asked Xena in a quiet voice.

"Yeah... just thinking."

"About?" urged the teenager.

"What's going to happen with you while I'm at the academy... if I go."

"You'll go," promised Xena. "And I'm sure I'll keep myself busy."

"Hold on... what am I going to do after I graduate from the academy?" Gabrielle quickly lifted her head. "Am I suppose to do anything in particular?"

Xena shrugged then said, "I know most bards travel and tell stories for several years. A way to... earn a reputation so to speak."

Gabrielle furrowed her eyebrows in thought. "But if I do that, means I'll have to leave you more."

"Don't worry... I'll be fine."

"You're probably right...."

Xena frowned at her friend's agreement.

“You’ll probably find some cute guy by then,” started Gabrielle, “get married... have kids.” She smiled sadly at her friend.

“Maybe,” agreed the teenager. “Maybe not.”

“You ever thinking about where you’ll be in the future?”

“Mmmm.” Xena pressed her lips together. “Sometimes but I don’t worry too much about it.” She focused her eyes back on her best friend. “How about you?”

“Sometimes I do.”

“You’ll be a famous bard, I know that,” stated the teenager.

“I hope so,” whispered the little bard.

“I know so.” Xena reassured Gabrielle with a warm smile.

Gabrielle smiled back and just laid there studying her best friend.

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Gabrielle rolled onto her side and studied her best friend.

Xena smiled at her.

The little bard mirrored the smile back but her eyes were more serious.

“What you think about?” whispered the teenager.

Gabrielle shrugged then replied, “Just about when you leave in two days.”

“Don’t think about it,” urged Xena. She reached over and carefully plucked a piece of straw out of the long blond hair.

The little bard’s green eyes followed the slender fingers as they pulled the straw from her hair. She then watched the straw being held in the air then placed back on the straw pile. “I know it’s just... I’m going to miss you.”

“I’ll miss you too,” confessed the older girl. “But I’m happy I’m here.”

The tiny bard brightened up at that. “Me too.” She then rolled onto her back and studied the roof of the small barn. She always loved spending a night or two up in the loft of the barn with Xena, it was a tradition between the friends. She sighed at the thought of her friend leaving and it caused her to wonder when she’d see Xena again. She then asked, “You think I can come to Amphipolis soon?”

“Probably,” answered Xena. “Mother would like to see you again.”

Gabrielle giggled at the mention of Cyrene.

“I think she would adopt you if she could,” teased the teenager.

“I think so too,” agreed Gabrielle. “But I’m not sure how your brothers would take that.”

Xena huffed. "Toris wouldn't be too fond of it."

"Ly would though."

"Yeah he would." The teenager furrowed her eyebrows. "He really likes you too."

Gabrielle turned her head at what Xena mentioned. "Does he?"

"Uh huh." Xena licked her lips. "He's always asking about you or just talking about you."

The small bard grinned. "He likes me huh?" She paused but then added, "He reminds me a lot of you... but a male version."

The older girl laughed in response, afterwards she said, "Yeah he does." Suddenly a devilish smirk formed on her lips. "He'd make a good boyfriend for later huh?"

Gabrielle grumbled at that, she turned her head away and folded her arms against her chest. "I like Ly but... nothing much else." She closed her eyes and muttered, "Not ready for a boyfriend."

"Yeah I know," uttered Xena, "still too young."

"Xen?"

"Mmmmm?"

"Why don't you have one?" Gabrielle could hear her friend stop breathing briefly. She realized she wasn't getting any response so she urged Xena on. "Seriously." She rolled her head to the left and stared at the teenager. "I mean... you are seventeen."

Xena chewed faintly on her lower lip then finally replied, "Just can't find anybody right for me."

"No cute boys in Amphipolis?" teased the little bard.

The older girl grumbled at the question and stated, "We have a lot of rude, not to mention ugly, boys in the town."

A couple of giggles came from Gabrielle.

"Besides," continued Xena, "I just don't date anybody."

"Figures," retorted the tiny bard.

Xena mock glared at her best friend for the comment. "You know what?"

"What?"

"You are a bratt, Bri."

Gabrielle stuck her tongue out for a response.

"You little... bratt!" roared the teenager. She sat up but with a handful of hay. She tossed it on top of her friend.

“Aaaaah!” screamed the tiny bard. She sat up sputtering and thrashing away at the straw covering her face. She finally got most of it off her body but a few pieces still in her hair and in her mouth. “Oh gross,” she whimpered. She reached up and slowly extracted a piece of long straw from out of her mouth.

Xena laughed hard at the scene.

Gabrielle threw the straw over the loft’s edge and then glared at Xena. “That’s it,” she growled. She sprung up onto her feet but was soon leaping towards her best friends.

“Oh Hades!” yelled the teenager. She soon found herself on her back with a very furious little bard on top of her. She began laughing at the red faced Gabrielle.

“It’s not funny!”

Xena then suddenly stopped laughing and had a very devilish grin. Without warning, she rolled to their bodies to the right in all of the hay.

Gabrielle growled when she looked up into twinkling blue eyes. She quickly forced her friend to roll to the left.

The teenager only made them roll again.

They kept rolling to the left but then suddenly Gabrielle felt a shock rip through her body as she went off the loft’s edge.

“Xena!” screamed the little bard. Her entire body directly rolled off the ledge but she just grabbed onto the edge before she went over. “Xena!”

Xena furiously tore the straw away from her face and grabbed a hold of her best friend’s wrists. “Grab onto my arms, Gabrielle. And don’t look down.”

The tiny bard gripped her friend with all her strength. She then peered down below and saw how far the drop was and the pitchfork on the ground sparkled at her. “Oh gods!” She began squirming and struggling.

“Gabrielle, relax please. You’ll be okay.”

The tiny bard took a deep breath; she closed her eyes and tried ignoring her racing heart.

Xena was finally able to get her feet under herself and began pulling back. She slowly lifted her smaller friend back up onto the loft. Once she had Gabrielle over the edge, she scooted back a ways from the ledge and pulled her best friend into her arms. “You okay?” she whispered.

Gabrielle whimpered quietly then tucked her head into Xena’s chest. She then started shaking uncontrollably.

Xena felt her heart drop as she hid her friend in her arms and legs. She lowered her head on top of Gabrielle’s then she was able to hear the little bard quietly crying. She sighed and tightened her grip around Gabrielle more. She sensed her anger growing inside of herself for failing to protect her best friend.

The tiny bard lifted her head slightly so she could wipe away the tears on her cheeks. She then raised her head more and then rested it on Xena's right shoulder.

"You okay?" whispered the teenager.

Gabrielle nodded faintly.

"I'm sorry," uttered Xena in a shaky voice.

The smaller girl closed her eyes and nuzzled her face into Xena's warm neck. "It wasn't your fault," she muffled out.

"Yes it was... I shouldn't have rolled us that far."

"You didn't know," stated the tiny bard.

"It doesn't matter, should have been more careful."

Gabrielle lifted her head off Xena's shoulder. She peered up into navy eyes. "It wasn't your fault, Xen. I mean, you could say it was my fault for jumping into you."

"Mine for throwing straw at you," reminded the teenager.

The little bard shook her head. "Wasn't anybody's fault... it was an accident." She watched Xena's eyes turn away from hers. "Xena?" she whispered to draw back Xena's focus.

The older girl looked back to her friend.

"Not your fault, okay?"

Xena didn't say anything but then gradually nodded. Yet she was still angry with herself and promised herself and Gabrielle that she would protect Gabrielle better from here out. "Tired?"

"Yeah I am," admitted the tiny bard. "Are you?"

"Yeah," uttered the older girl. She glanced to her left then leaned that way to grasp their blanket for the night. Slowly, she lowered herself back, pulling Gabrielle with her.

Gabrielle snuggled into her best friend's side and closed her eyes. She then felt a warm wool blanket cover her and Xena. She smiled some to herself as she cuddled in closer.

Xena smiled too and finally rested her eyes. After a big sigh, she tried relaxing and going to sleep.

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The following day, the friends decided to visit the market and mingle about after they received Hecuba's permission. Together, they went through the different stands, stalls, and small shops.

"Ooooh, Xen, look," cooed the little bard. She pointed out the necklace at the jewelry stand.

The teenager moved closer beside her friend and studied the silver necklace. "That's very nice," she whispered.

Gabrielle smiled up to Xena then glanced back down at the necklace. "I wish I had the money to buy it." She then frowned after saying that.

The taller girl raised her right hand and rubbed her best friend's back. "I know." She continued studying the silver necklace that had a quill for a pendent. "Come on." She made a mental note of the price tag on the necklace right before she led her friend away.

The smaller girl wove her way through the people back to the middle of the market place. "I'm getting hungry."

Xena grinned at her friend's declaration. She noticed it was noon according to the sun's position and decided she too was rather hungry. "Wanna go to the Greasy Spoon?"

"Yeah sure." The small bard made a beeline for their favorite restaurant. "I'm so hungry."

The teenager grinned while following behind her friend. "I'm pretty hungry too."

"Not as hungry as me," joked Gabrielle.

"Nobody is as ever hungry as you, bard," taunted the older girl.

For a response, Gabrielle stuck her tongue out then hurried off to the steps of the restaurant.

Xena giggled at her friend and rushed after her, as not to lose track of her.

Once the pair was inside, they decided to eat up at the bar together. It was not long before they were served today's lunch, a regular meal that they both thoroughly enjoyed. While they ate together, they talked about this or that, mainly family.

"Oh, you know what I just remembered," cut in the tiny bard.

"Mmmm?" asked the teenager between a mouth full of lamb.

"I need to grab more scrolls." Gabrielle pointed a long bread roll at her friend. "I almost forgot."

Xena swallowed her bite of lamb from her gyro and then grinned. "We can't forget them."

"Definitely not," agreed the very serious bard.

The teenager laughed quietly to herself as she took the second to last bit from her gyro. "Know what I wouldn't mind?"

"What's that?" Gabrielle swirled her last piece of bread through some leftover sauce from the beef and lamb.

"I want a couple of daggers," whispered Xena. She tried being quiet about it since she didn't want any funny looks from various people around them.

Gabrielle's ivy eyes widened in surprise. "Really?" she squealed.

"Ssssh," urged the older girl.

The tiny bard laughed softly and leaned forward, closer to her best friend. "Really?"

"Yeah, really," answered the teenager. "Not sure why though."

"You think it's safe?" uttered the tiny bard. "I mean, my dad says it isn't safe for girls to handle sharp things like that."

Xena rolled her eyes. "Gaaaabriellleeee," she drew out.

"What?" huffed the tiny bard.

"I like your dad a lot and all but come on," pushed Xena, "What is so different between girls and boys anyway?"

The bard shrugged. "Their bodies... guys are much stronger."

"Yeah right." Xena grabbed her last piece of her gyro. She wagged the meat in front of her friend's face as she spoke. "Just the other day, I was wrestling with both Lyceus and Toris. I whipped both their butts." She popped the meat into her mouth.

"Really?" squeaked the tiny bard. "But... but you're like a tougher girl than most of us."

"What's that suppose to mean?" Xena arched a brown eyebrow at her friend.

"Ummmm... well..." Gabrielle grinned sheepishly. "What I mean, Xen is that... well you've grown up with two brothers. I have a sister so like..."

"I act like a boy?" probed the older girl.

"No, no," squeaked the tiny bard. She held her hands up briefly but lowered them when she spoke again. "It's just you know how to be tougher because you had to grow up with two brothers. Lila and I, well... we are use to each other and we play with dolls instead of sticks."

Xena considered her friend's words as she chewed on the remains of the beef in her mouth. "I guess you're right, Bri." She sighed, swallowed the small meat, and then added, "Guess I need to act a little girlier."

Gabrielle huffed at that and rolled her eyes. "Gods... I hope not." She finally straightened back up in her seat. "I like the way you are."

"Thanks." The teenager offered a warm smile and got one back in return. "Come on, let's go."

Gabrielle suddenly grinned. She hopped off the tall stool and waited for Xena.

Xena paid the bartender for the two meals then stepped off the stool as well. With Gabrielle, she headed out of the tavern.

"You think you can get the daggers?" whispered the small girl.

“Yeah, I think so.” Xena watched her best friend jump down each step. She just grinned, bent her knees, and jumped over all three steps to land neatly on the dirt road.

“Show off,” growled the bard yet she grinned.

Xena winked and teased, “Thanks.” She then went a little more serious. “Okay, here’s the plan. You go get your scrolls okay? While you’re doing that I’m going to get the daggers. Alright?”

“Why can’t I go with you?” whined the little bard.

“Because then I’ll look younger than I really am, no offense.”

Gabrielle’s shoulders dropped. “Really?”

“Unfortunately yeah.”

“I can wait outside,” urged Gabrielle.

Xena just shook her head. “I’ll come back to the scroll stand for you.”

The tiny bard frowned some but finally asked, “Promise?”

“Promise,” replied the teenager.

“Okay.”

Together, they went to the scroll stand and once they were there, Xena offered her friend some money for the scrolls. As always, the tiny bard refused the dinars and told her to hurry up while at the weapons store.

Xena promised to be back in a few minutes and for Gabrielle to take her time at the scroll stand. She then turned around and started walking off into the market area again. Once she knew she was out of Gabrielle’s vision, she broke off running. She had to carefully maneuver her way through all the people as she ran.

“Where’s that stall?” growled the teenager to herself. She then found what she had been hunting. Coming right up to the owner of the stall, she asked, “How much is that necklace?”

The owner turned around, he looked the young girl up and down. “Its thirty dinars.” He smiled warmly at her and picked it up then carefully handing it to her. “Are you interested in it?”

“Well... yes and no,” replied the teenager. “I’d like to buy it but not for me.”

“Oh, a gift then?” The jeweler smiled even more. “Whom for?”

“My best friend... she loves to write.”

“Oh I see.” The jeweler folded his arms against his chest as he thought about this. “And how much were you expecting to pay for this charm?”

Xena peered up with sky eyes. “I wasn’t sure.” She lowered the necklace back down carefully. “Anything really since it’s for my friend.”

The man nodded at this. “And when do you plan to give it to her?”

“Well...” The teenager seriously considered this question then answered, “Her birthday is soon.”

“Perfect. And how much money do you have with you?”

Xena took a deep breath as she thought about how much her mother gave her for her allowance and how much lunch was today. “Thirty-two dinars.”

“And do you live here in town?”

“No, just in Amphipolis.”

“Really? I’m originally from there. Who is your mother?”

“Cyrene,” answered the teenager.

The jeweler’s eyes widened at this information. “Then you must be her only daughter, Xena?”

Xena brightened up at this. “Yes actually. You know my mother?”

The jeweler nodded at this and answered, “I was close with your mother for many years until I moved here. My name is Potestas.”

“Nice to meet you.” The girl held out her hand.

Potestas grinned and shook Xena’s arm firmly. “Now then,” he continued while releasing her arm. “You have thirty-two dinars, her birthday is in a couple of months, and you want that necklace?”

“Yes, sir,” agreed Xena.

“Now will you be in town again soon?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well then, how about you give me seven dinars now. I’ll hold this necklace for you. Then when you want it for her birthday, bring me another seven dinars and we’ll be even. How does that sound?”

Xena’s eyes widened. “Fourteen dinars all together?”

“Yes, for Cyrene’s daughter anything.”

Xena chuckled at that. “I’ll take it.” She unhooked her pouch and fished around for seven dinars.

Potestas took the necklace and carefully slipped it away in a special pouch for later. He then took the money from the young girl. “I’ll see you soon then, Xena.”

“Thank you, Potestas.”

“You’re quite welcome, dear. Tell your mother I said hello.”

“I will.” Xena smiled and started walking off but called, “Bye!”

“Bye!” The jeweler waved but then went back to his business.

The teenager took off sprinting for the weapon’s shop and now there was a bounce in her run. She made it there in no time and went right inside, out of breath. Once inside of the small store, she studied the various weapons in the store. She raised an eyebrow though at the long, heavy built sword that hung high up on the far wall. She admired it for several minutes.

“Like the sword huh?” questioned the weapons master in the store. He’d reappeared out of the back of the shop and had watched the girl studying the sword.

“Its beautiful,” answered Xena.

“It is,” agreed the weapons master. He turned around and reached up to carefully lift the sword off the display. He then gently lowered it onto the glass casing.

The teenager neared and leaned against the casing as she looked down at the sword.

“May I touch it?”

“Of course, be careful though.”

Xena nodded then gingerly ran her right hand down the blade of the sword. She studied the blue gem at the top of the hilt. “What’s it made of?”

“Well,” started the weapons master, “It’s made of steel.”

“Doesn’t look it.” Xena peered up in question at the man then back down at the sword.

“No, it’s been coated in bronze for looks.”

“Why not gold?”

“Gold is too weak for a sword.” The weapons master folded his arm. “Gold is good for fashion but not a well made sword. The bronze is much sturdier and ages well.”

Xena nodded her understanding but then asked, “What’s the gem?”

“It’s a sapphire,” replied the man. “It took a black smith a very long to produce this sword.”

“Why is that?”

The weapons master folded his arms again. “Steel has to be heated at a very high temperature. As soon as it’s touched by water it begins to cool and then its harder to shape the steel. So the black smith went through many trials and errors to come out with just this one sword.”

“It sure is amazing though.”

“I agree.”

Xena lifted her blue eyes back up. “May I hold it?”

“Well...” The weapons master pressed his lip together. “It's rather heavy.”

“I can handle it,” promised the teenager.

The weapons master saw the confident look and nodded his head. “Go ahead.”

Xena grinned suddenly. She wrapped one hand around the hilt and began lifting it off the case. She soon realized she needed her second hand, her left hand too curling around the hilt. She hefted the sword up with all of her strength, she stared at it for several minutes, memorized by its beauty and strength.

“Amazing sword, isn't it?”

Xena could only nod her answer. She then felt her muscles straining from the weight some but before she lowered it, she asked, “How much is it anyway?”

“Oh gods, it's not for sale,” replied the weapons master. “I doubt I could part with that sword.”

The teenager chuckled at the weapons master's words. She lowered it slowly back onto the glass case. “I can understand why.”

The man picked it up without trouble and lifted it back into its home high above. “Now then, what can I help you with?”

Xena finally tore her eyes away from the sword. “I was interested in some daggers, possibly.”

“Hmmm.” The weapons master gave a curious look. “How old are you?”

The teenager sighed. “Seventeen, sir.”

“I'm afraid I have a store policy that I may not sell to anybody that's under eighteen.”

Xena grumbled quietly to herself but then stated, “My eighteenth is this coming winter.”

The weapons master considered the girl for a minute but then said, “I think I can let this one slide.” He walked off to his right to another case. “All my daggers are here.”

The teenager brightened up and quickly hurried to that side of the shop. She knelt down and looked over the weapons in the display case. “That's a dagger?” She pointed against the glass.

The shop owner peered through and chuckled deeply. “That would be a breast dagger.”

Xena dropped her head back and grinned. “Really?”

The man nodded while chuckling some more.

“Interesting,” muttered Xena; she continued studying the daggers over. “How about those two?”

“These ones?” The weapons master pointed from his side of the glass. “Nice choice.” He slid open the glass door, reached in, and picked up the two matching daggers that both had separate sheaths. He placed them on the top of the display unit.

Xena stood back up and examined the two daggers. “I like these.”

“They’re very lovely.” The man picked up one of them. “They’re rather light but still hold enough weight to make them fly.” He then unsheathed it and held out the dagger in the palm of his hand. “And I enjoy the design engraved on them.”

Xena smiled as she ran two fingertips over the integrated design of intertwining ivy leaves. “How much are they?”

The weapons master considered while he placed the one back down on the case. “For you, twenty dinars.”

“Honestly?” Xena peeked up between her brown bangs.

“I like you, so yes,” answered the shopkeeper.

Xena smiled at that.

The weapons master grinned and took that as a yes. He placed the one dagger back into the sheath. He then went across the shop back to the front. He checked to make sure they were locked into their sheaths then placed them into a woven satchel to carry them in for now.

The teenager, on the other hand, pulled out twenty dinars and handed them over. In return, she received the satchel. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome and please be careful with them.”

“Yes, I know.” Xena smiled warmly then quietly left the store. Once outside, she grabbed a hold of the daggers while they were in the bag, she took off sprinting for the scroll stand.

Gabrielle looked up when she saw Xena reappeared at her side. “Get them?”

“Yup,” answered the teenager.

“Seriously?” The tiny bard grinned.

“Seriously,” simply replied the older girl. “I’ll show them to you when we’re in your room.”

“Alright.”

“Got what you needed?”

“Yeah, sure did.” Gabrielle held open her bag of scrolls.

Xena nodded and then asked, “Ready to go home?”

“Actually yeah, been a long day.”

The older girl chuckled. “Come on.” She twisted and turned her way through the crowd until they were out of the market. “Maybe we can get a nap in before dinner.”

Gabrielle sighed happily at that idea. “Sounds good to me.”

Xena laughed at her friend. “Me too.”

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The little bard snuggled closer into her friend’s side. “You really have to go home tomorrow?”

Xena let out a long sigh. “Yeah,” she whispered. “Sorry.”

“Not its okay... just I’ll miss you.”

“Yeah me too.” The teenager placed her hands under her head as she stared up at the ceiling. “At least we live close by.”

“Yeah true,” agreed the tiny bard. “When you think we’ll see each other again?”

“Hopefully soon.” Xena grinned. “Mother wants you to come over. She enjoys having you over just as much as me.”

Gabrielle chuckled at that. She rolled onto her right side so that she snuggled up against her friend. She threw her left arm across her friend’s stomach. “I’d like to come over.”

“Ask your parents, okay?”

“I will,” promised the smaller girl. She was quiet momentarily but then suddenly asked, “You going to show those daggers to me?”

Xena had a devilish grin. “Yeah sure.” She sat up then rolled out of the bed. She grabbed the bag off her friend’s small desk. She sat down on the bed again and crossed her legs.

Gabrielle sat up as well and crossed her own legs.

The older girl removed the two daggers from their bag and handed them to Gabrielle.

The tiny bard pulled one out of its sheath and looked it over. “I really like it.”

“Me too,” agreed Xena.

“Wait... what are you going to do with them?” asked a confused bard.

Xena shrugged and answered, “What most people do with them.”

“And that is?” pressed on the younger girl.

“Learn how to throw them mainly.”

“Oooh.” Gabrielle’s head bobbed a little and she sheathed the dagger. “Happy you have them?”

“Oh yeah.”

The smaller girl laughed quietly and handed them back carefully. “Me too. I know you wanted them.”

“Uh huh,” agreed the teenager.

“Can you teach me how to use them once you learn?”

Xena brightened up at the request and asked, “Are you sure?”

“I think so... yeah.” Gabrielle smiled. “I think I would.”

“Alright, I will,” promised the teenager. She wrapped the daggers back up in the bag and placed them on the floor. “Let’s get some sleep.”

“Yeah, I agree.” Gabrielle grabbed her friend by the shoulders and together they rolled into place in the bed.

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“How was your visit, dear?”

Xena lifted her head up but yawned before she replied to her mother.

Cyrene waited while she continued directing the horses down the dirt path towards Amphipolis.

“It was nice, mother.”

Cyrene smiled.

Xena returned the warm smile.

“Gabrielle’s parents said you both had a nice time together.”

“We did,” agreed the daughter.

“They also asked if Gabrielle may visit soon.”

“Did they?” Xena grinned at the news. She lifted herself up in the wagon some and hopped into the seat beside her mother. “What’d you say?”

“I told them anytime she wants to come over she can.”

“Thanks, mom.”

“Welcome, sweetie.” Cyrene briefly patted her daughter’s back then concentrated on the horses again. “Gabrielle’s birthday will be soon.”

“Yeah I know.”

Cyrene raised a dark eyebrow at her daughter. “What’s that grin about, dear?”

The teenager laughed softly because she knew her mother knew her too well. “Gabrielle and I were in the market and I happened to meet an old friend of yours.”

“Oh really? Who was that?”

“Potestas.”

“Oh gods... I haven’t seen him in ages. I didn’t realize he was living in Potidaea now.”

“Well I met him.”

“And?” urged her mother.

Xena wiggled around a little in her seat to get more comfortable. “Well,” she started, “he had this necklace with a quill pendent on it. I asked how much it was and we began talking. He told me he knew you and me, when I was a baby though I think. So he offered me the necklace for fourteen dinars.”

“Do you have it now?”

“Not yet, I paid half of it now. Then when I go back for Gabrielle’s birthday, I pay the other half.”

“That was very nice of him. Did you thank him?”

“Of course, mother.” Xena smiled. “He was very nice.”

“He is a nice man.” Xena’s mother gave a light jerk of the reins to slow the horses back down. “And I am sure Gabrielle will love the gift.”

“Oh I know she will.”

The mother arched an eyebrow at her overly confident daughter. “Oh?”

“Uh huh. Gabrielle saw it earlier and just loved it.”

“I see.” Cyrene began to chuckle. “You are always the clever one.”

Xena just grinned at her mother’s words.

“We should be home fairly soon.”

“Yeah I know.” The teenager sighed. “How are the Toris and Lyceaus?”

“They are fine. Ly missed you though.”

A few chuckles escaped the teenager. “He always does.”

“He adores you,” reminded the mother. “Toris on the other hand...”

“Toris just needs to readjust his attitude,” grumbled the girl.

“Honey, I think sometimes he thinks a lot about your father.” She rested her left hand on her daughter’s knee. “It’s hard on him, I believe.”

“He’s gone though,” stated the teenager. “What’s there to think about?” She crossed her arms against her chest, a displeased look on her face.

Cyrene squeezed her daughter’s knee briefly then returned it to the reins. “Toris misses your father.”

“What father?” reminded Xena. “You’re all we have, mother.”

“I know, honey. I realize you do not miss him but Toris misses having a father.” She shook her head. “He is angry he has no father figure to look up to like all the other boys in the town do.”

“Ly isn’t like that though,” countered Xena.

“No he’s not and he is not Toris either.”

The teenager groused to herself. “I still don’t understand him sometimes.”

“I know, sweetie just... don’t give him such a hard time. He loves us all and may not show it but he’s just going through a stage.”

“Yeah I know,” whispered Xena. She brushed back a few strands of deep brown hair. “You think about father at all?” She peered up.

Cyrene pressed her lips together but then responded. “Not really, honey.... You three are the most important things in my life.”

Xena smiled happily. She leaned over and lowered her head onto her mother’s shoulder.

Cyrene revealed her own smile, and she placed a gentle kiss to her daughter’s temple. She then returned her attention to the road.

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Xena narrowed her eyes, pulled back her right hand as the dagger shimmered from her fingertips, and she suddenly threw it roughly.

The dagger glided through the air and struck the centre of the black circle on the tree.

“Bullseye,” declared Xena proudly. She faced her best friend with her hands on her hips.

Gabrielle laughed and her head bobbed. She looked at the practice tree with the dagger sticking out at the centre point. “How long did that take you?”

The teenager grinned as she walked over to the tree to retrieve her dagger. “I started the day I got home with them.”

“I can’t believe that.” She studied the other dagger in her hand that she held onto for Xena. “Only a month?”

“Uh huh.” Xena took the sheath from her friend and put the dagger into it.

“That’s amazing.” Gabrielle handed over the other dagger. “I wonder if I could learn that quickly.”

“Maybe.” The teenager shifted one foot forward and leaned back against the other. “I can show you. Then once you get the hang of it, you just have to practice.”

“Well, I don’t have a dagger,” reminded the bard.

“True, but you can burrow one of mine,” offered Xena.

Gabrielle gazed down at the two daggers in her friend’s hand. “Um... I’m not sure.”

“I don’t mind.” While she waited for a reply, Xena tucked her daggers under her shirt and in between her pants.

“I know just... kinda nervous about actually handling one now that I think about it.”

Xena chuckled and said, “It’s a lot of fun.”

“Really?”

“Uh huh.”

Suddenly a devilish grin appeared on the tiny bard’s features. “Show me when you come over for my birthday.”

“Alright, it’s a date.”

Gabrielle laughed quietly. She then asked, “You think your mom has dinner ready?”

“Yeah probably. Come on.” Xena took her best friend’s hand and led her through the forest. They entered Amphipolis again and headed for the opposite side of town where the tavern was located.

As they made their way home, Gabrielle started noticing a few boys following behind them.

“Xen, those boys-”

“I know,” whispered back the teenager. “They always follow me.”

“What for?”

The older girl shrugged. “Maybe because I’m the only good lookin’ girl in town.”

A couple of giggles left the bard. “You’re probably right.” She then asked quietly, “They ever done or said anything?”

“No, not really. I think they’re scared of me.”

“Why?”

Xena’s dark blue eyes twinkled at the little bard. “You don’t want to know.”

The tiny bard snickered in response.

Once back at the tavern, the pair went inside and went into the kitchen.

“Mother, you need any help?”

Cyrene glanced over her shoulder at the two girls and replied back to Xena. “Yes, dear. I need one of you to peel these carrots for me and can the other get the boys for me?”

“Where are they?” piped up Gabrielle. “I’ll go get them.”

“They’re back over in the woods on the other side of the tavern. Thank you, Gabrielle.”

The tiny bard smiled then headed out of the kitchen.

Xena, however, helped by peeling the carrots as her mother requested.

The tiny bard went outside and went around the corner of the tavern. Soon as she did, the same four boys that had been following her and Xena earlier greeted her.

“Well who are you?” inquired one boy.

Gabrielle looked around herself and saw all of them circling her. “I’m Xena’s friend.”

“Okay, Xena’s friend... do you have a name?” teased the boy.

The young girl glared at the older boy. “Its Gabrielle.”

“Well, we can tell you’re not from around here, are you?”

“Not really, no.”

“Didn’t think so.” The boy folded his arms against his chest. “I’m Dan and you see, your friend isn’t exactly well liked around here.”

“Why is that?” urged the small bard. She felt her heart beginning to race.

“Because she thinks she’s the hottest girl around and toughest.” He cracked his knuckles. “She’s such a princess. And we’ve been meaning to get her back for a few things.” He had vicious grin now. “That’s where you’ll play in, Gabrielle.”

“No thanks,” stated the little bard.

“Mother, I’ll be right back.”

“What’s wrong, sweetie?”

Xena put the carrot and knife down. “I’m just worried about something. I’ll be back in a flash to help more.”

“Okay, dear.” Cyrene watched her child hurry out of the kitchen.

Xena stopped on the porch of the tavern and cocked her head to one side. She heard Gabrielle’s voice and a boy’s voice. She narrowed her eyes and raced to the right of the porch. She gazed over and saw the four boys surrounding her best friends. “Hades,” she growled. She grabbed the rail of the porch; she sprung over the rail and landed on the ground. “Get away from her!” she yelled.

The four boys all stopped from closing in on the tiny bard.

Dan saw Xena heading for them and he ordered, "Get Xena!"

The three boys turned to the teenager and came after her. They started attacking her.

Dan though came at Gabrielle and picked her up off the ground.

"Xena!" hollered the tiny bard. She tried struggling against the older boy but found herself lifted off the ground and carried away.

Xena growled as she threw one of the boys off herself. She started fighting back.

The one boy she'd thrown aside got back up and came up behind her. He was a little bigger than Xena so he was able to grab a hold of her from behind.

Then the other two teenage boys started punching at her in various parts of her body.

Xena closed her eyes as she took a blow to her stomach then another at her face. She felt a few tears welding up behind her eyelids but she thought about her best friend. Suddenly her anger grew furiously and she lashed out. She grabbed the boy behind herself and hurled him over herself.

"Look out!" screamed the two boys in the front. They both were slammed by the bigger boy and fell to the ground.

"Stop struggling," snarled Dan. He threw Gabrielle onto the ground and glared down at her. "You're just a pain."

"I don't play hostage well in these games," retorted the tiny bard. She returned her own glare and sprung up at the tall boy.

Dan growled as he tried to grab her hands that were clawing at his chest. He managed to get a hold of her wrists but only after she clawed his right cheek. He was so frustrated though that he threw her and the back of Gabrielle's head hit a large rock.

Gabrielle moaned and closed her eyes; her body went limp.

"Stupid girl." Dan picked up Gabrielle in his arms and continued into the woods.

"Dinner should be soon," announced Toris, he lowered his wood sword.

"Yeah I know," agreed the young brother, he lowered his sword as well. He then gazed, confusingly, past Toris.

"What's wrong?" Toris turned around.

"Isn't that Dan?"

"It is and..." Toris furrowed his eyebrows as he studied Dan from a distance. "He's got some girl in his arms."

“Its Gabrielle,” uttered Lyceaus in fear.

“Come on, let’s get him,” ordered Toris. He went racing after the boy and his brother following behind. “Dan!” called out Toris.

Dan stopped and located the owner of the voice. “Hades,” he growled. He then suddenly heard Xena angrily scream his name. “Oh double Hades. How’d she get past them?”

Toris neared the boy and held up his wood sword. “Put Gabrielle down.”

Lyceaus held up his sword too and said, “I think you better, Dan. Xena will kick your ass.”

Toris grinned at what his brother said, and he had to just chuckle. “You know she will, Dan... soon as she gets here.”

Dan felt his heart pounding and sweat coating his body now. He started shaking his head.

“Dan!” growled an angry Xena. She stepped in front of her two brothers and whispered lowly, “Giver her to me or I’ll...”

Dan didn’t want to know what she planned to do. He just stared at feral blue eyes and a face written in anger. He cautiously handed the tiny bard to the girl.

Xena held her best friend in her arms tightly. She then felt something wet and warm touch her left elbow, she quickly realized Gabrielle’s head was bleeding. Her breathing deepened. “Toris,” she whispered quietly.

“Yes?”

“Please take her to mother. Her head has been hurt... somehow,” she whispered between her teeth.

Toris carefully moved closer to his sister.

Xena turned and handed Gabrielle off to her brother. “Go with him, Ly.”

“But-”

“Now!” yelled Xena hotly.

Both brothers stared at their sister, they’d never seen her this anger before in their lives. They both stepped back then rushed off and praying that Dan would live to see another day.

Xena turned her feral eyes back onto Dan.

Dan’s eyes widened at the vicious look appearing on Xena’s face. “It was an accident.”

“I doubt that,” she growled.

Dan kept shaking his head as he stepped back while Xena stepped forward. His back hit the tree directly behind him. “Xena-”

“Shut up,” growled the girl. She grabbed him by the collar of his shirt. “You bastard.” She felt her anger rage on and it caused her adrenaline to pump through her body. Now she was able to lift him up slightly off the ground, she then threw him onto the ground behind herself.

Dan stared up at Xena. Slowly he saw Xena extracted a dagger from under her shirt. “Oh gods,” he whimpered and began crawling backwards on his hands.

Xena revealed a primal grin. She knelt down beside the boy and brought the dagger under his throat. She saw all the fear in his eyes. She didn’t say anything nor did anything as she enjoyed all this fear he held for her. “Now then...” She lowered her face closer to his. “I’m going to tell you this once and you better not ever forget it.”

“Okay,” whispered the boy.

Xena pressed the point of the dagger in more to emphasize her power. “If you ever, ever touch Gabrielle or anybody else in my family again, I will make your insides your outsides.” She brought her face right into the other teenager’s. “Keep your boys away from us as well.” She paused as a very nasty grin crossed her lips. “Have I made myself clear, Dan?”

The boy faintly nodded.

“Good,” whispered Xena. She pulled back her dagger and slipped it back under her shirt. She started to stand up but stopped part of the way up. “Oh and another thing.”

Dan’s eyes widened when he saw the fist slam into his face. His head hit the ground, and he cried out.

“That’s for Gabrielle.” Xena stood up and walked off; in the background she could hear the boy crying about his broken nose. She shrugged it off and repeatedly clenched and unclenched her right hand. Her hand ached some from the hard blow she gave the boy but she really didn’t care. She also finally decided to wipe away the bit of blood smeared under the bottom of her lip.

“Mom, is she okay?” whispered Lyceaus.

Cyrene sighed and brushed Gabrielle’s blond locks away from her forehead. “What was your sister doing when you two left?”

“I don’t know, mother,” whispered Lyceaus.

“Probably kicking the crap out of Dan,” replied Toris. He entered Xena’s room with a bowl of water. “She was pissed, mom.”

Cyrene peered up at her son. She then stood up. “Take care of Gabrielle. I’m going to get your sister.”

“Mom, she’ll be fine.”

“I know that but I’m more concerned for this boy Dan.”

Toris chuckled.

“It’s not funny, Toris.” Cyrene stood in the doorway and ordered, “Keep watch of Gabrielle. Check the back of her head.”

“Yes, mother.” Toris watched his mom hurry out the room. He then glanced at his younger brother then back at Gabrielle. He lifted her head and with his free hand, he carefully dabbed the wet towel to clean off the blood.

“You think she’ll be okay, Toris?”

“She’ll be fine,” promised Toris.

Cyrene came around the side of the tavern, soon as she did she caught sight of her daughter coming out of the woods. “Xena?”

Xena didn’t say anything but approached her mother.

“By the gods,” whispered Cyrene. She carefully touched her daughter’s right cheek, examining the various cuts and bruises on her daughter’s face. “What happened, honey?”

“These four boys ganged up on Gabrielle,” uttered the teenager. “I kinda got angry.”

“Yes, I can tell. What happened to Dan?”

Xena shrugged but didn’t make any eye contact.

Cyrene turned her daughter’s face towards her own. “Xena, where is he?”

“He’s in the forest still.”

“Alright... go inside and clean yourself up.”

“Is Gabrielle okay?”

Cyrene sighed and removed her hand. “I think so. Let her rest, hopefully she’ll come out of it soon.”

Xena nodded and just brushed past her mother. She went into the tavern and upstairs.

The mother listened to her daughter go inside; she then headed into the woods in the evening sunset. After about three minutes of searching, she found the boy sitting up against a tree with bloody hands, nose, and scratched cheek. “Dan?”

The boy looked up with a tear stained face. “Who are you?”

Cyrene went a little closer but didn’t move in too close. “I’m Xena’s mother, Cyrene. Are you okay?”

Dan licked his lips and lowered his eyes to his bloody hands. “I just need to get home,” he whispered.

Cyrene took four more steps closer and knelt down. "Can I help you get home?"

Dan looked up into trusting hazel eyes. He slowly nodded.

Cyrene helped the young boy up and walked him out of the forest. "Where is your home?"

"I live by the butchers."

"Okay, let's get you home then." Cyrene sighed and directed the boy towards the other side of town. "How is your nose?"

"I think it's broken."

"May I ask what happened between you all?"

Dan sighed deeply and explained to Cyrene what had happened. "Me and three of my friends tried to get Gabrielle so we could tease your daughter. We didn't want to hurt anybody." He paused while chewing on his lip a little as he continued his story. "And well, Xena came out and saw what was happening. She got all angry and started hitting and punching at us all. I ran off to get away but she hunted me down." He shrugged then added, "She threatened me to stay away from Gabrielle from now on."

Cyrene narrowed her eyes yet nodded her understanding. "Well next time, I think its best you do not try to tease Xena. She has a rather bad temper."

"I can see that," agreed Dan. He saw his house coming into view so he stopped and said, "Thank you for walking me home."

"You'll be okay?"

"Yes, thank you again." Dan smiled warmly then continued the rest of the walk to his house.

Cyrene watched for a moment but then turned and went back to her own home.

Xena dried off her face and lifted her head, she stared at her reflection in the mirror. She mentally counted the scars on her face from the fight, there were three of them. She could also see a slight blackness developing under her right eye. "Great," she muttered.

After washing her face off, she went into her bedroom. Her two brothers looked to her immediately when she came into the room.

"Sssso, is Dan still alive?" asked Toris tauntingly.

"Yeah," replied Xena simply. She went to her dresser first and kept her back to her brothers. She quietly and carefully slipped out her two daggers, she placed them into her shirt drawer, tucking them underneath a few shirts. Turning around, she came to the other side of her bed. She knelt down besides the bed and studied her best friend.

"What happened to Dan?" quipped Lyceaus.

“Nothing, Ly,” replied Xena.

“Centaur shit,” countered Toris.

“That’s centaur crap, young man,” corrected Cyrene. She stood in the doorway with her arms against her chest. “Go down stairs, boys. I’ll have dinner ready in a few minutes.”

Toris stood up from the chair besides the bed. He grabbed Lyceaus’s arm and tugged him out of the room.

After they were gone, Cyrene sat down.

“Is she okay, mother?”

“I think so, honey.”

Xena nodded, licked her lips, and lowered her chin down onto the bedside. She just stared at her friend sleeping peacefully on the bed.

“Dan told me you attacked them.”

The teenager lifted her head up at hearing that. “I did not, mother. They attacked Gabrielle and I jumped in to stop them.”

“Dan had a bloody face and a broken nose, honey.”

“Mother!” roared Xena; she sprung up to her feet. “What you think this is huh?” She pointed to her face. “Or how about Gabrielle huh? You think she just hit her own head?” She huffed and turned around, she walked over to the window and stared at the town.

Cyrene sighed. She looked at Gabrielle for several moments but she stood up from her chair. She crossed the room to her daughter’s side. “Honey, please try to control that temper of yours.”

“Mom, they were going to hurt Gabrielle,” whispered Xena, “You know how I feel about her.”

Cyrene took a deep breath, she brought her left arm around her daughter’s tense shoulders. She slowly lowered her head onto her child’s shoulder. “I know, sweetie. I know she’s your sister. Just please be more careful next time and try to control your temper better. Please?”

Xena’s shoulders loosened up, and she dropped her head against her mother’s. “I will try.”

“Thank you,” uttered Cyrene. “Why don’t you stay up here for dinner. Keep an eye on Gabrielle. Okay?”

“Thanks, mom.”

“No problem, sweetie.” The mother lifted her head back up and quietly left the room.

Xena moved away from the window and sat down in the chair beside the bed. After about ten minutes, her mother had brought her dinner. She tried her best to eat most of it but it

was hard since her stomach was still doing flips from being upset about this afternoon. But after she ate most of it, she returned her plate to her mother then went back upstairs. She blew out a couple of candles in the room so that she could sleep.

The teenager then crawled into bed after she'd put her night shift on herself. Once she was comfortable in her bed, she cautiously pulled Gabrielle into her arms. She placed a gentle kiss to Gabrielle's temple and held her tightly.

"Xen?" muttered the tiny bard in her sleep.

"I'm here, Bri," whispered the older girl.

Gabrielle moaned and thrashed onto her left side, her back to Xena.

The older girl sighed and placed a gentle kiss to the back of her friend's head, right where the scab was growing. When her lips gently pressed against the scabbed skin, she felt her anger boil up again inside of herself. She tried to control it but it was so hard.

The bard whined, "Xena?"

"Come here," whispered the teenager. She helped her friend turn around then tucked her back into her arms.

"Xen?"

"HmMMM?"

"You stop Dan?" Gabrielle nuzzled her friend's neck and whispered, "He tried hurting me."

"I know... he won't bother you ever again."

The tiny bard tried pushing more into her friend's arms. "I have a bad headache." She lifted her head up some and opened her fuzzy green eyes.

Xena sighed but smiled sadly at Gabrielle. "Close your eyes again. I'll try to help it, okay?"

"Okay, thank you."

"You're welcome. Just go back to sleep." She shifted her left hand under Gabrielle's head to her right temple. Xena's other free hand, she placed her index and middle finger against Gabrielle's left temple. She then slowly massaged her friend's temples.

"Mmmmm," whispered the tiny bard. She gradually felt her headache calming, and she drifted back to sleep.

Xena, however, laid awake for a few candlemarks. Her mind repeatedly replayed the events of this afternoon. She continually heard Gabrielle screaming out for her. Her anger fueled through her body and the energy kept her awake for most of the night and caused for restless sleep.

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Winter had passed by and spring had begun in full glory, two months had passed by since the incident with the boys and Xena. The pair of friends had grown from that experience. Xena learned exactly the potential of her own anger as well as her physical strength. She'd grown to see the various possibilities to handling such a fight like that ever again.

Gabrielle, herself, also saw the anger her friend could hold but never experienced her best friend's own temperament first hand. She also felt a need to protect herself after that experience so that nobody could attack her like that ever again. So as promised, Xena taught her best friend how to use the daggers.

Xena had promised her best friend, soon as she mastered the daggers, that she would let her have one of them. Tomorrow was the day that Xena would pit against her best friend to see just how much she'd learned over the couple of months. But today, they were enjoying an incredibly special day, Gabrielle's birthday.

"Godssss." Gabrielle laughed as she stared up at her ceiling her in bedroom. "I can't believe I'm a teenager now."

Xena laughed quietly to herself. "Wait till you turn eighteen." She turned her head to the right on the pillow and smiled at her friend.

The new teenager brightly grinned and teased, "You'll be eighteen this winter."

The older teenager groaned. "I know."

"I can't wait!" Gabrielle sat up in her bed and decided to sit on Xena's waist. "I'm going to have the biggest birthday for you."

"Thanks but no thanks."

"Awe come on, Xen." Gabrielle grinned. "It'd be so much fun."

"Hades no," growled the older teenager.

The smaller teenager rolled her eyes. "You are no fun."

"Oh really?"

"Well maybe some," teased the little bard.

Xena chuckled at that.

Gabrielle then decided to lie back down but not on her bed but instead on top of Xena.

The older teenager smiled at her friend.

"So, you think I act my age?"

Xena shrugged and replied, "No."

"How old I act then?"

A gigantic grin broke out in Xena's expression. "A three year old."

“Xena!” Gabrielle swatted her friend’s side. “I’m the birthday girl, you can’t tease me today.”

Xena’s blue eyes rolled. “Oh yeah, that’s right.”

“Seriously, how old do I act?”

The older teenager went more serious as she slipped her hands under her head. “I think you act a lot older than thirteen.”

“Like how old?” urged the tiny bard.

“Mmmmm.” Xena considered for many seconds. “My own age.”

“Really?”

“Uh huh.” The older girl smiled softly and added, “I don’t hang out with any thirteen year old.”

Gabrielle folded her arms over her friend’s breasts and rested her chin on top of her hands. “Thanks.”

“Welcome,” whispered Xena.

The pair studied each other quietly without any noise except their own breathing.

Gabrielle sighed contently and lowered her head down onto Xena’s breasts with her arms sliding away. She then gradually closed her eyes.

Xena grinned at her friend. She slipped one hand free from under her pillow. She rubbed her friend’s back lightly.

“Gabrielle!” suddenly screamed out Lila.

“Oh gods,” groaned the little bard. “Now here comes the three year old,” whimpered the bard.

“Gabby! its time!” Lila came banging on the door. “I’m coming in!”

“Lila, wait!”

But Lila didn’t wait and started opening the door.

Gabrielle’s heart skipped a beat, and she never knew she could move so quickly as she flew off Xena’s body.

Xena’s only reaction was to hysterically laugh.

Lila came into the room to see a huffing and puffing sister standing up and a laughing Xena. “What’s going on?”

The teenaged bard glared at her sister. “You barging in, that’s what!”

“What?” squealed the sister. “I said I was coming in.”

“You could have waited!” growled Gabrielle. “You are toast, Lila!”

Xena finally stopped laughing and saw how serious her friend was being. “Better run, Lila.”

The eleven-year-old glanced between a grinning Xena and an angry sister. “Toodles!” she jumped out of the room and slammed the door. “By the way,” she yelled between the door, “Mom says dinner is ready.”

“We’ll be in there in a minute,” promised Xena.

Gabrielle listened to her sister’s footfall going into the living room. She sighed and looked across the room to her best friend. “That was close.”

“I’ve never seen you move so fast... other than for food,” taunted the older teenager.

“Thanks,” deadpanned Gabrielle.

Xena and the little bard both knew if they’d been caught lying in each other’s arms how much trouble they would be in for it. Not only were they in each other’s arms but they both were females. They each knew the other’s family’s outlook on such things. Neither one of them spoke to the other about it but quietly accepted it between each other.

Xena hopped out of the bed and came up to her best friend. She squeezed Gabrielle’s shoulders to help relax her.

Gabrielle sighed in relief and just hugged Xena.

The older girl hugged the tiny bard back. “Come on. Let’s get some cake.”

“Always after the sweets,” teased the little bard.

“Got that right.” Xena turned her friend around and pushed her towards the door.

“Okay okay, I got the drift.” Gabrielle opened the door and went to the kitchen. She sat down at the head of the table with Xena to her right, Lila and her mother on her left then her father was at the other head of the table. Anytime it was somebody’s birthday, they were allowed to sit at the head of the table for that night.

“Okay, birthday girl start dinner,” teased Lila.

Gabrielle glanced at her mother for approval.

“Go on, honey,” urged Gabrielle’s mother.

The young bard smiled and started dinner by taking a few pieces of chicken from the plate. She then handed it off to the guest, Xena. After that, she moved onto the asparagus then passed it to Xena as well. She continued this with each platter her mother had prepared. Once everybody had what they wanted on their plate, Gabrielle started the dinner.

After the dinner, Hecuba and Lila cleared the table together and prepared the cake.

“The best part,” teased Xena to her friend.

Gabrielle chuckled.

“I’ll agree,” stated Gabrielle’s father.

Xena even chuckled in response.

Hecuba blew out several candles in the kitchen to darken everything some.

Lila then came down the hallway with a large square cake on a plate that had thirteen lit candles in it. “Happy birthday to you....”

Everybody joined in singing with Lila.

Gabrielle eyes widened as she realized it was a huge cake of nutbread with strawberries on the top. Once the cake was down in front of her, she blew them all out in one go.

“Make a wish?” asked the older teenager.

“Oh yeah.” Gabrielle winked at her friend.

“Go ahead and start cutting up the nutbread, honey.” Hecuba stood up from her chair and relit the candles in the room. She then pulled out five small serving plates and put them in front of her eldest daughter.

Gabrielle gingerly placed a slice of the nutbread onto a plate and handed it to Xena. She then cut another piece and plopped it onto a plate with a few strawberries. “Pass that to father.”

Xena took the plate and handed it to Herodotus.

The young bard continued slicing pieces of the nutbread until everybody had a slice. Then everybody started eating their nutbread in happy silence.

After dinner, Xena and Gabrielle went to Gabrielle’s parents to ask if they could leave the house.

“Honey, where are you two going?” probed Gabrielle’s mother. “To the barn?”

“Hecuba, let them be... they’re old enough.”

“I know, Herodotus but I’d just like to know where they’ll be.”

“Just out to the field behind the house,” answered Gabrielle. “Please?”

Hecuba put the dirty plate down in the counter. “If you promise to sleep in the house tonight and not in the barn. Okay?”

“Yes, mom. We promise.”

Xena nodded her agreement.

“Okay go on.” Hecuba watched the two girls rush out of the house. She shook her head and turned back to the dirty dishes. “Those two are always into something.”

Gabrielle’s father chuckled and replied, “They’re kids... what can you expect?”

Hecuba chuckled at that.

Xena and Gabrielle slowly strolled around to the back of the house. They then entered into the remains of what was a wheat field that soon would be growing barely. Together, they searched out a perfect spot to lay and study the stars together. Once they were settled into comfortable positions on the ground, they started studying the stars.

“I love doing this with you.”

Xena felt a grin tug at her lips. “Me too.”

“A little cool though.”

“Come here,” offered Xena. She pulled her friend in closer.

Gabrielle snuggled up to the older girl’s side and started to warm back up. “Thank you for coming for my birthday.”

“I wouldn’t miss it,” promised Xena.

“Yeah I know... just always means a lot to me.”

“I know it does.” Xena turned her head and gave a warm smile.

Gabrielle returned the happy smile then looked back at the stars. After many minutes of silence, she whispered, “Xen?”

“Yeah, Bri?”

“Can I asked you something?”

“Yeah sure. Shoot.”

Gabrielle rolled onto her side and brought her right arm over Xena’s breasts. “I know we never talked about this before but....”

Xena raised a dark brown eyebrow in question. “What is it?”

“Well... why you let me, you know....”

“No, why do I let you what?” persisted the older teenager.

“Like... touch you or snuggle with you... things like that.”

“Well why do you?” countered Xena.

Gabrielle pressed her lips together at the question and simply responded, “Because I love you.”

“Same for me,” agreed Xena.

Gabrielle just blinked then lowered her head onto the side of her friend’s chest. “It’s just that I consider you my sister and all and I don’t do this stuff with Lila. Well I have when she’s upset or I’m really upset.”

“Yeah I know.” Xena squeezed her friend’s shoulder.

The little bard lifted her head to peer into warm blue eyes. “Remember when I asked you about if you’ll ever find the right guy?”

“Yeah a couple of months ago. Why?”

Gabrielle chewed on the inside of her lips a little yet asked, “You think you will?”

“Maybe.” Xena shrugged. “Not really worried about it though. Why are you so worried?”

“I’m not sure.” Gabrielle rested her head back down. She shifted her right hand back over and pressed her fingertips against Xena’s throat. She trailed her fingertips up to her friend’s jaw line.

“Gabrielle,” whispered Xena, she’d closed her eyes. “What’s on your mind huh?”

“You,” uttered the young bard quietly.

“What about me?” Xena felt her heartbeat go a little faster when Gabrielle’s fingertips came over her high cheekbones.

The young teenager raised her head back up again and watched blue eyes open up to her again. “Just... what it’d be like to kiss you,” she whispered softly. Her fingertips grazed across her best friend’s soft lips.

Xena felt a burst of heat flash through her body. She carefully brought her right hand up to Gabrielle’s left cheek. “Then find out.” She drew her friend’s head down with her hand.

Gabrielle closed her eyes when her lips touched Xena’s smooth lips. At first, she wasn’t really sure what to do since it was her first kiss but her imagination helped her along.

Xena felt Gabrielle’s warm tongue against her lips so she opened her mouth cautiously. She moaned when her tongue pressed into Gabrielle’s own.

The little bard whimpered and pressed her body against Xena’s more.

Xena pulled back some because she felt a little out of control. “Calm down, Gabrielle,” she muttered between the kiss.

The younger girl backed off, giving a huge sigh but tried to calm down.

“Come here.” Xena pulled her friend in closer and tried to get her to relax. She, herself, was trying to catch her breath again. Once a few minutes passed by, she asked quietly, “So what’d you think?”

“Gods,” whimpered the bard, she snuggled her head into her friend’s neck more. “I couldn’t write it if I tried.”

“Good then?” teased the older teenager.

“Uh huh.”

Xena grinned. "Not bad for our first times huh?"

"Yyyeah... hate to see what we're like after a few practice runs and a longer kiss." She then felt Xena's chest shaking from a few quiet laughs. She grinned.

Xena felt the grin shape from Gabrielle's lips. "So care to explain that one?"

Gabrielle brushed back her hair when she lifted her head back up. "Xena, honestly I don't want you to date anybody. Well... I do, just only one person."

"Who is that?" inquired the teenager.

Gabrielle placed the palm of her right hand against her friend's closest cheek. "Me." She searched loving blue eyes as she spoke more. "I'm sorry but I'm really selfish like that."

Xena felt an incredible smile pull across her face. "Me too."

"Seriously? You'd date me?" Gabrielle shook her head in confusion. "But wait, I'm your friend, sister... a girl... younger. Xena-"

"Gabrielle, hold on." Xena waited for her friend to settle down. "I've always loved you as my friend and a younger sister. Just over time as we've changed and developed, I've grown more love for you." She brushed back a few loose strands of blond hair behind Gabrielle's ear. "As I said earlier, you don't act younger than me. And far as two girls goes..." Xena shrugged. "Well, I've heard of two women being together."

"Yeah? Really?" asked a curious little bard.

"Uh huh." But Xena chuckled. "I have no idea but I hear its true."

"Wwwwweird."

"I wouldn't call it that."

"Yeah I know." Gabrielle lowered her chin onto her friend's chest. "Not that I know how a girl and guy... you know do it. Well I mean I do, but I don't know the finer details and all."

"Well," started Xena, "what happens-"

"Xena! Please... I don't need a class in male, female sex." Gabrielle groaned and rolled off her friend.

Xena snickered quietly but rolled to her right, on top of her friend. "Okay then. How about this?"

"How about what?" questioned the small bard.

"How would you like to... be my girlfriend?" whispered Xena lovingly.

Gabrielle rested there under her friend's body as she seriously considered the offer. She thought about everything from her family to Xena's then to her future and how she felt about Xena. After the consideration, she quietly replied, "I would love it." She then watched has a very happy smiled developed on her new girlfriend's face.

“Thank you.”

Gabrielle smiled sheepishly. “Thank you too.”

“For?”

“For asking and...” She trailed off but her face began to go bright red.

“What, Gabrielle?” Xena’s devilish look reappeared at seeing the blush.

“And for well, making my birthday wish come true.”

Xena smiled and lowered her head closer to her girlfriend’s. “I hope I do it every year.” She placed a light kiss to Gabrielle’s lips.

The bard giggled and suddenly wrapped her arms and legs around Xena’s body.

The older teenager groaned and suddenly rolled onto her back, taking Gabrielle with her.

Gabrielle positioned herself comfortably on her friend’s body. “I do have one question.”

“What’s that?”

“Um well...” The small bard began blush yet again.

“Oh let me guess, when are we going to have sex?”

Gabrielle laughed and swatted her friend’s side. “Its called making love.”

“We’ve always made love, Gabrielle,” taunted Xena.

“You know what I mean.”

Xena wiped away her teasing grin and finally answered, “When we think you’re ready.”

“Why me?”

“Because you’re only thirteen,” reminded the seventeen-year-old. She lifted her right hand poked the small nose in front of her.

“True... I haven’t even started my cycle.”

“Be happy,” stated Xena. “It’s a... pain.”

Gabrielle chuckled. “Yeah, you get so biiiii-”

“Gabrielle,” warned the teenager.

“I was just teasing.”

Xena shook her head but grinned nonetheless. “But seriously, I think its best we wait till you’re older.”

“Like how old?”

“Like when you’re my age.”

“Eighteen?” roared Gabrielle, she lifted herself up some.

The teenager sighed and pulled her little bard back down. “At least sixteen, okay?”

“Why?”

“Because you’re young, Gabrielle.”

The bard huffed. “You just said I act your age.”

“You do but I didn’t say your body is my age.”

The young bard groused and finally rested her head onto Xena’s chest. “I know but its just... I’ll be sixteen and you’ll be... twenty-one by then. Gods.”

“It doesn’t matter, from there out we’ll have the rest of our lives to do sex.”

“True.”

Xena rubbed her girlfriend’s back. “Worry about it later huh? We have plenty of time to decide. Alright?”

“Okay.” Gabrielle slowly closed her eyes.

The older teenager glanced at her peaceful friend, she felt a content sigh leave herself. She then decided it was the right time to give her friend the gift she’d been dying to give to her. Carefully, she slipped her right hand into her pant’s pocket and pulled out a black velvet bag.

“Xena?”

“Mmmm?”

“What you doing?” Gabrielle opened her eyes, lifted her head, and settled her chin onto Xena’s chest.

“Do me a favour, sit up.”

Gabrielle raised a light brown eyebrow at her girlfriend.

“Come on,” urged the older girl.

“Oookay.” Gabrielle grinned but nonetheless sat up. “And?”

“And close your eyes.”

The little bard arched her eyebrow momentarily but did as her friend asked.

Xena opened the black bag then ordered, “Lean forward for me.”

Gabrielle shook her head but a grin was forming on her lips. She leaned forward with her eyes still closed. “Anything else?”

“Just stay like that for a second.” Xena unhooked the two ends of the necklace. “One more favour.”

The young bard giggled and asked, “What’s that? You’re running short on them.”

“Ooooh I think you’ll give me... nutbread points for this one. Pull your hair up and hold it.”

“Rrrrrright.” Gabrielle reached behind and grabbed her hair. She clumped it all into one hand and lifted it up, holding it up.

Xena reached up, holding the sparkling silver necklace between her hands. She carefully brought the two ends around her girlfriend’s neck and watched the quill pendent settle into place. Finally, she clipped to two ends back together with the lobster like clasp. “There. Can lower your hair and take a look.”

Gabrielle slowly dropped her hair back down then opened her misty green eyes. “Oh Xen,” she whispered once she’d held up the charm in the palm of her hand to study it.

“I hope you still want it.”

The little bard shifted her eyes to her friend and a happy smile formed. “Why?”

“Because its your birthday and because I love you,” replied Xena.

Gabrielle examined the silver quill again and then gingerly lowered it against her chest again. She lowered herself back down onto her girlfriend’s body. She hugged Xena with all of her strength for about a minute straight.

Xena hugged her little bard back just as strong.

“Thank you so much,” whispered Gabrielle. She finally raised her head back up and placed a gentle kiss on Xena’s lips.

“You’re very much welcome.”

The younger girl chuckled and said, “I wondered what happened to it. I’ve been eyeing this necklace for months.”

“I know you have... thought you should finally have it.”

“Thank you.” Gabrielle squeezed her girlfriend again.

Xena responded with a kiss to the top of her bard’s head.

“And yup, you got nutbread points with me,” teased Gabrielle.

The older teenager started laughing happily. “Sweet!”

Gabrielle joined in the laughing.

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“Mom, Xena and I are going to go into the forest to play. Is that okay?”

Hecuba looked away from her garden and up to her daughter and Xena. “That’s fine, dear. Just be careful, please?”

“Yes, mother.” Gabrielle then asked, “Do you need help with the garden?”

“No, honey... I’m pretty much finished.” The mother wiped the dirt off her hands. “But after lunch, you might need to help your father in the barn or with the field.”

“Okay.” Gabrielle then considered her sister so asked, “Where’s Lila?”

“Oh she’s out helping your father at the market today.”

“That’s what I thought.”

Hecuba turned back to her garden. “Be back for lunch, ladies.”

“We will, mom.” Gabrielle hurried her best friend off towards town.

Xena walked beside her girlfriend as they went part way into town. They then headed off on a trail that led into the neighboring forest. Once she felt like she was far enough from sight, she reached over.

Gabrielle felt a large warm hand take hers. She quickly looked at Xena.

Xena smiled warmly and squeezed the smaller hand.

The tiny bard blushed but squeezed her girlfriend’s hand back.

They soon found a nice open yet secluded spot away from the town.

“Which tree?” inquired Gabrielle.

Xena turned in a full circle as she picked out the official contest tree. “That one.” She pointed to the medium size oak tree. She removed the two daggers from under her shirt and handed one to Gabrielle. “Okay, how about a little warm up first?”

Gabrielle extracted the dagger from the sheath and nodded. “Okay.” She bent forward and placed the sheath onto the top of a large rock. She took Xena’s sheath as well and put it next to the other one. “You go first.”

Xena chuckled and said, “Okay.” She took a large side step away from Gabrielle to gain more space. She then flipped the dagger and caught it by the end of the blade. With a huge grin, she pulled back her arm and threw it.

Xena’s dagger sailed towards the tree and dug into the bark directly under a branch.

“Your turn.”

Gabrielle groaned but then announced, “I’m so gonna miss the tree.” She sighed but held the dagger by the tip; she then pulled back her right arm and threw it.

Gabrielle’s dagger clipped the targeted tree and wedged into a branch in the tree behind the targeted one. “See!” yelled Gabrielle.

Xena shook her head as she grinned from ear to ear. She walked over to the target tree and extracted her dagger. She then retrieved Gabrielle’s as well. She handed her friend

the dagger back. “Okay, next time focus your eyes just solely on that tree, okay? Forget about everything else around you.”

“Okay.” Gabrielle focused herself on the target tree. For a second she chewed on her lower lip but then pulled her right hand back then threw her arm forward with the dagger releasing from her fingertips.

Gabrielle’s yelled happily and did a quick happy dance. “I got it that time.”

Xena laughed and handed her dagger to her friend. “Good for two in a row?”

“I can do this,” promised the little bard. She held Xena’s dagger by the end blade, pulled her arm back, and focused on the target tree again. She took a deep breath, held it, and chucked the dagger with all her strength.

The dagger soared and cut into the tree slightly to the left of the first dagger.

“Nice one,” praised Xena. She went to the tree and extracted the daggers again. “Okay, let’s test you a little more.”

“Um... how?”

“You’ll see.” Xena handed over the two daggers. “Now go ahead.”

Gabrielle licked her lips, focused on the tree again, and pulled her right arm back. She was about to throw it but stopped herself when she noticed Xena’s face rather close to her own. “Xen, stop that,” growled the bard.

“What’s wrong?” whispered Xena. “Can’t focus?”

“Xena,” growled the tiny bard. “I’m trying to. You’re distract....” She stopped, turned her head to Xena, and glared. “You are so mean.”

The older teenager snickered evilly. “And what? You think you won’t have any distractions when somebody is fighting you?” Xena corked a dark brown eyebrow. “Not like the world is going to stop for you, be quiet, and let you throw the dagger,” she whispered.

Gabrielle grumped with a few expressions but tried hard to ignore her girlfriend being so close to her. “You can do this, Gabrielle,” she coached to herself. She started to throw her hand forward.

“Yes you can, Gabrielle,” uttered Xena in a sensual voice.

The little bard faltered and her throw went to low. Her dagger embedded itself into the ground at the base of the tree. “Xena!” she roared.

The older girl stepped backwards a few times laughing so hard.

“That is not funny!” yelled the tiny bard. “I almost had it then you had to say my name... like that!” she growled.

Xena was hunched forward still laughing at her friend. "That was classic, Bri." She then saw her friend getting angry but focusing on the tree again with her right hand pulled back with the other dagger. She quickly moved closer again and right when Gabrielle was about to toss the dagger, she pressed her warm lips against Gabrielle's cheek.

"Xena!" yelled the tiny bard. She felt her anger boil up. She pulled her arm back as far as she could, she then hurled the dagger at the tree. Gabrielle's dagger drove its way deep into the tree's centre.

Xena pulled her face away from Gabrielle's and looked at the dagger. "Oooh finally used the anger huh?" She grinned and sashayed up to the target tree.

Gabrielle was shaking her head while grinding her teeth. "You are just pure evil."

"Thanks," responded the older teenager. She ripped the one dagger out of the tree and then picked up the other from out of the ground. She handed them back yet again to her friend. "One more practice run."

The little bard sighed and took them. "Don't do that anymore though, promise?"

"Okay... okay." Xena held up her hands and took a few steps behind her friend. "I'll watch from behind here." She put her hands behind her back but a devilish grin still masked her features. "Go on."

Gabrielle cleared her throat and readied one dagger in her right hand. She took a calming breath and pulled her right arm back. She licked her lips then prepared to throw the dagger.

"Gabrielle!" suddenly screamed Xena.

"Oh gods what!" yelled the tiny bard, she spun around while she was in the motion of throwing her dagger.

The dagger escaped Gabrielle's hand and went barreling towards Xena.

"Xena, look out!"

The older teenager dropped to the ground right as the dagger came at her head. "Hades," she muttered when she heard the dagger strike the tree behind her.

"Xena!" growled the tiny bard. "I could have hurt you. Don't do that!"

Xena lifted her head out of the grass and just grinned at her girlfriend. "You are funny."

"No I'm not... especially when I have sharp objects in my hand." Gabrielle knelt down in front of her friend. "You okay?"

"Yeah fine." The grinning teenager stood back up with Gabrielle's help. "Okay I promise not to do anything this time."

Gabrielle chuckled and moved back to her spot after she knew her friend was okay. She focused on the target tree and threw the dagger with perfect aim. This time she nailed the tree in the direct centre. "How was that?"

Xena smiled happily. "Perfect." She turned around and pulled the one dagger out of the tree. When she came to Gabrielle's spot, she saw her friend had pulled the other one from the target tree. "Now then, time for the contest." She neared the target tree and held the dagger up at the tree. "First our target area on the tree." She slammed the dagger into the tree and forcefully cut out a small circle in the bark.

Gabrielle looked at the small circle and squeaked, "I have to get it in there?"

"Yup." The older girl wiggled her eyebrows in a teasing manner. "You get it in the middle of that circle, you get your dagger."

The young bard groaned. "This will be funny."

"Come on, have some confidence," urged the eldest teenager. She pushed her friend away from the tree then made her stop. "Wait here. We have to have a line we stand behind to throw from." Xena picked up a long branch, lined up with the target, and then took four gigantic steps backwards. She dropped the branch at the front of her shoes. "From here."

"Forget that!" Gabrielle threw her hands up and stomped off after she saw exactly how far the throwing line was from the tree.

Xena laughed and raced after her friend. "Come on, you can do it. Just try."

Gabrielle spun around and pointed the dagger at her girlfriend's nose, which was half a foot away. "I can't."

"Yes you can, Bri," promised Xena. "I have faith."

"I don't!" Gabrielle laughed and lowered the dagger. "No way."

"Okay..." The older girl shrugged, turned around, and walked to the throwing line. "I understand... you're too weak and scared."

"What'd you say?" asked a small but now angry bard.

Xena whirled around on the balls of her feet. "You're scared... I know you can't handle something as simple as this." She bit back her lower lip to hold her grin down.

"I'm scared huh?" She marched right up to Xena with her dagger back up. "I'm too weak huh?"

Xena's blue eyes narrowed down to the tip of the dagger that was near her nose again. "Yeah, that's what I said."

"Fine, you're on." Gabrielle whipped the dagger down to her side and moved over to the throwing line.

Xena rolled her eyes while her back was to Gabrielle. She wiped away her huge grin and shifted to Gabrielle's side. "Okay, the best of three is the winner."

"Alright." The small bard raised up her dagger.

"You sure you want to go first?" Sparkling green eyes looked her up and down.

“Well the winner always goes first, duh.”

Xena laughed and said, “Be my guest.” She took one step back, and she placed her hands behind her back with her dagger.

“Lila?”

“Yes, mom?”

Hecuba turned around from the counter, she lowered her cutting knife to the counter.  
“Can you get your sister and Xena for lunch?”

“Where are they?”

“In the forest, I’m sure not too far off.”

“Probably down the path a ways.”

Hecuba nodded her agreement. “Go on and hurry.”

“Yes, mother.” Lila put the last plate on the table then rushed out of the house to find her sister and friend. She quickly found the path that led into the forest. She quickly walked down it, searching.

“Okay we’re both one and one,” stated Xena. “This is the last round and-”

“I know, I know,” cut off the teenaged bard. “If I win I get the dagger if I lose you keep it.”

“Uh huh.” Xena chewed on her lower lip. “Want to go first?”

Gabrielle thought about it then shook her head. “You go.”

The older girl chuckled and took the position in front of the throwing line. She took a deep breath, pulled her arm back with the dagger, and started to aim at the circle.

A huge grin creased the bard’s lips as she decided to play Xena’s game. She took a few small steps closer to her girlfriend.

Xena glanced at her friend from the corner of her eye. “Gaaabrielleee,” she warned.

The small bard leaned her head closer. “What’s good for one goose is good for the other one,” she whispered.

Xena groaned and whispered, “Pay backs.”

“Uh huh.” Gabrielle licked her lips and whispered, “Go on, oh expert one.”

“Bratt,” grumbled the older girl. She tried to ignore her girlfriend as she refocused on the target. With a deep breath, she tensed her arm up and started to bring it forward.

Gabrielle moved her head in a little closer.

Xena faltered in her throw when she felt warm lips lightly brush her neck. “Gods! Gabrielle!” she roared when the dagger hit the right inside of the circle.

Lila turned her head to the right when she heard her sister’s name being yelled out by Xena. She came to a sudden stop and saw Gabrielle and Xena’s heads above the large bush. She furrowed her eyebrows at what they were doing. So instead of making herself known, she sneaked up behind the brush, knelt a little, and listened carefully.

The tiny bard snickered at her friend’s attempt to get the dead centre. “Well in real life, the world isn’t going to stop for you, Xena be quiet and let you throw.” She pushed her friend aside and took her spot in front of the throwing line.

“Alright then,” declared Xena, “If that’s how you want to do it.” She narrowed her eyes and stood beside the other girl.

Lila quietly moved some of the thin branches out of the way so that she could see through the bush better. She now had a clear view of her sister and Xena. She watched as Gabrielle held up a shiny dagger and Lila’s brown eyes instantly widened.

“Go ahead,” urged Xena.

Gabrielle chewed on the side of her mouth because she knew her girlfriend would try to distract her again. She studied at where her girlfriend’s dagger hung, embedded into the tree. After a brief second, she concentrated on the middle of the circle and tried to keep her mind focused on just that spot.

Xena stood beside Gabrielle but slightly behind her. She lifted her left hand that was directly behind Gabrielle.

The little bard felt the faint breeze behind her back and it caused her to tense up. She knew her friend was about to do something to break her concentration. But instead of letting Xena best her, she used her emotion she used last time, her anger. So she pulled back her arm a little more, gritted her teeth, and began to swing forward.

Xena felt a grin spread across her lips as she ran her fingertips up Gabrielle’s back until she came to her neck.

Gabrielle was almost caught off guard by the warm sensations but remained focused on the target. She released the dagger from her fingertips and it sailed for the circle.

The older teenager watched in waiting tension.

Lila herself had even held her own breath to see if her sister did it or not.

Then suddenly Gabrielle jumped up and down, screaming and hollering in happiness. “I beat you, I beat you!”

Xena stood there, laughing, shaking her head, and admiring Gabrielle’s dagger in the direct centre of the circle.

Lila even giggled quietly to herself at seeing her sister's happy victory.

"Okay, okay," started Xena. She came over to her happy dancing bard and grabbed her by the shoulders. "I'll surrender my second dagger to you."

"Yes!" yelled the bard. She did another jump and then hugged her best friend.

"Gods... all this over a dagger," whispered Xena in the middle of the hug.

Gabrielle chuckled and pulled back a little. "But I won and its your dagger."

Xena smiled warmly at her girlfriend. She reached up to push back some of Gabrielle's blond hair. "You did well."

"Thank you... and thank you for the help."

"You're welcome," uttered the older girl.

Lila furrowed her eyebrows as she realized the two friends were having a rather long hug.

Gabrielle smiled warmly and reached behind Xena's head, she pulled Xena's head down.

Xena locked their lips together in a gentle kiss.

Lila gasped and fell backwards onto the ground.

Gabrielle tore away from the kiss. "What was that?" she uttered.

Xena narrowed her eyes and quickly released her friend. "Somebody is here," she uttered then quickly went to grab her daggers from the tree.

"Who is there?" called Gabrielle.

"Um... its just me, Gabby," called Lila from behind the bush.

"Lila?" growled the older sister. She stomped over to the side of the bush and looked down at her sister sitting in the grass. "Lila," she growled even deeper. "What are you doing here?"

"Mother asked me to get you and Xena... so I did."

"You sure did," agreed the older teenager, as she came up beside Gabrielle. Xena was carefully slipping the daggers back into their sheaths and placing them under her shirt again.

The tiny bard narrowed her eyes and knelt down closer to her sister. "Lila, what did you see and hear?"

"Um... nothing, sister." Lila then started to suddenly blush.

Gabrielle's shoulders slumped and a groan escaped her. "Great... great, I know just what you saw." She closed her eyes as she tried to think.

"I swear I saw nothing," squeaked out the younger sister.

Gabrielle opened her forest eyes and leaned closer to her sister. "I swear if you tell mother and father, or anybody else for that matter. I will--"

"Gabrielle," whispered Xena quietly. Her right hand rested between Gabrielle's two shoulder blades but she wasn't looking down at her friend.

The younger teenager looked up at her friend and saw the confusion on Xena's face. "What's wrong?"

"Do you smell that?" uttered Xena quietly.

"Smell what?"

"It smells like fire," answered Xena.

"Yeah I smell it too," agreed Lila.

"Sssssh," ordered the oldest girl.

Gabrielle had a confused look as she waited for her girlfriend to explain what was wrong. "Xena?" she whispered in fear, she grasped the strong arm nearest to her. "What is it?"

"I think something is happening in the village." Xena finally looked down at the two girls. "Come on."

Gabrielle helped her sister up onto her feet and the three girls raced back to the town. Once they were close to the edge of the forest, Xena stopped them.

"Hold on." Xena saw a warrior on horseback race past.

"The village is under attack," gasped Lila.

Gabrielle's eyes widened at the realization, and she saw the building just ahead ablaze. "Oh gods, no. Mother and father." She started to move past her girlfriend but Xena grabbed her wrist.

"Gabrielle, no if we go in there we could get killed."

"But mother and father," whispered Gabrielle in fear.

"I know..." Xena hastily thought about what to do.

Lila suddenly gasped when she saw a raider in the distance come up to a man and stab him in the stomach.

"Sssssh, Lila." Gabrielle grabbed her little sister's hand.

"What about mother and father?" asked the scared girl.

Gabrielle didn't have an answer as she looked up to her girlfriend.

"I'm not sure," whispered Xena in worry.

"We can't leave them," almost yelled Lila.

“Lila, hush. If we go out there we’ll be killed easily,” reminded the older sister.

“But mom and dad,” urged Lila. She shook her head furiously. “They’ll be killed if we don’t help them.” Without warning, she jerked her hand free and broke off running into the village.

“Lila, no!” screamed Gabrielle, she chased after her sister.

“Hades,” growled Xena, and she also went chasing after the pair. She quickly caught up to her girlfriend and called, “Gabrielle, get out of here, okay?”

“Xena... I have... to get Lila,” she rasped between her running.

“I can catch her, I’m much faster. Just get away before a raider gets you.” Xena grasped her best friend’s shoulder for a brief moment. “Go into the forest...” she rasped, “and go around the village to your house. Please?”

Gabrielle faintly nodded because she trusted that Xena could catch Lila. She slowed down and quickly raced back into the forest right as a raider flew past on a horse, just missing her.

Xena sighed in relief and looked ahead to see the small Lila not too far off. She pushed herself to speed up. But what she never saw was the raider on horseback turning around and urging his horse into the woods right on Gabrielle’s trail.

The little bard jumped over large branches and fallen trees, she rushed herself around the forest towards her home. She slowed down a little to try and catch her breath some, she felt as if her heart would burst from her chest. Yet she’d never felt so much excitement fueling through her body that made her run so fast. Now she understood what Xena must have felt that afternoon with the boys.

But as she leapt onto a huge rock, she heard a whining of a horse not far behind. “Oh gods no please no,” she rasped and jumped off the rock to keep running.

The raider removed his sword from his side and started swiping the branches out of his way. It made his horse speed up and easier to work his way through the forest. “Where is that girl?” he growled. Looking ahead for a moment, he caught sight of a small figure with blond hair running. “There she is. Come on, boy.” He urged his dark horse forward and faster after the tiny bard.

Xena saw Lila nearing the side of a large building but then suddenly at the other end of the building a raider reappeared. “Oh no.”

Lila screamed and stopped running when she saw him. She felt her knees weaken and her body weaken at the sight of him.

“Lila!” screamed the teenager. She reached between her shirt and grabbed one of her daggers. She held tightly to the dagger hilt as she felt her leg muscles strain to go faster.

The raider grinned happily and waved his bloody sword at the small girl. "Come here, sweetie. I won't hurt you." He neared Lila slowly.

Lila took one step back but that was all as she was possessed by pure fear.

"Lila, duck down!" screamed Xena at the top of her lungs.

Lila didn't hear the teenager and just stood there petrified by the raider.

The raider closed in even more and prepared to grab the small girl.

Xena gritted her teeth together then positioned her hands in front of herself. She took five huge strides then launched herself at the raider with her dagger out.

The raider looked up when he heard Xena's screaming but it was too late. He went onto his back and so much pain tore through the back of his head. Then he felt a warm blade pressed into his gut and he looked down when Xena got off of him. All he could see was deep red blood oozing through the wound over his black leather armour. He raised his eyes up and saw the blood dripping of the girl's small dagger. "Hades," he growled but he violently coughed up bloody.

Xena backed up as the blood from the dagger seeped down the blade and onto her hand. "Oh gods," she whispered. She hastily smeared the blood off her blade and hand onto her shirt. She tried to shake her fear away as she spun around. She sheathed her dagger again, and picked Lila up. "Let's go get your parents."

Lila clung onto Xena with all of her remaining strength, her face buried into Xena's warm neck.

The teenager continued running across town, slower now because of Lila's weight, but she still ran quickly.

Gabrielle took a quick glance behind and saw the raider was catching up to her. She looked back ahead and saw a huge tree had fallen over and caught onto another tree. She ducked down just in time before hitting her head on it. She knew that would slow the raider down for a bit but not long enough.

Instead of slowing down, she kept her pace up. She knew her field behind her house would appear soon. After about another half of a minute of running, she saw the end of the forest and the start of the field. She felt a bit of relief at this yet she feared the raider would follow her home. So she stopped next to a huge tree and saw a large opening in the base of it. Quickly she crawled into the hole and hid inside the hollow trunk of the tree.

The raider growled as he backed his horse up a few paces. He then spurred his horse in the side. "Go, boy!"

The horse galloped and jumped over the large fallen tree with easy. He landed on the soft moss and trotted through the forest in the direction his master told him.

Gabrielle held her breath when she heard the horse's hoof beats nearing. She then realized her feet were slightly sticking out of the hole. With quick thinking, she jumped up and hooked her feet into two small notches and held herself up with her hands. Again, she held her breath when the raider came even closer.

The horse snorted when his master pulled him to a halt.

"Where'd she go?" he hissed. He turned ever which way in his saddle, looking for the girl. "She was just here, I swear," he muttered under his breath. "Damn it." He slammed his fist into the saddle horn. Giving a hard jerk on the right rein sent his horse to the right onto a cold trail.

Gabrielle opened her eyes slowly as she listened to the raider go back into the forest. She then started to breathe normal again, and she lowered herself silently back onto the ground in the trunk. She waited about another minute then carefully crawled back out of the large hole. She kept low while peeking around a nearby tree. She saw the raider far off in the woods.

The little bard turned quietly and started for the open fields. She came to the edge of the forest and hopped over a huge log but when she landed, she landed on a stick.

The raider threw his head around when he heard the branch snap. He wrenched his horse back around and spurred him in the direction of the noise.

Gabrielle cursed herself and quickly sprinted into the field, she spotted her house slightly off to the right but straight ahead nonetheless. In a quick second, she looked back to see the raider working his way through the woods. "Oh Hades," she cursed to herself again. Yet she continued to her house but then her heart dropped when she saw her barn on fire. "Oh gods, please no," she whispered.

Xena ducked behind a building right before a raider ran past. She took several deep breaths while pressing her back against the cool house's siding. While her head dropped against the house, she closed her eyes and just felt the beads of sweat roll down ever part of her body. After lifting her head back up, she actually studied the attack on the village.

Off to her left she watched a large building on fire starting to topple over and crash. Then as she was turning her head to the right, she quickly saw a horsemen riding past with a man's body dragging behind his horse.

Xena closed her eyes after seeing the hacked body scuff past. She then finally opened her eyes after she turned her head to the right. Now she saw a warrior coming out of an open door of a house, he was rushing to pull his pants back up. After the raider moved out of the doorway, she saw glossy white eyes on the floor of the house staring back at her.

She quickly turned her head away after seeing the dead woman on the floor in the house. "Oh gods," she rasped and felt her stomach lift up into her throat. She clamped her jaw down, closed her eyes, and tried to hold her stomach down and remove the images from her head. Slowly her stomach relaxed, and she was able to breathe regularly again.

After a deep breath, she opened her eyes and knew they would have to move again before a raider caught them. But for the first time, she could now hear Lila's muffled crying. "It'll be okay, Lila," promised Xena. Now she realized her neck was wet from all the crying the small girl had been doing.

Lila peered up with red and brown eyes. "They're going to kill them, I know it."

"Sssh," hushed the teenager. "We'll all be okay." She pulled the girl's head back into her neck. She held tighter onto the girl while looking ahead again. She took one last huge breath of smoky air then took off on a run for the house; it wasn't much further. As she went around the house, she found a dead woman at the front of the house. "Oh gods," she whispered and jumped over the bloody body. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw a raider at the neighboring house gutting a man and another setting the house ablaze. She shook her head and continued to run for Gabrielle's house.

Once she made it past the town's burning tavern, she saw Gabrielle's house in clear sight. Her eyes widened when she realized the door to Gabrielle's house was fully open. She then saw her girlfriend now running between the burning barn and the house. "Gabrielle!" she screamed.

The tiny bard saw her best friend but her heartbeat was racing with the horse's hoof beats, which were catching up to her. "Xena, hide! A horseman is coming!"

Xena felt fear strike her when the raider from earlier materialized behind her friend. "No," she rasped.

Gabrielle then suddenly tripped on the well bucket that her family used. She rolled onto her back as the raider neared her. Gabrielle frantically tried to stand but her ankle was sprain from the fall.

The raider yelled and twirled his sword. "Got you now, kid!"

Gabrielle screamed in fear but a dark shadow fell over her.

"Stay away from my child!" yelled Gabrielle's father.

The raider's eyes went wide when the farmer with the pitchfork stepped in the way. He tried to stop his horse quickly but couldn't soon enough. His horse slammed into the points of the pitchfork.

The horse reared up, crying in pain and fell over with the raider underneath.

Xena came right up beside Gabrielle and grabbed her with her free hand. "Gabrielle, get up."

Gabrielle shook her head and struggled to get up onto her feet but was able to with some of Xena's help.

Herodotus yanked his pitchfork free and turned around. "Xena, I need you to give Lila to me. Then I need you to go get my two horses near the barn. They're tied up on the post. Go now!"

Xena nodded and lowered Lila to the ground. She hurried off in search of the horses.

Herodotus picked up her youngest daughter. “Gabrielle, follow me.” He hurried into the house with Gabrielle behind him.

Xena, however, went around the burning barn but soon as she was at the front of the barn, a dead raider surprised her. She stopped about five feet away from the body and just stared at it on the ground. She could tell Herodotus had killed him since there were several pitchfork puncture wounds in his neck, arm, and head. Xena though could not move not even around the body as she feared he might come to life and attack her. Suddenly though a horse whined and it brought her out of her trance.

The teenager made a point of walking far around the dead raider but kept watch of him. Once she was beside the horses, she started hastily untying them. After one rein was free, she wiped the sweat off her forehead and then yanked the other rein free.

Xena then led the dark mare and the workhorse around the raider and quickly went past the burning barn to the front of the house.

“Herodotus!” called out a man at the opening of the house.

Herodotus came out of the house with his two daughters and wife. “Potestas, get the Hades out of here!”

“I will soon as I know your family and Xena are out of here.”

Gabrielle’s father nodded and came down the steps, approaching Xena. “Xena, get on the horse with Potestas.”

Xena nodded and turned to Potestas, whom sat high up on a young golden mare. He held his hand out to her and she took it.

Herodotus helped his wife up onto the dark mare and then Gabrielle. He then handed Lila up to Gabrielle.

Gabrielle tucked Lila into her arms while her mother slipped one arm around her waist.

Herodotus quickly mounted the workhorse. “Let’s get out of here.” He directed his horse around the house and led the group into the open field. Once they were in the field, he spurred his horse into a gallop and all around them was open fields for a long distance.

Yet soon as the group was galloping in the field did five raiders on horseback caught onto them. They came racing past the house and burning barn to play chase.

“Herodotus, they’re following us!” called Potestas.

Herodotus saw the five raiders coming after them. “Alright,” he called, “You all stay together, I’m going to try and lead them away from you all.”

“Father, no!” called Gabrielle. “They’ll get you! Philip is too old to go any faster.”

“I know and I’ll slow everybody down.” Herodotus pulled on the workhorse’s right rein and started to split from the group.

“No, dad!” cried out Gabrielle.

Hecuba held her daughter into the saddle tightly. “There’s nothing we can do, Gabrielle.”

The small bard began to cry for the first time today as she watched her father growing more distant.

Two raiders quickly broke away from the group and persuade Herodotus.

When Gabrielle saw the two raiders catching up to her father at a rapid pace she buried her head into Lila’s own head.

Xena felt so much anger as she wiped the tears away from her cheeks furiously. “We have to do something, Potestas.”

“We can save ourselves, Xena.” Potestas urged his young mare to go faster. “Hecuba, force your horse.”

Hecuba nodded solemnly and spurred her horse more.

Potestas took a quick look back and realized the three raiders were catching up. He knew there was no way Hecuba’s older horse could get away from them. The raiders’ horses were trained for speed and this type of game. He tried to think of something to do to save at least the children.

Gabrielle lifted her head from Lila’s and looked back at the raiders. She squealed when she saw one of them directly behind her horse. “Mother!”

Hecuba took a quick look and saw the raider was behind her. “Oh gods,” she fearfully whispered.

The raider forced his horse to go faster and brought the horse along the right side of Hecuba’s horse. He grinned at the mother and her two children. He unsheathed his sword and waved it at them. He then urged his horse even more and brought his horse ahead of Hecuba’s.

Suddenly Hecuba was surrounded. One raider was ahead, one to her right, and one wedged between her and Potestas.

“Gabrielle!” yelled Xena.

Gabrielle was flooded by all of her fears. She looked over to Xena and that only started stinging tears.

The raider that was between the two horses extracted his sword and swiped at Hecuba. It forced Hecuba to move away from Potestas and Xena.

“Xena, please!” screamed the small bard. “Oh gods help us!” She held out her hand as she grew further away from Xena.

Xena, without thinking, tried to get out of the saddle to go after Gabrielle.

“No, Xena!” The jeweler forced the teenager back into the saddle and held her down.

“No, no Gabrielle! We have to help her,” screamed the girl, tears rolling down from her cheeks.

“We can’t do anything for them, Xena.” He then saw the raider that had been between them break away and come back after them. “Hades,” he growled. He kicked his mare hard and ordered, “Go girl, use everything you have.”

The mare whined and took deep breathes as she pushed herself harder than she ever had done in her young life.

Xena continued to look off to her right where she saw Gabrielle and the two raiders. She then saw Hecuba’s horse come to a stop and the two raiders circling the horse.

“Xena!”

Xena felt her heart fall when she heard Gabrielle’s piercing and fearful scream. She held onto the saddle horn and tightly clenched, as all she could do was watch the raiders force the three women off the horse. Her heart was pounding and her body screaming to jump off the horse. She watched one raider chase after them on foot while the other remained on horseback. And all she could do was watch from so far away.

Gabrielle screamed for her life as she tried carrying Lila away but she felt so weak. She soon fell from the pain in her sprained ankle. She pulled Lila into her arms and hid her then balled herself up around Lila.

The little bard could feel her sister shaking, so much that her own body shook with hers. Gabrielle tried to think about anything but what was happening to her. Yet Lila's crying and whimpering only reminded her exactly what was about to happen to them both.

Xena had lost sight of her girlfriend. She felt so much anger as much as fear and she couldn’t take anymore. Suddenly, she pushed off the horse and slammed hard into the field.

“Xena!” yelled Potestas then he pulled his mare into a sudden stop.

The raider saw Xena on the ground and that she was amazingly getting up.

Xena limped up onto her feet; she saw the raider coming for her now. She gritted her teeth and forced her legs to move and to even run. She went towards the direction she’d last heard Gabrielle cry out.

Potestas released the reins and grabbed a hold of his mare’s mane. He leaned to the right of his saddle and lowered his right hand downward.

The teenager kept trying to run but started to slow down as she ran out of energy and her eyes were blurring over. She could barely run now from the immense pain in her leg. She then fell to the ground on her hands and knees.

“Xena, get up!” yelled Potestas. He peered up slightly to see the raider so close to the teenager. “Go, girl. Come on!”

Xena strained to get herself up. She looked between Potestas and the raider, both closing in at the same rate. She then limped towards Potestas hoping to help Potestas gain an edge.

The jeweler clenched his teeth, opened his right hand wide, and called out, “Grab my hand!”

The teenager held her hand out and felt her hand clasp with the man’s.

Potestas squeezed hard and lifted him and Xena up. He hauled the tall girl into the saddle with surprising strength and had just enough seconds to force his mare around.

The raider cursed as he just missed the girl but continued his chase for the two, he wasn’t very far behind.

The mare galloped as much as she could to help her riders get away from their hunter.

Xena could barely breathe from everything. She held onto the horse’s mane with the last of her strength in hopes not to fall off.

Just ahead, the jeweler saw the beginning of the forest and he knew the northeastern road to Amphipolis was not far beyond that. The only thing he feared now was getting his mare through the forest. He knew she was not too good with forests and sometimes could get spooked. He just prayed today would not be one of those days.

The group finally entered the forest and it instantly slowed them down. Yet Potestas urged the horse through the thick woods.

The raider came into the forest and pushed his horse into the woods after them. He drew out his sword and started hacking away at the various branches; this seemed to help him catch up to his prey.

The jeweler realized the raider was closing in as he looked behind but soon as he turned around he was slammed in the head by a large tree branch. He was knocked off his horse.

The mare bucked up and whined when she lost her master.

This had caused Xena to lose her grip, and she fell off. “Potestas?” she called.

Potestas held his head in his bloody hands but stood up. He knew the raider was near but he quickly picked Xena up from the ground and hauled her over to his mare. “Get on her, now,” he ordered.

Xena pulled herself up into the saddle and grabbed onto the reins.

“Get out of here, Xena. The road to Amphipolis is just ahead. Go!” he yelled.

“What about you?” she asked quickly, she caught sight of the raider just fifteen paces away.

“Just go!” Potestas forced his horse around while saying, “Get her home, girl. Don’t stop for anything, Argo.”

The horse whined and galloped off when she received a slap to her rump, a signal she knew all too well. Gallop and do not stop until you cannot gallop anymore.

Potestas whirled around when he heard the raider's horse directly behind him.

The raider grinned down at him and decided he was tired of the chase. He'd let the girl go and thought it'd be much more fun to turn this man inside out.

Xena though held tightly onto the mare's reins but also grabbed a clump of the horse's mane.

Argo jumped over a few small logs and then went up a small hill onto a dirt road. She came to the top, stopped for a second and looked left then right.

The teenager did nothing but bury her head into the horse's mane. Her tears started again.

Argo whined and went to her left, instinct telling her that where she was original born was this way. She continued down the small dirt road at her fastest gallop.

Xena throughout the ride towards Amphipolis just clung onto the golden mare. She couldn't remember anything about the ride except the smell and comforting warmth of the young mare. All she thought about was Gabrielle, and all she heard were Gabrielle's terrified screams. Images of Gabrielle holding her hand out and screaming for her flashed repeatedly in her mind. The repeated images grew so strong in Xena's mind that at one point, she'd thrown her head back and screamed at the top of her lungs.

Xena never felt so much hope just sink out of her since she'd failed Gabrielle again. And she'd never felt so useless in her life more than she had at that instant in time of watching Gabrielle taken away from her.

During that ride back to Amphipolis, so many things consumed Xena and ate away pieces of her into a darkness she never imagined could exist in this world. And from the start of that horse ride to the end of it, Xena felt her strongest emotion devour her and she embraced it with her heart and soul. She was then controlled by one of the most feared emotions any person ever encountered, pure and raw anger.

**To be continued.**