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

To Find What was Mine

By Red Hope

Section One

Part 1: Gabrielle's Second Year

The young girl stepped out of the back of the jail wagon. She made sure to keep her head low as she ducked down. Once she was out, she quickly turned around and helped her mother down.

“Thank you,” whispered Hecuba.

Gabrielle didn't say anything but did give a sad smile to her mother. She then waited for her little sister and hefted her out of the wagon onto the ground.

“Let's go, girls,” ordered the man.

“Yes, my lord.” Gabrielle followed the man through a small crowd of people. Far ahead, she could see a fence and on the other side was a huge crowd of people throwing their hands up here and there to place bids. She sighed then glanced down at her feet but looked back up as they neared the side of a stage.

“Wait here.”

The three girls squeezed in together as they watched their lord talk to another man that stood attention at the steps of the stage.

Gabrielle stared up at the stage where a young man stood in the centre. He was shackled at the wrists and was somewhat bruised yet he seemed in good health. Her eyes then wondered over to the crowd of people. One man had thrown his hand up and the auctioneer on the stage called out twenty dinars.

“Do you think we'll be sold together?” whispered Lila; she glanced between her sister and mother.

“Maybe,” replied Gabrielle.

Lila suddenly had a fearful expression.

Hecuba gave a disapproving look to her eldest daughter. She switched her attention to Lila. “Don't worry, honey. I'm sure we'll stay together,” she promised.

Gabrielle sighed knowing that was most unlikely. Even she heard plenty of times of families being torn apart by slavery. She moved her eyes away from the auctioneer and to her little sister. She studied Lila, whom was too busy watching the auction to notice Gabrielle looking at her. Gabrielle mentally counted all of the bruises on her sister's exposed body. She sighed deeply; there were thirteen, thirteen dark bruises. She also saw the remaining scar across her sister's back from the few whip marks.

Gabrielle shivered at the reminder of the whip beatings at the start of the slavery training. She slowly looked up from Lila and looked at her mother's back. She noted her mother's attention was mainly on the auction. Her mother, like her and Lila, wore rather revealing clothes and all three of them had lost a large amount of weight.

As her forest eyes travelled up her mother's body, she stopped and just stared at the tattoo on her mother's right hip. It was a small yet distinct 'S' in black that simply stood for slave. She knew if they ever saw freedom one day, they would still wear this mark that would forever outcast them from society. The slave tattoo would be her constant

reminder of the future ahead of her. And as she stared at her mother's slave tattoo, she instinctively grazed her fingertips across her own exposed tattoo.

"Gabrielle," hissed her slaver. He grabbed her by her forearm and jerked her closer.

The young bard suddenly fell out of her daze and looked to her master. "I'm sorry, my lord."

The slaver growled and lightly slapped her across the cheek. "Pay attention, girl." He then tugged her towards the steps. "You're up first."

Lila's eyes widened and she grasped her mother's hand tightly. "Mother?"

"Hush," warned Hecuba.

Gabrielle gave one last look to her mother and sister then climbed the steps.

The auctioneer rushed over and grabbed Gabrielle's wrist. "Who's your master, girl?" he whispered as he led her to the front and centre of the stage.

"Hecht."

"How long have you been a slave and how old are you?" The auctioneer stood there at the front of the stage with her.

"About thirteen months and I'm fourteen."

The auctioneer nodded and suddenly whirled around to the crowd with a huge smile on his lips. "My friends, I have here a young one." He held his hand out to Gabrielle. "She has been trained by no other than the infamous Hecht." He walked behind Gabrielle and came to her other side. "Let's begin the bidding at... thirty dinars."

"Thirty here!" called one man.

"Ah thank you, sir." The auctioneer walked away from the girl and went to the other side of the stage. "How about over here. Any of you gentlemen willing to give thirty five for her?" He directed to Gabrielle again. "She's been fully trained by Hecht himself."

"Thirty five!" bid an older man.

"Oh yes, Cornelio! Yes, sir!" The auctioneer gave a happy smile to the older man then focused back on the bidders. "Can any of you give me forty for this girl? Even the great Cornelio selects her."

"Forty over here!" yelled a young man from the back.

"Excellent, young man!" hollered the auctioneer. "Wise to bid on her... especially for those late nights!"

Several of the men in the crowd all laughed together.

"What's that mean, mother?" uttered Lila.

“Nothing, honey,” quietly replied Hecuba. She felt a great sense of dread fill her similar to the one on the day Potidaea was attacked.

“You two need to be quiet,” suddenly growled their master. His angry eyes especially rested on Lila since she always began the talking.

Lila lowered her eyes.

“Okay anybody want to give me sixty?” pressured the auctioneer. “Come on, you young men. You can’t pass up such a beautiful slave as this one.” He grinned while adding, “She is almost in her prime years.”

Several men in the crowd started laughing deeply at this.

“Sixty here!” yelled out a man that mainly looked like a warrior.

“Excellent!” called the auctioneer. He then crossed to the other side of the stage.

“Anybody want to do sixty five?” He got no response. “How about sixty two? Come on!”

“A hundred dinars!” called out the same young man from the back.

The auctioneer gaped at the young man but quickly recovered. “One hundred dinars then!” He held his hands out to the slave and said, “Going once! Going twice!” He spun on his heels and now pointed at the young man. “Sold to the young man!” He then went to Gabrielle’s side and grabbed her by the arm. He quickly pushed her down the steps.

Gabrielle almost tripped on her own sandals as she was rushed down the steps. As soon as she was on the ground, Lila was pushed up the steps. She quickly caught Lila’s scared eyes and it made her heart drop.

Lila was dragged to the front of the centre stage and put on display for the crowd.

The auctioneer bent down and asked Lila the same questions she’d asked Gabrielle.

As the auctioneer started the bidding on Lila, the young man was paying for Gabrielle.

“Does she listen well?” asked the young man to Hecht.

Hecht nodded while folding his arms. “Yeah... and if you need to reinforce anything a few good whippings does the trick.”

The young man nodded but was grinning. “I’ll remember that.” He untied a bag of dinars from his side and handed it to the slaver. “That’s a hundred there.”

“Thank you,” replied Hecht. “Enjoy.” He gave a huge grin.

The young man quietly laughed then faced Gabrielle. “Follow me, girl.”

Gabrielle’s eyes flickered to her mother, and she took a step closer to her mother instead of her new master.

Hecht quickly stepped between the mother and daughter. He grabbed Gabrielle by her hair. “Listen to him, girl.” He jerked her head down.

Hecuba closed her eyes and bit her lip.

Hecht threw the slave towards the young man. "A real good whipping," he reminded.

Gabrielle stumbled and fell down on her knees into the dirt. Her watery green eyes lifted up to her mother.

Hecuba did nothing, as she knew if she did it could cost Gabrielle dearly.

The young man raised an eyebrow as he stared down at his new slave. "Alright, girl. We'll do this the hard way." He reached behind and untied a collar with a leash. "Stand," he roughly ordered.

The small bard stood up and felt the cool leather slip around her neck then tightened into place.

"Let's go." The new master jerked the leash and led her away.

The young slave looked back to her mother.

Hecuba kept her eyes locked with Gabrielle.

Gabrielle then lost sight of her mother from the people moving around. She then looked across to her sister still on the stage. She heard somebody bid fifty-one dinars for Lila then she was sold. She frantically looked through the crowd to find out who bought her sister but she could not find them.

Once Lila was off the stage, Hecuba was on it now up for sale.

The young bard sighed and didn't look up to her mother. She instead switched her focus to her little sister being paid for by her new master. He was a middle-aged man, who once paid for her took her away from the auction area. After about twenty seconds, Gabrielle lost track of her sister, and she knew that was the last time she'd ever see Lila.

"Let's hear twenty for her!" yelled the auctioneer. He had no real response for her.

Gabrielle's new master glanced at her then back up to Hecuba. "Is she a good cook?" he whispered.

The small bard felt her stomach drop yet she knew it was a chance to keep her mother at least. "She's wonderful."

The young man narrowed his eyes and suddenly held up his hand. "I'll give thirty for her!"

The auctioneer gleefully smiled at the man for bidding again. "Yes, sir!" He then turned his focus to the other bidders. "Will anybody give me thirty-two?" After about fifteen seconds of silence and started to call out, "Going once, going twice.... Sold! Thank you, sir."

The young man nodded and tugged at Gabrielle's leash. "Let's get your mother."

The small girl followed behind the man. Every step she took, her hope seemed to float away with her sister's absence. Ever since the day after the raid of Potidaea, she'd grown angrier and angrier at this life she was given. Although when she looked up and her eyes met with her mother's, she felt some scrap of happiness return.

Within a candlemark, Gabrielle and her mother were sitting in a wagon again but not a barred one like Hecht's. This time it was an open one, which meant they could stretch out a little better. That in its self was a relief for them both.

Their master was in the front sitting on the passenger's side. Another young man, presumably a slave, was actually guiding the horses.

Gabrielle, however, couldn't keep her eyes off the young man that was possibly a slave. She couldn't shake the feeling that she'd seen him a few times before yet she couldn't place him.

"Once we've returned, I want you to show them to their quarters," ordered the master.

The driver nodded and asked, "In the slave house, my lord?"

"Yessss, Perdicus." The master raised an eyebrow in warning.

"Sorry, my lord." Perdicus returned his attention to the horses.

The master half turned in his seat and looked to his two new slaves. "Get plenty of rest this evening, girls. Tomorrow you both will be busy."

"Yes, my lord," answered back Hecuba.

Gabrielle didn't give an acknowledgement to her master, which only angered him.

"Girl, did you hear me?" hissed the master. He reached out and dug his nails into her arm.

Gabrielle gritted her teeth but now looked to him. "Yes of course, my lord."

"That's better." The master gave a toothy grin then turned back into his seat.

After about a two more candlemarks of riding, the group arrived at the gates of a dirt road that ended at the front of a large stone house. As they passed through the gates, Gabrielle took note of the olive trees lining the road to the house. She then scanned the surrounding grounds of the house and knew it was in fact a combination of wine and olive groves.

Hecuba was first out of the wagon then the bard slid out next. Once everybody was off, except Perdicus, he ordered the horses to go to the stables behind the house.

"Wait here," commanded the master, "He will return for you two." Without another word, he walked towards the large home and went up a few steps and into the house.

Hecuba waited until he was out of earshot and quietly asked, "Are you okay, honey?"

"I'm fine," brushed off Gabrielle. She didn't look at her mother while she folded her arms against her chest.

Hecuba only felt her shoulders slump more now. Today was a day that second the raiding day; she'd now lost her youngest child.

Gabrielle suddenly realized Perdicus had returned from the stables.

"Follow me." Perdicus guided them through the grounds and went to a small house that was offset from the master's house. "The slaves stay in here." He went up five steps and pushed open the door for them.

Hecuba went in first then her daughter followed.

Perdicus stood in the doorway while saying, "Its small but... it becomes home after awhile."

Gabrielle quickly realized the house was about half the size of her home. It had four beds or rather two bunk beds then a small lounge area further back.

"By the way, I'm Perdicus."

Hecuba turned around and finally smiled. "I'm Hecuba." She lifted her right hand and rested it on Gabrielle's shoulder. "This is my daughter, Gabrielle."

Perdicus returned the smile and said, "Well... welcome to Michulus's home."

"Thank you." Hecuba sadly smiled at the young man and stepped into the house more.

Gabrielle followed in and sat down on a bottom bed to the right.

"What we do for dinner?"

Perdicus considered Hecuba's question then finally answered, "I doubt we'll eat tonight." He went into the tiny living room area and picked up a chair. He brought it into the living quarters and sat down. "We'll probably eat tomorrow morning."

"What are our jobs?" finally spoke up Gabrielle.

Perdicus sighed as he rested back into his chair. "I think you'll be helping me some and helping to clean. Your mother will probably be the cook and helping the misses."

"Is Michulus strict?"

Perdicus shrugged. "He likes his slaves sticking to the rules. As soon as they're broken then we'll be punished rather harshly."

"Are there any other slaves on the grounds?"

"Actually there are two others." The young man slightly turned in his chair and pointed off to his right. "Over there is a smaller slave house and they live there." He turned back to the two women. "They're both dark skinned ones too."

"From Egypt?"

"I think so. They and I mainly take care of the groves and whatever maintenance needs to be done."

Hecuba nodded a few times as she considered their new circumstances. “Michulus is well known for his winery?”

“Yeah actually.” Perdicus sighed and then added, “He’s also rather political too. His entire family is into politics.” He paused while thinking about something for a second but then leaned forward in his seat. “To tell the truth, have you two heard the latest rumours about the war against Rome?”

“Not really, no,” confessed Hecuba.

“Well there’s been a lot of talk about the states gathering together to strike against Rome. A lot of people fear that Rome will soon gain too much strength and start to conqueror... starting with Greece.”

“Gods really?” whispered Hecuba in surprise. “I’ve heard a lot of talk that Rome was growing more powerful but not that powerful.”

“Yes, well... they’re power is increasing. So a lot of people in Greece are demanding the states to unite and attack Rome before we’re attacked.”

“What’s this have to do with Michulus?” urged a frustrated bard.

“Michulus is one of the wealthy people pushing for the war against Rome.” He finally sat back into his chair again. “Only problem is, a lot of the common people think this war will only ruin Greece.”

“They’d rather join Rome,” simply stated Gabrielle.

“Yes they would. A lot of the technology Rome possesses we could benefit from learning.”

“But at the same time the wealthy don’t want the Greek economy to be slaves of Rome.” Gabrielle huffed and shook her head. “Well we conquered Rome during Alexander the Great’s days sssso what comes around goes around.”

“True,” agreed Perdicus. “Personally, I think Greece could benefit from it, even the economy.”

The small bard shrugged and muttered, “Greeks and dictators don’t mix.”

Perdicus sighed and decided a change of topic was in order. “So... where do you two originally come from?”

“We’re from Potidaea. It’s a town on the peninsula of-”

“Wait Potidaea?” Perdicus brightened up at the mention of the town. “Small town right? With the small fishery on the eastern side?”

“That’s the one,” agreed Hecuba.

“By the gods.” Perdicus laughed and whispered, “It’s a small known-world after all.”

“Why?” inquired Gabrielle. She knew she recognized him and now she had to figure it was from her own hometown.

“I’m from Potidaea.”

Hecuba’s eyes immediately widened. “Where in town did you live?”

“I was on the western side... away from the market.” He quietly laughed in surprised. “Where did you two live?”

“We had that small farm on the eastern side.”

“The one that was set away from the town, right?”

“That’s the one,” replied Hecuba.

“Now I remember,” cut in the small bard. “I’ve seen you in the market a few times... selling grains.”

Perdicus nodded a few times. “My family had a very small farm. We’d just moved there.” He lowered his eyes but continued speaking, “My folks were killed in a raid.” He looked back up. “The town was raided...” He fell short on his words. “You both must have been there?” His eyebrows knitted together.

“Yes,” answered Gabrielle, “that’s how we ended up being slaves.”

“Same thing happened with me... but it was kind of after the raid.” Perdicus gave out a long and deep sigh. “I wondered what’s happened with the town...?”

“Knowing Potidaea... they probably recovered.” Hecuba shook her head after about a minute of thinking. “The one reason why my husband and I settled there was because Potidaea was known for not having raids.”

“We moved there in hopes our farm would do well.” Perdicus just stared at the floor. “Especially with the small harbour growing there.”

The silence fell between the group as they all recalled that day in Potidaea that changed their lives dramatically.

Gabrielle suddenly pulled herself out of her thoughts and took a quick glance outside. It was now dark time, and she decided she was tired from today. Looking to her mother, she said, “I’m going to bed, I think.”

“Alright, honey.” Hecuba smiled at her daughter, leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek. “Top or bottom bed?”

“Top.” Gabrielle forced a warm smile and patted her mother’s leg. “Goodnight, mom.” She hopped off the bed and climbed up the side ladder into the bed above.

“Well...” Perdicus stood up and returned the chair into the living room area. “I think I’ll check to see if Michulus needs anything else.” He approached the door and pulled it open. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.” Hecuba watched him leave and decided to curl up in bed as well.

The small bard however lay on her back in the bed and stared up at the ceiling. She quickly glanced over at the few candles lit and hanging from the wall across the room but returned her attention to the ceiling. She lay there, thinking about where her little sister was now. She could still recall the scared expression Lila had as she stood on that stage on display.

Gabrielle had never realized just how little she could do until over a year ago. After they’d been taken by the two raiders in the field, they were kept in the army’s camp for several weeks. She shivered at the memories of just how dirty and disgusting those raiders were around them. Once the raiders had transported them into southern Greece, they were then sold to Hecht.

At first, she was confused as to why the raiders could sell them for money but then when Hecht explained her new life to her, she understood. She could still recall his words on the first day she’d become a slave.

“I have purchased you.” Hecht had locked his eyes with Gabrielle’s. “Do you know what the means, girl? That means you are my rightful property. I own you, possess you, and control you. I may do with you as I please.” He had paused and lowered his face closer to Gabrielle’s. “I can be nice to you if I want or I can beat you until your dead. I can feed you and clothe you or starve you and rip every piece of clothing off your back. You have to listen to every word and call me your master, girl. You have no rights and no voice in any of this. Do you know what you are, girl?” He had lifted up a leather collar with a leash. “You...” He then slipped the collar around her neck. “are...” Now he buckled it and held up the leash. “a slave...” Suddenly he had jerked the leash with all his strength bringing Gabrielle’s face right into his own. “forever.”

The young bard shook her memory away and quickly turned to her right side, facing the wall now. She felt a chill ripple up and down her spine but as she tried to think about something else, she noticed a new sound. She went very still and concentrated on the muffled sound. Within a few seconds, she realized it was her mother crying below her.

The small bard climbed out of her bed quietly and curled into the bed with her mother.

Hecuba kept her back to her daughter but once she realized Gabrielle as in the bed, she turned around.

Gabrielle didn’t say anything nor did her mother, they simply held each other. After about a minute or so, Gabrielle also started crying. She too felt so much weight on her shoulders and an intense anger growing deep in her. In so many ways she was scared about what her future held and just how long her future would run. And even to this day, she still wondered what ever happened to her father. Now she would be constantly wondering where Lila was or if she was even still alive.

And what about Xena? Every night, she was plagued by thoughts about her best friend. She knew nothing of what happened to Xena. Her imagination played with her making her believe Xena was enslaved too. Or worse yet, she had continuous images of her girlfriend being hunted down and slaughtered by the raiders.

Either way, she'd felt her hope slow slip through her fingers as she learned the exact hardships of slavery. Every thought about freedom was squeezed out of her with each lashing she received from Hecht.

All she could do now was keep her head tucked under her mother's chin as she cried the last few months away. Eventually though she found sleep through all her tears that night.

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"Hey," whispered Perdicus. He reached out and nudged Gabrielle's back with his right hand. "Hey, wake up."

Gabrielle slowly opened her eyes and quickly turned over. "What's going on?" She then realized her mother was gone. "Where's my mom?"

"It's the late morning. Your mother finished making breakfast for everybody. You need to get up and start your chores."

The small slave nodded her head and dragged herself out of bed.

"Come on, we'll make a fast break for the kitchen." Perdicus hurried out of the slave's house and escorted her to the kitchen. He opened the back door to the kitchen and waited for Gabrielle to go in first.

Soon as she was inside, her mother greeted her.

"Morning, honey." Hecuba quickly rushed her daughter to a small two-person table that was next to a pair of windows. "Sit down and eat." She went to the counter and picked up a large plate of food.

Gabrielle slightly smiled at the sight of her mother's cooking; it'd be a long time since she'd had any of it. Without a second thought, she dove right into it.

"How are things going?" asked Perdicus.

Hecuba gave a faint nod. "Not bad. I think everybody is fed."

"Have you met the misses?"

"I did actually. She's very nice."

Perdicus smiled at that. "Yes she is."

Hecuba chuckled but added, "I think I'm suppose to help her some after this."

The young man nodded. He then realized that Gabrielle was already finished her breakfast. "She can eat fast and a lot," he joked.

Gabrielle half glared at the boy.

Hecuba chuckled some and picked up the clean plate. "Yes, she's always been a good eater."

"Mother," warned Gabrielle. She lifted a warning eyebrow at her mother.

Hecuba just huffed at that then went to clean the plate and fork. She glanced at Perdicus while she was cleaning the dishes. “What will Gabrielle be doing today?”

Perdicus sighed in response. “I’m not sure. I need to ask Michulus honestly. Actually I’ll do that now.” He crossed the kitchen and went out of the door that went into the main house. He decided that he’d go to Michulus’s office first. Once he was there, he tapped on the closed double doors.

“Come in.”

Perdicus creaked open one door and slipped into the office. “Sir, what would you like Gabrielle to do today?”

Michulus peered up from the scroll on his desk. He folded his hands in his lap and rested back into his seat. He remained quiet while he considered the question. “She needs a little... meat on those bones.” He pressed his lips together but suddenly focused on Perdicus again. “Have her muck the stalls. Show her what is expected.”

“Yes, my lord.” Perdicus bowed his head and started to step back.

“Also, Perdicus.”

The young slave stopped and lifted his head in question.

“Tell her to come to my office afterwards.” Michulus sat back up in his chair. “I’d like to see the work she’s done.”

“Yes of course, sir.” Perdicus stepped out of the office.

Michulus remained motionless as he listened to Perdicus’s footfall fade away down the hallway. He then went back to his work.

Perdicus entered the kitchen again and told Gabrielle her duty for now. Once they were outside, he headed for the stables.

“Are the stalls dirty?” inquired Gabrielle.

“Yeah, they’re pretty bad actually. We haven’t had the time to clean them.” Perdicus sighed and patted the girl’s back. “Sorry for your luck.”

The small bard grunted at his words. “Yeah,” she muttered.

“Sorry,” honestly apologized the young man. “I didn’t mean it like-”

“Its alright,” brushed off the small girl.

Perdicus took a brief look at the girl then saw the stables coming into view. He went inside first and took Gabrielle down to the very end. “Alright, you use these tools to haul everything out of the stalls. Once you get it into the middle aisle you brush it out of the stable.” He stopped for a moment then continued. “Now, there should be a wheel barrel not far and you can put it all in there. The stuff goes over to a huge pile over that way.” He pointed off to his right. “The manure is good for the olive trees and grapes, it gets reused.”

The bard nodded and reached up to pull off the pitchfork from the wall. She stared at it for several moments, many memories returning to her from just staring at it.

“Hey.” Perdicus now rested his right hand on her shoulder. “I know how you feel.”

Gabrielle felt her shoulder droop a little at the boy’s effort to reach out to her. “I’m sorry for being a little... tough.” She shook her head and then rested it against the pitchfork. “This isn’t easy.”

“I know... sometimes I can’t understand why this happened to me.” Perdicus closed his eyes for several seconds but gazed down at the bard again. “Its not a bad dream like I always wish it was.”

“Yeah,” sadly whispered Gabrielle.

“Well...” The boy trailed off but squeezed Gabrielle’s shoulder before releasing her. “I’m always here for a talk.”

Gabrielle felt a tiny smile tug at her lips. “Thanks.”

Perdicus gave a wink then left the stables but called out, “Happy cleaning.”

The small girl sighed; she dropped her head against the pitchfork again, and stared at the messy stalls. “Well... better get started.” She hefted the pitchfork into both hands and stepped into one stall.

Three candlemarks passed by and Gabrielle finally found herself shoving the mix of straw and manure out of the stables into the warm day. Once it was all outside, she started hunting around for the wheelbarrow that Perdicus had mentioned. She went around the side of the stables and saw Perdicus coming towards her.

“Hey,” greeted the bard.

“How’s it going?” asked Perdicus.

Gabrielle shrugged then answered, “Almost finished.”

“Good to hear.” The young man formed a warm smile.

Gabrielle couldn’t help but mirror it back.

“Oh afterwards, Michulus wants you to go to his office. When you go into the kitchen, go through that door and go to the other end of the haul. He’s down there.”

“For what though?”

Perdicus just shrugged.

The small girl shrugged as well but finally noticed the wheelbarrow off to her left next to the stable.

“Go on,” offered the young man.

Gabrielle chuckled and went to the wheelbarrow.

Perdicus watched for a moment but went back across the grounds to continue his work.

The young bard took about half of a candlemark to load up the wheelbarrow and carted it all to the manure pile. She made several trips back and forth but eventually won the smelly battle. She then took the tools back into the stable and put them back into their homes.

Gabrielle then decided to head to Michulus's office so she made her way to the kitchen first. When she went inside, she didn't find her mother so she shrugged it off. Although she did decide she felt pretty icky from cleaning those stalls so she took a minute to wash up. Once she dried herself off with a towel, she continued onto Michulus's office.

Michulus looked up when he heard Gabrielle enter. "Did you knock?"

Gabrielle stopped halfway through the doorway. "No, my lord."

Michulus narrowed his eyes at the girl. "Then step out and do so," he slightly growled.

The slave hesitated but stepped out and closed the door. After a shaky breath, she rapped on the door then waited.

"You can come in now," ordered the master.

The teenager sighed and pushed the door back open and went inside this time.

"Now then, how are the stalls?" inquired the lord.

"Better, sir."

Michulus glanced at Gabrielle then looked back at his scroll. "I will inspect them later then."

Gabrielle didn't say anything, she just stood there in silence and waiting for some kind of order.

The master finally pulled away from his scroll after about three minutes. He lifted his attention to his slave. "Now, I'd like for you to stay in the house for the rest of the day. Help clean around the house... the misses could use the help." He stood up from his chair and came around to the front of the desk. "You'll mainly be in the house... taking care of it." He folded his arms against his chest and leaned against the desk. "The misses is expecting a child soon so she cannot do much."

"Yes, sir," finally spoke up the bard.

"For now on, each day you can report to her. Understood?"

"Yes, my lord," answered the slave. "Anything else?"

Suddenly a huge grin creased the master's lips. "Actually yes." He pushed off the desk and neared the small girl. "I also wanted to mention what your other position is here."

Gabrielle swallowed the lump she now felt in her throat. "What is that, sir?"

Michulus reached up and placed his two fingertips under her chin and tilted her head back. He stared deep into wintry forest eyes. "You'll be my mistress... in training," he whispered.

The small bard felt every piece of her body prepared to run but she remained locked in her spot.

Michulus lowered his head a little more and pressed his lips against her forehead. "Go to the misses now."

Gabrielle reached behind and scrambled for the doorknob. She easily found it and hastily turned around.

Michulus stood there watching the heavy breathing slave race out of his office. He stood there in front of the open door and studied the young girl. Once she was gone, he grasped the door's handle and pulled it closed.

~*~*~*~

The summer season seemed to push on without many other incidents. Gabrielle and her mother had now been Michulus's slave for two months. The labour wasn't overly intensive except for certain times when they were called to go outside in the summer heat and help in the winery area. Overall, they seemed to prefer their new chains compared to the ones that Hecht had given them.

While the summer progressed so did Gabrielle and Perdicus's relationship. Gabrielle had missed having a figure in her life that was strong, somebody to look up to and respect. Originally, she always looked up to Xena and idolized her talents but she'd lost her best friend. Perdicus was only a year older than Gabrielle but he knew his way around a little better than the bard. It was easy then for Gabrielle to admire him yet her growing attachment to him sometimes even scared her.

"So how was your day?" Perdicus picked up a dirty rag from next to the sink and started drying his now clean hands off.

Gabrielle carried the hot loaf of bread from the stone oven to the counter next to Perdicus. "Yeah it went well." She slipped the wood tray onto the counter before her hands dropped it from the heat.

"Where's your mother?"

"I think still helping the misses." Gabrielle shrugged and reached past the young man to grab a serrated knife, which was hanging on the wall.

Perdicus nodded a few times then stood there watching the small girl carefully slice the warm bread. He finally placed the dirty rag back up on the counter.

"How were the groves?"

Perdicus shrugged and wondered over to the small table. He pulled out a chair and sat down.

The small bard gave him a curious look for not answering her question.

The young boy chuckled. He finally answered, "It wasn't too bad."

"Yeah... there was a cool breeze today."

"Thank the gods for that." Perdicus sighed dramatically and fell back into his chair then spread his legs out.

Gabrielle studied him for a moment after she finished cutting the bread but then looked over to the main kitchen door.

Hecuba entered the kitchen and saw the pair. She then noted Gabrielle had made the bread for tonight's dinner. "Honey, that's my job."

The young teenager shrugged and stated, "I can help."

The mother shook her head, neared her, and then pushed her off. "Go sit with Perdicus."

Gabrielle shook her head despite her grin. She decided to go ahead and sit down for the first time today. A large sigh left her soon as she relaxed into the chair. "How was the misses today?"

"Maria was good," replied Hecuba. "You didn't see her?"

The bard shook her head. "I had a lot of cleaning and laundry to do. How about you?"

"I was helping the misses with her preparations for the baby."

Perdicus huffed at that. "She's been preparing for three months now. How long does it take?"

"A long time," replied mother and daughter in unison.

The young man laughed at them and shook his head. "If you say so."

Gabrielle suddenly stood up and announced she was going to check on her laundry.

"I'll come with you," offered Perdicus.

The young bard felt a warm smile tug at her lips. "Come on."

Together the pair left the kitchen and went down the main hall then made a left about halfway down the hall. They entered into a small room considered the laundry room. Inside were a few large wood tubs for cleaning the clothes along with a few buckets to retrieve water. Then there was also a fairly big fireplace used for heating the water. At the opposite side of the room was a split door and Gabrielle currently had the upper part of the door wide open. Outside could be seen two laundry lines and both were full with clothes flapping in the breeze.

"Wait here," spoke Gabrielle. She went to the door and there in front of it, she picked up a woven basket for the laundry. She pushed opened the door with her freehand and went to the second clothes line.

Perdicus stood there watching her but then moved to the now closed half door. He folded his arms on top of the door and leaned against the door. He remained there silently studying the young girl.

After the little bard had all of the dry laundry, she made her way back to the laundry room. When she'd turned around and found Perdicus just watching her, she couldn't help but grin.

"What?" asked the young boy once she was close enough.

Gabrielle shyly laughed and replied, "Nothing."

Perdicus revealed a silly grin but stood up and opened the door for his friend.

The teenager stepped around Perdicus and went directly to the folding table. She slid the basket onto the counter then moved down the counter a little. She took one piece of material at a time and folded it.

"Can I help?" offered Perdicus.

Gabrielle flashed a quick smile but returned to her folding. "Thank you but I'm okay."

Perdicus shrugged and stated, "Suit yourself." He took a few small steps back then leaned back against the cool wall.

"So..." Gabrielle placed the folded tunic off to the side then picked up another article out of the basket.

"So?" urged Perdicus.

"So have you ever thought about your future?"

"You mean as far as staying a slave?"

"Yeah." The small bard hesitated in though but continued folding. "Do you think you'll stay as one or not?"

Perdicus's eyebrows knitted together as he really considered the question. "Sometimes, yeah."

"Other times no?"

"Yeah, sometimes no." The young man sighed as his features loosened up again. "I can't help but hope that one day I'll be free again."

The young girl shook her head as an amusing smile came across her features.

"What?"

"Just because you have hope doesn't mean you'll be free again." Gabrielle sighed then faintly shook her head. "Its just human nature to always hope."

"That's true," agreed Perdicus. "But hey, I figure if you ever stop having hope... then you are truly enslaved."

Gabrielle stopped halfway through folding the shirt and turned her head to Perdicus.
“You know... that’s really true.”

“It is because having some hope is the start of your freedom.” Perdicus pushed off the wall and neared his friend. “Don’t you still have hope you’ll see freedom again?”

“I use to.” The bard folded the last tunic then put it into the pile of neatly folded clothes.
“But not so much now.”

“Why not?”

Gabrielle felt a long sigh come and go as she placed the clean clothes into the basket.
“Just because of so many things that have happened overtime.”

“From the raid?”

“The raid, losing family, being enslave... losing my best friend.”

Perdicus felt a lot of compassion rise up inside himself for Gabrielle. He then furrowed his eyebrows as he thought about what she just said to him. “Best friend?” he muttered.

“Yeah,” whispered Gabrielle.

“Wait... I remember one time seeing you in the market with this taller, older girl.”

The bard looked away from Perdicus and grabbed the basket. “That would have been her.” She jerked the heavy basket off the table.

“What was her name?”

Gabrielle licked her lips and took a moment to reply but finally replied, “I don’t want to talk about her, honestly.”

“I’m sorry,” whispered Perdicus. “I didn’t mean to start...” He trailed off, lost for words.

“Its okay,” offered the young girl. “It’s all over now.” She neared the door that went to the main hall.

“I know but I know it still hurts.” Perdicus came over to her as a sad smile took over.
“I’m always here to help if I can.”

“Yeah I know you are.” Gabrielle gave her own smile but warmer.

The young man searched the cool forest eyes and then lowered his head a little.

The small bard felt her heart skip a beat and the basket become a little heavier than earlier.

Perdicus paused but lowered his head the rest of the way and pressed his lips into Gabrielle’s.

Gabrielle stiffened up when his touched hers and she tried to step back but the door wouldn’t let her. After a few seconds, she started to relax and faintly returned the kiss back to him.

Perdicus pulled back from the soft kiss, still smiling.

The young girl sheepishly smiled, quickly turned around, and left the room.

Perdicus's smile went into a silly grin as he quickly followed after her.

Gabrielle tried relaxing but felt her body slightly shaking. She came to the main steps that went up to the bedrooms and she stopped. "I'm going upstairs to put this stuff away."

"Alright... I'll head back to the kitchen." Perdicus gave a faint wave then continued to the kitchen.

Gabrielle stood there, momentarily but slowly climbed the steps. She went directly to the master bedroom and peered into the room. "Hello?" she called.

"Come in, Gabrielle," answered the misses of the house. She was sitting in a rocking chair, facing an open window and slowly knitting something. "How has your day been?"

The slave girl quietly walked in and went to the misses's dresser. "It's been rather busy, misses." She lowered the basket onto the floor and slid open the bottom drawer.

"Gabrielle, you know you can call me Maria." The expecting mother lowered her knitting onto her lap and peered across to the young girl.

"Yes ma'am I know but the master prefers I do not." Gabrielle didn't turn her head to the misses as she continued carefully placing the clean clothes away.

"Gabrielle," whispered Maria's warm voice, "Gabrielle?"

The young bard stopped what she was doing and turned her head to the misses. "Yes ma'am?"

"Do you see Michulus in here?"

"No, ma'am."

"Then it is okay to call me Maria." The woman returned her attention to the open window and continued rocking. "What is your mother cooking tonight?"

"I'm not sure, honestly." The teenager went back to slipping the clothes into the various drawers. "Are you and the lord eating together tonight?"

"I'm afraid not," replied Maria. "He is too busy with some guests."

The bard licked her lips and picked up the basket with a few clothes still in it. "May I ask who the guests are?" She crossed to the other side of the room, past Maria, and went to the dresser near the washroom.

"Some gentlemen from the state government."

"Oh," muttered the bard. She opened a few drawers of Michulus's and put away his tunics. After she was finished, she went over to Maria's side. "Is there anything you need?"

“I’m fine, thank you, Gabrielle.”

Gabrielle faintly nodded and started for the door with the basket in her right hand.

“Oh, Gabrielle?”

“Yes ma’am?” The bard stopped in the doorway and turned back.

“A little company would be nice.”

The slave girl sadly smiled and placed the basket next to the door but out of the way.

“Pull that chair up, dear.” Maria pointed to the chair that was next to the window.

The teenager walked over, picked it up, and placed it beside the misses.

After the small girl was settled in, Maria started rocking again. “Your mother told me you like to write...?”

Gabrielle just shrugged.

“You do not?” urged Maria.

The small bard let out a long sigh but replied, “I use to, yes.”

The misses didn’t respond and just rocked her chair while staring at the window. There was a few minutes of silence but she whispered, “Because of slavery?”

“Yes,” quietly replied the bard.

Maria pressed her lips together for a moment as she thought about the girl. “I can say I’ve been very lucky with my way of life.”

The teenager remained silent after Maria’s words.

“I can’t imagine anything less.” She paused while glancing at Gabrielle then softly adding, “It has to be life shattering.”

“It is,” quietly agreed the bard.

Maria chewed on the inside of her lower lip. She suddenly reached over and patted the girl’s hand. “Maybe it’ll get easier soon, Gabrielle.”

The teenager inwardly grunted at the remark.

The misses pulled her hand back. “Michulus is not the kindest of people... it can always catch up.”

“It’s a lot better here than with my previous owner.”

Maria sadly sighed and whispered, “Do not hold your breath on that.”

Gabrielle looked at her in question and worry.

The misses returned her attention to the window and whispered, “Go help your mother, dear.”

“Yes ma’am.” Gabrielle slowly stood up and returned the chair. She went to the doorway and picked up the basket. After she’d put the basket back into the laundry room, she made her way to the kitchen for dinner.

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“Gentlemen, there is nothing to worry about,” reassured Michulus. He sat up in his chair, keeping his eyes locked with the three other men in the office. “The states can be... influenced to join again.”

“Michulus, with all due respect, the states have not joined in many years,” reminded one man, he was to Michulus’s far right. His name was Nautic, a very well known political man in the state government.

“Yes I know but they have done it before.” Michulus lifted his arms and rested them both on his desk.

“I doubt you’ll get much luck from some of the southern states,” cut in Solus.

Then the man in the middle, Salarius, added, “The Spartans will certainly agree.”

“Personally, I think all of the states will agree eventually.” Michulus studied the three men. “We must make them agree.”

“Michulus, as much as I respect you and your ideas, I do not think this will be agreed upon.” Nautic shook his head. “The people will never go for it. Even your father, Cornelio, could not do it and we all know how much influence he has among the governments.”

“Not to mention Cornelio is against the idea,” spoke up Salarius.

“Then what should we do, gentlemen?” urged Michulus. He narrowed his eyes and grasped the edge of the desk with his hands. “Let ourselves be conquered by Romans, whom only like to duplicate everything of ours. For gods’ sakes, they take our technology, our economy, our warfare, and now they want to take our lands, women, and children.” He paused and then quietly added, “We’ll be Roman lap dogs. No better than these slaves.” He held his hand out to Perdicus over in the corner, whom was filling a water pitcher up with more water.

Perdicus felt his skin crawl at his master’s words but he kept his back to him. He pretended as if they were not even in the room.

Michulus lowered his hand back to the desk. “So are you three men or are you mice? Squeak up if you are.” He had a smug grin on his expression.

The three men exchanged looks then slowly looked back at Michulus, they all started to nod together.

Gabrielle kissed her mother on the cheek. “Goodnight, mom.”

“Goodnight, dear.” Hecuba smiled up at her daughter then rolled over onto her right side in her bed. She now faced the wall and closed her eyes.

The bard inwardly sighed, turned around, and went just outside of the slave house. Soon as she came out, she found Perdicus still sitting on the bottom step. After quietly closing the door, she sat down on the last step beside her friend. “How are you doing?”

Perdicus shrugged.

“What’s wrong?” quietly asked the girl.

The young man sighed and briefly glanced at his friend then back at the moonlit olive grove across the grounds. “I was in Michulus’s meeting for a moment to fill up the water pitcher.”

“And?”

“And... Michulus was talking about the rumoured war against Rome.”

“What were they saying?”

Perdicus shook his head then looked down at his feet. “Michulus was trying to convince these men to fight Rome. He was saying Greece would be Rome’s lap dog... as bad as a slave. He then pointed at me for an example.”

Gabrielle felt a deep sigh release from inside herself. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. She brought her right arm across the back of Perdicus’s shoulders and slightly hugged him.

“I guess I understand why you think sometimes you’ll never be free.” The young man felt his shoulders slump down. “Sometimes I’d rather just die than live this life.”

The bard chewed on her lower lip as she thought of something to say to comfort her friend. “Just keep hoping, Perdicus,” she whispered, “there’s always hope. You’ll be free again.”

Perdicus finally turned his head to Gabrielle and revealed a sad smile. “Thank you.”

“Just have some faith.” Gabrielle forced a warm smile.

Perdicus now looked to his right, away from Gabrielle, and stared at Michulus’s office window. He saw Michulus standing directly beside the window, facing the three men. “I’m not sure if I’m for or against this war.”

“I’m always against war,” stated Gabrielle. “It serves no purpose.”

“Sometimes it can,” countered Perdicus.

“People dying senselessly... that is never the answer.”

Perdicus returned his attention to his friend. “That’s true.”

Gabrielle softly smiled and reached over, taking his larger warm hand.

The young man felt a smile crease his lips. He leaned towards his friend and slowly pressed his lips against Gabrielle's.

The bard's body was already hot from the summer heat but it was intensified when Perdicus started kissing her.

As they young teenagers were kissing, Michulus happened to look out of his office window. He narrowed his eyes when he saw his two slaves kissing on the steps of the slave house.

"Michulus?" asked Nautic.

Michulus quickly turned his head back to the group of men. "I'm sorry. As I was saying..."

Perdicus gradually pulled back from the long and soft kiss. "Having you here has made it easier, Gabrielle."

The bard faintly smiled and took a deep breath. "I know, Perdicus." She squeezed Perdicus's hand and asked, "Tired?"

"Yeah, actually." Perdicus stood up and helped his friend up onto her feet. "Let's get some rest." He opened the door and led Gabrielle in by their locked hands.

Within a few minutes, the pair was in each of their beds and trying to sleep. For once, sleep didn't seem to take as long as it use to for them.

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The next morning, Gabrielle found herself back in the house cleaning the library room. It was a room that Michulus would retreat to when he'd had long days. Occasionally it was Gabrielle's duty to clean it up and reshelve whatever books he'd taken out. Once everything was neater, she would then scrub the wood floor on her hands and knees starting in one corner until she reached the doors on the opposite side of the room.

As soon as the bard started to come close to the two huge double doors of the library, she heard her mother call down to her. She stopped and looked behind herself to her mother. "Yes, mom?"

Hecuba came closer to the library but remained down the hall a little ways. "Michulus wants you in his office."

Gabrielle nodded. "Thanks, mom."

"Welcome, dear." Hecuba went back down the hallway and into the main hallway. She quietly went upstairs to the misses's room.

The teenager continued scrubbing the floor until she reached the entrance. She finally stood up on her feet in the doorway with her bucket of dirty water in her right hand.

"Looks better," she muttered. Turning around, she went first to the laundry room to pour out the dirty water outside. After that, she headed for Michulus's office since he asked for her. She could only imagine what it was about today.

Michulus peered up when he saw her come into the office. He looked back down at his half written scroll and continued with his sentence.

Gabrielle didn't move nor did she look at him, she just simply stared at the wood floor.

The slave master lifted his quill and reached up a little more, placing the quill back into the ink jar. He then slowly stood up from his chair and came around the desk then sat on the corner. He remained there silent and waiting for the girl to look at him.

The teenager had her two hands intertwined together in front of herself. Suddenly, she felt her own grip growing stronger and her palms sweating. She slightly licked her own lips and forced herself to look up into her master's direction. "I'm sorry, sir if I took too long."

"No, that was fine." Michulus right hand was resting on the desk; he drummed his fingers on it briefly. Slowly his eyes travelled over to the window across the room and he stared out at the olive grove. "I finally decided upon something last night, Gabrielle."

The small bard felt her stomach twist.

Michulus's dark eyes drifted back to the slave. "I've been meaning to teach you the rules of a mistress lately. Unfortunately, I've been rather busy with business." He now lifted himself off the desk and neared the girl. "But of lately I've been... inspired to start the lessons of a mistress to you." He stood directly in front of Gabrielle, staring down at her. "The first rule you must remember, Gabrielle, as a mistress you are solely mine... nobody else's. Is that clear?"

The slaver girl didn't say anything and after about a few seconds she faintly nodded her head.

"Gooooood." Michulus slyly smiled as he lifted his right hand and cupped her chin. "Don't forget that, Gabrielle." He lowered his head closer to hers. "Otherwise, it could cost you dearly," he whispered, "or maybe... somebody else. Understood?"

"Yes... master," uttered the tiny bard.

"Glad to hear it." Michulus finished the distance and started what seemed like a soft kiss but quickly turned rougher than anything.

Gabrielle felt the urge to back off but knew the risks if she did such a thing.

Michulus finally pulled away once he sensed the small girl was urging for breath. He straightened up while grinning at his mistress. He lightly patted her cheek with his right hand then returned to his chair behind the desk. "Finish your work, girl."

Gabrielle stood there, stiffened in fear but pushed herself to the door. She fumbled a little for the door handle yet quickly made it out. Once she closed the door, she stood there and tried to take in what happened and what he'd said to her. Her dark forest eyes closed as they started to sting, she suddenly opened them and went running down the hallway, not sure where she was going. She then went into the laundry room, closing the door behind herself, and frantically looked around the room.

The small bard's body was shaking from the violation she felt from Michulus. She felt a need to hide from the world and she went to the folding table and crawled underneath it. She pressed her back against the cool stone wall, pulled her legs up, and dug her head between her legs. Her tears started to roll down her cheeks quicker than earlier.

"I feel rather thirsty," announced Maria.

Hecuba lowered her knitting into her lap, as did Maria. "I'll get something to drink."

"No, no its okay, Hecuba." Maria lowered her knitting off to her right side and slowly stood up.

"Misses, I don't want you to-"

"Hecuba, its okay," promised the expecting mother.

Hecuba stared at the other woman's large stomach, looked up to her, and asked, "Are you sure, Maria?"

"I'm positive." Maria softly smiled. "I'll bring you something too."

"Thank you."

Maria gradually left the room and climbed down the large flight of stairs to the main hallway. She started for the kitchen at the right end of the hallway but stopped after about three steps. She stood there, silently. She tilted her head to one side and brushed back her curly black hair. After turning her head to the left, she instead turned around and went to the laundry room door. Behind the door, she could make out the muffles of crying.

She held out her hand, prepared to grasp the door handle but she felt hesitant. She felt a slight struggle inside herself yet after a few seconds, her fingers curled around the handle and she slid open the door some. She slightly poked herself inside and at first could not find the source of the crying until she looked down under the folding table. "Oh gods, Gabrielle," she uttered.

Maria slipped into the room, closed the door behind herself, and bent down in front of the small bard. "What's wrong, child?"

Gabrielle finally realized Maria was in the room, and she lifted her head up. "I'm sorry, misses. I didn't mean to-"

"Gabrielle," cut off Maria, "its okay. I'm not mad." She reached out and carefully grasped one of the girl's knees. "What happened, sweetie?"

The bard shook her head and her eyes drifted away from Maria.

The woman deeply sighed. "Please Gabrielle, what's happened?"

"Nothing for you to worry about, misses. I promise."

“Yes it is,” stated the misses. She squeezed Gabrielle’s knee a little. “And please, it’s Maria.” She waited for the girl to say something but could tell she wasn’t about to reveal anything. She pressed her lips together, squeezed the bard’s leg one last time, and then crawled under the table to sit beside her. “Well... I will not leave until you’ve told me what has happened.”

“But misse... Maria, you’re pregnant and shouldn’t-”

The misses held up her hand to stop her. “Then that’s not my fault since you won’t tell me what’s happened.”

Gabrielle lowered her eyes and turned her head away. “Honestly, Maria... its nothing to be worried about.”

Maria reached across with her right hand and turned Gabrielle’s head back to her own. “Gabrielle, listen to me... I was the oldest child in my family and I had five siblings under me. A couple of them were your age and liked to ignore a lot of things like you do. But I know how to handle kids like you so you mind as well stop and just tell me.” She removed the serious expression from her face and slightly grinned.

Gabrielle faintly chuckled but felt her shoulders slump again. “Its not that I don’t want to talk about it... well I don’t but... you shouldn’t have to hear it, Maria.”

“Gabrielle, have you ever had an older sister?” whispered Maria.

“Well... not a blood sister no but....”

“Somebody like that?”

Gabrielle faintly nodded.

“Well then, did you and your older sister feel comfortable enough to talk about anything, no matter what?”

The small bard licked her lips as she sensed her heart dropping and old memories coming back. “Yes.”

“Then please look at me like an older sister too, Gabrielle.” Maria gently smiled at the young girl and finally lowered her hand back to her lap. “It is okay... even if it’s about Michulus. I know more about him than people realize, trust me.”

“Well... I’m not sure about this one, Maria.”

“Gabrielle, let me guess....” Maria stared up at the bottom of the folding table while saying, “you’re his mistress and he just let you know now, right?” She turned her attention back to the bard.

Gabrielle just stared at her in amazement. “But... how’d you....”

“Gabrielle, it’s not that hard to figure out. I know Michulus very well.” Maria shrugged, reached up, and brushed some of her hair back. “I knew from day one you weren’t bought

just to clean... not as young and beautiful as you are. I know what Michulus is about, sweetie.”

The slave shook her head and stared at the cracked stone floor. “Can I ask you something, Maria?”

“Yes, sweetie?”

“Why did somebody like you... somebody nice as you marry somebody like him?”

Maria took a deep breath then gradually released it. “To reform.”

“Reform?”

The misses faintly nodded and explained. “Michulus father is a very nice man and well respected. My own family is as well and both Michulus’s family and my own have been close for years. My father, before he died, betrothed me to Michulus because he and Michulus’s father had hopes to make a good man out of Michulus.”

“They thought he’d be a bad person?”

“Pretty much,” answered Maria. “They both had hopes that I could help him. And I have... in some ways and in other ways I cannot.” She sighed and shook her head. “There is only one thing that can truly change a person for better.”

“What is that?” quietly asked the small bard.

Maria gave a sad smile to the girl then whispered, “Love.”

Gabrielle didn’t say anything back and just stared across the room.

“Gabrielle,” uttered the misses, “I’ll try my best to keep him away from you... but there is only so much even I can do.”

“I know, Maria.”

“I’m sorry.” Maria grasped the girl’s knee. “Just have faith... things will work themselves out, I promise.”

“I hope so,” muttered the bard under her breath.

“They will,” promised the woman. “Keep your hope about it.”

Gabrielle just barely nodded then wiped away the remaining tearstains. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Maria was about to slide out from under the table but stopped. “It might be safer, sweetie if you go first.”

The small bard chuckled and crawled out from underneath. She then helped Maria from under the table and asked, “Where were you going?”

“To the kitchen for water for myself and your mother.” Maria went to the slightly open door and asked, “Would you like to join us?”

The slave considered for a moment. "What are you doing?" She had a very curious look.

"Knitting." Maria suddenly heard a huge groan from the girl, which made her laugh at the girl. "Gabrielle, you can tell me a story," she offered.

The small bard brightened up at that idea. "Alright then." She quietly left the laundry room with the misses and tried to push away today's events with Michulus as if they didn't happen.

After she'd helped Maria get a few cups of water from the kitchen, she went upstairs to master bedroom. She pulled up a chair next to her mother and Maria then asked what kind of story they wanted to hear. Both women asked for a mythology story and Gabrielle tried to think about some of the ones that she knew about. She soon recalled one of her most favourites about a tribe of women called Amazons and how the first Amazon was born. She relaxed in her chair and started her tale about the first Amazon.

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Gabrielle sighed deeply while staring at the ceiling not far above her. Below she could hear her mother's faint sounds of snoring. She rolled to her left and lowered her eyes down to Perdicus's bed. He too was asleep but his back was to the wall so she was able to study his features.

Perdicus took a deep breath and tried to go to sleep. He really couldn't because his body was a fair bit sore from today's work. After a heavy sigh, he opened his eyes and gazed across at Hecuba. Then he gazed up and found Gabrielle staring down at him. He softly smiled.

Gabrielle returned the smile but hers was sad.

"Not tired?" whispered Perdicus across the room.

"No," quietly replied the bard. "How about you?"

"Not really." Perdicus lowered his eyes to the wood floor. Briefly, he studied a few cracks in the wood then lifted his gaze back up to the girl. "Wanna go out for a walk?"

"You think it's safe?"

"Sure." Perdicus climbed out of his bed and waited for Gabrielle to come down.

The pair quietly left the slave house and went into the warm summer's eve. At first, they aimlessly walked around in the olive groves but then they seemed to head back for the master's house. They silently went around to the back of house where there was a small gate that slipped between the house into a courtyard.

Perdicus carefully and quietly opened the gate and let Gabrielle in first. He followed and made sure to be cautious about closing the metal gate again.

Gabrielle went to the centre of the courtyard and settled down on a white marble bench.

Perdicus scooted onto the bench next to his friend. He dropped his head back and stared at the three-quarter moon directly ahead.

The small bard sighed deeply and rested back into the bench. “Beautiful isn’t it?” she uttered.

The young man faintly nodded. He didn’t say anything for a few minutes but broke the silence with a random question. “Ever thought about having children, Gabrielle?”

The small girl blinked at her friend, wondering where that question derived from him. “I’m not sure, honestly.”

Perdicus sighed then folded his hands in his lap.

“Why you ask?”

“Just curious,” simply replied the young man.

Gabrielle furrowed her eyebrows but returned her attention to the moon.

Michulus gradually opened his eyes as he shifted out of his dreamscape. He narrowed his eyes when he heard a few faint whispers outside his bedroom window. He briefly glanced at Maria on the other side of the bed but turned his head back to the window. Slowly, he stood up out of bed and neared his window but just on one side of it. He poked his head outside and scanned for the owners of the voices.

“Yeah I have,” quietly answered Perdicus. “I think I’d like two children.”

Gabrielle nodded at his answer and considered it for a few minutes. “So why did you ask, honestly?”

The young man shrugged but looked at his friend. “Gabrielle, do you like me seriously?”

The bard felt her stomach drop now, and she swallowed her nervousness down. “Uh... yeah, Perdicus I do,” she confessed but she knew in certain ways it was a lie to herself as much as to Perdicus.

Perdicus slightly turned on the bench and faced his body towards Gabrielle. “Gabrielle.” He reached over and held her hands in his own. “To be honest, I could marry you and settle down.”

The small bard caught her breath in her chest, her entire breathing locking up in fear.

“I’m serious,” whispered the young man, “I could start a family with you.” He was about to say something else but fell short.

“What is it?” urged Gabrielle.

Perdicus squeezed the smaller ones in his hand. “We can’t start a family or anything like that because... we’re slaves.” He paused and bit the bottom of his lips a few times. “What

I guess I'm trying to ask is... will you try to escape from here with me? Then we can start a life together?"

The small bard stared at her friend and tried to take in everything he just said to her. "Perdicus," she uttered, "we can't escape from here."

"Yes we can, I know a way."

Gabrielle shook her head then said, "Even if we do, Perdicus... we'll be outcasts from society." She directed to the brand on her hip. "This cannot be removed, Perdicus."

"It doesn't matter, Gabrielle. We don't need society to start a life together."

"And what about my mother?"

Perdicus stared at her trying to come up with an answer. "She'll be okay here, Gabrielle. Maria will take care of her."

Suddenly, Gabrielle's green eyes went into a deep swirling green. "I will not leave her here, Perdicus," she quietly growled.

"Gabrielle-"

"No," hissed the small bard. She jumped up to her feet and freeing her hands. "I won't leave my mom here, Perdicus." She turned her back to him and quickly left the courtyard.

Perdicus sat there stunned as he watched his friend disappear around the house. He closed his eyes.

"And how would you escape, Perdicus?"

The young man hastily turned his head to the deep, angry voice behind him. "Michulus, sir." He jumped up from the bench.

Michulus neared the slave. "Answer my question, Perdicus."

Perdicus took a step back; he also noticed Michulus had a sword in his right hand. "I wasn't going to escape, sir."

Michulus's eyes slowly narrowed while his patience thinned. He lifted his sword, the tip pointing towards Perdicus. "We will see," he growled.

Gabrielle sat down on a step of the slave house and dropped her head into her hands. "Gods," she muttered. She roughly ran her fingers through her hair then looked up to the moon. "Xena," she whispered, "where are you?" Her face went back into her hands and again today her tears returned. "I need you... with me... so bad," she whimpered. She kept her head in her hands, crying until she could control the pain again.

Yet slowly the door to the slave house crept open and Hecuba quietly stepped out. She went down a couple of steps and sat down beside her daughter. She didn't say a word because she already knew what her daughter was crying about since the first day. She

reached over and just pulled her daughter into her arms, holding her tight and occasionally kissing the top of her head.

~*~*~*~

The following day, Gabrielle had realized Perdicus never returned from last night. She's been worried that he'd possibly runaway on his own but she'd found him later that day. After finally seeing him, she soon became even more worried as he had several scabs and bruises on his body and a black eye. And there was one instant that she went to place her hand on his back but he quickly flinched when she did so.

Gabrielle had tried to find out what happened to him but Perdicus would not talk about it. She easily figured it had to do with Michulus. She also noticed he never spoke anything about last night, and she decided not to bring it up with him.

After that incident with Perdicus, things settled back down for her for a little while. Chores around the grounds and in the house continued as normal during the remainder of the summer. Michulus continued to see his three friends from the political party and best as Gabrielle could tell a bit of trouble was starting. On one occasion, several townspeople from the neighbouring village arrived at Michulus's gates demanding to speak with him. Michulus however ignored their demands to speak with him.

Then the end of the summer neared and with the change of season came a change in Michulus's treatment of Gabrielle. The bard realized Michulus began to look her over more often than not. And then as the leaves slowly started to turn on the trees, Michulus began touching Gabrielle on various spots of her body. During the times she had to clean the office with him in it, he would brush past her with a touch to her arm, back, or even chest. Each and every time, Gabrielle felt her shoulders become heavier and heavier.

On one early fall day, when the wind had started to finally pick up, several townspeople from the village returned again to Michulus's grounds at the gates. Perdicus was the one to meet them again at the gates, telling them Michulus refused to speak with them.

Gabrielle stood in the window in the hallway and watched Perdicus speak with them. She dropped her head against the broomstick and continued to watch them. She really could not make out what the leader of the group was saying but he was definitely not happy. Then one man pushed up through the group of towns people and in his right hand was a pitchfork. "Oh gods," whispered the bard.

"What's wrong?" asked Hecuba, she stood on the bottom step of the stairs.

"Come here, mom," called Gabrielle, she pointed out of the window.

Hecuba stood next to her daughter and saw the large group of townspeople at the gate confronting Perdicus. "What's going on?"

"I think they want to talk to Michulus and they're not to happy about something."

"Oh my," whispered Hecuba. She caught sight now of several people with a few torches. "Honey, hurry up stairs and get Maria."

“Why?”

The mother turned to Gabrielle. “Just go, now please.”

The teenager was hesitant but nodded and raced upstairs to get the misses.

Maria looked up when she saw the slave come into the room without announcing herself. “What is it, Gabrielle?” She’d seen the slight panic in Gabrielle’s eyes.

“There are some townspeople at the gates and they’re very angry.”

“How do you know?” Maria started to stand up but very slowly due to her pregnancy.

“They have pitchforks, swords, and torches,” answered the bard.

“Oh gods.” Maria reached out with her hand. “Help me.”

The bard switched the broom into her left hand and took Maria’s hand with her right. “Come on.”

They hurried out of the room and tried to rush down the steps but Maria could only go so fast. “What’s happening, Hecuba?” called Maria halfway down the steps.

Hecuba peered up at Maria and Gabrielle then back to the window. “They’re trying to break the gates open. Perdicus is trying to hold them along with those to black slaves.”

“They won’t be able to,” whispered Maria in fear. So finally made it to the ground floor and went to the window to see what was happening too.

“I better tell Michulus,” stated Gabrielle.

Maria grabbed Gabrielle’s arm and squeezed it hard. “No, he can take care of himself, Gabrielle.”

“But Maria-”

“I know but we can’t.” The misses looked back out the window and saw the gates about to breach. “We have to worry about ourselves right now.”

Hecuba nodded her agreement.

“Where can we go?” whispered Gabrielle. “What about Perdicus?”

“He can take care of himself, honey,” replied Hecuba.

Gabrielle felt her heart drop but she knew there was nothing she could do.

“Come on.” Maria started for the kitchen.

“Where we going?” asked Gabrielle.

“To the stables... it’s the safest spot,” whispered Maria.

The group made it to the kitchen and went outside. As soon as they came outside though, the gates burst open and the three slaves were trampled.

“Hurry,” urged Maria. She grabbed Gabrielle’s wrist and forced her to run with her.

Hecuba glanced behind and saw the townspeople waving their various weapons and yelling out for Michulus.

Maria was the first into the stables with Gabrielle and Hecuba behind her. “We have to hide.”

“Where?” hastily asked Hecuba.

“Let’s go in here,” replied Gabrielle. She directed to the stall with her broom.

“There’s a horse in there,” stated her mother.

“Perfect.” Maria went up to the stall and opened the door. “They won’t look inside the stall with the horses. Come on.”

Hecuba and Gabrielle squeezed in and sat down on the floor beside each other.

Maria closed the gate and looked at the stall from her side and saw two handles on either side. She looked behind the horse and saw a mucking broom. She quickly went around the horse and ripped the broom off the hanging peg. She went back to the stall door and slid the broom between the two handles to lock the door. After a heavy sigh, she sat down on the ground beside the other two, her back against the stall door.

All three women kept quiet as they listened to the yells of the townspeople.

“What you think is happening?” whispered the bard.

Maria shook her head then dropped it against the stall door. “Fighting.”

“Why’s this happening?” questioned Hecuba.

“It has to do with the war against Rome,” replied Maria, she slowly closed her eyes.

“Nobody wants this war but the people who would benefit from it. Michulus is one of them.”

“Michulus won’t give in to them though,” stated Gabrielle.

“Exactly... that’s why these people are here. To make sure he stops one way or another.”

“Oh gods,” uttered Hecuba, her eyes were wide with fear. “But they wouldn’t attack you, Maria?”

Maria turned her head to the mother. “I can’t be sure and I can’t risk it either.”

“Wait,” whispered the small bard, “I hear something.”

Maria lifted her head up and carefully listened. “Somebody is outside the stable,” she whispered. After she said that, somebody stepped into the stable but they were dragging their feet.

Gabrielle pressed her back against the wall and kept her eyes closed.

“Gods,” moaned a man, and then he fell to the ground.

Gabrielle’s eyes flew open. “Perdicus.” She jumped up.

“Gabrielle, no,” warned Hecuba, she grabbed her daughter's arm trying to pull her back down.

“Mother, we can’t leave him to die.” Gabrielle jerked her arm free, and she grabbed the stall door and jumped over it with the broom still in her hand.

Hecuba started to stand up but Maria reached over and held her down. “Don’t, Hecuba. She’ll be fine.”

Gabrielle bent down beside Perdicus. “Perdicus?” She grasped his shoulder with her free hand. “Perdicus?”

The young man faintly lifted his head and peered up with fuzzy eyes. “Gabrielle?”

“Hey its okay.” The young girl sadly smiled.

“I’m not so sure.” He was lying on his stomach so he directed down to his lower body.

Gabrielle glanced down and for the first time saw the small pool of blood. “Oh gods, no. What happened?”

Perdicus closed his eyes again and whispered, “One of those people attacked me.”

“That would have been me,” growled a man at the doorway of the stable.

The girl peered up at the man with the sword. She gritted her teeth. “Why’d you do this?” she hotly yelled.

“Because slaves of Michulus shouldn’t even live,” hissed the man. He stepped into the stable. “That includes you, girl.” He pointed the tip of his sword at her.

Gabrielle felt her anger boiling up just as fast as her fears. She slowly rose up with the broom in her hands and slightly held out. “I’m not a slave.”

“You could have fooled me.” He directed to the brand on her hip.

The bard shook her head as she felt a few tears build up in her eyes. “I’m nobody’s slave and you had no right to hurt this man,” she yelled.

“Shut up, girl.” The man took a few closer steps and raised his sword.

Gabrielle took a step back but when she saw the sword coming down at her, she raised the broom up.

The man stood there stunned that his sword had been stopped. He quickly pulled it back and growled at the bard.

The small girl jumped away from him and went down to the next stall.

The man shifted and now stood next to the first stall.

“Stay back,” yelled Gabrielle.

The man laughed and took a swipe at the girl.

Gabrielle jumped out of the way but took steps forward and swung her broom at him.

The man yelped when it connected with his arm. He twirled his sword and slashed at Gabrielle.

The bard screamed when the blade sliced at her leg.

Suddenly the horse in the stall cried out and started pounding his hoofs down and turning every which way in the stall.

Hecuba and Maria now could do nothing to help Gabrielle in fear they’d get trampled by the horse. They had to move out of the way of the horse, starting to scoot away from the stall door.

The man suddenly reached out and grabbed the stunned bard and swung her around.

Gabrielle tripped over Perdicus and rolled onto the ground then hit her head on the opposite wall. She slumped against the wall with the broom in her lap.

The man laughed and twirled his sword, raised his hands with the blade pointing down at the slave.

The horse loudly whined, completely turned in the stall so that he faced the wall.

“Stupid slave,” growled the man. He took a deep breath and started to bring his sword down.

The horse whined, threw his head up, and then bucked with his hind legs.

The man stopped when he saw the stall door suddenly coming at him. He screamed when the door slammed into him, sending him flying into the stable's doorway.

Gabrielle shook her head when she saw the horse coming out of his stall and coming at the man.

The man turned onto his back after getting the door off but he soon regretted it when he found a horse’s face in his own.

The horse snorted in the man’s face and stared into his eyes.

The man just felt a fear shiver up and down his back from the angry horse’s look. He started to stand up but then saw the horse’s teeth reappear.

The horse pushed his head forward and clamped his teeth down just in front of the man’s nose.

The man screamed, dropped his sword, jumped up and ran out of the stable.

The horse stood there for a second then huffed. He turned his head around and saw that young man was now next to Gabrielle.

Gabrielle shook away her astonishment and looked to Perdicus.

“Are you okay?” whispered the boy.

“Yeah... I am.”

Hecuba and Maria came out of the stall and knelt by the bard.

Maria was closes to Perdicus and said, “Let me look.”

Perdicus nodded, closed his eyes, and painful turned around and rested against the wall next to Gabrielle.

The misses looked over Perdicus’s wound and shook her head.

“I know,” whispered the young man. “It's okay.”

“You’re going to be okay, right?” asked the bard to Perdicus.

Perdicus swallowed and instead of answering, said, “Look, remember I told you about how we can escape out of here?”

“Yeah?” whispered the small girl.

“If you go to the far southern end of the grounds, to the wood fencing, you’ll find apart of the fencing loose. You can get through.”

“What about you?” urged the bard.

“I can’t make-”

“Don’t say it,” warned Gabrielle.

“Gabrielle,” cut in Maria, “he’s lost too much blood.”

The small girl closed her eyes.

Perdicus grabbed his friend’s closest arm. “Gabrielle, you have to get out of here.”

“We can’t leave you here,” hotly stated the bard.

“Gabrielle, please go before its too late.” Perdicus squeezed her arm tightly. “Just look at it this way, I’ll be free too.”

The bard closed her eyes and tried to hold back her tears.

Hecuba grasped her daughter while whispering, “Come on.”

The small bard dropped her broom and stood up.

“Let’s go,” ordered Maria, she was partially out of the stable. She waited for a second and then started off when the two other women followed.

Gabrielle looked back at Perdicus as she hurried out of the stable.

Perdicus faintly nodded and closed his eyes, dropped his head back but after a few seconds his head slumped to one side.

The young girl knew exactly what happened and she felt her tears finally break free. She took a quick look at the horse that still stood in the doorway of the stable.

The horse cocked his head to one side then suddenly broke off cantering to the group.

Hecuba glanced back to see the horse catching up to them. "He's following us," she called to Maria.

"Well he's not going to fit through the fence, it won't matter." Maria saw the fencing in sight and noticed how two boards slightly protruded from the rest. She figured that had to be the right spot.

Once the group came to the two boards, they started pulling on them to try and pull them off.

"Hades," growled Maria. She let go and tried peeking between the boards. "Oh gods... they've been renailed."

The horse shook his head at the now scared looks on the humans' faces. He took a few steps closer, lowered his head, and pushed against Gabrielle's side.

The small bard looked at the horse and asked, "What, boy?"

The horse gave a harder push.

"I think he wants us out of the way," suggested Maria. She stepped back along with the slaves.

The horse came closer to the fence; he turned around, and reared up his back legs.

The two boards went rocketing into the air.

The horse huffed stepped to his left twice, whined, and threw up his hind legs again.

The two new boards cracked from the hard blow.

The horse huffed more in anger than anything but reared up his hoofs again and sent those two boards flying too.

"I like this horse," stated Maria in happiness.

"He's coming with us." Gabrielle took a step closer and patted his neck.

The horse huffed and leaned into the patting.

"Come on, ladies." Maria stepped through the large opening and waved her hand.

The two women and the horse walked through but Gabrielle stopped and looked back at the stable. She realized now it was on fire.

Hecuba sighed and came behind her daughter. "He's right, honey... he is free now."

Gabrielle grasped the fence beside her and shook her head. "I just feel terrible about it."

"Its okay, Gabrielle... its okay."

The small bard turned around and started walking towards the woods that wasn't far ahead. "Where are we going?" she quietly asked then wiped away her tears.

Maria sighed but replied, "To Michulus's father... Cornelio."

"You think that's safe?" asked Hecuba in worry.

"Very... he's with the people not the governments." Maria took a deep breath as she felt all the excitement from today catching up to her.

"Are you okay?" asked the worried girl.

"Yeah... just...." Maria stopped walking and slightly bent forward.

Gabrielle glanced at the horse then back to Maria. "You should ride the horse, Maria."

"I'll be fine," rasped the misses.

Hecuba now cut into the conversation. "Gabrielle is right, Maria. You're pregnant and need to take it easy."

The horse came up closer to the group and stood next to Maria.

The expecting mother lifted her head to the horse.

The horse snorted a little but then he slowly and carefully lowered himself down onto the ground.

Maria softly laughed at the horse and took his offer. She grasped his mane and carefully climbed onto his back.

The horse stood back up and continued the journey for the woods.

Gabrielle glanced at her mother then back to the horse. "I wonder what breed he is?"

Hecuba laughed for the first time today and brought her arm around her daughter's shoulder. "I don't know, honey."

"Me either." The small teenager started walking again with her mother. "I wonder what this means?" she whispered just for her mother to hear.

"I'm not sure."

"You think we'll be free?" whispered the bard.

Hecuba looked away from her daughter and felt a sense of defeat come inside her. "I don't think we can ever truly be free," she uttered.

Gabrielle's head slumped at her own mother's words. "Because of the brand."

The mother sadly nodded her head.

“Mom?”

Hecuba looked at her daughter in question.

“I miss Lila,” whispered the small girl.

The mother closed her eyes while she turned her head away. “I miss Lila too, honey.” She opened her eyes again but squeezed her daughter’s shoulders in reassurance.

Part 2: Xena’s Second Year

Xena knelt down in front of her bed and carefully slid the item under her bed.

“Xena, sweetie?” called her mother.

The girl looked up when she saw her mother poke her head into the room.

“Hi,” she greeted to her mom.

Cyrene smiled at her daughter. “What you doing, sweetie?”

The teenager looked under her bed, her hands still grasping the sheath, and the hilt of the sword gleamed up at her. “Just cleaning up some, mother.” She lifted her head back up to her mother.

Cyrene chuckled at the answer. “Okay... come down stairs when you’re finished. Dinner is almost ready.”

“I’ll be there in a minute,” responded the girl.

The mother nodded and quietly left her daughter’s room.

Xena sadly sighed and stood up again. She pulled the bed sheet back down to hanging over the bed. She then went down stairs to join her family in dinner. Everybody was talkative except for Xena; she’d always been quiet these days. It’d gotten to the point where Cyrene became terribly nervous about her daughter. Xena was quiet, she constantly had nightmares, and now she was hiding things from her own mother. Cyrene felt as if something was building up inside of her daughter and was preparing to take her child from her. Ever since that day in Potidaea, her daughter had never been the same.

“I’m going to go check on Argo,” announced Xena after she finished her meal.

“Always worried about that stupid horse,” jabbed Toris.

The teenager glared at her older brother and stated, “Like you are with your girlfriend.”

“Hey,” growled the young man. “At least that’s a healthy relationship,” he chided.

“Whatever.” Xena pushed her seat out and stormed out of the tavern to the small stable she’d built herself for Argo.

Cyrene slowly turned her head to Toris. "I've told you before, would you please lighten up on your sister."

"Mother, all she does is ride that stupid horse... almost every damn day. Who the Hades knows where she goes and what she does."

"Toris, just leave her be."

"Yeah Toris, ever since Gabrielle died she hasn't been the same," reminded Lyceus.

Toris sighed and rested back into his chair.

"Please give her a break, Toris." Cyrene leaned forward in her chair. "I think she needs her family more than the hard times."

"Yeah I know," whispered the young man.

Xena ran her hand up and down her horse's nose.

Argo whined but continued to eat her feed she'd just received.

"How is it?"

The horse snorted.

"Same old, same old huh?"

Argo looked up at her master and snorted again. She lowered her head and continued munching on the feed.

"Yeah I know." The teenager reached behind and pulled out an apple. "That's why I brought this."

The mare immediately looked up and saw the apple. She whined in happiness.

"Eat the feed first," ordered the young woman.

Argo whined, stared at the apple, stared at the feed, then back at the apple.

"Go on," ordered Xena again.

The mare sighed and went back to the feed.

Xena lowered the apple onto the stall door's top. She then rested her left arm into the top as well. "I still keep having those dreams, you know?"

Argo looked up in question.

"The ones about... her."

Argo sighed, waited for a second, and then went to finishing off the feed.

"Everybody keeps telling me she's dead... I just can't believe it, girl." Xena realized her horse had finished the feed off and that meant it was time for the dessert. She reached

behind and extracted one of her old daggers. She gracefully twirled the dagger in her right hand the plunged it into the apple. "I can't see her giving up like that." She wrenched the dagger through the apple, starting to slice it.

Argo carefully watched the apple being cut up while listening to her master's words.

"Maybe I'm just fooling myself... she probably is dead."

Argo whined at that and stomped her feet.

"You think she's still alive too huh?"

The mare threw her head up and down and stomped a hoof again.

Xena sadly smiled and handed over a slice of apple. Right when Argo was about to take it, she pulled the apple away. "Or you just agreeing because you want this apple?"

Argo huffed and whined then shook her head.

The teenager chuckled at that and held the apple slice back out. "That's what I thought."

Argo brought her lips around the slice and pulled it free from her master's fingers.

Xena finished cutting the next slice and held it out. "I have to find out, girl."

The mare stopped halfway from taking the slice and peered into her master's eyes.

"Argo, I have to know what's happened to her."

The horse sighed but took the slice and started munching on it.

"But I can't go back there even though I know that's the best place to probably start the search."

Argo shook her head and dramatically sighed.

"Yeah I know... bad memories huh?" Xena held out her next apple slice. "I've been training for several months with that sword. Plus everything else I've been doing and with you."

The mare stretched her neck out and nudged her master's hand.

"What?"

The mare shook her head.

"What? About the training?"

Argo bobbed her head a few times.

"I'm ready."

Argo whined in laughter plus shook her head.

Xena frowned at her mare. "You're not getting anymore of this apple then." She twirled the dagger and slipped it away. "Actually it looks pretty good." She brought the

remaining half of the apple up to her lips but she suddenly laughed at her mare's pouty look. "Alright... alright." She held out the apple half for her horse. "So you really think I need more training?"

The horse was chewing on her bite of apple as she considered the question. She finally shook her head.

"Well... only so much I can do without training against an opponent." Xena sighed and held out the last morsel of apple. "The rest I'll just learn on the way."

Argo took the last bite and quietly chomped down on it.

"I'm just not sure how I'll tell mother," she whispered. "I mean, I'm going on nineteen, I can do what I want by now," she stated.

The mare laughed quietly.

"I'm serious," warned the teenager.

Argo huffed but settled down nonetheless.

Xena gave a deep sigh. "I'll talk to her tomorrow." She glanced outside. "With spring coming, the weather will be better... better for travelling." She felt her shoulders slump as she turned back to her mare. "You know, it's been almost a year since everything happened." She paused and quietly whispered, "It'll be her fourteenth birthday soon."

Argo stretched her neck out again and nudged the side of her master's face.

Xena turned her head back to her mare. "Sorry." She patted her horse's nose and said, "Get some rest, girl." She turned around and quietly left the stable. She tugged her cloak against her body then continued to the tavern. Once she was back in her bedroom, she started settling into bed for the night.

But before she went to sleep, she'd pulled out two scrolls from under her bed. She unrolled them and just sat there, staring at them. On them were maps of Greece with every small town to large city along with the roads between them. Almost every night, Xena would pull out the maps and review them, memorizing them until they were locked in her head. It'd been one of Xena's many projects to prepare for the search.

After she finished with them, she slipped them back under her bed then leaned over to the nightstand. She lit the two candles since sunset was near. Reaching back under her bed, but on the other side, she removed another scroll. This scroll contained a long list of herbs used as medicines. One of Xena's worries was getting hurt and never being able to care for herself. Fortunately with this scroll, she was able to memorize all the herbs that were used in various treatments, what they looked like, and where to find them. And what made it even more interesting was the fact here and there were notes that certain herbs could kill a person or hurt them if used in a certain way.

By the time she'd finished rereading the scroll, she rolled it up and tucked it back away in its hiding spot. She finally decided she was tired, blew out the candles, and crawled under her covers to fall asleep soon.

Again for the seventh night straight, she had dreams about Gabrielle. This dream was a very different one compared to most of her others it was a pure dream and less of a nightmare. Gabrielle came back to her in her dreams, begging her to find her and save her. And for whatever reason, Xena saw Gabrielle in chains just like the other few times she'd had this same dream. She couldn't quite figure out what the chains meant yet she had her ideas of what they meant and it clued her in where to start her hunt.

The next morning, Xena had gotten up a little late in the morning but went down stairs right after getting changed. She first went to find her mother and found her in the tavern preparing for the official reopening day of the tavern later this week.

“Mother?”

Cyrene turned around and lowered the cutting knife onto the counter. She wiped her hands on her apron then finally asked, “Yes?”

“Can I talk with you for a minute or two?”

“Sure, sweetie.” Cyrene went outside into the main portion of the tavern. She sat down at a table but next to her daughter.

Xena settled into the chair.

“What’s going on, Xena?”

The teenager sighed deeply then replied, “I think... I’m going to leave.”

Cyrene stared at her daughter while considering her words. “Leave?”

“Yes, I want to find... Gabrielle.”

The mother chewed on her lower lip as she considered her daughter’s words. She reached out and held her child’s hands. “Sweetie... Gabrielle is gone. You have to let her go.”

“No!” yelled Xena. She jumped up from her chair and moved behind it. “She’s not gone, mother.” She grasped the chair with all of her strength. “She’s alive... I know it.”

“How can you be so sure, dear?” Cyrene felt her heart starting to pound.

“I just know she is, mother.” Xena stared at her mother then added, “I’m going to find her.”

“Sweetie, how are you going to find her huh?” Cyrene clasped her hands in her lap and added, “It's dangerous out there... you can't do it alone.”

“Nobody would come with me anyway, mother. I’ll be fine.”

“Xena,” warned Cyrene, “there are crazy... sick people out there.” She stood up now. “If one of those people gets a hold of you... gods only know what could happen to you.”

“I’ll be fine, mother.”

“How do you expect to protect yourself from them, huh?” yelled Cyrene.

Xena straightened up. "I've learned how to use a sword."

The mother stood there in complete shock. "You what?" she hotly whispered.

"I've learned how to use a sword, mother."

"Xena, I don't care if you had an army behind you. It's not safe."

"Mother, I can take care of myself and old enough to go out on my own. Why do I need your permission?"

Cyrene came around her chair, closer to Xena. "Because I'm your mother."

The teenager sighed and took a few steps away then turned back around. "Mother, I have to find her."

"Xena, she is gone."

"They never found a body!" yelled the teenager.

Cyrene shook her head and folded her arms against her chest. "For all you could know, Xena her body could be some where else. You can't possibly track her down."

"Yes I can," stated the young woman. She turned around now and started walking up stairs.

Cyrene quickly followed after her, calling, "Xena, don't do this."

Xena went into her bedroom and went to her dresser. She pulled out her second dagger and held onto it in her hand. "Mother, please just let me do this."

"So you can end up dead too?" yelled Cyrene.

"I won't," argued the teenager. She grabbed her leather bag from her dresser and threw her dagger with sheath into it. Also in her bag she had a small bag of dinars, heavy blanket, some food, and another change of clothes. "I can take care of myself."

"Xena, think... you're just a child."

"What's going on?"

Both Cyrene and Xena turned their heads to Lyceus in the doorway.

"Nothing to do with you, Ly. Go on," ordered the sister.

"No, what's the yelling about?" urged the sixteen-year-old.

"You heard your sister, go on, Lyceus."

The young man sighed and turned around. "Alright." He went back into his room but quickly put his ear against the wall that adjoined Xena's room.

Cyrene turned her head back to her daughter after she heard Lyceus's door close. "Xena, please stay home."

“Mother, I can’t.” Xena knelt down beside her bed and reached under it.

The mother furrowed her eyebrows as she wondered what was under her child’s bed.

The teenager stood back up with a sword’s hilt sticking out of a sheath.

“Xena, no.”

“Mother, please.” She came up to her mother. “I have to find her... I have to know if she’s still alive or not.” She shook her head and whispered, “I can’t take anymore of these dreams.”

“And what happens if you find the answer you don’t want, Xena?” Cyrene felt her heart sinking now and tears building up.

“At this point... any answer will help.” The teenager lowered her head.

“Xena... please stay here,” quietly urged her mother. “I can’t lose you.”

“You won’t, I promise.” Xena lifted her head back up. “I’ll be back.”

Cyrene lowered her arms and closed in the distance. She pulled her child into her arms and hugged her.

Xena sighed and could only snuggle in closer since both her hands were full of items.

Cyrene kissed her daughter’s head, pulled back a little but didn’t let her go. “You come back here when you find what you’re looking for. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, mother.”

The mother stepped aside and watched her daughter walk past.

Xena stopped in the doorway and turned her head back. “I love you, mom.”

“I love you too, sweetie... go on before I change my mind.”

The teenager faintly nodded then quietly left the room. She hurried down stairs and swung her pack onto her back. While rushing out to the stable, she fumbled to tie her sword onto her side.

Cyrene took a couple of steps backwards, sat down on her daughter’s bed, and hung her head down. “Oh gods,” she whimpered and tears began to fall.

Lyceus shoved the last item, a shirt, into his satchel then jumped to his door. He quietly opened his door and stuck his head out checking the hallway for anybody. He saw nobody so he silently crept out and went downstairs, making sure not to touch the steps that always squeaked. Once he was outside, he went bolting for the small stable where he knew his sister would be right now. When he got inside of the stable, he found Xena in the stall just finished tacking Argo up.

“Lyceus, what are you doing?”

“I’m coming with you,” he replied, “I’m packed and ready to go.” He held up his leather satchel briefly then swung it onto his back.

“I don’t think so.” Xena pushed open the stall door, tugged on Argo’s reins, and walked her out of the stable.

“Xena, I’m going with you,” stated the young man.

“No, Ly,” growled the sister. “You’re staying here with Toris and mother.”

“Why can’t I go?” Lyceus took two large steps to catch up with his sister.

Xena stopped and faced her smaller brother. “Because mother needs you... and because I said so.”

“Toris will be here,” he argued. “And how come it’s okay for you to go? What? Mother doesn’t need you?”

The teenager shook her head. “This is something I have to do... alone.”

“Why can’t I come?” protested the young man. “Gabrielle was my friend too.”

“Lyceus,” warned Xena. “I don’t have time for this.”

“Xena, she was my friend too.” The brother took a step closer and grasped his sister’s arm. “Please? Can I come with you? You’ll need the extra help.” He paused. “Please? I want to help find her too.”

“Lyc-”

“I’m just going to follow you anyway,” reminded the young man.

Xena sighed and looked away from her brother as she thought about what he said to her. “Alright.” She turned her attention back to Lyceus only to see his expression happy and excited. “One condition.”

“What’s that?”

“If things start to get dangerous, I’m taking you back home. Okay? Agreed?”

Lyceus slowly nodded his head. “Okay.”

“Alright... let’s go.” Xena continued walking to the small gates of Amphipolis with her brother beside her.

“Where we going first?”

“I’m not sure just yet,” replied the teenager. She took one last look at her mother’s tavern, home, and then turned her head back never to look back again.

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Lyceus glanced over at his sister then looked back down the dirt road. “Do you know where we’re going?” he quietly asked.

Xena felt a tiny grin tug at her lips but she coolly answered, "Yeah."

"How you know?" The sixteen-year-old had a very curious look.

The taller sister chuckled and simply replied, "I memorized all of the roads, towns, and cities in Greece, Ly."

"No you didn't," protested the young man. "That's horse manure."

"Ly, I've been planning for this day for a year now," reminded Xena.

"Gods... really?"

Xena briefly looked at her brother, sadly nodded, then looked back down the road.

"What... what else have you learned or done to... prepare?"

The older sister felt her grin return. "I've learned how to use a sword and daggers, trained Argo..." She trailed off and just shrugged.

"Memorized the roads too," reminded the young man. "Wait... you know how to use a sword?"

"Yesss."

"Cool." Lyceus had a huge grin now. "But I'm sure you're not an expert."

"No," agreed the young woman. "But I think I can hold my own pretty well."

The brother sighed, shook his head then whispered, "I hope you don't have to."

"Yeah I know." Xena lifted her left hand and ruffled her brother's hair.

Lyceus swatted his sister's hand away and fixed his hair while asking, "You think we'll find Gabrielle?"

"Yes."

The young man pressed his lips together. He looked down and kicked at a stone then lifted his head back up. "Where we going first?"

"We're going to a small but important town," replied Xena.

"What's so important about it?"

The teenager sighed but she answered, "It's a centre for warlords."

"What you mean? A lot of warlords and warriors collect there together?"

Xena faintly nodded. "Pretty much."

"Why are we going there?" Lyceus's eyebrows were pushed together but he ended up answering his own question. "We're looking for the people that attacked Potidaea huh?"

“Exactly.” Xena reached up with her right hand, which held the reins, and patted Argo’s neck. “I think if we find the person in charge of that attack, we might be able to find out what happened to Gabrielle.”

Lyceus rubbed the back of his neck with his right hand and dropped it back to his side. “How are we going to do that? I mean... we can’t just stroll up to the leader and ask him.” He slightly chuckled at his own words.

“No... we can’t,” agreed the young woman.

“Then...?” He peered up at Xena in question.

All Xena did was grin evilly then returned her eyes to the road. After a few seconds, she did say, “First though, we need to get some money.”

“How in Hades are we going to do that?”

The young woman shrugged but she then suddenly stopped and fully faced her brother. “One thing though.”

Lyceus cocked his head to one side.

Xena now pointed her index finger at her brother. “You’re going to have to learn how to use a sword.”

“Swwweet.”

The teenager shook her head as her hand went back down. “But Lyceus, I’ll teach you so you can protect yourself... not fight. Okay?”

“Um... okay.”

Xena accepted that and continued the journey down the dirt road.

Lyceus had no idea what town they were headed for but he did know they were travelling west. He was still surprised by what his sister had been doing for the past year to ready herself. He never realized just how much Gabrielle meant to Xena until today. He could also figure it out for himself that Gabrielle must have meant more than a friend to his sister. His only hope though was to help his sister find Gabrielle so that Xena would finally be at peace. Xena had lost herself after Potidaea and he missed his sister more than anything.

And has the pair travelled westward, Xena took the time to sort out her plans. First, she knew she needed more money but she was unsure where’d they find that just yet. Second, they needed to make it to the town of Delia and find out about the leader of those raiders. But before she could do that, she would have to teach her brother how to protect himself with a sword. Her only concern at this point was her brother’s own safety. She could only imagine what her mother was thinking and feeling now that her daughter and youngest son were gone. After realizing that, her head hung down, and she stared at the various leaves, stones, and grass that passed by them.

Xena tried to push her thoughts away and for once she stopped them by concentrating on the noises surrounding her. She could make out some trees shaking in the light breeze, a few birds chirping, and some animal tromping just off to the left in the woods. She then noted her mare's hooves tapping on the road along with her and Lyceus's boots scuffing on the road in unison to her sword tapping against her side. Then her focus went deeper to the sound of Argo's breathing, then her own, and Lyceus's as all of the other sounds in the world faded out. She gradually lifted her head now as her ears started to filter in a new sound she hadn't heard earlier. The new sound suddenly made her come to a dead stop.

"What's wrong?" asked Lyceus.

"Ssssh," urged Xena. Her sky eyes slowly deepened into a rich sea blue. "You hear that?" she uttered.

"What?" whispered the young man.

The teenager tilted her head to one side then gradually turned it to her left. "Somebody is coming... towards us."

"I don't hear anything." Lyceus shook his head and curiously asked, "Even if there is... why so worried?"

"Because..." Xena trailed off as she concentrated on the new noise and realized there was a second one that bothered her more than anything. "I think they're... armed."

"Armed?" muttered Lyceus.

Xena suddenly looked at her brother and held out Argo's reins. "Take her reins, okay?"

Lyceus took them but hastily asked, "What's wrong?"

"I don't think this'll be... good." The young woman took a few steps in front of her brother. She could now make out the noises even better. "Two," she whispered, "both men." She shook her head, took a few more steps, and pulled her light weight cloak closed so that it hid her sword. She turned her head back to her brother. "Just stay there, okay? No matter what happens."

"Um okay." Lyceus wasn't sure what was about to happen but he was worried either way.

When Xena turned her head back, two men started to materialize ahead of them. She reached up, brushing her dark brown bangs out of the way but placed her hands now at her sides.

The two men were talking away but one of them had caught sight of the two teenagers ahead in the road. He slapped his friend in the side to get his attention.

Xena curiously took notice of what they were wearing and carrying. One man had a sword at his side and the other was carrying a mace in his hand. They had satchels on and didn't have much in the way of armour yet looked rough.

The two men approached the teenagers once close enough, they stopped and studied them, especially Xena.

“What are you kids doing out here alone?” asked the man with the sword.

“Out for a stroll,” sarcastically replied Xena.

The swordsman glared at the girl and took a step closer to her. “I hate smartasses.”

“So do I,” taunted Xena, she flashed a sly grin.

The guy with the mace started to lift it up and tap the mace gently in his free hand.

“Look kids,” started the swordsman, “here’s how it works. We’re bandits and we smash your faces in before we take what we want.” He ran his tongue along the front of his teeth. “And I mean aaanything.” His eyes ran up and down the length of Xena’s body.

Xena felt a faint shiver ripple down her back. “First of all, we’re not kids.” Slowly her eyes started to form into slits while her anger grew. “And second, you can’t take what’s not yours.”

“To Hades we won’t,” growled the swordsman. He tore out his sword and started after Xena.

Xena jumped aside which only pushed open her cloak. She reached in with her left hand and extracted her sword. “Back off,” she warned.

The swordsman laughed and threw a grin to his buddy. “Not only a kid with a sword but a girl at that.”

Xena felt her anger turn into rage as her lip curled. She suddenly lunged forward and brought her sword down on the bandit.

The swordsman brought his sword up just in time to stop hers. He then realized just how strong she was as she pressed her weight down against him. With the gritting of his teeth, he pushed up with his legs and threw her off.

Xena took a step back yet held her spot. She gave a good spin of her sword and lunged at the bandit again.

The bandit with the mace shook his head with a small laugh as he watched in amusement. He took a good step back and watched as the pair started to circle in their spot. He grinned to himself as he pulled his mace back, preparing to take a whack at Xena.

“Xena!” yelled Lyceus, and he was about to stop the bandit but found it too late.

Xena had already put her sword behind her head and caught the mace on her blade. She gave a hard jerk and freed the mace from the bandit’s hands then threw it over her head into the woods.

The bandit stood there shocked by what happened.

Xena took a daring slash at the swordsman however he jumped away in time. This though gave Xena time to turn slightly and slam a kick into the other bandit.

The bandit went flying onto his back.

Lyceus took the opening, letting go of Argo's reins, and lunging at the bandit on the ground. He quickly brought his fist into the bandit's face and knocked him unconscious.

Xena was still parrying off her attacker. She brought her blade out to stop the bandit's then quickly attacked with a slice and missed.

The swordsman however suddenly dropped down and took a swipe at her legs.

Xena hadn't expected it and tried jumping back yet stumbled and fell onto her back. Her sword fell out of her hands and landed just beside her. She looked up at the bandit standing above her.

Lyceus saw what was about to happen, he could do nothing from how far away he was from Xena.

Xena felt her heart stop when she saw the sword coming down on her. She quickly acted and brought her hands up, palm to palm, in hopes to stop the blade somehow.

The bandit saw his sword come to a stop, and he lost his grin. He just stared at his blade stuck between this girl's two hands.

Xena stared at the sword between her palms with the tip of the blade just touching her nose. She now felt the air fill her lungs again; she tried to regain her senses as she curled her fingers around the blade and jerked it free. She threw the sword far aside, grabbed her own, and jumped back up onto her feet. She grinned as the tip of her blade pressed into the bandit's throat. "Kids huh?"

The bandit swallowed, he was captured by Xena's stormy blue eyes.

Xena finally realized just how hard she was breathing along with the amount of excitement that fuelled her body. She debated about what to do now. She fisted up her left hand, lowered her sword, and disappeared into a blur as she punched the bandit in the face.

The bandit stumbled backwards and had no time to recover. He was hit over the head with the butt of Xena's hilt.

Xena stood there, breathing hard, and glaring at the bandit lying in the dirt.

"Xena?" whispered Lyceus.

The teenager didn't hear her brother; she remained still.

Lyceus didn't know what to do at first. He took two careful steps closer to his sister then gently grasped her arm. "Sis?"

The young woman shook her head then finally lowered her sword. "Sorry," she whispered.

“You okay?”

“Uh... yeah.” Xena brushed the question aside; she quickly went to her mare. She had some rope tied to the side of her saddle so she untied the rope from the saddle and went to the swordsman first. She grabbed one of the bandit’s wrists and dragged him to a tree close to the road. “Bring the other guy over here too,” she called.

Lyceus had a confused look however went grabbed the other bandit and tugged him to a tree a bit close to the swordsman. “What now?”

Xena had removed one of her daggers. She was busy cutting the rope into two separate ropes. Once she had it cut, she tossed one to her brother. “Tie him up to the tree... real tight.” She slipped her dagger away then went onto the other side of the tree. She hastily took the bandit’s arms and wrapped them around the tree. She then lashed them down against the tree, making sure her knot was strong and tight.

Lyceus had done the same then went back onto the edge of the road. He curiously looked at his sister, wondering what they were going to do now with the bandits.

The teenager stepped back and stood next to her brother. “Well... first.” She whirled around and paced over to the sword the bandit left on the ground. She picked it up but held the hilt out towards her brother. “You need a sword.”

The sixteen-year-old stared at his sister, his eyes were wide. “Xena-”

“Take it,” coldly ordered Xena.

Lyceus felt a sigh come out although he did as his sister told him. He carefully brought his right hand around the hilt of the sword then felt the entire weight of the sword. As he held it up in front of himself, he studied the sharp blade.

Xena grinned to herself then stepped past her brother. She knelt down in front of the swordsman and removed his sheath. “Here.” She tossed the sheath at her brother.

Lyceus barely caught it but slipped the sword away and worked on tying it against his side.

The young woman returned her focus on the bandit. She now noted the small bag on the right side of his hip, a huge grin spread across her lips. She bit down on her lower lip as she worked the small pouch free. Once she had it in her hands, she gave it a good shake and received several jingles in response.

“Wow... how much is in there?”

Xena smirked at her brother. “Plenty. Check the other guy.”

Lyceus nodded. He knelt down in front of the other bandit and also found a small pouch attached to his side. After he took it off, he opened the top and peered into it.

“How much?” asked Xena.

“I’d say at least twenty dinars.”

“Perfect.” Xena had a huge grin as she went to her mare. “Here.”

Lyceus approached his sister and handed over the money.

The young woman combined the two pouches into one then swung her pack off. She bent down onto the ground and opened up her satchel. She dropped the dinars into her satchel, closed it back up, and stood up while putting the pack on again. “Let’s get out of here.”

“I second that.” Lyceus waited for his sister to get Argo. Once Xena was next to him, he started travelling with her again. “What about those bandits though?”

Xena threw back a quick glance at them then settled her eyes back on her brother. “Don’t worry about them.”

The brother shrugged. He kept himself a little busy adjusting his light cloak around the sword. He tried to do what his sister was doing by hiding the sword inside of his cloak.

“We’ll stop in a few candelmarks.” Xena took a long and deep breath then added, “I’ll teach you the sword a little.”

“Alright,” agreed the excited young man.

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“Xena, let me try,” offered Lyceus.

The teenager threw a menacing look at her brother. “I can do it, Ly.”

The young man held up his hands in defence then walked away. “Okay.”

Xena sighed and went back to trying to start the fire in the pit. She’d done it several times before at home in the woods but she’d never really practice enough times. After a deep breath, she started rubbing the wood against each other just under the dry leaves.

Lyceus curiously watched his sister and decided it was best to stay out of her way. He took a quick look at Argo and she was busy eating grass for dinner. “Um, sis?”

Xena lost her concentration at the mention of her name and she whipped her head around. “What, Ly?” she hotly asked.

Lyceus wasn’t looking at his sister when he asked, “Can I untack Argo?”

“No,” growled Xena. “I’ll take care of her.” She turned her head back to the fire pit.

“Well... is there anything I can do?”

“Lyceus” hotly whispered Xena. She closed her hollow blue eyes. “Just be... quiet for a few minutes. Okay?”

The brother gulped down his lump in his throat and just stood there, quietly.

The young woman counted to ten then tried to start the fire again. This time, she didn’t just scrape the wood together fast but with more force.

Lyceus dropped his head to one side when he saw sparks flying then land on the dry leaves. "You got it."

Xena sighed and pushed the lit leaves deeper into the pit where the twigs and sticks were located. She watched as everything began to burn. Once she decided the fire was strong enough, she grabbed two larger branches off to her right and put it into the growing fire.

"What's next?"

The sister stood up finally and turned to Lyceus. "After I untack Argo, we'll practice with the swords."

"What about dinner?" For emphasis, Lyceus rubbed his stomach.

Xena felt a faint grin tug at her lips as she went over to Argo. "I only brought some of mother's bread, dried fruit, and some spices."

"That's all we're having then?"

The young woman tugged off Argo's saddle and placed it on the ground. "No, we're going to have to catch something."

Lyceus shook his head and laughed. "Xena, how are we going to do that?"

"Come on, Ly it's not that hard." Xena removed Argo's face piece and placed it beside the saddle. "There you go, girl," she whispered and patted Argo's side. "Let's get dinner first then," she decided aloud.

Lyceus second that and decided to follow his sister into the woods. "What are we... catching and how?"

Xena came to a stop in front of a berry patch. "First we need the bait." She hastily plucked about a dozen berries. "Next a good hiding and trap spot." She stood still but was carefully studying the surrounding area. Her expression brightened up when she found the perfect spot. She rushed over to it, slightly jumping over small hurdles of branches and bushes.

Lyceus came to a quick stop when his sister did the same. He watched as Xena placed the handful of berries in an open patch of moss.

"Come on," whispered Xena. She grabbed his brother's cloak and tugged him with her.

The pair went behind some bushes and ducked down into them.

Xena silently withdrew her two daggers. She held the one in her right hand by the tip.

Lyceus carefully studied his sister and noticed how she was not taking her eyes off the pile of berries. He slowly shifted his eyes to the red berries and started to notice these little quails began to emerge out of the forest.

The teenager pulled her arm back and waited until a quail came to a stop at the pile of berries. She abruptly threw her dagger at the quail.

The small bird had fallen to its side with the dagger sticking out of its side. Soon as it did that, all of the other quail disappeared into the woods.

“Hurry, grab the quail,” urged Xena.

Lyceus sprung out of the bushes and picked up the dead quail. He placed the quail onto the ground, drew out the bloody dagger but carefully wiped it off with a few leaves. He handed it back to his sister. “Nice shot.”

Xena grinned and replied, “Thanks.” She already had her second dagger readied in her right hand and placed the first one into her left hand. “You want two or one?” she whispered.

“Two.”

The teenager chuckled at her brother then went serious as she focused on the quails that re-emerged out of the woods. Again, she waited until a quail came to the bait then struck with her dagger. She repeated this until she had four dead quails. “Is that good?”

“Oh yeah,” answered Lyceus. “Thanks.”

“No problem.” Xena faintly smiled while she was putting her daggers away. She stood up with a quail in either hand.

The brother grabbed the other two and they returned to the camp.

Xena took a moment to put more wood into the fire then place the quail next to the fire for later. She also had taken Lyceus’s birds and placed them beside the other two. Both she and Lyceus took off their packs and stuck them next to the Argo’s tack. “Feel like practicing?”

Lyceus nodded his head.

“Alright.” The sister decided to do the practicing in the camp but off to one side since the clearing was rather large. She unsheathed her sword as she neared her brother. “You’ll enjoy this,” she lightly taunted.

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Lyceus flopped down on the ground beside the fire. He simply closed his eyes and knew he’d fall asleep any minute.

Xena chuckled at her brother’s exhaustion. She unbuckled her sword and placed it down on the ground, next to where she’d sleep. She slowly walked over to where her satchel was on the ground. She knelt down in front of it and pulled out a blanket to keep her warm. She then checked Lyceus’s bag too and sighed happily when she saw his blanket in there too. She carried them both over to where Lyceus was and opened up her brother’s first. With a good toss, she let it fall over her brother.

The young man slightly cracked open his eyes and gave a faint smile to his sister.

“Go to sleep,” ordered Xena.

Lyceus chuckled and closed his eyes again.

Xena dropped her own blanket onto the ground and decided to check on the fire. After it was well stoked for the evening, she went back to her brother's side and lay down on the ground beside him. To her right though was her sword in its sheath. She grabbed her blanket and shook it open then covered her entire body.

"The ground is a little hard," whispered Lyceus.

"I know... tomorrow we'll get some bedrolls."

"Good idea," agreed the brother.

Xena let a small grin appear but she replied, "Go to sleep, Ly."

"Yes, commander," teased the young man.

The teenager shook her head and just rolled onto her side, trying to go to sleep. She let her eyes drift shut but her thoughts were nowhere near sleep. She considered the various supplies they would get tomorrow in the town. She also tried to estimate about how much money they had now between her own and the two bandit's dinars.

Then her muses wandered to how she'd find out information about the various warlords in the area. She tried to figure out what to do after she knew what warlord attacked Potidaea a year ago. She was just worried that the warlord might not be active or dead for that matter.

After a very long sigh, Xena tried to push her thoughts away and relax. She gradually felt her concentration slipping as she fell asleep. Within twenty minutes, she'd returned to her dreamscape.

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"So... what's the name of this town?" whispered Lyceus. He didn't like the looks of the town to start. It was a small yet very gloomy almost a dark town.

"It's Delia," quietly replied Xena. "We need to be careful too."

"Why's that?"

Xena lightly tugged on Argo's reins.

Argo understood the signal and shifted closer to her master so she could better protect her.

"Because this is a large hang out for warlords and warriors."

Lyceus pressed his lips together while a surprised look came over his features. "Good reason."

"Yeah, I thought so too." Xena slowed down a little when they came into the town. She quickly scanned the town for a tavern or some kind of bar. "This way," she ordered.

The brother tore his eyes away from a group of armed men off to his left. He moved closer to his sister and followed after her. He then realized everybody in the town seemed to turn in their direction ever since they came into the town. "They're all staring at us," he mentioned.

"Yeah... that's because we're teenagers."

The young man huffed but tugged his cloak closer to his body. "I already like this place, sis."

Xena held back her chuckle. She saw the tavern ahead come into view and she saw a small stable. "Let's go in there first."

Lyceus nodded, making his way first into the stable with his sister.

The teenager directed her horse into a stall but left her tacked up. "We won't stay here too long."

"Sounds good to me." Lyceus left the stable next to his sister.

The siblings entered the tavern and went directly to the bar. They both pulled up a stool and waited for the bartender.

The bartender, after five minutes, finally approached the teenagers and suddenly had a funny look. "What in Hades are kids doing here?"

Xena's expression went right into a nasty glare. "We're here looking for some information." She'd already pulled off her satchel and had it open in her lap, just out of everybody's sight.

"Nothing a couple of kids could need." The bartender turned away yet he stopped midway when he heard a few dinars hit the bar. He turned back to the two teenagers. "You must really want some information then."

"Yeah, we do." Xena had a dinar in her right hand and she was tapping it on the bar. "Think you can help out?"

The bartender looked around himself then looked back at the two. His right hand came up and plucked the two dinars off the bar. "What you want?"

"I take it a lot of warlords and whatnot come through here huh?"

"Yeah of course," bluntly responded the man. "Why?"

Xena tapped the dinar again to keep his attention. "Well... you must know of that raider about a year ago on the town of Potidaea?"

The bartender was taking a deep breath as he jogged his memory. "Oh yeah... I did hear about that one. We actually had several of those raiders in here a few days afterwards bragging about the raid." He then lifted an eyebrow.

"Really huh?" Xena's sly grin suddenly slipped into place. "You know who the leader was by chance?"

The bartender held out his right hand. "It'll cost a little more, girl."

The teenager sighed but pulled out two more dinars and gave that to him along with the one she already had in her right hand. "Who was it?"

"His name is Bracis."

"Is? So he's still around?"

The bartender turned his attention to Lyceus for the first time. "Yeah, he is actually. He mainly runs the eastern portion of Greece... that's his turf."

"Turf?" questioned Lyceus.

"Yeah, these warlords each have their little... sector. None of them crossover unless they have intentions to expand."

Xena thought about that and filed it away for later. "You said there were a few raiders in here?"

The bartender went back to Xena. "Yes, a few of them. It wasn't long after the raid."

"They say anything about prisoners?"

The bartender sighed, licked his lips and scanned the room before finally replying, "Yeah actually. They were bragging they'd caught several women and planned to sell them into slavery."

"That was it?" inquired Lyceus.

"That's all I can remember." The bartender glanced between the two teenagers. "A lot of these warriors come and go in here... telling far fetched stories about this or that. They all get jumbled in my head after awhile."

"Its okay," stated Xena. "Thanks for the help." She started to slip off the stool.

"Wait."

The two teenagers paused and looked back up in question.

"You two should be careful... these people are real, they don't play with sticks."

Xena and Lyceus exchanged looks but Xena said, "We're no ordinary kids." She sealed up her pack, swung it around, and reassured the man by poking out the hilt of her sword.

The bartender saw it but shook his head. "Be careful... this is no place for a couple of teens."

"No worries," stated Xena. She signalled, with her head, to the door.

The brother quickly made his way out with Xena behind him.

Xena tried to ignore the few whistles she got from the men in the tavern. She simply clenched her fists and kept going.

Once they were outside again, Lyceus asked, "Where to now?"

"There should be a small market just down this way," Xena mentioned. "We need to pick up some stuff."

"Bedrolls for one."

Xena grinned at her brother before leading the way to the market. After they came into the market, they went directly to a stand that carried a lot of various travelling supplies. At that stand, Xena and her brother bought two bedrolls, dried foods, and two water skins. After they paid for the items, Xena asked for where the nearest leather shop would be from that stand.

The siblings then went to the leather stand that the man had told them about in the market. The leather stand was a lot larger than the supply stand.

"What we need here?" quietly asked Lyceus.

"Saddlebags." Xena was already picking through some of the leather products and found the pile of saddlebags on the main table. She began wedding through them by size and price.

"How about this one?" Lyceus held up a tan and medium size saddlebag.

The teenager grabbed it from her brother and faintly grinned. "Perfect, Ly." She went to the merchant and bargained a little with him, getting him to take five dinars off. After she paid the man, she said, "I think we got what we need. Let's head back to Argo."

Lyceus second the idea. He helped carry some of the supplies. Within a few minutes, they arrived back at the small stable to find Argo inside waiting.

Xena gave her brother her water skin and the bag of dried goods. She then slipped into the stall with the saddlebags and began attaching it to the saddle. Once she had it in place, she took the dried goods and put them away in the saddlebags. "Give me the bedrolls."

The brother tried his best to hand them over without dropping everything.

Xena grabbed them and put them into the other saddlebag side. "Hold onto the skins," she mentioned. She swung off her pack and took out her blanket. She shoved it into the saddlebag as well. "Give me your blanket, Ly."

Lyceus lowered the two water skins onto the ground and opened his pack. He pulled out his blanket and gave it to his sister.

Xena placed it into the saddlebag as well. After that, she cleaned out a few more items in her pack, putting them into different parts of the saddlebags. She then threw her pack on again but held the pouch of dinars in her hands.

Lyceus then backed out of the stable when his sister came out of the stall with her mare.

"Here, take Argo and give me the skins."

"Where you going?" asked the brother after he gave Xena the skins.

“To fill them. Wait here.” Xena didn’t look back and went up to the tavern.

Lyceus furrowed his eyebrows and turned to Argo. “She treats you like this too?”

Argo huffed and nodded her head.

“Yeah but you’re a horse.”

Argo threw up her head and whined at the young man.

“Yeah... I think she loves you more than me,” he joked lightly.

Argo also snickered and lowered her head back down.

Xena went directly to the bar with the two skins.

“Back again, huh?” asked the bartender. He came down to Xena and asked, “What you want now?”

“Can you fill these?” The teenager held up the two water skins.

The bartender sighed but reached over and took them from her. “I’ll be back.” He went into the kitchen for about a minute then returned with full water skins.

“I owe you for it?”

The bartender shook his head. He was about to leave but paused and said, “By the way, I heard that warlord you’re looking for is due west of here. About a candlemark or two.”

Xena nodded. “Thanks.”

“Uh huh.” The bartender strolled off to help the rest of his customers.

The young woman sucked in her breath as she made her way to the door of the tavern. She tried not to make any eye contact with the various men in the room.

Lyceus looked up when he heard somebody come out of the tavern. He smiled at his sister. “Got ‘em filled huh?”

“Yup.” Xena came next to her mare and lashed down the water skins onto the saddlebags. She then put away her money and asked, “You ready?”

“Yeah, can’t wait to get out of this town.”

Xena took the reins, turned her mare around, and headed for the gates of the town.

“Where we going to find this warlord?”

“West of here.” The teenager grinned at her brother. “We’ll probably meet up with them by this evening.”

“Then what?” asked the worried boy.

Xena shrugged. “Spur of the moment.”

“Oh great,” grumbled Lyceus.

The teenager patted her brother on the back. "You were the one that wanted to come."

"Don't remind me," chided Lyceus.

Xena chuckled quietly to herself but a faint smile creased her lips.

~*~*~*~

"Can we take a break?" suddenly cut in Lyceus's voice.

"Need a break huh?" taunted the older sister.

"Xena," groused the young man. "I haven't been preparing for this for the past year like you."

Xena lifted an eyebrow at him. She suddenly made a sharp right turn into the open grass. "How did you know I've been... training?"

"Sis, come on." Lyceus shook his head. "We all knew you were doing something. Almost everyday you were off with Argo and wouldn't show up until sunset."

The teenager sighed as she stared at the ground passing under her feet. "Ly, I had two choices."

"What you mean?"

Xena lifted her head back up; with her free hand she brushed back her dark brown bangs. "I could have sat around in my room and cried about Gabrielle. Or I could have done something about it." She paused then simply stated, "I decided to do something about it."

"Yeah I know, sis." Lyceus released a long sigh. He folded his arms against his chest. "I'm just worried."

Xena finally came to a stop deciding this was a good area to rest. "Worried about?" She turned to Argo and decided to take off her face piece so she could eat some of the surrounding grass.

"Just... if this is a good idea," confessed the young man. Lyceus found a good size rock and sat down on it. "I mean, maybe mother is right, you know. There are a lot of dangers out here."

The young woman had her back to her brother as she hung up Argo's face piece onto a low branch. "Look Ly..." She slowly faced her brother. "You can go back home."

"That's not what I meant, Xena." Lyceus ran his fingers through his blond hair. "I'm just saying, you think you're really ready for this?"

Xena approached her brother and bent down in front of him. "Look Lyceus, I've been training for an entire year... that was more than I wanted to do." She lightly placed her right hand on her brother's knee. "You don't understand how much I need to find out what's happened to Gabrielle."

"What happens if she's dead?" whispered the brother.

“Then I can finally let her go.” Xena searched her brother’s dark green eyes. “If she’s not, then I need to find her.”

“Why?” uttered Lyceus. “Why is she... this important?”

Xena remained motionless as she considered the question. She really hadn’t answered that question to herself yet either. “I’m not sure really,” she confessed.

“There must be a reason.”

Xena lowered her eyes and tried to think more about it. Slowly her crystal blue eyes lifted back up. “Ly, I don’t know if this’ll make sense but I just can’t live without her.” She felt her old emotions for Gabrielle started to push through inside of her. “She means so much to me, Ly. Just trust me on that.”

“I know,” whispered the brother. He leaned forward and suddenly hugged his sister.

Xena was a little surprised but wrapped her arms around her brother. She hadn’t been hugged by somebody in over a year. After her brother let go, she quietly asked, “You thirsty?”

“Yeah, actually.”

The sister had a faint grin as she stood up and went to the munching Argo. She untied one water skin and threw it over to her brother. “After you’re finished, I want to teach you some more with the sword.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah definitely.” Xena waited until her brother was finished drinking. She then took the skin and put it back. Afterwards, she and Lyceus did more teaching sessions with the sword for about half of a candlemark. Then the pair continued their journey to find the warlord Bracis.

“Xena, it is getting late,” mentioned Lyceus.

“Yeah I know.” Xena sighed as she took a quick look at the western sun. It would be setting within a candlemark if not sooner and she knew they needed to make camp soon. “Alright... let’s get off the road and find a spot.”

Lyceus second the idea and went off the road into the woods. “Hey, there’s a cave over there.” He stopped and pointed to it.

Xena grinned when she saw it. “That’ll do.” She went directly to it and once partially inside, she noted some people had been here.

“Looks like somebody else was here,” mentioned Lyceus. He poked his boot at the ashes in a small fire pit.

“Yeah, they sure were.” Xena lifted up a sharpening stone. “Looks like some kind of army or-”

“Warlords,” finished Lyceus. He held up a worn out dagger. “A little shabby.”

“Keep it,” suggested Xena. She turned to her horse and put the reins over her head. “You think you can set up camp yourself?”

“I think so, why?”

The teenager shifted to the mare’s saddlebags. “I think I’m going to scout around.”

“You think this was from the warlord Bracis?” Lyceus held out his arms when his sister plopped the saddlebags into him.

“I think so,” agreed Xena. She went over to the fire pit and bent down beside it. She scooped up a handful of the ashes and lowered her nose to it. Her nose crinkled up at the scent. “Yeah, not too long ago either.” She threw the ashes back in and wiped her hands clean. “Take care of camp. I’ll be back with dinner. Fair?”

“Sure.” Lyceus stood there, watching his sister mount Argo. “Be careful.”

Xena grinned as she settled into the saddle. “I will.”

Lyceus watched his sister turn Argo around then canter off. He lowered his head and stared at the saddlebags in his arms and the worn dagger sticking out. “Great,” he muttered.

Xena rode Argo hard to the western direction. She knew of a small town not too far and she had a sneaky suspicion. She kept Argo at a hard ride for about twenty minutes then slowed Argo down to a trot when she realized she was coming to a hilltop. She pulled Argo to a halt when she just made out faint signs of smoke ahead.

“Okay, girl. Stay here and wait.” Xena dismounted her mare and patted her on the neck. “I’ll be back.” She quietly approached the hilltop and once she figured she was close, she lay down on the ground and crawled the rest of the distance. As she neared the edge of the ridge, she started to see tents materializing far below in a valley. Once she was on the edge, she laid there and stared at a fairly medium size camp below. “Bingo,” she whispered.

Down below in the camp, Xena counted at least twenty-five tents. She figured there had to be at least two raiders per tent. She then saw one tent was larger than the rest, it had to be Bracis’s tent. She took a good deep breath at that point and all she smelled was fire, burning. She furrowed her eyebrows because it was a rather strong scent considering it was only coming from a few campfires below. That was when she looked across the valley to the opposite ridge and saw smoke coming up from that side. “Gods,” she whispered.

The teenager immediately looked back down at the camp. She now watched the raiders and saw them each polishing their swords or sharpening them then others were wiping down their armour. “They just attacked that town,” she whispered. Then in the centre of the camp was a tent that had two raiders in the front, on guard. “Must have hostages,” she muttered.

She was about to crawl backwards but faltered when she saw Bracis come out of his tent. She settled back into her spot and carefully watched him. She realized he was a big man, rather large and he seemed rather muscular too. Although he had this look about him that made him seem less intelligent. Her eyes then travelled back over to Bracis's tent and she saw a small flag flying from the top of his tent.

Suddenly Xena was pulled back to an old memory. She'd already seen that flag flying. It was back in Potidaea, in the town centre.

Xena stared at the yellow and black flag, flapping on the pole in the centre of Potidaea. She pulled Lila closer to her body. She couldn't help but wonder whose flag that was waving but she turned her head away. Right at the same time a raider stepped out of somebody's home, where a woman laid on the floor, dead.

Xena shook her head and pushed the memory away. Her eyes unlocked from the yellow and black flag and she decided it was getting late. She crawled backwards then stood up and went to her mare. "Hey, girl."

Argo whined her welcome and nudged her master.

The teenager smiled a little then mounted Argo. "We need to find dinner before it gets any later."

"Yes!" gloated Lyceus. He proudly smiled at the fire he'd just started. "That only took less than a candlemark."

"Three-quarters of a candlemark to be exact," cut in a deep voice.

Lyceus looked into the woods at hearing the voice but he saw nobody. He then heard a horse whine. "Xena?" He then saw his sister emerge out of the darkening woods with two rabbits in her hands and her mare tagging behind. "Gods... you scared me, sis."

Xena sensed a slight grin tug at her lips. "Thanks."

The brother shook his head. "You must have found something." He stared at the rabbits in her hands. "Other than rabbits if it took you this long to come back."

"Yeah, I did," confessed the teen. She went to the fire and placed the rabbits beside the fire. "Let me untack Argo and I'll skin those rabbits."

"Not a problem." Lyceus sat down on a log that was positioned next to the fire pit. "What'd you find?"

"Found the warlord and his men."

"Yeah?" The brother brightened up at the news. "What else?"

Xena shrugged as she pulled off Argo's saddle. "Looks to be about fifty men roughly."

"Wow." Lyceus fiddled with the dagger in his hands. "Anything else?"

“They have a few hostages.”

The brother looked over to his sister, who was just outside of the cave. “They must have done a raid not too long ago.”

“Yeah... there’s a town by the name of Athium. Its pretty small but they attacked it.”

“Gods,” whispered Lyceus. He sighed sadly and stared down at the dagger. “So what are we going to do now that we found them?”

Xena hung up Argo’s face piece onto a tree branch. The saddle was rested against the tree’s trunk. “I think we’re going to join them.”

“What?” Lyceus threw up his head, and he had the most confused look. “You’re serious?”

Xena patted Argo’s side, she ducked into the cave. “Yes, I’m serious.” She bent over and picked up the two rabbits by the ears. “Why?”

“Well...” The brother wasn’t sure what to say but he asked, “What purpose will that serve us?”

“We need to get close to them, Ly if we want to find out any information.” Xena started heading out of the cave but added, “Only way to do that is join them.” She disappeared into the woods.

“This just keeps getting better,” he muttered. “Couldn’t you have thought of a better plan?” he yelled to his sister.

“I’d like to hear yours,” called back Xena from somewhere in the woods.

Lyceus huffed and shook his head. After about three minutes, his sister came back in with the skinned rabbits and a long, thick branch skewered through them.

“Here put this over the fire.”

The young man took the branch with the rabbits and placed it over the fire, holding it in place. “We’re really going to join them?”

“Yeah,” replied Xena. “Going to try at least.”

“I hope this works,” whispered Lyceus.

“Me too,” agreed the sister quietly.

After dinner the siblings relaxed in their own spots. Xena had found that sharpening stone again and pulled out her sword. She tried to figure out how to sharpen her sword with the stone. After several test trials, she figured out how it worked.

“Hey, sis... you think this is a good dagger?” He held it up.

Xena sighed and looked up from her sword. “Let me see it.”

Lyceus sat up from the log and went over to his sister. He handed it over.

Xena looked over the dagger. She grabbed her sword and the whet stone. She put them down on the ground next to the large rock she was sitting on top. "Go to the saddlebags and in that small side pocket, pull out that rag."

Lyceus went over to the saddlebags and found the side pocket. He pulled out the rough cloth and wondered what it would do. He gave it to his sister.

Xena pressed her lips together as she rubbed the dagger's blade through the cloth a few times. She pulled the cloth away then held up the dagger. The blade reflected the firelight back. "Shiny again," she whispered.

Lyceus grinned at the dagger.

The teenager then carefully ran her thumb against the side of the blade and noted it was pretty dull. She picked up her new sharpening stone and started running it down the blade.

Lyceus carefully watched his sister sharpening the dagger. "What about a sheath?"

Xena shook her head. She flipped the dagger over in her lap and sharpened that side as well. "You'll have to be careful with it, Ly. We can get you one the next time we're in a town."

"Alright."

The young woman pulled the whet stone away and held it out to her brother. "Good as new."

The brother smiled and took his dagger back. "Thanks." He also took the cloth back.

Xena nodded then picked up her sword.

Lyceus put away the cloth then sat back down on the log by the fire. He somewhat opened his cloak as he tried to decide where to put it for now.

Xena studied him briefly but returned to sharpening her sword. The stone was a perfect size to fit the palm of her hand. She stroked the stone down the blade, brought her hand back up, and ran the stone back down. She continued this pattern until it became a natural rhythm for her. As she became use to it, she started to go a little faster and she seemed to fall into the rhythm. She felt a long sigh leave her as she began to relax from this simply rhythm and from the sound of the stone running down the metal.

The brother glanced over to Xena and saw she was lost into what she was doing. He sadly smiled at that then looked at his dagger again. He turned his torso some and looked down at his side. He carefully slipped the dagger between his side and his belt. He decided it should stay put and not cause any problems. He sighed and studied his sister again for just a moment. He stood up now and said, "I think I'm going to get some rest."

Xena almost didn't hear him but she stopped her sharpening and peered up at him.

"Alright, Ly. Sleep well."

Lyceus licked his lips and nodded. He went over to the two bedrolls and blankets he had laid out earlier. He unhooked his sword and pulled out the dagger. He placed both of them beside his bedroll then he crawled underneath the blanket.

The teenager looked back at her sword and continued sharpening it for another candlemark or so. After she'd felt some kind of relief from sharpening the sword, she stopped. She put the stone away in her saddlebag for later then she too went to sleep.

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“Okay, how’s this work again?” Lyceus stared down at the camp far below in the valley.

Xena sighed and turned her head to her brother. She repeated the plan. “We’re going down there and asking to join the... army, raiders, group.”

“The whatever,” concluded Lyceus.

“Yeah, the whatever down there.” Xena placed her attention on the raiders below. “I have a feeling they might say no.”

“You think?” teased Lyceus. “Wonder why.”

The teenager swatted her younger brother. “Look, in either case, I think we’re going to have to challenge them. Let me do it.”

“Challenge them? You mean fight them.”

“Exactly,” agreed Xena. “Let me do it, okay?”

Lyceus raised an eyebrow.

“Ly, I know the sword better than you so it only makes sense.”

The young man sighed and shook his head. “Alright.” He turned his head away. “What if we do join them? What happens then?”

“Then we try to get some of those raiders to trust us. Once they do, we’ll start asking around about what happened at Potidaea. See if we can get some more information about what happened to Gabrielle.”

“Okay. But...” He took a deep breath and continued his question. “But what if Bracis decides to attack a town? What are we going to do then? I mean... I can’t slaughter people,” he whispered.

“I know, Ly. We’re just going to have to fake it somehow.”

“Oh great,” grumbled the brother. “This is going to be really tough, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” honestly confessed Xena. “You sure you want to do this? I can do it alone, Ly.”

“No, no.” Lyceus chewed on his lower lip. “Don’t want you going alone. I can do this.”

“Alright.” Xena brought her left hand onto her brother’s back. “Just follow my lead, okay?”

The brother lightly moved his head in agreement. "Let's go."

Xena had a big grin as she crawled backwards. She stood up right when her brother did the same. She went to her horse and took the reins. "This way."

The siblings went around the ridge to the opposite side where there was a small trail that took them down to the camp. As they started down the trail, they noticed several raiders were stopping what they were doing and turning towards them.

"This will be fun," muttered Lyceus.

"I know," retorted Xena.

Once they made it to the bottom they came to a quick halt.

"Who the Hades are you two?" growled one raider. He extracted his sword.

Three other raiders around him also pulled out their swords.

Xena slowly arched an eyebrow at the man. "I'm here to talk to Bracis."

The raider narrowed his eyes at the two teenagers. "Go home, kids."

Xena licked her lips and glanced at her brother.

Lyceus just shrugged and grinned.

Xena had an evil grin as she looked back at the raider. "We want to talk to Bracis." She folded her arms against her chest and in the process, she pulled her cloak open to reveal her sword.

The raiders saw the sword and took her little more seriously now.

"What for?" finally asked one raider.

The teenager looked over at him. "We want to join up," she simply replied.

The group of raiders started to laugh together.

Xena released her mare's reins. She felt her patience thinning out. She unsheathed her sword and quickly stepped up to the closest raider. She pressed the point of her blade into his throat. "I was serious."

The raider stared into dark blue eyes. He tried not to flinch as he signalled for one of his buddies to get the leader.

Xena gave a nice grin as she backed off.

The raider rubbed his neck and stepped back as well when Bracis arrived.

Bracis approached the two teenagers and folded his arms against his chest. "Sorry, we're not accepting kids in my army."

Xena chuckled at his words and held up her sword then let the blade fall back against her shoulder. "Great... because we're not kids," she harshly stated.

Bracis narrowed his eyes at the girl. "Go home or we'll be happy to add you to our hostage pile," he growled.

"What you afraid of?" whispered Xena, a grin in her features. "That a 'kid' will beat you?"

Bracis stared at the two teens and he looked over his shoulder. "Prostig, you think you can handle this girl?"

The raider named Prostig, came up beside the warlord and looked Xena up and down. "Sure."

"Alright." Bracis looked at Xena again. "If you can hit Prostig a hundred times before he hits you three times, then I'll consider you two joining."

"Deal." Xena signalled for her brother to take Argo's reins that were just dangling in midair. She then followed Prostig and Bracis into an open area.

Lyceus remained on the sidelines with Argo beside him.

Xena went into the centre of the circle and pushed her cloak out of the way. She gave her sword a good spin and waited for Prostig to near her.

Prostig unsheathed his sword from his side and grinned at the teen. Then for the first time, he realized Xena was as tall as he was and he knew he was one the tallest raiders in the group. He shook the thought away, not letting it bother him.

"Ready?" taunted Xena.

Prostig's upper lip twitched and he lunged at Xena.

The teenager jumped back. She felt her pulse picking up and her heartbeat was starting to ring in her ears.

"Come on, girl," coaxed the raider.

Xena spun her sword then suddenly jumped and took a slash at the raider.

Prostig held up his sword in time and stared at the girl in shock.

"Ninety-nine more to go," she teased.

Prostig readied his sword.

Lyceus felt a grin trying to spread across his lips but he tried hiding it. He watched his sister beat down on her opponent, getting one strike after the other on him.

Prostig felt his anger rising up. He suddenly threw off a kick.

Xena was caught off guard; she took the blow to her face and went stumbling backwards. Her vision blurred over and all she could see now was a blob coming towards her. She blinked her eyes but it didn't help and the blob was coming closer. She squinted her eyes.

"Come on, Xena," whispered Lyceus, "he's right in front of you."

Xena calculated how many steps he'd take before he would strike. She gave him two more steps until he was close enough to her. She saw the blob move two more times. She immediately dropped down with her sword out and she took a swipe. She watched the blob jump away which gave her a few seconds to blink again.

She quickly wiped at her eyes as she stood back. She focused on her opponent and he came back into human form.

Prostig saw Xena grinning now and he knew she was about to do something. He had only two more strikes left while she had sixty-three to go.

The teenager started circling her opponent.

The raider spun his sword; he remained in his spot but was turning to keep Xena in sight. He waited for her to strike, knowing she had some kind of plan.

Xena suddenly stopped and just remained motionless.

Prostig raised an eyebrow at the girl and waited for something, anything.

Xena bent her knees, spun her sword, and gave a sly grin.

The raider couldn't wait anymore, he suddenly launched at Xena.

The teenager laughed devilishly and jumped to her side as the raider breezed past her. Right after he went past, she quickly attacked him from behind. She managed to get a swipe at his mid-back when her sword connected with his armour.

Prostig growled and spun around but before he could attack, he found himself on defence as Xena overpowered him.

Xena struck her sword against his about ten times but she pulled away.

Prostig became confused when she suddenly pulled back. For one instant, he took his eyes off Xena to see the crowd's emotions. And in that moment, he lost sight of Xena.

The teenager had moved so quickly and managed to hurl a fist into his face.

Prostig went stumbling backwards with one hand over his face. "Fuck," he growled.

Xena didn't wait; she kicked him in the stomach.

Prostig hunched over and he almost lost his grip on his sword.

Xena took the advantage and brought the butt end of her sword to his head.

Prostig slammed into the ground but took a third blow to his side. He recovered himself by rolling away then getting up onto his knees. He had his back to Xena but knew she'd strike, so he put his sword behind his back just in time. He knew she was down to forty-eight more strikes and he had yet to get a second one.

Xena backed off and tried to catch her breath for a moment. She then decided to play with the raider more. "You're doing pretty good," she taunted.

The raider gritted his teeth. He suddenly reached behind his back with his free hand.

Xena's eyes widened, as she knew what he was going after. She waited for one instant when she saw the dagger coming around from his back.

Prostig threw the dagger with all of his strength.

Xena dropped down to the ground, her face in the dirt and her hands in front of her. "Hades," she muttered. She saw the raider's feet coming at her at a fast speed. She hastily reacted and rolled away then jumped up to her feet just in time to see his sword buried in the dust. "Missed." She watched as the raider approached her, his eyes full of anger.

Prostig took a quick swipe but missed.

Xena suddenly lunged and struck his armour. She then came at him again and again.

The raider parried all of her strikes away. He tried backing away so he could rethink an attack but Xena pressed on him.

Xena grinned as she heard her sword ping against her opponent's. "Forty-three...." Xena's sword connected again, "Forty-two, forty-one, forty...." She continued to count aloud her strikes and she could see how frustrated the raider was getting with her. "Thirty-four."

"Gods damn you, girl." The raider became so frustrated that he suddenly took a jump back and that gave him enough space to kick at her.

The teenager saw it coming and was able to lean back as the boot breezed just past her nose. "Close... but not close enough." She suddenly dove at him.

Prostig held up his sword to stop her. He thought she was going to back off but he realized she was pressing her weight against his own. He grinned at that. "You are not as strong as me, girl."

"Let's see about that." Xena flash a nasty grin and then pressed all of her weight into him and pushed with her legs.

Prostig gritted his teeth and growled at how strong she was in comparison.

Xena saw how into the tug of war he was and she decided to take it to her advantage. She hadn't exactly ever used her left hand to do a solid punch but it was never too late to try. She released her left hand from her hilt, fisted it up, and quickly brought it into the raider's face.

Prostig lost his vision as his head was punched away.

The young woman suddenly lifted her right leg and kned the raider between his legs. She could hear the entire crowd of men suck in their breaths.

Prostig had fallen onto his knees with his hands cupping between his legs.

Xena grinned and lifted her sword.

The raider knew she was going to bring it down on him. So he forced himself to face her and he lifted his sword up to meet hers.

“Thirty,” stated Xena.

The man simply groaned at her.

The teenager inwardly chuckled at his reaction. She brought her sword around and connected her blade against his again.

Prostig could only deflect her attacks as he tried to recover from the knee blow.

Xena now struck against his blade hard and held it down as she bent her head down. “Sixteen to go,” she whispered.

The raider just glared back at her.

The teen scraped her blade against his then walked backwards a few steps.

Prostig forced himself to stand back up.

The two opponents stood there, facing each other and measured each other up.

Lyceus whispered, “Think she’ll win?”

Argo lifted her head and whined.

“I think so too.” Lyceus grinned then looked back at his sister.

Xena licked her lips and waited for her opponent to attack first. She then decided to toy with him a little more, knowing she could finish this. She twirled her sword once but now held the hilt so that the blade was pointing down. She plunged her sword into the ground. “Come on, I’ll give it easy to you.”

Lyceus’s mouth dropped. “Is she crazy?”

Bracis even grunted at that and muttered, “Stupid, girl.”

Prostig grinned despite he was a bit weary. He shook his head while saying, “You do want to die.”

“Nah.” Xena grinned, she bent her knees.

The raider growled and lunged at her, bringing his sword at her head.

Xena leaned to her right as the sword breezed past. She then saw him swipe again at her head so she ducked as it breezed overhead. Then the raider’s sword stabbed at her stomach and she bent forward while sucking her stomach in as the blade flew just under her chest. She then saw he was about to strike at her feet so she rolled away and landed back on her feet but kneeling down.

The raider laughed deeply as he stepped between her and her sword. “Shouldn’t have left it behind.”

The teenager felt a bit of panic but she held her confidence by giving him a grin back. "Come on, big boy." She stood up to her full height.

Prostig puffed out his chest and took a step closer. Before he could take a swipe at her, she'd already kicked at him. He watched as his sword went reeling out of his hand. He hissed from the pain in his hand.

Xena watched his sword land further away than hers and she looked back at him. "Fifteen."

They both knew they each needed their swords to finish this contest.

Prostig was the first to move, he raced after his sword.

Xena jerked her sword out of the ground first and came at the raider.

Prostig grabbed his own just in time and turned around to face Xena. He suddenly found himself slammed by repeated attacks by Xena.

"Ten, nine, eight... seven." Xena continued her assault, one blow after the other without letting up her strength and force.

Prostig growled when he heard the count down. He heard her yell two then she suddenly stopped.

Xena stepped back and grinned. "Two left, big boy. What you say?"

The raider didn't say anything; he just lost all patience and charged Xena.

The teenager hadn't quite expected it as she stopped his sword from hitting her neck. She felt herself locked down by his strength.

"One left," growled Prostig.

Xena felt her arm strength giving up. She hastily thought about what to do. She let go and rolled off to her right.

Prostig went two steps forward, almost losing his balance.

Xena had spun around behind him and did a fast kick to his back.

Prostig lost his footing and landed on his stomach, his grip on his sword gone.

Xena positioned the tip of her blade to where his heart was located. "I have one left," she whispered. "I'm sure you can guess where it'd go."

The raider groaned and dropped his face into the dirt.

Xena's grin twitched at the corner of her lip, she gently tapped her blade against his armour and walked off. "One hundred," she called out to Bracis.

All of the raiders in the circle began whispering amongst each other.

Bracis took a few steps into the ring and waited for Xena to come closer.

The teenager came up to the warlord. She gestured for her brother to join her.

Lyceus came over with Argo in tow.

“So?” Xena sheathed her sword, her hands rested on her hips.

Bracis briefly watched Prostig getting up onto his feet. “You’ve proven yourself.” He regarded the strong yet young female for a moment then said, “Alright, you two can join.” His eyes flickered between the two siblings then rested on Xena again. “I hope you make out the week.” He turned around and walked off.

Lyceus laughed in surprise and he almost grabbed his sister for a hug. “You did it,” he whispered in awe.

Xena winked at her brother. She then tensed up when she sensed somebody coming up behind. A warm hand grasped her shoulder tightly.

“Nice job, kid,” whispered Prostig. He squeezed her shoulder even tighter. “Let me know if you want anybody to practice on.”

Xena lifted her head a little and replied, “Yeah sure, thanks for the match.”

Prostig grinned then walked off without another word.

“So what now?” asked Lyceus.

“Now, I set you two up,” replied a raider. He’d come up along side of Xena. “I’m Tracker.”

“Tracker?” repeated Lyceus.

“Let me guess,” teased Xena, “you do the scouting.”

“How’d you know?” Tracker nodded to his right. “Follow me. Show you where you can settle down your horse.”

Xena nodded and took the reins from her brother.

Tracker led the way into the main portion of the camp. “So how you know each other?”

“Oh we’re-”

“Partners,” finished Xena. She gave a smile to her brother but her expression held more warning than anything.

“Huh.” Tracker reached behind his head with both of his hands and tugged his ponytail tighter. “Interesting.” He thought for a moment then asked, “What are your names?”

“I’m Xena and this is Lyceus.”

Tracker nodded a few times and said, “Over here is where we’re keeping our horses.” He directed at the group of horses that were contained in a fenced in area.

“You normally come here?”

Tracker nodded as he opened the gate. "This is one of our main camp outs."

Xena directed her mare into the fenced in area. She didn't take long to untack her horse. She'd given her brother her saddlebags and she took care of the rest.

"I'll show you both to your tent." Tracker continued into the camp again. "You're lucky, we had two of our men get killed yesterday in the raid. So you both get their tent."

"Oh wonderful," chided Lyceus.

Tracker ignored the comment. He focused on the young woman. "So, where'd you learn to fight?"

Xena shrugged. "Taught myself."

Tracker held back his surprised expression. "Really?"

"Yeah, really." Xena cocked her head to one side. "It comes to me naturally."

"I won't argue that," agreed the raider. "And why did you two want to join anyway?"

"Fun and money," replied Lyceus.

Xena chuckled and slapped her brother's back hard. "Home got boring, right Lyceus?"

"Yup, sure did, Xena." Lyceus coughed a little and patted his chest.

"Where are you both from?"

"We're from Amphipolis," spoke up Lyceus.

Tracker grinned and said, "That's great. We could use inside help with raiding Amphipolis."

"Hey, that's not a problem. We know that town inside and out," mentioned Lyceus proudly.

"Perfect," stated Tracker.

Xena groaned inwardly.

"Well, here's your tent." Tracker grabbed the flap and held it open for them. "Enjoy."

"Thanks, Tracker." Xena let her brother in first. Then after the raider left, she stepped in too and threw her saddle at Lyceus. "We know it inside and out?" she growled.

"What?" yelled Lyceus. He found his right foot pounding when the saddle landed on his foot.

"Lyceus," growled Xena lowly, "that's our home town. You want it attacked?"

"Um... no."

Xena shook her head. “Then shut up about it.” She picked up her saddle from the ground and carried it over to one of the bedrolls on the ground. She placed it at the foot of the bedroll then placed the face tack on top of it.

“Sorry,” whispered Lyceus. “What was I suppose to say?”

“That you were from Athens or something,” muttered Xena hotly.

The brother’s shoulders drooped down. He held out the saddlebags to his sister.

Xena took them and put them next to Argo’s tack. “It’s okay.” She stood up. “Let’s just hope he forgets you said anything.”

“Me too,” agreed Lyceus.

“Why don’t you sit down and relax a little?”

The young man considered the idea as he sat down in the bedroll. “Can we spar later?”

“Yeah sure,” promised Xena. “I just need to catch my breath.”

“Yeah I know.” Lyceus saw his sister was taking out her whet stone. “You were amazing, sis.”

Xena shrugged as she sat down on her bedroll. “I was okay.”

“You were amazing,” repeated Lyceus.

The teenager peered across to her brother but looked at the whet stone in her hand while she sat down on her bedroll. “Thanks but... I have a lot to learn.”

“Not as much as me,” joked Lyceus. He flopped back into his bed.

Xena chuckled some as she unsheathed her sword then began sharpening her sword again.

Lyceus closed his eyes and tried to relax while listening to Xena’s stone run down her blade.

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Later that afternoon, Lyceus and Xena had sparred together just outside of the camp. They sparred for about a candlemark and half until sunset. They then returned to the camp to experience their first meal, it wasn’t as bad as they thought.

The next day, Bracis announced to pack up camp and that they were headed east to another old campsite. The small army of raiders managed to pack up things by the late morning and started their journey due east. They were never able to make it to the campsite but they stopped about midway and camped out. The following day they travelled the rest of the distance yet they weren’t head just east but a little north as well. The raiders finally rolled into an older camp of theirs by late afternoon.

Then at dinner that night, Bracis told everybody by tomorrow in the late morning to be prepared to attack a town. All of the raiders cheered and hollered for tomorrow’s raid.

Lyceus furrowed his eyebrows while whispered, "What town is around here?"

Xena stared down at her food then quietly answered, "Cirra."

"Is it big?"

The teenager shrugged and replied, "It's about the size of Potidaea but not quite that wealthy."

Lyceus shook his head and asked, "How you know this stuff?"

Xena faintly chuckled. "I did my homework, Ly."

"So, are you two ready for an attack tomorrow?"

Xena looked up to see Prostig. "Yeah sure."

Prostig sat down at the bench with the two teenagers. "Have either of you ever killed before?"

Lyceus felt his stomach turn at just the thought.

"Can't say either of us have," replied Xena.

Prostig had a half grin. "It'll change everything for you."

"How's that?" pressed on Xena.

The raider took a deep breath before answering. "After some many times, you start to lose any regard for life."

"I can imagine," muttered Xena. She pushed her plate of food away, not feeling so hungry now. "You've been here long?"

"Yes." Prostig was about to say more but he saw two other raiders sitting down with them.

"Hey Tracker," greeted Xena.

Tracker nodded and held out a hand to the other raider. "This is my buddy, Latho." He held his hand out to Xena first. "That's Xena and that's Lyceus."

"Hey," greeted Latho.

Xena nodded and so did Lyceus.

"What were you talking about?" asked Tracker.

"About how long I've been here," replied Prostig.

Tracker chuckled and stated, "He came with the horses."

Lyceus grunted at that.

"How about you and Latho?"

“I’ve been here for about five years,” stated Latho.

“A year myself.”

Xena nodded at the raiders’ answers. “Raids always go well?”

“For the most part, yeah.” Prostig considered for a second. “Not too many flops, you know.”

“The other day was one of the first times in awhile somebody has been killed,” mentioned Latho.

“How many were killed?” asked Lyceus.

“Just two.” Tracker grinned. “Their tent you have now.”

“We remember.” Xena grinned back and folded her arms against her chest. She leaned back and felt the post of the tent come in contact with her back. “Ever get that many problems during the raids?” she probed.

“Not normally.” Latho slowly let a smirk work into his expression. “Plenty of screams and money.”

“I do recall this one raid like a year ago,” mentioned Prostig.

“You talkin’ about that town on the peninsula?”

Prostig looked down at Latho. “Yeah, that one. What’s its name?”

“Potidaea,” answered Tracker. “I was even there for that one.”

Lyceus felt his body tense up at the mention of Potidaea. He noted Xena remained as relaxed as possible.

“What happened in that town?” probed Xena.

“Nothing too out of the ordinary,” started Latho. “I tell you though, I can still remember that one damn family or group. Whoever the Hades they were.”

“Oh, you’re not going to fucking whine about them again, are you?” Tracker groaned and shook his head.

“Tracker, I’ve never had a chase like that before.” Latho had a deep laugh for a moment. “It was a lot of fun.”

Prostig grinned down at Latho. “You’re just pissed you never got that girl.”

“Yeah, I am.” Latho sighed and looked back at the two teenagers. “Me and few of the boys were chasing this farming family. They’d managed to get onto three horses. Slowly the family broke down into three groups. I happened to have one group by myself.” Latho paused as he tried to recall what happened. “I went after this guy and a kid. They were fucking fast on this horse they had but I managed to get the guy.”

Xena felt her heart race as her own memories filter back. She stared at Latho and so many memories came back. She now realized Latho was the raider that had chased after her and Potestas.

“Didn’t that girl get away too?” urged Prostig.

“Yeah, she did,” grumbled Latho. “It was a good chase though. I enjoyed it... enjoyed gutting out that old man more.” He laughed a little.

Tracker shook his head. “Still can’t believe you didn’t get that kid.”

“Oh shut up, Tracker.” Latho glared at him. “I’d like to have seen you do better.”

“Hades I wouldn’t have even bothered.” Tracker looked away while stating, “I don’t kill kids.” He looked at the two teenagers across from the table. “No offence.”

“None taken.” Xena sat up.

“Women and children...” Tracker shook his head. “I don’t touch.”

“I second that,” agreed Prostig.

Latho stared at the other two raiders. “A bunch of fucking wimps. A woman can pick up a sword just like any other man. And the kids... they grow up too.”

“Latho, that doesn’t make it right.”

Latho grunted at Tracker’s words. “You’re just a bunch of pussies.”

“No, just got a few more morals than you, Latho.” Prostig slowly raised an eyebrow at him in challenge.

“Fuck you, Pro.” Latho stood up and stormed off.

“He always like that?” inquired Xena.

“Who? Latho?” Tracker let out a small laugh. “Yeah, he’s a fuckin’ dick sometimes but that’s just him.”

“Why don’t you two kill women or children?” finally spoke up Lyceus.

Tracker looked at Prostig in question then returned his attention to the teenagers. “I don’t believe in killing pointlessly. If somebody is fighting me, sure I might kill them in self defence. I won’t kill somebody because I want to or I enjoy it because I really don’t.”

Prostig moved his head in agreement. “That’s what Latho does, he enjoys his work. I’m in it for the money.”

“I’m here mainly to learn,” stated Tracker.

“Learn what?”

Tracker gave a small grin to Xena. “How to fight... and track or scout.”

“Then you’ll leave?” urged Lyceus.

“If I find something better, yeah.”

Xena found that curious. She tried to relax as she leaned back against the pole again. “Do a lot of the men kill for fun?”

“Its fifty-fifty,” answered Prostig.

“Think about it like this, Xena,” started Tracker, “if you constantly kill the people in the towns you raid. Then you’ll never have anybody to raid. That goes the same for burning them down or destroying them. If you destroy the town and kill all the people, then you won’t have a town later to raid again. Economically, it’s stupid.”

“That’s true,” agreed Lyceus.

“But you do capture some of the people?”

“Sometimes yes, Xena,” replied Prostig.

“Like with that town Potidaea,” cut in Tracker, “we rounded up…” He started mentally counting. “Ten people, Pro?”

“Yeah, I think it was around there.”

“It was something like ten women,” concluded Tracker.

“Just women or kids too?” urged Xena.

“Sometimes kids,” answered Prostig. “I think that time we had two girls.”

“Yeah we did,” agreed Tracker. “I remember that one kid, she was scared to death.”

“Mmmm.” Prostig chuckled at the memory. “I had to guard them that one day. This girl must have thought I was a giant.”

“Well you are tall,” mentioned Lyceus.

Prostig chuckled at the young man’s words. “She thought so too. She clung to her older sister every time I checked on them.”

Xena tried hard to hold back her grin as she stored away what information they were telling her.

“Anyway,” cut in Tracker, “we normally sell the women we capture to slavers.”

“Always slavers?”

Tracker shook his head. “I think just one. Bracis is friends with one, right Pro?”

Prostig nodded. “Yeah that guy Hecht. He’s a well known slaver. He’s well known for training them more than anything.” He considered his memory for a second then muttered, “I think those women from Potidaea were sold to him too.”

“Who cares?” grumbled Tracker. “That was a year ago. I’m sure those women are well into the slavery system by now.” He chuckled and shook his head.

“Bracis get a lot for selling them?” questioned Lyceus.

“Yeah normally.” Tracker furrowed his eyebrows. “I think it's like fifteen dinars, flat rate.” He shrugged his shoulders. “Bring in ten and get a hundred and fifteen dinars. It works.”

“Sounds like it,” agreed Xena. “You think tomorrow’s attack will be easy?”

“Cirra?” Prostig laughed. “Cirra is always easy pickings.” Slowly a large grin crept along his expression. “I’m sure you’ll decide then if you really want to stick around, kids.”

Xena grunted at that and sat up. “Yeah sure, Pro. You’re just worried I’ll beat you again.”

Prostig lifted an eyebrow slowly. “I’d love to see it, kid.”

Tracker started laughing quietly as he listened to them.

“Yeah, yeah,” brushed off Xena. She stood up and looked down at her brother. “Ready to turn in?”

For an answer, Lyceus stood up.

“Xena?”

The teenager looked at Prostig in question.

“You didn’t do too badly that day, kid.”

“You didn’t do so bad either, Pro.” Xena winked then pushed her brother to leave the tent.

Prostig watched them leave then he shifted his attention to Tracker. “I don’t understand why a couple of kids join up with us.”

“Neither do I,” muttered Tracker. He scratched at the side of his face. “Better keep an eye on them though.”

“Why you say that?”

Tracker huffed and said, “With all these brutes? Pro, we both know these raiders around here.”

“Tracker, you worry too much.”

“Think about it, Pro. What would a couple of kids be doing here huh?” Tracker licked his lips and shook his head some. “Nor does it make sense how or even why that girl has learned a sword like she has. It just doesn’t add up.”

“Mmmmm.” Prostig chewed on the inside of his mouth.

“And I don’t know what it is either... but I swear I recognize her from somewhere,” muttered Tracker. He turned his head back to Prostig. “Do you?”

“Nope, can’t say I do.”

Tracker sighed and reached back to tighten his ponytail. “Anyway, Pro... I think we need to look after them.”

Prostig grunted. “I don’t baby sit.”

“Shit, neither do I but I like these kids... for whatever Hades of a reason.” He gave a drawn out sigh before standing up. “I think I’m getting out of here.”

“Have fun with Latho in the tent,” he taunted.

“Pro, don’t fuckin’ remind me or you can sleep with him for now on.”

“Nope.” Prostig held up his head. “All yours.” He dropped his hands onto the table.

Tracker smacked his friend’s back and said, “Thanks.” He quietly left the food tent.

Prostig rested in his seat for a moment but slowly stood up and left for his tent.

“They had Gabrielle and Lila,” stated Lyceus when he sat down in his bedroll.

“Sure sounds that way,” agreed Xena. She unhooked her sword and rested it next to her bedroll.

“So all we need to do is find Hecht.”

The young woman nodded her head. She took off her cloak; she then tossed it on top of Argo’s tack. “We need to do that next before we can leave. I don’t plan on trying to hunt down one man without knowing his location.”

“Wait, Xena.” Lyceus put his own sword by his bed and put the dagger there as well.

“What happens once we find out where he is?”

“Then we go after him next.”

“Oh great, great.” The brother flopped into his bedroll. “He’ll probably have some kind of army in his backyard or something that we’ll have to fight off.”

Xena grinned at her brother’s words. She walked over to the tiny table that had a few candles; she blew them out and waited until her eyes adjusted. She found her bedroll and crawled into it. “We’ll see, Ly. Alright?”

“Yeah sure.” Lyceus was about to go to sleep but realized something. “What about tomorrow?”

“We’ll fake it, Ly.”

“How in Hades you do that?”

The sister grumbled as she rolled onto her side. “You don’t kill and just sack the families for money. Just stay with me tomorrow and we’ll get through it.”

“Alright,” agreed the young man. He went quiet and decided to go to sleep as well.

Xena finally closed her eyes but it took her a candlemark to fall asleep. She couldn't help but think about her best friend. She knew she was on the right trail yet she felt so far from finding Gabrielle. She just tried to keep her wits about herself and planned to find her friend no matter what it took.

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“Ready, kid?” asked Prostig. He was standing next to Xena's mare.

Xena peered down at the tall man. “Yeah.”

“Where's your partner?” asked the curious raider.

The teenager turned in her saddle some and saw her brother. “He's comin” She settled back into her saddle then asked, “Where's Tracker?”

“I imagine him and Latho are coming.”

Xena huffed. “I can't believe it takes this long for this army to attack a village.”

Prostig grunted at the girl's words. “I'm use to it after so many years.”

The teenager shook her head as she realized about half of the raiders were ready while the other half were still messing around in the camp. “I would have my men all here at once and quickly.”

The raider found that peculiar and he peered up at her again. “And how would you do that, kid?”

Xena licked her lips then simply said, “I'd kill 'em if they took this long.”

Prostig was about to laugh but realized she was very serious. “You are tough, kid.”

“Got to be.”

The raider folded his arms over his chest. “Sometimes, yes.” He grasped his right wrist and adjusted his gauntlet. “It all depends on the leader.”

“True,” agreed Xena. She now heard her brother approaching from behind. “Nice of you to join,” she teased.

Lyceus sighed while shaking his head. “I couldn't get my sword in the right spot.”

Xena lifted up an eyebrow.

The brother's expression went into defence. “What? It was really bothering me.”

The young woman gave a half grin then looked away. She now saw Bracis was coming and several raiders were following behind him. Some of the raiders were on horseback while others simply remained on foot.

Bracis started calling for everybody to follow out of camp to raid Cirra.

Prostig saw out of the corner of his eye Latho and Tracker running to catch up with the raiding party. "You two better hurry," he called.

"We're comin', damn it," yelled Latho.

Xena tapped Argo in the sides and took up the rear of the raiding party. To her right was Lyceus then on her left were Prostig, Tracker and Latho. For some reason, she felt a little in control because she knew three out of four of these men respected her. She enjoyed that sensation and it made a satisfying grin spread across her face.

"How was your night, Xena?" inquired Tracker.

"Restless," replied the young woman.

Tracker laughed softly at that and asked in a taunting voice, "Too excited about today?"

"Actually, yeah," responded the teenager.

Lyceus peered up at his sister in surprise.

Tracker nodded a few times. "Hey, I get excited about some of these raids myself."

"I love a good raid," stated Latho. "But a battle is much better."

"How is that?" questioned Xena. She remained calm while swaying in her saddle rhythmically to Argo's walking.

Latho peered up at the girl, his eyes were wild. "A lot more of a challenge to fight another warrior."

"I would think that's too much of a challenge for you, Latho."

"Oh shut the fuck up, Pro." Latho bared his teeth at the large man.

Prostig just brushed him off.

"I hope we don't have to travel far to this village," complained Tracker.

"It's not too far." Prostig reached to his side and extracted his sword. "About another five minutes over there." He spun his sword at his side. "But all up hill."

Tracker grumbled at that as he noticed they were already travelling up a hillside. "Damn it, I might join you on that horse, Xena."

"I don't think so, Tracker." Xena revealed a grin at the small man. "My horse only holds one."

"Nice mare at that," mentioned Tracker.

Latho huffed as he studied the horse. "She's quite a golden colour... almost distinctive."

Xena licked her lips after he said that, it made her stomach turn in worry. "She's a good horse."

Latho was still examining the horse as if he was trying to find an answer to a question.

“Latho?”

Latho lost his focus when Xena said his name. “Yeah?” He looked up at her.

“Do you have any particular skill?”

A huge grin appeared on the raider’s face. “I use to be very good at stealing. I was a thief before I was a raider.”

“Just got caught too many times huh?” Prostig could sense Latho’s anger rising at what he said.

Latho ignored the other man despite his words. “I just decided one day I could admit that I liked to steal. Figured I could be of more use in some type of army.”

“Got yah,” stated Xena.

“Here we go.” Tracker pointed to the town just ahead after they’d climbed the hill. “Get yourselves ready.” He reached to his side, unsheathing his sword.

Latho did the same.

Xena pulled out hers and gave it a good spin. She then glanced down at Lyceus.

The brother knew he had to pull out his. After a deep breath, he removed his sword and tried to mentally prepare himself for this.

Bracis called for the raiding party to stop. He had orders for the party to split. Half would take the western side while the other covered the eastern portion. He also ordered for it to be a fast raid, take as much valuables, and supplies as you could carry. As far as hostages went, he wanted three to four women. After that, he commanded for the raiders to attack the town.

Xena held her hand down to her brother. “Come on.”

Lyceus took her hand and hauled up into the saddle behind his sister.

“Thought it was a one person horse?” teased Tracker.

“I make special exceptions once in awhile.”

Tracker grunted at her answer but was grinning.

“Yaaa!” called Xena. She’d spurred her mare in the sides.

Argo broke out into a gallop, heading into Cirra behind several other raiders on horseback.

“What’s the plan?”

Xena held the reins in her left hand while her sword was in her left. “Just raid forget about the idea of prisoners or killing or burning. Alright?”

“Got it.”

The sister directed Argo into the town. She could already see the townspeople were running in fear and screaming. A lot of the women were chasing after their children to hide in their homes. The men were more or less trying to prepare for the raid. They'd been sacked one too many times not to know what would happen.

Xena headed for the western side of town. Half of the horsemen went east while the other west. Once they were into the western portion, she stopped her mare and said, "Hop off, Ly."

The brother took a shaky breath but dismounted the tall horse.

"Look out, Ly!"

Lyceus had already seen the farmer coming at him. He met the man with his sword.

"Die you damn raiders!" yelled the farmer. He pulled his pitchfork away and took a stab at Lyceus.

Lyceus had stumbled back and he thought he'd bump into Argo but Xena wasn't there anymore. He then saw Xena was behind the farmer.

"Get the Hades out of here," growled Xena.

The farmer spun around at hearing the voice behind him. He then suddenly saw the huge horse jump up and direct her hoofs at him. He screamed, dropped his pitchfork, and raced off.

Argo's hoofs slammed into the ground.

"Thanks, sis."

Xena grinned and patted Argo's neck.

"Hey, kids. How are things over here?"

The teens saw Prostig joining them at a jog.

Xena shook her head and said, "Most of these people are in their houses."

"Yeah I noticed that too."

The young woman carefully dismounted her horse. "No point in staying on her." She smacked Argo's rump. "Stay close, girl."

Argo whined and galloped off to the edge of town to stay out of harm's way.

Prostig raised an eyebrow at the girl. "You must really have her trained."

Xena grinned and spun her sword. "She'll be here in an instant if I whistle for her."

"I'd love to see that." Prostig laughed and said, "Come on, stay with me, kids." He started for the closest house, which was straight ahead. He climbed the three steps and suddenly kicked at the door.

The door cracked from the hard blow.

“Good door,” praised Prostig. He gritted his teeth, took a step back, and then ran towards it. He rammed his right shoulder into the door and the door flung open. He stepped inside.

Xena and Lyceus followed into the house.

“Grab what you think is important,” reminded Prostig. “Looks like nobody is here.”

Xena looked around in the first room, which was a lounge room. She saw nothing important so continued down a small hallway that had three doors. She went to the furthest door on the left.

Lyceus on the other hand went to the door on the right.

Prostig took the nearest room.

Both teens suddenly heard a woman screaming. There were sounds of struggling in the room that Prostig had entered.

Xena knew what was happening, she tried to ignore it. She realized now she was in a kid’s room. She narrowed her eyes as she went over to the bed; the sheets were messy. She touched the bed and felt it was still slightly warm. Scanning the room, she saw a small closet on the opposite side. She started to close in on it but stopped when she heard her brother come into the room.

“Find anything?” asked Lyceus.

“No nothing.”

The brother hung in the doorway and studied the room. “Looks like a girl’s room.” He noted the wooden horses on the dresser with a doll in between them. He sighed and looked to his sister. “Prostig found a woman in that other room. He’s trying to subdue her.”

Xena chuckled at that. “Doesn’t sound like he’s having much luck either.”

“Not really,” agreed Lyceus.

The young woman half turned to her brother. “Why don’t you see about helping him, Ly?”

Lyceus stared at Xena, trying to understand if she was serious or not. “Um... okay,” he finally said. He disappeared out of the room.

Xena turned her head to the closet; she licked her lips and spun her sword. Slowly she walked up to the door and her left hand curled around the door knob. She remained motionless as she could just make out heavy breathing behind the door. She jerked the door open yet didn’t point her sword out. Scared brown eyes stared at her.

“Don’t hurt me,” whispered the girl.

The teenager lowered her sword more to her side. "I don't plan to." She took one step closer.

The girl pushed back more into her hanging clothes, trying to hide from the raider.

"What do they call you, girl?"

"It's... Calli," whispered the girl.

Xena could see the fear in the child's eyes. She tried to think of something to calm her down. She bent her knees, which made her about the girl's height. "How old are you, Calli?" She'd already guess her to be around Gabrielle's age or maybe younger.

"Twelve," whispered the girl.

"Alright, Calli," uttered Xena, "do me a favour, okay?"

The girl didn't make any acknowledgement.

Xena sighed before she said, "Stay in here until somebody gets you or until sunset, okay?"

The girl just faintly nodded. She opened her mouth to say something but stopped.

"What's wrong?" whispered Xena.

"I... I... heard my mom scream," whimpered the child.

"Don't worry, she'll be fine," promised Xena.

"Wha-what about my dad?"

The teenager raised an eyebrow at that. "Where is he?"

"I'm... I'm not sure. He told me to hide and... he left."

Xena knew immediately the father had run off to do something to help protect his family. "He'll be fine too, okay?"

The girl nodded again.

Xena was about to say something else, her mouth half opened.

"Xena?" yelled Lyceus.

The teenager groaned and turned her head. "Yeah, Ly?"

"We need your help, hurry up out here!"

"Yeah, I'm coming!" Xena returned her attention to the girl. "Stay here, got it?"

The girl nodded as she pulled a pant leg that was dangling in front of her into her face.

Xena stood up and pushed the door shut. She quickly raced out of the room and went down the hall. "What the Hades is wrong?"

“Prostig needs help with that woman,” spoke up Lyceus. “He wanted your help.”

“Great,” complained Xena. “He’s outside?”

“Yeah,” answered Lyceus. “I’ll come with you.”

The two siblings rushed out of the open door.

Prostig had dragged the woman down the steps and was trying to gain control of her.

The woman, however, was furiously struggling against Prostig.

“Xena, I need your help.” Prostig growled as he tightened his grip on the woman again.

“On my right side I got some rope, get it and tie her up for me.”

Xena nodded and sheathed her sword.

“Don’t you dare,” screamed the woman. She jumped, pushing off Prostig and tried kicking at Xena when she was close enough.

“Watch her,” warned Prostig. “She’s a tough one.”

Xena laughed. “I’d say so.”

Prostig decided to make it easier so he turned instead and brought his side around to Xena.

The teenager neared him and untied the ropes from his side.

“There should be a few short ropes.”

“Got it.” Xena took two short ropes and tied the rest back onto his side.

“No!” screamed the woman, she tried breaking Prostig’s grip but he was much stronger.

Prostig clenched his teeth and managed to growl, “Woman, stop struggling or we’ll do this the hard way.”

Xena then decided to make this faster; she reached behind her back between her cloak and pulled out one of her daggers. She quickly moved and pressed the tip into the woman’s neck.

The woman felt the cold point press into her neck, she instantly stopped thrashing around.

“Good idea,” whispered Xena.

Prostig decided it was safe now so he slowly turned back towards Xena. This then gave him the chance to slip his right arm from around her waist to around her neck. “If you fight me anymore, I just won’t bother anymore and kill you instead.”

The woman closed her eyes at his words.

Xena felt her heart drop. She had a job to do though; she bent down and started tying the woman’s ankles. Although as she did it, she made sure to put rope between her legs so

that she could walk but not run. Afterwards, she stood up and started tying her hands together.

“Mommy?” called a small girl’s voice.

Lyceus spun around and saw the small girl standing on the top of the steps.

“Calli, get out of here!” cried out the mother.

“Where the Hades did she come from?” yelled Prostig.

“Hades,” hotly whispered Xena. “Damn kid.” She jerked the woman’s bindings tightly and tried to rush the final knot.

“Calli, go hide!” called a man’s voice.

Lyceus had already seen the man coming around the house from the opposite side.

“Let her go!” yelled the man. He had a sword in his right hand and he was headed for Xena.

“Xena!” warned Lyceus. He bolted for the man, his sword out. He made it just in time, his sword clanging against the man’s.

Xena let out a huge sigh of relief when her brother covered her back. She tried to rush the knot even more but started to fumble the knot. “Shit,” she growled while listening to the fighting in the background.

Lyceus backed up a few steps without watching his footing; he stepped back onto a rather large stone that rolled under his foot. He went flying backwards, landing on his back.

“Die you damn raider,” growled the man.

Xena knew what was happening; she’d just finished the knot and had already spun around, unsheathing her sword again. She moved so fast that she had no time to think, only react. She took two large steps then thrust her sword.

The man had his sword over his head and never brought it down. Instead, he lost his grip and it fell from his hands off to the side. He lowered his hands, his fingers curling around Xena’s sharp blade. His eyes finally locked with scared blue ones.

Xena stood there, that was all she could do as she watched the blood trickle out of the corner of the man’s mouth.

“No,” suddenly cried out the wife in pain. “Oh gods no.”

Lyceus sat up after he realized he was okay. He now saw why he was okay.

The man took two steps backwards.

Xena’s blade slide out from inside of his stomach and his blood dripped off the blade.

The man shook his head in fear; he didn’t want to believe what just happened. He could barely feel his heartbeat yet his entire body felt on fire.

So much panic rose up inside of Xena as she frantically thought what to do but she didn't know what to do. She remained frozen in her position.

The father looked up to his daughter; he walked over to the steps, slightly hunched over and his bloody hands over his stomach. He couldn't make it up the steps though, and he fell onto the bottom step and lay back against them.

"Daddy?" whispered Calli, she'd gone down the steps to meet him. "Daddy?" She looked up and stared across to Xena.

Xena lifted her eyes to the girl, she could feel the girl's pain. It was the same kind of pain she'd felt the day she'd lost Gabrielle. Suddenly her breathing became ragged and her entire world spun, almost to the point everything became dizzy.

"Xena?"

The teenager closed her eyes when she heard Prostig's voice.

"Snap out of it, Xena." Prostig could tell the girl wasn't grasping what had just happened. "Come on, kid... let's go."

Xena shook her head. She took one last look at the child on the steps with her dying father. She forced herself to turn away then go to Prostig.

Lyceus urged himself to stand up finally. He glanced down at Xena's sword, small droplets of blood still ran down it. He swallowed and quickly followed the group.

"Let's get this woman to Bracis," suggested Prostig. He was now able to get the woman to quickly walk. She'd become almost sedate because of the event that just happened.

Within a minute, the group had returned to the gates where Bracis was waiting with a few men.

"Got one huh, Pro?"

"Yeah, she's a good one, sir." Prostig pushed the woman to the five guards.

Those five raiders pulled the woman in closer.

"Oh got one, Pro?" Tracker and Latho joined up two the bunch. "Latho got a young woman himself."

Latho was pushing the fighting woman towards the five raiders. She must have been about Lyceus's age.

Latho gave the girl to one of the raider's. He then turned around, facing Prostig, Xena and Lyceus. "Hey, Xena." He grinned at Xena and neared her. "Welcome to the club." He punched her shoulder the pointed at her sword blade. "And now there's no leavin' the club." He laughed loudly and walked off back into the town.

Xena lifted the sword, she'd forgotten about the blood, not wanting to believe it. She quickly brought her cloak around and wiped the blood off on the outside of her cloak.

Prostig looked over at Tracker. "Want to join? That woman took more time than I wanted."

"Yeah, I hear you. I'm low on dinars," joked Tracker.

"You joining us, Xena and Lyceus?" asked Prostig.

Xena shook her head then replied, "Yeah, yeah." She quickly followed after the two raiders.

The raid continued into the early afternoon. Xena's group mainly ransacked a few homes without any other incidents. Fortunately the three homes had already been abandoned but they managed to find jewellery tucked away or people's savings of dinars. Between Lyceus and Xena, the pair had added fifty dinars to their stash but they never took any jewellery, leaving it to Prostig and Tracker.

After the raid was over, the party left the town and travelled back to camp. Xena had whistled for Argo to come back and she had within a few seconds. The entire ride back, Xena tried to push away what happened today. She didn't know what bothered her more, the fact she'd killed somebody or the how she'd reacted. She tried to shake it off as an accident yet she could have had perfect control of the situation but she hadn't, she'd reacted wrong.

When they arrived back into camp, the raiders all cleaned up and decided today's raid was worth celebrating. The hostages they'd taken were all placed into a guard tent where they were shackled and tied down to the ground by ropes and ring nails. Then at the front of the tent, two guards were posted.

Xena had taken Argo to where the horses were being kept. The horses were harnessed around the neck by a soft rope then the other end of the rope was tied to another rope, which had both ends hooked to two trees. Lyceus was going to help his sister but she'd told him to go to the tent. He didn't want to argue with her, so he'd quietly left her.

The young woman had all of her mare's tack in her arms, she started for her tent. She had to weave her way through all the other raiders. She studied almost each and every one she passed. Most of them were sitting outside of their tent, their armour off, and using a wet cloth to wipe dried blood off their armour. Occasionally, she would glance at a raider's damp cloth and notice just how red it was with blood. She finally made it back to her tent and ducked into it.

Lyceus was sitting on the ground with his sword and dagger sitting in front of him.

Xena could feel her brother's green eyes following her every step.

The brother sighed after her sister had put Argo's tack down. He wasn't quite sure what to say to his sister at this point.

The young woman reached up and started untying her cloak. She made a mental note to wash it later, probably before dinner. "How you feel?" she quietly asked.

The brother huffed at that as a frown developed. "I should be asking you that," he muttered.

"Why?"

"Because of what happened" he replied. He dropped his head and stared at the two blades in front of himself.

Xena pulled her cloak off and dropped it onto the ground beside the horse tack. "Its okay, Ly."

"Xena, how can you say that?" Lyceus shook his head; he still wasn't looking at his sister. "I froze and it... it costed your... innocence."

The sister sighed after what he said. She came over to him and sat down beside him but still facing him. "Ly, it was either that or you. I'd much rather make that sacrifice then sacrifice your life."

"I know but... that doesn't make it right, Xena."

"No it doesn't... I messed up."

Lyceus quickly turned his head to Xena. "That's not what I meant."

"I know... but it's what I meant." Xena shook her head. "I wasn't thinking and for that mistake, it got that man killed."

"Xena, you did what you thought was right."

The sister held up her hand then lowered it. "I didn't think about it, Ly. I reacted... that was my mistake."

"Then what in Hades were you suppose to do huh?"

"I should have acted."

Lyceus shook his head in disbelief. "Xena... you were trying to save me. Why in Hades are you so tough on yourself for it?"

"Because I killed somebody today, Lyceus." The sister closed her eyes then gradually opened them again. "My next mistake could mean you getting hurt... or even killed. I'm not gonna let that happen."

Lyceus lowered his eyes as he stared again at his two weapons. "Do you really think this is still a good idea, sis?"

"I think we're getting close, Ly." Xena reached forward and started playing with her boot's laces. "I have a feeling those hostages will be taken to Hecht. If they're taken by the raiders, maybe we can somehow slip into the group."

"Then we'll know where Hecht is huh?"

"Yes, and get a feel for what his home is like." Xena wrapped the lace around her finger as she continued to talk. "Hopefully it won't be a problem."

“You think he might even still have Gabrielle?”

“That’s what I’m hoping.”

“Wonder how long it takes to train a slave?” whispered Lyceus.

Xena shook her head as she thought about it too. “I have no idea.” She unwrapped her finger then reached over to her brother. “Going to be okay?”

“Yeah... you?” whispered Lyceus.

“I’m a survivor.” Xena gave a small yet light smile.

Lyceus tried to return the smile but it was hard.

The sister patted her brother’s leg and stood back up. “I’m going to clean my... cloak.”

“Need help?”

“No, I’ll be fine, thanks. Try and take it easy. I’m sure around sunset they’ll start the celebration.”

Lyceus rolled his eyes. “Great.”

With that, Xena left the tent after swiping her cloak off the floor. She knew of a small lake near by that everybody used. She avoided a lot of the raiders since their tent was on the edge of camp so she made it to the small lake in no time. Once she was on the water’s edge, she bent down and pushed her cloak into the water.

It only took her a few minutes to clean it. Although that was only because Xena furiously rubbed at the bloodstain with the palm of her hand or her nails. She was able to get it all out and it left no permanent stain. Once she decided it was clean enough, she stood up and rung the cloak out getting most of the water out. She then returned to the tent only to find her brother conked out so she kept quiet. She was able to hang the cloak by its hood onto a nail that stuck out of the centre pole in the tent.

For a few seconds, Xena stood there regarding her brother. If anything, she was happy he was still here in her life. She’d been convinced today she might have lost him and almost did lose him. After Gabrielle, she didn’t plan to lose anybody else as important in her life. But right now, Xena felt a sense of energy still inside of herself and she needed a way to get rid of it. With that in mind, she quietly left the tent and went in search of Prostig.

Fortunately it didn’t take too long for her to find him. He was sitting outside of his tent, sitting in a wood chair, seeming to admire the coming sunset. He’d looked up when he saw Xena coming towards him.

“Hey, kid,” he greeted.

Xena gave a nod in return. “Feel like sparring?”

“Sparring huh?” Prostig studied the young woman for a moment then asked, “The raid didn’t wear you out?”

“No, actually... feel kind of... hyper but not quite like that,” tried to explain Xena.

The raider considered that as he stood up. “We’ll do a little before the celebration starts. Come on, kid.” He led the way to where there was an open area for them. “So you have lots of energy left huh?”

“Mmmm.”

“Feel like you have no control over it?”

Xena thought about it before answering. “Yeah... feel like it controls me actually.”

Prostig felt a long sigh leave him. “Sounds almost like bloodlust but...”

The young woman looked up when he didn’t finish his words. “But what?”

“But you’re too young for something like that... plus you didn’t really fight a battle.”

The teenager shrugged and lifted her right hand to rest on her sword hilt. “I don’t know much about bloodlust.”

Prostig came into the open area and stopped. He faced the girl. “It typically happens to people who get a real thrill from fighting, they really get into it. So after the battle is over, they’re left with like a...” He tried to come up with the right word.

“After effect?” suggested Xena.

“Sort of. They’re just still caught up in the excitement. They have to do something to shake it.”

“Like what types of things?”

Prostig now stepped back a few times and unsheathed his sword. “Some just practice with their sword to work it off. Some I’ve heard run or horseback ride even.” He shrugged before giving his sword a good spin. “Others have sex.” He licked his lips then added, “Guess it's all what you’re into.”

“Hmmm.” Xena unsheathed her sword. “Sounds interesting.”

“I’ve heard it can be intense sometimes.”

Xena chuckled a little at that. “I guess I wouldn’t know.” She grinned and asked, “You ready?”

“Come on, kid,” taunted the large man.

Xena’s grin only got larger as she stalked forward to Prostig.

After their practice, the pair went back into the camp for the celebration. Yet on the way, Xena started asking the raider about the prisoners.

“Well, they’re taken to Hecht’s compound.”

“Who goes?” asked the curious teenager.

Prostig raised any eyebrow slowly. "I'm in charge of the delivery. Typically Tracker comes with me, sometimes Latho, and some of the others. It depends on how many women we have. Why you ask?"

Xena shrugged. "Just interested."

"Interested how?" The raider saw his tent just ahead.

"Lyceus and I wouldn't mind going... if we can."

Prostig came to the entrance of his tent and stopped in front of it. "Why, kid?"

"I just like travelling, honestly."

The raider crossed his arms and pushed his arms against his chest. "Alright, kid... you two can come. We could probably use the extra help." He turned to his tent but called, "See yah over at the celebration."

"Yeah, see yah, Prostig." The young woman quickly made her way over to her and her brother's tent.

That evening, Lyceus and Xena joined in the celebration in the main portion of the camp. Most of it consisted of drinking and socializing as well as eating. It was also the first time either Lyceus or Xena had ever drunk. Both of them found themselves partial to the ale more than anything. Although they were both careful about how much they did drink but by the time they left the party, they had a good head buzz.

When they did make it back to their tent, it was fairly late however the celebration was just in the middle of things. It didn't take that long for Xena and Lyceus that night to get to sleep, the ale mainly putting them both to sleep. However the night's rest was rather restless for them, especially Xena. Her dreamscape seemed to continue growing darker and darker with each passing night.

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That following day, the raiders hardly stirred in the camp, many still out cold in their tents if they made it to their tent. The day after the raid was mainly dedicated to recovering from the party; little activity went on if any. The next day, however, was when Bracis requested for Prostig to take the hostages to Hecht. Bracis had suggested Prostig take four others with him and to take the jail wagon to keep the women in for the ride.

Prostig followed his leader's orders. He'd selected Xena, Lyceus, Latho, and Tracker to come with him. He then prepared the jail wagon with Xena and Lyceus's help and hooking two horses up to the wagon. Then he, Tracker, and Latho loaded the women into the wagon by the late morning. In the meanwhile, Xena and Lyceus took care of their things and tacking up Argo.

"Are you two ready?"

"Yeah, we're set," answered Lyceus.

Prostig peered up at Xena, who rode her mare now.

Xena nodded her response back.

“Alright.” Prostig went over to the wagon and climbed up. “Lyceus, ride with me.”

The young man took a deep breath and went over to the wagon. He hauled himself up into the seat.

The raider glanced back to Latho and Tracker. “Ready, boys?”

“Yup,” answered Tracker.

Prostig turned back around and adjusted the reins in his hands. He cracked them, which brought a sudden jerk to the wagon as the horses started moving.

“How long does this take?” inquired Lyceus.

“We’ll be there tomorrow... in the late morning or so,” replied Prostig. “We have to make it to his compound.”

“Where’s his compound?” Xena had brought Argo along side the wagon but on Prostig’s side.

“Have you ever heard of Summons?”

The young woman’s lips and eyebrows were pushed together, in thought. “Small town, right? I think south west of here.”

“That’s the one. His compound is about fifteen minutes just south of the town.”

“How large is the compound?”

Prostig returned his attention to Lyceus. “It’s not that large but he does keep it under guard because of the slaves. He doesn’t believe in letting his... money runaway.”

“That makes sense,” agreed Lyceus.

“Those kids ask a lot of questions,” muttered Latho to Tracker. He and Tracker were walking behind the wagon, keeping an eye on the women.

Tracker thought about it but shrugged. “Nah, they’re kids... kids always ask a lot of stuff.”

“Yeah five year olds,” chided Latho. He settled his eyes on Xena’s back. “They’re up to something.”

“Latho, you worry too much,” complained the small raider.

Latho ignored his friend’s words and decided he’d keep an eye on those teens. What he didn’t know though was that Xena had heard the entire conversation. Xena had a natural knack for being able to hear the lowest whispers and it so happened she’d been paying attention to them. She’d already sensed Latho was questioning how suspicious she and Lyceus would act yet for some reason; she had faith in Prostig and Tracker. The fact that Prostig and Tracker were with them kept her less on edge more than anything.

The trip remained quiet from there out. The group continued their way south-west to the town of Summons and mainly stuck to the roads, especially considering the wagon would not travel through the wooded areas. But not until late that afternoon, did they meet up with some company on the road.

“Wahoooo,” called Prostig, he pulled back on the reins.

The horses whined but came to a sudden stop

Xena let Argo go ahead a little more but stopped her as well. “That doesn’t look too good,” she muttered. Just ahead she could make out three armed men coming towards them.

“Take these, Lyceus.” Prostig gave him the reins. He jumped off his seat and quietly unsheathed his sword. “Stay here, Xena.”

The teenager nodded and pulled hard on Argo’s reins.

The mare understood the signal and began walking backwards.

“Tracker, Latho,” called Prostig.

The two raiders came around the wagon from either side and joined Prostig.

“Oh, company on the road,” joked Tracker.

“Bandits,” muttered Prostig.

Lyceus sighed then propped his elbows onto his knees and dropped his chin into his hands. “We miss out on the fun.”

Xena chuckled as she relaxed in her saddle.

The three bandits closed in on the group and noted the three men. They then saw the wagon with Lyceus on it and Xena on a horse next to it. They had no idea what was in the wagon but it was two of things they figured, people or animals.

“What can we do for you, gentlemen?”

The middle bandit stopped and looked at the very large man. “Just curious as to what you got in that wagon.”

“Nothing of your business,” replied Latho, he gave a smug look too.

“Help us!” suddenly called out a woman’s voice.

Xena turned in her saddle and punched at a bar. “Be quiet,” she growled lowly. She narrowed her eyes at the woman that’d spoken up.

The woman actually felt herself shrink from the nasty look she’d received from the younger woman.

“Sounds like they have a nice wagon load,” joked one bandit.

“Just walk away,” suggested Tracker.

“Hey little man, shut the Hades up,” growled a bandit.

Tracker didn't care anymore; he jumped at the guy in the middle.

Latho pulled out his sword and took the closest bandit.

Prostig took care of the remaining one.

Xena sighed as she watched the three raiders fight the three bandits. She leaned forward, her arms resting against the saddle horn. She watched them fight back and forth. She saw Prostig was the first to get his opponent down. After Prostig knocked his man out cold, he turned his back on him to see if he could help out his friends. Xena though realized the bandit wasn't really unconscious and was getting up with his sword. “Hades,” she hissed. She reached behind her back while calling out, “Prostig!”

Prostig started to turn around.

Xena knew it'd be too late so she quickly reacted and brought her dagger around and threw it.

By the time Prostig had turned around, he'd found the bandit caught in mid action but stopped by a dagger in his sword hand. The bandit's sword was on the ground now and Prostig took the chance to run his sword through the bandit's stomach.

Prostig reached out with his left hand and jerked the dagger out of the man's hand. He then pulled his sword out and watched him fall down. He sighed then cleaned off both blades. By then, Latho and Tracker had disposed of the other two bandits. So he went back to the wagon with them but approached Xena first. “Here.” He held up the clean dagger.

Xena reached down and gently took her dagger.

The large raider climbed back into the seat with Lyceus. He quietly took the reins back and waited until Tracker and Latho were behind the wagon again. He brought the reins up but paused and looked at Xena. “Thanks.”

Xena said nothing back but smiled.

Prostig cracked the reins to continue the journey.

Around a candlemark before sunset, the group stopped and made a small camp just off the road. Xena had agreed to catch dinner if she didn't have to cook it. So she'd brought back several quail and two rabbits for dinner. They'd all ate quietly and never fed the captives. Throughout the night, each person took a shift to stay on watch. Xena had the last shift and she had to wake everybody by the morning.

So, the trip to Hecht's compound was not much longer after they'd left the small camp. Once they came close to the village of Summons, they went around so they wouldn't attract any attention. Both Lyceus and Xena felt a bit nervous when they knew they were

coming closer to Hecht's compound. Xena also felt excited because she could only hope Gabrielle was still there.

Yet once Hecht's compound came into view, Xena's shoulders slowly slumped. She realized just how fortified and well protected the compound was made. It wasn't large as Prostig had said but it was protect by huge walls and on the walls were guards monitoring everything.

At the gates, the group waited to get authorization to enter. Once they were approved, the huge, thick wood doors slowly creaked open for them. Prostig urged the horses into the compound where they were met by several guards and one man.

"Welcome back, Pro," greeted the man.

Prostig halted the horses beside the guards. He climbed off the wagon and said, "Nice to see you again, Hecht."

"How have things been?" inquired the slaver.

"Pretty well."

"Bracis is well?"

Prostig nodded while walking over to the wagon with Hecht. "He is well... business is good. How is business with you?"

"Never better." Hecht happily smiled then turned his attention to the seven women in the wagon. "Very nice, Pro. I see it was a good raid."

"It went well."

"Which town?"

"Cirra and Athium," replied the raider.

Xena had been watching Hecht and Prostig. She now realized the women in the wagon had huddled to one side of the wagon, further from Hecht.

"Do you plan to stay for the night?" inquired Hecht.

"No, we need to return to Bracis right away," replied Prostig.

The slaver nodded and turned to his guards. "Take them out and put them away."

The guards quickly moved to the back of the wagon and threw open the doors. They started pulling the screaming women out one by one.

Hecht turned to the raider with a large leather bag. "I like these ones, Pro. Tell Bracis the extra is a gift for his continued business."

"Thank you, Hecht." Prostig quickly tied the pouch to his side. He then held out his arm.

"Take care, Pro. Thank Bracis for me." The slaver briskly shook the raider's arm then released it.

Prostig lifted himself back into the wagon. "Take care, Hecht." He circled the wagon around.

Hecht watched the raiders leave his compound. That was when he noticed for the first time the young woman riding on the large horse. He suddenly had a confused look. "How interesting." He then saw the teenager turn some in her saddle and looked back at him. He quickly took in her facial features before she turned back around. "Very interesting." The raiders left and his gates started to shut so he decided to return to his previous work.

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It was now the mid to late afternoon, the raiders had gotten rather far from Hecht's compound by now. The ride had remained quiet like it had yesterday and earlier today.

Tracker had noticed his tent mate was extra quiet than normal. They were still travelling behind the wagon just because they were use to it. Tracker suddenly elbowed his friend and asked, "Why so quiet?"

Latho shook his head and looked at Tracker. "Thinking."

"Oh, be careful," teased the small raider.

Latho rolled his eyes and he returned his eyes to Xena's back.

"What's wrong?" Tracker whispered, "You keep looking at her."

"I don't know... I keep thinking I've seen her before."

Tracker was shaking his head as he said, "I doubt it, Latho. You have a bad memory from getting hit over the head too much."

Latho turned his head to Tracker then looked at Xena again. "Tracker, I know when I've seen somebody before." He paused but said, "I'll figure it out... sooner or later."

It wasn't until about two candlemarks before sunset that Prostig decided to make camp. The raiders found a good secluded but open spot that happened to be next to a fairly good sized spring. Again Xena offered to do dinner and suggested fish from the stream, trout to be exact.

The group had quickly set up camp then Xena and her brother went down to the spring to catch the fish together. The other three raiders remained in the camp, resting from the long day of walking. Both Tracker and Prostig sat on one side of the fire while Latho was on the other.

"When you think we'll make it back at camp?" inquired Tracker.

Prostig was sitting on a log by the fire and he looked over at Tracker, who was on the ground. "Probably in the afternoon. I think Bracis has plans to head west again."

"Why is that?" cut in Latho.

"He wants to add more to the sector."

Tracker looked back at Prostig. “We’re going to war?”

“I think so,” answered Prostig.

Latho huffed and shook his head. “Finally.”

“Latho, we’re not ready for Lex.”

Latho looked across to his friend. “Tracker, we can handle that warlord.”

“I don’t know,” argued Prostig, “last time we couldn’t.”

“We have more men since then,” reminded Latho.

Tracker shook his head. “Need more skills... not men.”

“Mmmm,” agreed Prostig.

Latho huffed and lowered his head as he leaned back against the tree. “We can take them,” he muttered.

Xena finished rolling up her pant legs after just rolling up her sleeves and started wading into the water.

“Xena, this isn’t going to work.” Lyceus folded his arms over his chest.

“Sure it will, Ly.” The young woman went out into the water until the water reached just under her knees.

“It won’t,” protested the brother, “there’s no way in Hades somebody can do this.”

Xena shook her head as a grin spread across her lips. “Have some faith, Ly.” She bent forward and lowered hands into the water.

Lyceus decided not to argue anymore. He just sat down on a rock. He briefly looked down at his sister’s boots and cloak on the ground. Looking back up, he curiously watched his sister stand in the water bent over. He sat there waiting and waiting; he dramatically sighed once to get his sister’s attention but got none. He then shifted on the rock more from his butt getting sore. “Xena,” he whined.

“Wait, Ly.”

The brother groaned and slumped forward, looking down at his boots. He then heard something splashing around in the water, he lifted his head up.

Xena suddenly threw up her hands with something wriggling in her hands. She tossed the wriggly item at her brother.

“Oh gods!” screamed Lyceus, he jumped up from the rock when the fish landed at his feet. “Xena!”

The teenager laughed at her brother. “Thought I couldn’t do it, huh?”

“Um welllllll...” Lyceus shyly laughed and became perplexed at how his sister did this trick. He looked up and now noticed Xena had her back to him. He just sat back down and tried to think about how she did it.

Tracker and Prostig were quietly talking back and forth in the camp.

Latho, however, was keeping to himself, still thinking. He was still trying to recall where he'd seen Xena before or even her mare. Slowly his eyes travelled over to Argo. He noticed how the horse was still tacked up, her reins tied to a tree branch. He kept staring at the horse, especially the backside of her.

Then he had a quick flash back of when he was on a chase, alone and after a man and a girl. It was the good chase he had in the town of Potidaea a year ago. He remembered chasing after that family where there were two men and four women. One man was on a labour horse alone, another horse had one woman with her two children then the third had an older man with a dark haired, tall girl. He then recalled the chase he had to grab that girl when she'd fallen or even jumped off the golden mare.

Latho suddenly sat up when Xena's face suddenly fit the girl's face. He looked back at the mare and instantly recognized her as the same horse he'd chased after for so far. He quickly stood up and said, “I'm going to check on the kids.” Without another word, he hurried out of the camp.

Tracker followed him until he was gone; he then looked back at Prostig. “What was that?”

Prostig didn't answer, as he became a little worried.

Latho slowed down when he neared the spring. He went a little closer then realized he was in earshot. He hid behind a tree and just listened.

“Xena, you think Gabrielle was there?”

Xena still had her back to her brother. “I'm not sure, Ly.”

Lyceus looked down at the three fish in front of his feet. The fish weren't hopping around as much now. “Are we going to go back, sis?”

Latho quickly grinned when Lyceus called Xena sis. He knelt down but didn't move just yet.

“Yeah, we will, Ly.” Xena felt a fish brushing her fingertips and she instantly clamped her hands around the fish. She pulled it out of the water and threw it to her brother.

Lyceus sprung up onto his feet and caught it. He fought to keep it from jumping from his hands and managed to put it in the pile. He sat back down then asked, “I hope we find her there and free her from Hecht.”

Latho slowly began to realize now why these two teenagers were in the raiding party now. They were impostors bent on finding out information about Hecht. He felt his anger

starting to boil up. He ground his teeth then decided to act. He looked over his shoulder and noticed several bushes were directly behind Lyceus. A nasty grin developed on his face. He lowered himself down onto his stomach and started crawling towards Lyceus.

Xena started to get a bit frustrated since no fish were coming back to her. She needed just one more fish so there would be enough for everybody. She tried remaining motionless.

Latho stalked closer and once he came close enough, he waited.

The brother yawned then stood up from his butt being so sore.

The raider found this to be the perfect moment; he sprung up directly behind Lyceus. He leaned forward some and brought his right hand around and over Lyceus's mouth. His other arm came around the boy's waist. "Don't even breathe hard," he muttered.

Lyceus stiffened when he heard Latho's voice. He tried to frantically think of what to do.

Latho now noticed there was an unsheathed dagger on Lyceus's side. He reached down with his left hand and pulled it free. "Nice dagger," he uttered, "as a matter of fact, it was mine. Nice of you to clean it up for me before I kill you with it."

Lyceus's eyes widened but before he could do anything, Latho lifted him up and pulled him over the bushes.

Xena shook her head and called, "Ly, I don't think I'm getting anything." She waited to hear some type of response from her brother but she didn't get one. She slightly turned while straightening up. "Ly?" She realized he was gone, the fish were still on the ground but Lyceus wasn't there. "Lyceus?" she called. She focused her eyes at the woods when she heard a tree branch snap. "Ly, what you doing?" Still she didn't get any response from her brother.

The teenager quickly got out of the water and put on her boots then cloak. "Lyceus?" she called again. She unrolled her pant legs furiously. Xena decided to find out who snapped the tree branch, she hopped over the bushes. "Lyceus?"

"Xena," called Lyceus, his voice sounded like it was in pain.

"Lyceus?" Xena hastily pinpointed her brother's voice then raced in that direction. "Where are you?"

"Over here."

Xena could just make out his voice. She felt a bit panicky when his voice sounded so low. She went past a few more trees then found her brother on the ground. "Lyceus, wha..." She dropped down beside her brother, his eyes were barely open. "Ly?"

Lyceus forced his eyes open. "Latho is here," he whispered. He could barely formulate his words, his eyes so heavy.

Xena grabbed her brother's hand; it was covering something on his side. "Lyceus, what's going on?" She felt some kind of liquid on her hands, coated from Lyceus's own hand.

She turned her hand over to see all the blood on it. "Lyceus, what the Hades happened?" She pulled her brother's hand away to see the wound now.

"Latho," rasped Lyceus, "he stabbed me."

Xena now realized Latho must have finally figured out who she was from his past.

"Xena, I didn't think you survived."

The young woman sprung up and unsheathed her sword. "Latho, you fucking bastard."

Latho was still holding Lyceus dagger that was covered in blood. "I'm so glad I finally get to kill you. It always bothered me you got away."

Xena took a step forward but made sure to keep Lyceus behind herself. "I'll kill you."

"Oh don't worry, I haven't killed your brother yet," the raider teased, "I wanted him to see you die like the loser you are, Xena." He bent his knees and held out the bloody dagger. "You should have never come back, girl."

So much anger grew inside of Xena as she thought about Potestas and now her brother was badly wounded by this same raider. She took several menacing steps towards him.

"Come on, girl," taunted Latho.

Xena suddenly lunged forward after the raider. Her sword completely missed the man.

Latho had jumped aside and now had unsheathed his sword; he still kept the dagger in his left hand though. "Let's finish this, girl." He twirled his sword then brought it slashing towards Xena.

The teenager stopped his sword, she then kicked at him, just missing him. She was so angry that her own rage was overpowering her focus.

Latho started to use this to his advantage and started taking several stabs, swipes, and thrusts at her. Then one stab at her right side caught her right on the arm.

Xena screamed some and stumbled to her side from the pain in her arm.

"Hurts don't it?" Latho had a huge grin as he noticed her breaking down. "This is no game, girl."

Xena looked back with flashing stormy blue eyes. Yet again, she lunged but more blindly.

Latho parried the attack away but he threw a punch at her face.

The teenager leaned back into the punch then she took a kick at her stomach.

Latho laughed and took another hard kick at her stomach.

Xena fell onto her back and lost her sword in the process.

The raider didn't hesitate as he bent down to her left side with the dagger at her throat.

The young woman froze when the bloody tip pressed into her throat. She closed her eyes as her nails dug into the dirt.

Latho lowered his face into Xena's own. "You didn't do bad, girl. I'm even impressed how far you've come to find your family," he whispered. He then considered her for a second, which only caused a satisfying grin to creep along his features. "By the way, that girl, Gabrielle... I killed her myself. You should have seen how she cried and begged for her life. It was so pathetic."

Xena's eyes suddenly flew open to meet dark almost black ones. "You fuckin'-" She fell short when the dagger tip slightly pierced her skin.

"What?" hotly whispered the raider. "It was a good chase, Xena." He prepared to push the dagger into her throat but the sound of a sword unsheathing caused him to stop and look up. "What the..." He couldn't finish his words when he saw a sword hilt swinging around towards his head. The hilt smashed into the side of his head and sent him onto his side.

Xena scrambled for her sword that wasn't far away.

Lyceus dropped his sword but now his hands were bleeding from holding the blade so hard. He slumped forward after losing so much energy from swinging the sword and sitting up on his knees.

Latho though was now up on his knees and glaring at Lyceus. He flipped the dagger to hold it by its blade now.

Xena had turned around in time to see Latho pulling back his arm with a dagger. "No!" she screamed. She sprinted forward after Latho but Latho had already thrown the dagger. By the time she made it to Latho, it was too late and she simply kicked him in the face sending him flying onto his back. She spun around to see Lyceus lying on his side with the dagger sticking out from his chest. "Lyceus, Lyceus?" She dropped to her knees beside him, grabbing his shoulders.

Lyceus's eyes were closed but his left hand slightly moved and closed over his sister's hand. "Love you, sis," he muttered then his grip loosened.

"Ly?" whispered the older sister. "Ly, come on." Xena felt tears come down her cheek. "I love you too, Ly," she whimpered. She furiously wiped her tears away and she turned her head to Latho.

Latho had just started to shake off the hard kick he'd gotten. He started to stand up now.

Xena stood up to her full height, her sword in her right hand. She didn't say a single word, her darkening eyes remained locked on the raider. She lifted her sword and was about to stalk forward but suddenly arms wrapped around her from behind.

"Don't, Xena," warned Tracker from behind.

Latho laughed at the girl being held back. “Nice timing, Tracker.” He started walking forward but stopped when a sword from his right came at his neck. He turned his head to the right. “Prostig, fuckin’ put your sword down.”

“No, Latho.” Prostig held out his hand. “Give me your sword.”

“No!” yelled Xena, she tried to struggle against Tracker. “Let me go, Tracker,” she growled.

“No, Xena.” The small man grabbed Xena’s right arm and slammed her elbow hard against his armour.

Xena’s involuntary reaction was to drop her sword. She hissed and tried to fight Tracker more. “He killed Lyceus!” she yelled.

“Pro, get the Hades out of the way,” growled Latho, “this girl joined the raiders because she’s trying to find her family. She’s the girl from Potidaea that I tried to hunt down.”

Tracker furrowed his eyebrows as he realized it too. “Now I do remember I saw you in the village, hiding against a house with a little girl in your arms. I didn’t come after you because....” He trailed off as it sank in who this girl was in his arms.

Prostig glanced between Xena and Latho. “Latho, you just killed this boy for no reason.”

“He’s her brother... and he was helping her. Who the Hades cares?”

“I care,” growled Prostig. He ran his blade along Latho’s neck as he stepped closer to him. “I would kill you, Latho now if you weren’t in the raiding party,” he hotly whispered.

“Prostig, don’t let him get away with this,” growled Xena and she struggled against Tracker more.

“Xena, there’s nothing I can do.” Prostig turned his head to the teenager. “To Bracis, Latho hasn’t done anything wrong... he’s actually helped stop intruders.”

“No.” Xena dug her nails into Tracker’s arms but it didn’t seem to help. “You fuckin’ bastard, I’ll kill you.”

“I don’t think so, girl.”

“Latho, give me your sword,” ordered Prostig again. “If you don’t... I will run you through no matter what.”

Latho looked in the large man’s eyes and knew his words were real. He handed over his sword.

Prostig held Latho’s sword in his right hand.

“What about Xena?” asked Tracker.

“We have to take her back to Bracis,” spoke up Latho.

Prostig pressed his sword against Latho's neck more. "I'm in command here, Latho. Shut the fuck up." He turned his attention back to Tracker. "We're going to let her go." His eyes shifted to Xena. "Xena, you are to leave if you ever show near Bracis, I can guarantee you that he will kill you. Take your brother and your horse and get out of here. Do you understand me?"

"Pros-"

"Xena, do you understand me?" growled the large man. "I am doing you a huge favour here."

"He is," whispered Tracker. "Bracis could kill him for this."

Xena closed her eyes and tried to control her anger. Slowly her dark blue eyes opened and she tried to remain focus on Prostig, not Latho next to him. "Alright," she whispered painfully.

Prostig nodded to Tracker. Tracker finally released the teenager.

Xena took a step towards Latho, her eyes locked on him and his smug expression. She forced herself to turn away and she bent down beside her brother. Her shaky hand came forward and grabbed the dagger that was embedded in her brother's still chest. "Oh gods," she whimpered.

Tracker felt his heart drop as he watched Xena's fingers curl around the hilt.

Xena bit her lower lip so hard it started to bleed. She counted to three mentally then wrenched out the dagger. She could faintly hear a rib bone crack inside his chest. She held the dagger in her right hand and lifted it, it was coated in Lyceus's blood. She then watched the blood ooze down the blade, over the hilt, and touch her index finger. She suddenly jumped and threw the dagger onto the ground; she furiously wiped the blood off her finger onto her pants.

Prostig lowered his head and turned it back to Latho. "Alright, let's go into camp, Latho." He turned Latho around and pushed him towards the camp. He marched Latho into the camp.

Tracker bent down and picked up Xena's sword.

Xena closed her eyes. She tried to hold her tears back; it was too hard as her warm tears slowly rolled down her cheeks. She kept her eyes closed as she slid her arms under Lyceus's body and urged her legs to lift them both up. When her weak legs finally had them up, she opened her eyes again.

"Come on, Xena," whispered the raider.

Xena urged her legs move one in front of the other. She gradually made her way into the camp. She stared down at her brother, hoping to see his chest move up and down, it never did. Once inside the camp again, she saw Latho was inside of the jail wagon, locked up tight. Prostig stood in front of the wagon to make sure Xena didn't make any moves for him.

Tracker followed Xena until she was at her horse. With his free hand, he was able to untie Argo's reins and placed them towards the saddle.

The young woman bent down and lowered Lyceus onto the ground again.

Xena wiped her tears away then slipped her left foot into the stirrup. She hoisted herself into the saddle. She slipped her other boot into the other stirrup.

Tracker held out Xena's sword.

The teenager took her sword back and sheathed it quickly.

Tracker then bent down to lift Lyceus's body up as high up as he could go.

Xena leaned over and took his brother back, lowering him into the saddle in front of her. She kept one arm around him, and she noticed his body was still warm. Her right hand clumped up the reins.

She tapped Argo in the side.

Argo didn't whine for once, she followed her master's orders and began walking.

Tracker lowered his head and walked away, out of the camp.

Prostig remained in front of the wagon as Xena came past.

Xena had her eyes lock on Latho as she went by the wagon.

"Xena, go home... please," whispered Prostig. He suddenly had hollow blue eyes rest on him. "Go back."

Xena looked away and just went into the surrounding forest; she disappeared into the setting sun.

~*~*~*~

Xena arrived just outside of the village. She reached up and pulled off her hood just after pulling Argo to a halt. She stared at the town and felt so many memories lift up inside of herself. She sighed and dismounted Argo. It seemed liked she'd been gone for years yet she knew it had only been so many days. She pulled Argo's reins over her head then stopped to look behind her mare.

The small yet long wooden box was tied to Argo from behind. Etched on the top of the box was the letters L y c e a u s in gold.

Xena had used the remaining dinars to have the oak box made for her brother. She turned her head away and patted Argo's neck. With a shaky breath, Xena started walking into Amphipolis. She at first kept her head up but as soon as she was past the small gates of Amphipolis she received so many looks that arranged between angry, surprised, confused, disgust, and curious. All of the looks made her drop her head and she almost wanted to leave yet her mind made her go forward.

When she arrived at her mother's tavern, she signalled Argo to stop along side. Xena stood there, frozen by her own fear. She could feel her stomach dropping and her heartbeat growing faster. Yet somehow she managed to put one foot on the step then brought her other foot to the next step and gradually went up to the door. Her sweating hand grasped the door handle and pushed the door open.

The door shut behind her and it caused a slight boom to ring through the tavern.

"Hold on, I'll be there," called out Cyrene's voice from the kitchen.

Xena didn't move, she remained in front of the door. She raised her head up when she saw the kitchen door push open and her mother came out.

"Here I..." Cyrene stopped after she came around the bar and saw who it was at the door. "Xena?" A happy smile grew on her expression. "Oh gods, Xena." She rushed over to her daughter and pulled her into a hug.

Xena hesitated about hugging her mother back but she wrapped her arms around her.

"Oh gods, sweetie. I've missed you and Lyceus so much." She kissed her daughter's temple.

Xena almost started crying at that point when she heard her brother's name.

Cyrene loosened the hug, leaned back but didn't let go. "Where's your brother, honey?"

The teenager swallowed and didn't say anything.

"Honey, what's wrong huh? Where's your brother?" Cyrene started to read her daughter's expression and saw her eyes going watery. "Xena, what's happened to your brother?"

The only thing Xena could say was, "he's outside."

Cyrene didn't move at all nor released her child. "What's ha..." She lost her own words, as her fears since they'd left suddenly became more realistic. "He isn't?" she pleaded.

Xena dropped her head down, not able to look at her mother any longer.

"Oh gods... no." Cyrene released her daughter and stood there. "Oh gods..."

"What's happening?" Toris was standing on the bottom step. He'd just lost his smile after hearing his mother.

Cyrene finally forced herself to go outside, she rushed out.

"Xena, what's happened?" Toris got no response.

"Oh gods no!" cried out Cyrene.

Toris look away from his sister to the open door; he now saw the coffin on the ground.

"Oh gods... Lyceus." He raced outside, brushing past his sister.

Xena turned around, her arms around her body and all she could do was watch her mother kneel down beside Lyceus's coffin. Toris had sat down on the steps, not able to stand any longer.

"Oh gods no Lyceus." Cyrene had her hands on the coffin and so many tears were coming out.

Toris turned his head to Xena. "What happened?" he coldly asked.

Xena licked her lips, she could barely see since her eyes stung so badly. "He... he was killed... by a raider."

After her daughter's words, Cyrene lifted her head and her eyes locked on her child. "Xena... you were responsible for your brother." Her right hand never left her youngest son's coffin. "You should have never let him go with you."

"I... I..." Xena lost her words.

"How could you do this, Xena?" yelled Cyrene.

Xena tore her eyes away from her mother. She now realized people in the area were looking at them. Her mother calling her name returned her attention to her.

"Xena, this is your baby brother."

"I... I know, mother," whispered Xena.

"How could you do this?" hotly whispered the mother. "You were responsible for him." She stood up now and went up a step, her finger pointing at Xena. "You are responsible for his death." She threw up her hands in the air. "You got your brother killed!" she yelled in angry.

"It... it was an accident," pleaded Xena. Her eyes stung even more as tears were now coming out and she became light headed. "I didn't mean-"

"You didn't mean it?" yelled Cyrene, "What the Hades were you thinking, Xena? Your brother is dead thanks to you!"

Toris couldn't take the yelling and fighting, he dropped covered his ears as his lap became wet from his tears.

"Because of your obsession of a dead girl you've gotten your brother killed!"

Xena tried to push away her mother's words.

Cyrene finally stopped and tried to calm down but a look down at her son's coffin only furthered her anger. She climbed the remaining steps and approached her child. "Leave my home, Xena," she whispered half angrily and half painfully.

Xena looked up quickly. "Mother-"

"No," cut off Cyrene, "Leave now. I don't want you back here," she hotly whispered. "Go!"

Xena stared at her mother, surprised by her words and amount of anger. "I..." She fell short on her words as her mother's angry eyes made her shrink. All she could do now was leave, she brushed past her mother. She raced down the steps and went to her mare. She grabbed a dagger from behind her cloak and cut the ropes to Lyceus's coffin.

Cyrene stood there, watching her every move.

Xena quickly mounted her horse and without looking at her brother or mother, she kicked Argo incredibly hard.

Argo whined and broke off into a gallop towards the entrance of Amphipolis.

Cyrene remained standing until she saw her daughter disappeared out of town. She then had to sit down, her strength gone but her eyes remained on Lyceus's coffin. She raised her eyes to the point where Xena had ride off a second ago. "Oh gods... what have I done," she whispered.

Toris had finally removed his hands from his ears. He tried to think about what to do to help. He looked up to his mother, grabbing her hand.

"Toris, I don't know what I've just done." Cyrene squeezed her son's hand.

Toris's hand went pearl white from his mother's grasp. "I can go after her... bring her back."

Cyrene stared at Toris then slowly shook her head. "No... let her go. She won't come back after what I've said to her."

"But... you can tell her you didn't mean it," pleaded Toris, his face was soaked and red.

"She won't... believe it," whimpered Cyrene. She let go of Toris's hand and dropped her face into her hands. "Oh gods." She began crying and whimpering. Her entire life seemed to crush down on her, she felt so desperate as her anger seeped away and she missed her two children. She was left with a dark hole inside of herself.

"I want my two babies back," she rasped out between her tears and sobbing.

To be contiued.