



The Gift

Chapter 3

Riddles and Revelations

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Xena and Gab speeded up on the horse's saddle. The storm was raging hard, they had to go back and find a suitable solution to what they had just faced with great trouble.

“Quick, quick!” Xena spurred Argo.



The road was very bumpy, all of a sudden Argo reared up as if she saw something frightening; Xena kept her balance, while Gabrielle was unseated, fell on the ground and rolled to a slope that was headed inside a dense forest.

“XENAAAAaaaaaaaaa...”

“Gabrielle!” Xena tried keeping balance, then she jumped off the horse with one of her athletic moves and went desperately searching for her friend.

“For all Gods...such a pain...” Gab found herself in a dense bush. The feeble sunrays behind the clouds, were barely penetrating the woods.

She touched her nape grimacing and tried to get up, when someone helped her from behind.

“You?!?” Gab was surprised, but not even so much after all.

“Gabrielle! Gabrielle where are you! Answer me!”

Xena's shouts were not hiding how much she was worried of losing her friend. The bushes were so dense, many times branches and brambles wounded her making her bleed; anyway Xena did not care, she was not even feeling pain.

While she was hitting branches with her sword, suddenly she stopped.

“Can't believe it. You're here...”



“I can’t understand if I have visions, or if you are real...” Gab was very confused.

“Is this your way of thanking me for saving your life???” Aphrodite pointed to a cliff on her right.

“Well, ehm...yes...thank you...but what are you doing here?”

“I was wondering how things were going between you and Xena!”

“Very well, considering that we should kill a bloody Sphinx and Xena lost her chakram accusing me to have lost it...”

“Ah, no...you didn’t lose it, it is obvious!”

“Sorry?”

“I borrowed it...let’s say this...”

“What? Are you aware of the severity of what you have caused?”

“Hey, pretty! I have done that for you! I thought that without her weapon she would have dedicated more to her feelings instead of fighting everywhere!” she snorted.

“Does Xena seem the kind of person that could stop only for this reason? Anyway, stop it, make the chakram showing up and let’s end this!”

“Ehm...I don’t think this is possible...”



“You’re incredible, Xena...you always feel my divine essence...what did I do to deserve such consideration?”

Ares was right behind her and caressed her hair persuasively, then he moved in front of her.

“I don’t feel it...I feel your stink. Unmistakable...” Xena smiled sarcastically.

Ares regained his composure, as always the warrior was insulting him, not even so veiled.

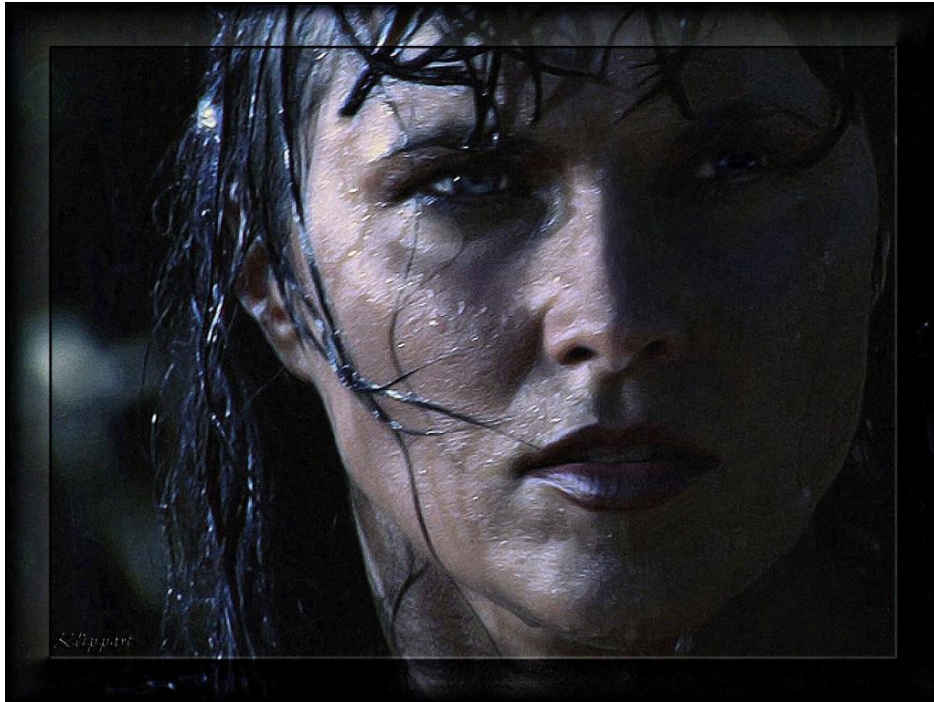
“However, Xena, I think killing the Sphinx is a very bad idea...she is here for a specific reason...”

“And for this specific reason you want to prevent me doing it, right?”

“Have fun, Xena...you should celebrate. Why undertaking a mission greater than you?”

“I won’t allow other Thebes’s citizens murders, Ares...”

“Oh, but the fearsome Sphinx doesn’t want to kill Thebes citizens, Xena...don’t be so naïve, my dear...”



It was clear that Ares was aware of so many more things than what King Laius had told her. Since she was already suspecting something, now, thanks to the God's words, she was having a clearer picture of the situation: behind all this plan Ares was the puppeteer...but what was King Laius trying to hide?

"Tell me something more, Ares...what's so interesting in Thebes that has made bothering the God of War...?" Xena was more and more ironic.

"Your anniversary? Maybe I want to give you something..."

"A gift? You?" she sneered.

"Sure...what better gift than your favorite God? Maybe an amazing army...! What do you think?" he caressed her face moving aside some strands of wet hair that were placed there.

"I say that you can keep this gift for you."

"Xena...don't think that I am not aware of your attachment to the little blondie...but remember that she has made your chakram disappear on purpose..." Ares laughed out loud.

"What? It's not possible...what are you saying?"

"Without your chakram you fall beneath common mortals' feet. You have no chance to defeat the Sphinx, and I repeat you to let her accomplish her task or you should fight against me...see you next time...Xena...!"

"Ares...! Ares!" the warrior invoked him uselessly.

The God of War disappeared, leaving Xena to her doubts and uncertainties, to her questions that needed quick answers.

However, upon all of this, the most important thing was finding Gabrielle.

Gabrielle was unbelievably furious for Aphrodite's silliness.

"You don't know where it is? You took it!"

"Gabby, I really don't know where it is...maybe I got distracted and..."

"Distracted...by what?"

"Well, I was in company of five young men and I think I got my head lost...you understand...no...? No...you can't understand..." Aphrodite pitied Gabrielle for her lack of experience with love.

"You must find the chakram, Xena needs her weapon back!"

"Ok, ok, I will do my best, but at least you should be grateful, no? Xena has noticed you!"

"Xena hasn't noticed me..."

"Thought you were smarter, little girl! Anyway, sorry for the trouble! I will try to put remedy!" and disappeared.

Gabrielle was deeply thoughtful; the thing that Aphrodite made the chakram vanish and then lost it did not make her feel good.

She was feeling the real need of helping Xena, into deep she felt that all has happened was her fault.



"Gabrielle! Where are you! Answer me!"

After the conversation with Ares, Xena was definitely furious with Gabrielle, but not finding her was making Xena feeling anxious, and the annoyance of not having her chakram with her was smaller and smaller.

"I'm here, Xena!"

"For all Gods, Gab...are you ok? She hugged her kissing the girl on her forehead, without noticing she stained her corsage with blood.

"Yes, luckily all ok, but you are wounded...come, there is a torrent very near..."

The two women were sitting on the torrent's edge and Gabrielle lovingly was taking care of Xena's wounds; the warrior was appreciating those attentions much.

"Done!" Gab smiled.

"Thank you..." Xena smiled back, noticing some embarrassment in the girl, then she lifted her face up with her hand and Gabrielle thought seriously that Xena wanted to kiss her.

Yes, she was sure. This time she would have let her doing it; there was a moment of hesitation.

"Where's my chakram?!?"

"Xena, do you still believe I took your ring?" Gabrielle was much irritated; half for Xena's insistence and half because she was feeling disappointed for that missed kiss.

"Ares told me..."

"Ares always played with our weaknesses and minds, Xena!"

"Yes, you're right...you're right Gab...I just can't understand...there is something missing...I think Ares has a precise role in this entire story..."

"And I think we can obtain many more answers at Kind Laius' court!"

"What do you mean, Gab?"

"Leave it to me, Xena...after all, talking is still my accomplishment!" she smiled mischievously.



The rain was pouring and the two girls were almost reaching Thebes' main square.

"We're almost there Gabrielle, as soon as we arrive at the castle nobody will take a warm bath away from us!"

Gabrielle was watching Xena with extreme admiration, attracted also by the rain, pouring down on the warrior's body, making it even more embossed and seductive. Then her attention was immediately dissolved by what was around her: the square was completely empty, no citizen nearby.

"Xena, what...?"



Gabrielle couldn't ask anything, because a colossal being was flying above their heads; subsequently, the famous Greek Sphinx in all her majesty was plain on a column in front of them.

She was as terrifying as beautiful, disturbing and fascinating at the same time: she had a feline body, wonderful white feathers and hazelnut colored eyes.

Xena didn't think twice, she unsheathed her sword with a hand and with the other protected Gabrielle.

"Calm down warrior, I don't want to hurt you. My name is **Neris**" the Sphinx's voice was comparable to a mature woman's voice. Warm and seductive.

"I only desire what is rightfully mine"

"Try to be clearer!" replied Xena.



“The bloodline can be broken only by the one who created it, warrior”.

“What are you going to do in the meantime? Are you going to kill other poor people?” Gabrielle intervened.

“Young ladies, for no reason, nobody dies. I only took life, for the fault of the one this trouble created. The city carries a viper in her bosom, *reus est*. Deliver it to me, and Thebes will be free.”

Neris took off the column.

“Solve the treat or die”. The Sphinx spread her wings and flew away.

“What did she mean?”

“You’re the riddles’ expert...Gab”

Xena and Gabrielle finally reached the castle, completely soaked and dirty of mud.

“Gabrielle, I don’t want you to say anything to King Laius”

“Why?”

“Because I have a plan”

“What plan, Xena?”

“Not now, Gab...”

As soon as they were in, one of the guards immediately welcomed them.

“Can you follow me? King Laius is waiting for you.”

Gabrielle immediately took word.

“We really need a warm bath, it was a very heavy day, as you might notice...then we will talk to the King. Can you do us this favor?”

The guard was not so convinced, but nodded.

“Naturally, the handmaids will escort you to the thermal baths...”

“In this way you will have all the time to explain me everything about your plan, Xena...” Gab was smiling pleased.



The thermal springs were located in a hidden part of the castle, only accessible to the King and his most loyal ones.

Xena and Gabrielle were inside one of the rooms in which, besides a large bathtub filled with warm water and adorned with Lotus flowers and scented candles, there was also a kind of small refreshing waterfall behind their back.

“Such a pleasure...” Gabrielle was transported by the warmth of the water on her skin and by Xena, who was massaging her shoulders.

“...now it is even more pleasant...” she added, touching Xena’s hands that instinctively stopped.

“What is this...?”

“Oh, just a necklace bought at the market before leaving for Thebes, Xena...”

“So cute...it seems my chakram...” sighed disillusioned.

Gabrielle could not tell her that she bought that object thinking of a gift for her, and that it was just a small thing for her anniversary, deciding to keep that for herself and then searching for something more appropriate later.

“Have you already thought of what to tell King Laius?”

“That we have met the Sphinx, without going into further details, Gabrielle.”

“So not a word about the riddle?”

“Least of all, Gab...”

“You don’t think he could help us?”

“King Laius? If everything is as I think, he will only be an obstacle” Xena continued her massage going from the shoulders to Gabrielle’s back, immersing her arms in the water ending on the girl’s hips.

Gabrielle felt shivers along all her body and a strange feeling in her stomach, that made her spontaneously closing her eyes.

She wanted to turn around and throw herself on Xena, and when she was about to, Xena sneaked out of the bathtub and flushed a handmaid out of the curtains, grabbing her by her fluent curly hair; then she held her wrists.



“Since when you were here spying on us?”

“I wasn’t...wasn’t...I wasn’t spying on you my lady” the handmaid was babbling, trying not to look at Xena’s naked body, and in the attempt she laid her eyes on Gabrielle.

“Cover up, Gab!”

“So? Xena insisted.

The handmaid did not reply, so Xena watched her carefully.

“You’re not at King Laius’ service, these are golden earrings...no handmaid could own them...tell me who you are!”

Xena tightened the girl's wrists harder, so she gave up.

"My name is Iris...and I am, well, I was, King Laius' wife..."

In one of King Laius' guestrooms, Xena and Gabrielle were preparing for the evening, with the help of some handmaids, since there would have been a bacchanal in honor of Laius.

The King has explicitly requested their presence, mostly for discussing about the latest events.

The corsage and skirt Gab was used to wear, as well as Xena's leather clothes and armor, were temporarily substituted by two white and golden robes, long to the ankles; Gabrielle's robe had a side slit that made her leg and thigh visible. Even their hairstyles were different than usual, more Gabrielle's than Xena's, since the warrior's hair were completely loose, while her friend's were partially tied up with some curls delicately falling along her face's sides.

Xena was wearing a brass ring representing a feathered snake on her arm, that was highlighting her bicep, slightly muscled; Gabrielle was wearing the strôphion and the necklace bought at Corinth's market under her dress, and also some rings borrowed from the King for the occasion.

"You're so beautiful Gab..." Xena was tenderly watching Gabrielle, then she encircled her waist with an arm.

"Ready?"

"Yes..."



The hall used for the party was huge: there were various tables with every gastronomic dish as far as the eye could see, some of King Laius' guests were

already sitting, some others were laying on comfortable couches, chatting and tasting fruit.

“Xena, why so many people...?”

“I guess the King organized a kind of great party in Roman’s style...”

“Sex, wine and transgression...? I don’t think it is for me...”

“We are not here for this, but we could not refuse the invitation...” Xena noticed a certain concern in Gabrielle, so she hugged her tighter, smiled and the girl felt protected.

At the same time, King Laius entered in the hall, escorted by his loyal guards.

His clothes were eccentric as always, even sparkling, his eyes with excessive make-up, but he seemed showing a certain concern, despite his appearance.

“Oh my beautiful guests, our clothes suits you so very much! Please take a seat, my very very welcome! They say tomorrow there will be someone’s anniversary...” the King winked jokingly at Xena, that pushed her elbow against Gabrielle’s.

“I didn’t say anything, Xena” she said softly, very upset.

The two girls sat one near the other: Xena on the table’s longest side and Gabrielle next to her, in the corner. King Laius sat at the head of the table and ordered the servants to bring some wine.

“Please, beautiful ladies! This is my vineyards’ nectar, please try it!

Gabrielle started sipping it, the wine should have been particularly strong but good, since the expression on her face was a mixture of huff and surprise, she never tried anything like that before; Xena on the contrary swallowed it without problems.

“So what news are there about your researches, my venerable Goddesses?” King Laius seemed very impatient of knowing what they had to report.

“Not much, Majesty. The Sphinx attacked us, threatened us to resolve the riddle she left, before letting us go” Xena was hermetic.

“Another riddle? Thebes is risking to be razed to the ground...do you know the answer? What would this very difficult riddle be?”

“What is that animal walking with four legs in the morning, with two at midday and with three in the evening?” Gabrielle sneaked in the discussion.

“For all Gods of highest Olympus! Do you know the answer?” King Laius did not hide a certain turmoil.

“Not yet, Majesty, but I think I’m very close to the solution...” Gabrielle added.

“Oh, so perfect!! I’m so very happy!! Such very good news for my very tired ears!”

Xena was puzzled about her friend’s intervention.

“What kind of riddle would it be?”

“You said we had to mislead King Laius, no?” Gabrielle smiled mischievously, certainly the wine was having its effect.

“Sure...” Xena replied hesitantly.



Xena was eating bread with sesame with taste, while Gabrielle a small portion of roasted spicy pork with her bare hands, which only increased her thirst, making her drinking many cups of wine. The other diners started being very noisy while toasting in honor of God Dionysus, some were asking loudly to the King to start with the show.

“Let the dancers in, now!!”

From a corner of the huge hall, behind a large velvet bordeaux curtain, men and women, almost naked, made their entrance twirling, starting the show with very sensual moves; following some musicians accompanying the dancers with their instruments.

Xena was carefully watching the show, until a terpsichorean approached her inviting her to dance, and she accepted willingly, with Gabrielle’s astonishment that started turning into jealousy the moment she saw the young girl clinging to the warrior.

She tried not to give importance to that, until a sturdy man, surely one of the King’s guests, didn’t ask her to dance with him just in the moment the music was turning slow.

Only to make a spite to Xena, with the favor of the Gods’ nectar, she agreed.

The man, noticing that Gabrielle has lost her inhibitory brakes, tried to hug her and kiss her neck.

When the warrior noticed what was happening, she went as close as possible to Gabrielle and her dance partner.

“Would you allow an exchange?”

Xena left the young dancer in the man’s arms and took her friend by grabbing her waist, continuing with her the slow dance.

“What did you think to do?”

“Mmmh...nothing different than what you were doing, Xena...now would you please let me go...?”

“For you to return dancing with that guy? I don’t think so...”

“Why not...?” Gabrielle looked at Xena as never before. Then she stopped.



“My head is spinning, Xena...I think I drank too much...”

Xena made Gabrielle sitting down on one of the couches, then she took a strawberry, dipped it into honey and offered her.

“Eat. It will make the taste of alcohol going away and fill your stomach. You didn’t touch food.”

Gabrielle took Xena’s hand, looked in her eyes and brought the pulpy strawberry to her mouth. Xena looked back at her.

In the meantime, the party was going on and the guests were going beyond, starting to approach physically.

Gabrielle tried to look away, but things were not particularly good because soon she realized that Xena was looking at her in a different way than usual; she touched her arm naturally and Xena noticed that, placing her hand upon Gabrielle’s and intertwining them. The girl went closer to the warrior’s ear, whispering with provocative voice:

“Take me away from here...”

Gabrielle, as soon as she was back in the guestroom, fell in a deep sleep. It was pretty obvious that her body was not able to tolerate wine.

Xena was disappointed.

She was watching the ceiling, couldn’t sleep, despite the fact that many times Gabrielle was sleeping next to her.

“But it was a simple pallet placed on the cold and bare ground...here we are on a bed...a very comfortable one...” she thought.

Gabrielle, interrupted by the incessant moves Xena was making on the bed, woke up, only to find herself sleepless and thoughtful: she could feel the warrior’s sighs and breath, her scent...and this was preventing her from finding the right position to fall asleep again.

“Gabrielle...are you asleep? Gabrielle...I know you’re awake...when you sleep, you snore...”

“I don’t snore!”

“I was right, you’re awake!” giggled.

“Let me rest!”

Xena placed her hand on Gabrielle’s back and caressed it.

“Tell me I am not the reason of your turmoil, Gabrielle...”

Gabrielle turned around, despite the dark and thanks to the moon rays entering from the window, she could see very well Xena’s eyes, and the same darkness gave her bravery.

“Yes, you’re right. It is about you. And I know this confession won’t do anything else than satisfying your ego”.

“Do you believe I’m so terrible...?”

“Should I spit on you all the beautiful words you told me in the last few days and also your regret of having me with you for these years?”

“Gab, I don’t wanna fight...”

“I do, Xena! You...you don’t understand...I have left my family...my sister...and no...I never cared about Perdicus...but I left my life behind to follow you because I was...because **I am**...in love with you.”

Xena tenderly caressed Gabrielle’s cheek, which was imperceptibly grazed by a tear that Xena wiped with her thumb, and Gabrielle instinctively caressed Xena’s hand with hers.

“You’re so sweet, Gabrielle...you’re not the young girl that I met in Potidaea...you are a woman...”

“I love...and I know you don’t...”

“No, it’s not like this, Gabrielle. Don’t say it.”

“What...?”

“I’m not good with words, Gab...but I cannot allow you to say what I feel about you...”

Gabrielle was waiting for a sequel, but Xena stopped.

“It’s so late, we should sleep” Xena returned supine watching the ceiling, as if it was the most interesting thing in that moment, all for not going on with that conversation, but Gab did not accept it.

“No Xena, you cannot say this and close the discussion! I won’t allow you!”

Gabrielle changed position, finding herself upon Xena. The ceiling was no longer visible. Xena had Gabrielle's face just in front of her and her hair were lightly touching her shoulders.

Xena got up, took Gabrielle's face between her hands and the two women intensely looked into each other's eyes, then Xena lowered her glance to Gabrielle's perfect lips, kissing them lightly with hers.

Gab at the first warrior's touch opened her mouth instinctively and for Xena it was a clear invitation to take possession of it.

Gabrielle was pleasantly shaken by the way Xena was impulsively kissing her, her tongue seemed wanting to penetrate her to the core and she felt hers even more when the warrior ripped off her clothes and grabbed her breasts with ardor, to kiss them with dedication and love.

"Is this the way a warrior makes love?"

Gabrielle asked herself about that with her eyes completely closed.

"This is how Xena makes love...my Xena..."

The thought became a deep anxiety, when the warrior returned tasting her mouth and tightening her against herself.

In that moment she wanted to tell her that she had never been in intimacy with anyone before, even if she had let her understand that she made love to Perdicus in the past. For this reason, she could not feel like stopping her.

She relaxed herself still with her eyes closed: Xena was incredibly strong and her body was hot, she could barely move below her.

While she was kissing her and intertwining with her, her hand started going under clothes and Gabrielle instinctively for her lack of experience touched Xena's arm, trying to stop her, feeling the veins of the warrior pulsing under her skin, but Xena untangled from that obstacle and suddenly found herself taking delight of the girl's intimacy.

Gabrielle felt a strong shiver along her spine and a sharp pain between her legs that made her wincing, but Xena's kisses managed to distract her from that sweet uneasiness, twisting her heart with emotions.

The girl tried to adjust herself to the warrior's movements, she didn't want to seem clumsy, but Xena was so intoxicated by her that couldn't notice anything, until the moment of Gabrielle's maximum pleasure, since slight grimaces of pain were mixed to panting and breathlessness.

Xena felt something among her fingers, something that was very different from Gabrielle's pleasure only.

"You...you never..."

"Yes, because I want you and we would have never been here...if I told you that..." she stopped.

Xena was very sorry, so Gabrielle kissed her lips with extreme softness, sinking her hand in her beloved's hair, that slowly and gently slide on her back: she could feel her tense muscles; that was driving her mad, so in the meantime she was proceeding along all her body until she reached her hips.

With a sensual move she tried to let Xena understand that was her turn now, so the princess found herself below Gabrielle and to the attention of her lips, that kissed each millimeter of her face, her neck and all of her war scars, ending by mistake on one that was still fresh.

“Forgive me, Xena...I...”

“It doesn’t matter Gabrielle... it doesn’t matter...” she whispered softly.

Gab continued kissing Xena, that let herself be carried away by that sweet passion never felt before, that brought her to a different pleasure when the girl’s hand made her way towards her and her fearful and inexperienced fingers became daring and aware, thanks to the love she felt.

“I love you Xena...love you to death...”

Those words made the warrior gasping, leaving her almost breathless, then with extreme tenderness she laid exhausted on Gabrielle’s breast, hugging and tightening her with the last strength left.

“Your heart is beating madly, Gabrielle...”

“You can’t understand how much I wanted this...how much I wanted to become yours...”



“And was it...how you had pictured that...?”

“You’re sweaty Xena...” she covered her with the bed sheet.

“Yes, it was so beautiful...” she added.

Xena returned her thoughtfulness with a very sweet kiss on her lips.

“This is the most beautiful gift you could have given me, Gabrielle...”

The two women fell asleep tenderly in each other’s arms.