



The Gift

Chapter 4

Deception and Prodigy

WRITTEN BY
Flawless

ENGLISH TRANSLATION
Giulia V.

ARTWORK
Flawless
Various Artists
Ubisoft (Greek Sphinx)

That night another storm was raging on Thebes, which made Gabrielle waking up suddenly. Scared, she jumped, lifting her back from the bed.

Not only the thunders had made her restless, but also what she was dreaming.

That woke also Xena up, who immediately worried for the girl.

“All ok, Gab?”

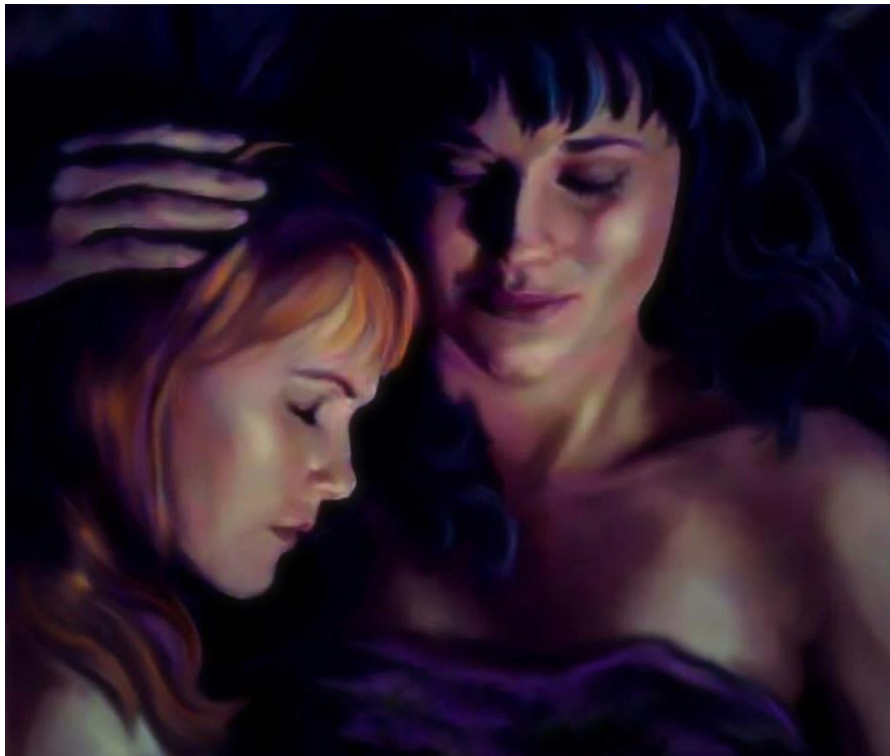
“Yes...I think so...”

Xena gently wrapped Gabrielle in the sheet, who reclined on the warrior’s breast.

“I’m scared...”

“Of what, Gabrielle?”

“That you could die...”



“Killing me is not so simple...” Xena reassured her, kissing her forehead and tightening her closer, and Gabrielle immediately replied to the warmth of that hug, as if she wanted to cling on it.

Xena could feel it.

“Why don’t we go away from here, Xena? And go back to Amphipolis...?”

“To stay home and spin the wool? It’s not the life I want...we want...otherwise you would have never followed me...”

“So you’re not repented to have kept me with you?”

“No, Gabrielle...”

“So why did you say that...?”

“I was furious for having lost my chakram...but I have never thought for real that it was your fault...I don’t think I could ever deprive myself of you...”

The two women looked at each other for a long time, then Xena caressed the girl’s face and started kissing her, but the kiss was immediately interrupted by a windblast, which made the window slamming.

Gabrielle got up to close it, but something outside woke her curiosity up, and waving her hand she called Xena.

Under the pouring rain, outside King Laius court walls, Neris and Iris were evidently confabulating.

The view was not so clear because of the plenty water and the strong wind, but from that little they could understand, Iris placed an object on Neris' paw, finally the Sphinx caressed Iris' head with her other paw, to then take off hardly, until she disappeared.

"It seems that the Sphinx and Iris are in confidence, Xena..."

"Yeah... most probably Iris didn't tell us everything..."

FLASHBACK: THE PREVIOUS NIGHT, AT KING LAIUS THERMAL BATHS

"You were Laius' wife? Try to explain!"

"Xena please, let me go...it is not my intention to escape...yes I was the King's wife, until he disclosed my secret..."

Xena let go.

"One year ago I gave birth to two twins..."

"So?"

"They were not the King's sons, but Crisippo's. When Laius found out, he gave the order to kill my children and I became his slave...the earrings I'm wearing are my mother's. I don't own anything valuable or noble anymore..."



Plentiful tears started falling on the face of what has remained of Thebes Queen. The woman, looking better, seemed older than her age and Xena could not avoid feeling empathy for her.

She placed her hand on the shoulder as a sign of support and her tone became sweeter, even though she was not hiding a suspicious look.

"Why spying on us?"

"I wanted to understand for what reason Laius convoked you...now...excuse me...would you cover yourself...?"

Iris lowered her glance and gave Xena a linen cloth. She was considerably embarrassed.

Xena wrapped the cloth around her, while Gabrielle could hardly give her attention to Iris, because she was fascinated by the warrior's movements, who noticed that and smiled.

"Ehm...but what has the Sphinx to do in all of this?" Gabrielle asked with extreme curiosity.

"Neris is Thebes' protector. Bringer of prosperity and justice. After the cruel death of Crisippo, she casted a curse on all of us with her impossible riddles...nobody could solve them until now..."

"The famous bloodline..."

Xena started giving herself answers.

END OF THE FLASHBACK

Xena and Gabrielle looked at each other as if they were contemplating the same exact thought: Neris and Iris were clearly in confidence and were hiding something.

"What are we doing, Xena?"

"Tomorrow morning we are going to search for Neris and we will give her the solution to her riddle.

"Do you know it?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Could you please share with me your knowledge?" Gab was clearly annoyed.

"Not now. Let's go back to sleep. An intense day is waiting for us"

"You never stop giving orders, right Xena...? Maybe even I know..."

"Gab...please..." Xena interrupted her.

Gabrielle lifted the sheet to place herself under it, uncovering Xena, who looked at her pitiful.

"Good night, Xena!" and she turned her back.

"When this will be over, I think I will go back to Potidaea for real!"

"Gabrielle..." Xena touched her shoulder, trying to turn her around, but the girl stayed firmly on her position, physically and morally.

She knew that if she were going to turn around, Xena's glance would have melted her, giving her the victory. Xena was her strength, but even her worst weakness.

In the early morning, Xena went to the stable where Argo was, feeding her with a juicy apple.

"Directly from the King's court...you're a lucky girl!" she smiled, caressing the horse's muzzle with affection.

That moment of indulgence, however, was really short, because Ares appeared behind her.

"You're in a good mood Xena, it seems you spent a good night..."

"What are you doing, now you spy on me?"

The God of War placed his hands on her hips and, moving his head towards her neck, he sensually smelled her skin.



“It is not necessary. The blondie’s scent on you is sickly...”
Xena moved away, nervous because of Ares’ manners and words.
“What do you want, still?”
“It seems you did not listen to my warning...I have tried to tell you politely...”
“You know I prefer the unkind way, Ares...” Xena’s challenging tone was switched on.
“Ok Xena, as you want...I also prefer violence...but...” Ares went closer to her, sensually caressing her chin.
“...I’d rather use it in a more pleasant way...”
“When I will find out what binds you to Thebes, you are going to pleasantly taste my sword stuck in your breast...”
Ares smiled ironically, and disappeared.

Gabrielle had watched the scene secretly.
When Ares disappeared, she decided to intervene, with Xena’s surprise when she saw her.



“You and Ares...incredible!”

“Gabrielle, you’re wandering...”

“Surely even my eyes are wandering, isn’t true, Xena? Since when it goes on with Ares?”

“It never started.”

Gabrielle placed her hand on her forehead.

“Why do I feel that I’m wasted with you?”

“Gabrielle, please...”

“Your relationship with Ares...sooner or later you have to explain it to me...I feel like I’m going crazy...”

Xena went closer tightening her and she tried to kiss her, but Gabrielle turned on the other side and lowered her eyes.

“Gabrielle, I...I lo-... Nothing.” And she stopped.

“You cannot even say it, Xena...you cannot say what you feel for me...”

“It’s not simple...”

“Yeah.”

Gabrielle wriggled out and went out of the stable.

She could feel that Xena loved her, but she also knew that it was not the right moment to discuss about it.

There were more important things to accomplish before.

“Gabrielle, going to face the Sphinx is deceitful, it’s better if you stay here watching over Iris...”

“If you think she could escape, I really don’t think she will, Xena...”

Gabrielle seemed having a pretty clear idea on facts.

“...and I want to come with you, it doesn’t matter if it could or could not be dangerous!”

Bring me with you, Xena...

Those words recalled to the warrior’s mind the first time the two women have met.

Xena could not understand what Gabrielle found so special in her to the point of wanting to follow her anywhere, even to hell.

And she was sure that, if it was necessary, she would have followed her even there, with or without her consent.

“Fine, Gab. Let’s go”.

“Run! Stay safe!”

A man with his bleeding forehead was running and screaming out loud, terrified: above him, the terrible Sphinx was gliding on Thebes’s main square, trying to grab the unfortunate citizens that could not escape.

Two women, about to enter Aphrodite’s temple, were petrified by terror exactly when the creature was about to swoop down on them, but the man, interposing between the women and the Sphinx could avoid the massacre, sacrificing himself. This was not useful anyway, since Neris landed in front of them with the firm intention to kill them.

While she was exposing her claws, Xena's battle cry could be heard from afar, and in a moment, almost without noticing, she had the warrior on her back, who was trying to tame her and annoy her with her sword, without exaggerating. Neris tried many times to hurl the warrior to the ground, then, since she was not succeeding, she took off.

"Warrior, I don't want to kill you, don't force me to do it!"

"I could tell you the same, Neris!"

The Sphinx made real flight stunts, but Xena managed to stay well firm, until the creature didn't swoop down on the ground, making her fall, and with a backlash threw her in the air.

Subsequently Neris, threatening, went closer to Xena with sinuous steps, who was unconscious on the ground; she lifted one of her big paws with sticking out claws, ready to sink, when suddenly she felt a strong pain on the left part of her rib cage. Gabrielle has collected Xena's sword, transfixing her in the best way she could.

"You...little girl...**how did you dare?!?**" the Sphinx turned her head towards her with an evil expression.

Gabrielle's hands started shaking until she dropped the sword, while Neris pointed her claw on the girl's neck, in the same point of the necklace, fitting it in and pulling it, trying to choke her, but the chain broke and the necklace flew away up high.

In that same moment, Aphrodite appeared.

"Ah, here it is!" she smiled.

The Goddess pointed her finger to the necklace, that transformed in the lost chakram and was about to fall on the warrior, still unconscious on the ground.



"**Xenaaaaa**" Gabrielle scream out loud as strong as she could to wake her up, and Xena, a little shocked by the general chaos and by the girl's voice, quickly grabbed her chakram with her right hand and, without losing time, she threw it against Neris, wounding her lightly on one of her paws.

"Why didn't you kill me, warrior?" Neris licked her wound.

"I know you're not a threat for Thebes, and Gabrielle has the solution to your riddle!"

"I...what... Xena but...?" Gabrielle was surprised.

"Yes Gabrielle, you know the answer! Come on! Expose it!"

"Well, ahem...the bloodline...the trouble...King Laius! He's the viper in Thebes's bosom!"

Gabrielle was pleased of herself and the Sphinx looked at her surprised.

“Exactly girl, exactly...you solved the riddle...now bring the blasphemous here and Thebes will be free! King Laius must die!”

Xena nodded with her glance.

“Has it been so easy, Xena?”

“Almost as the materialization of my chakram, I can say...” she smiled.

“Xena...I didn't know about it...”

“Yes, sure...”

“No, I swear it Xena...I could never lie to you...”

Xena looked at Gabrielle in a suspicious way, while the girl sighed, as if she had to surrender for not being believed; then at some point the Goddess of Love appeared.

“Did you come back to give me additional problems?”

“No little girl, I'm here to say a couple of things to the warrior of your heart...”

“Well? What is it?”

“You should think a little more to the girl you walk around with, Xena!”

“I'm not following you, Aphrodite.”

“The chakram, silly! I have taken it...ehm...borrowed it, thinking that you, not having your weapon anymore, would have dedicated to Gabrielle...that has eyes only for you!”

Gabrielle suddenly became completely red. Tomatoes were pale, compared to her skin, and feeling observed by Xena she felt her hear beating faster.

“It was not necessary for you to unduly take my crakram Aphrodite...but I thank you for the thought...”

“You're always so rude, Xena! Well, I have nothing else to do here! See you soon, girls!” she blinked her eyes to both and vanished.

Gabrielle was in evident embarrassment for Aphrodite's words, ad tried to talk about something that could divert from what had just happened.

“What are you going to do with King Laius? Do you really want to deliver it to the Sphinx?”

“Not really.”

“So...?”

“So...no.”

“I see we're back to old manners here...fine, I will not insist...” she placed a hand in front of her and she turned on the other direction.



“Gabrielle...”

Xena grabbed the girl’s wrist, and the two women found themselves one in front of the other.

The warrior caressed Gabrielle’s face, then with the glance of who was feeling strong emotions and awkwardness, she pronounced words that the youngest would not have forgotten.

“I think I love you, Gabrielle...I believe I had always known it...”

“Do you think or do you know...?”

“I know it...”

Gabrielle suddenly jumped in Xena’s arms, who replied to that sign of affection hugging her tight.

“I thought you were never going to say it, Xena...”

“I will always tell you Gab...or at least I will try...”

Gabrielle was conscious that she could not pretend more than that from Xena, and that what she had just confessed her was much, for a person like her.

Xena went closer, and the two women exchanged a long and sweet kiss, then the warrior started to get rid the scrap metal of her armor and she jumped in the bushes with Gabrielle, who found herself upon her, starting to unfasten the bodice.

“Xena...what do you want to do...? We could not be alone...”

Xena slid from her lips to kiss her neck, arriving to the breast slightly uncovered, while Gabrielle placed her hands among the thick black hair of the warrior, alternating caresses from her arms to her waist.



The sighs of the two women were deeper and deeper, Xena was undressing Gabrielle even more and the kisses on her skin were becoming more and more daring, but something interrupted them: it was Ares.

Suddenly Xena recognized the black leather boots among the thick grass, and immediately tried to cover Gabrielle.

“Damn it! You’re mad! As well as a voyeur!”

“I’m not here for this show, even if I must admit that you’re good, Xena...” he smiled ironically.

Xena tidied herself up, she got up with Gabrielle and covered the girl, placing herself in front of her.

“...but you’re good with the wrong person...” the God added.

“What do you want, Ares?”

“I’m only inviting you to go and accomplish your duty, instead of wasting your time in effusions. Ah, how you’ve changed, Xena! Once you were my merciless warrior...now...well, it’s enough to look at you...at both of you” he grinned ironically.

“Why all of this rush, Ares?”

“Rush of justice...”

“The God of War talking about justice makes me laugh...anyway I will take care of Laius. It’s a promise I made to Neris.”

“Excellent, Xena. Try to avoid...how to say...more distractions” Ares smiled sarcastically.

The warrior welcomed that smile as a challenge and in a moment, Gabrielle found herself tight to Xena’s lips, lost in a whirling as well as unexpected kiss.

The two women continued kissing with emphasis, as if they were eating up themselves, and it was just in that moment that Ares, mad of jealousy, threw a lightning in the middle of the sky and vanished, swearing.

The lightning stroke on the ground, leaving a deep-burnt line.

The two girls barely avoided it.

“Was it necessary to cause his rage, Xena? He could have killed us...”

“Necessary and primary...look at the quicksilver color of these ashes...”

“I didn’t think that the Gods’ lightning was so precious” she smiled.

“Neither do I, Gab...”

Xena and Gabrielle, on Argo's saddle, were going back to King Laius' court.
"You had your chakram back, instead my stick is forever lost..."
"You have been good with the sword, but...I would never have said that..."
"Neris was going to kill you, I had to think quickly...I didn't imagine you thought I was so poor, Xena!"
"Surely there are things about you that I didn't consider before...I admit it..."
"Which ones?" Gabrielle was clearly curious.
"Other...things..."
Gabrielle understood what Xena was referring to, and caressed her arm lightly.
"Gab..." Xena turned around and kissed the girl gently, while Argo was running towards a dark and undefined destiny...



"Take them!"
King Laius, seeing the two women arrive, gave order to his soldiers to capture them.
"Laius, tame your dogs! We are not here for..."
Xena could not finish speaking, since she was attacked suddenly, and Argo was scared and went wild, making both she and Gabrielle fall.
"Stay behind me, Gab!"
They were completely surrounded by the King's guards, the biggest of them tried to jump on Xena, that in the attempt to protect Gabrielle ended up deeply wounded on her arm and stopped tenaciously by another soldier.
"Tie them up and imprison them immediately in the underground!"
"Let my horse in peace!" was the last thing Xena could say, before being hit on her head and pass out.

King Laius' cells were cold and humid. The musty smell was mixed to the stuffy one, making each attempt to breathe sickening. It was clear that the prison had not been used for many years. The only source of light and air was coming from a very small window, placed above the bench on which Xena was trying to rest; Gabrielle was sitting beside her and was medicating the wound in the best way she could.



“Da...damn, Gabrielle...”

“Try to stay still, Xena...the cut is very ugly...”

“I know it very well, what do you think?”

“Xena, please...let me take care of you...” Gabrielle’s sweet and reassuring tone calmed down the woman, in a clear state of suffering.

“I have no doubts that you can...I cannot see you, Gab...come closer...”

Gabrielle moved towards the slice of light gifted by the Moon and noticed, from the warrior’s feverish eyes, that she was feeling much worse than what she could imagine. The wound was surely infected.

“I will take you away from here, Xena. I promise you” and she caressed her face, feeling the sweat pouring on her fingers; touching her neck she realized not only that her heartbeat was accelerated, but the heat was not leaving any doubt on her feverish state.

“Thank you...love...”

Gabrielle was breathless. Xena never called her in that way. Surely the fever was making her delirious.

“Try to rest...”

Xena, even if her arm was wounded, took Gabrielle’s hand, then she squeezed and kissed it.

“I love you, Gabrielle...” the girl was feeling her heart beating faster and faster, but at the same time she was extremely sad, as if those words could be the last pronounced by her warrior.

“Me too, Xena...since the first days when I decided to follow you...I fell in love with you...”

“I know...”

Xena drifted in a tormented and deep sleep, while Gabrielle turned towards the glimmer of light.

Gabrielle was walking nervously back and forth in the cell, trying to find a solution to go out from that gloomy place and save Xena, but she had no idea about how she could do it.

“Gab...Gabrielle...I...I’m cold...”

“For all Gods, Xena...”

Xena was clearly getting worse.

She tried to warm her, tightening the woman to herself, but she knew it was not going to help much.

“If only I could go out of here...oh Xena, how much I would want to have your strength and your spirit...” and while she was starting to cry, she could hear a whisper coming from outside.

Looking out, she could see the same scenario of the previous night: Iris and Neris together; this time however the clear sky and the silence all around made everything widely sharp.

Iris placed in Neris’ paws some toys and sweets, then she covered her head with a wrap and she stepped away from the Sphinx, that even this time took off until she disappeared far away.

Gabrielle had no doubts anymore on what Iris was doing, and she tried to call her, screaming as much as possible.

“Iris! Iris, please! Stop! Iris!”

The woman stopped right in front of the small cell window.

“What do you want? I cannot stay here!”

“Iris, you should help us! Xena is sick!”

“I...I can’t, Gabrielle...I’m sorry...”

“Xena could die! Please, help us...”

“I...I don’t...”

“If Xena dies, I am going to tell Laius about your secret...”

“My...? What? No, you can’t...you don’t know...”

“I know everything, Iris...I’m sorry to threaten you but the life of the woman I love is at risk...and even your heart is full of love...I know it...help me, Iris, and I will help you...”

“Tell me what you need, Gabrielle...”

Iris came back to the cell window of the Royal Palace, stealthily bringing to Gabrielle all the needed to medicate Xena, and a candle to make as much light as possible.

“Ok, now give me the honey, I will try to bind the wound in the best way I can...”

“Hurry up, Gabrielle...oh, if Laius would discover me! He is going to kill me!”

“He won’t, Iris...he’s not capable of...”

“What are you saying, Gabrielle?!?”

“Listen to me, Iris, you risked a lot coming here...and I thank you for that...please believe to what I’m telling you...trust me...”

The girl caressed Xena's face, which was still showing signs of suffering; Iris, seeing that move, could not help but feeling tenderness.

"You must love her very much..."

"Xena is who I live for...I would do anything for her..."

"I understand you, I would do anything for my children..."

The night passed in a very rowdy way for Xena, between fever and pain. Gabrielle prayed the Gods that she could recover quickly, because seeing her suffering in that way was killing her, especially when she was delirious, the fear she could not make it was attacking her.



"Gabrielle..."

"Yes Xena, I'm here..."

Gabrielle grabbed Xena's hand, then she caressed her face and noticed that she was still sweaty, while the voice tone was becoming weaker and weaker.

"Gabrielle, I..."

"Xena, please, you should not stress yourself...rest..."

Gabrielle was feeling a lump in her throat and as if she had a rock suffocating her breast. In that moment Xena was not the brave and strong warrior, but a woman who was physically weakened and struggling to survive.

Xena was a demigoddess to Gabrielle's eyes, an unbreakable hero.

She was used to be always saved.

She was always accepting any decision the warrior could take, since she was wiser.

She was strongly rescued, even if she was only about to fall.

Now it was Xena who needed all of that, and Gabrielle, despite she was partly feeling inappropriate, maybe because she was too used to be always the girl to be rescued from troubles, wanted to give her all of that.

She took a deep breath. Then she changed the medication again.

Gabrielle lied down next to Xena, she was very tired but she couldn't nor wanted to fall asleep; a few moments later the warrior woke up.

"Gab..."

The girl, as soon as she felt pronouncing her name, tried to get up, but Xena stopped her.

"No, Gab...stay beside me..."

"Xena...how are you feeling...?"

"As if the whole Mount Olympus fell upon me..." she smiled.

"You cannot avoid making jokes even when you're sick, Xena..."

The warrior tried to sit, but she couldn't, so Gabrielle embraced her back with an arm and let the warrior lay down on her.



"Are you comfortable?"

"I'd like to be always so comfortable..."

Gabrielle felt embarrassed.

"Do I still make you nervous?"

"Yes, Xena..."

"Then you are going to feel even more now, for what I am about to tell you, Gabrielle..."

Xena suddenly became serious, and stared in Gabrielle's eyes.

"I don't know if I can make it through..."

"You have a tough skin, Xena..."

"Please, Gab...let me finish..."

A sad silence then accompanied the warrior's words.

"I don't know how this is going to end, Gab...this place is a grave and maybe it is amplifying my fears...if only I was feeling better...we would have gone away from here..."

"I know, Xena...sadly I..."

"You will be a great warrior, Gabrielle, with or without me..."

Gabrielle smiled sadly.

"With you, not without you...Xena..."

"I would have never imagined I was going to end my days here...in the prison of a King without backbone..."

"So you also understood..."

“Yes, Gab, the plan behind all of this could not have been made by Laius...he’s too naïve or too stupid...it was...it was Ares...”

Xena started to feel bad again, the rest seemed over.

Gabrielle tightened Xena.

“Don’t be sad, Gabrielle...you know...I...damn my arm is hurting so much...”

“Xena, I will do anything to save you, please, don’t give up!”

“Gab, if we go away from here, I... want to stay with you...for all my life...”

Gabrielle was overwhelmed by a strong emotion, she wanted to be in her arms and tell her how much she loved her, but Xena’s conditions and the situation didn’t allow that.

“No...I must find a solution...we cannot stay here any longer!”

Placing her hand on the cell walls, she could feel they were very wet. She started scratching them with her nails and she realized that the soil between a brick and the other was mixed to some musk, and that it didn’t seem difficult to remove it.

She tried to do the same thing with the ones below the small window, and she could notice that the mold was even softer.

She took Xena’s chakram and the removal was extremely simple.

“I’m lucky that Xena is not herself and she cannot see what I’m doing with her ring...I’m sure she would not approve it...” she thought, speaking aloud.

“But I’m doing it for you, Xena...I will not let you die here!! Well...it is surrendering...if only I had more strength...”

Gabrielle managed to weaken the most part of the bricks below, then she had an idea:

“Argo! But that horse is only reacting to Xena’s call...I will try it anyway! The stable is not very far, thank Gods...she should hear me...”

Gabrielle whistled several times, but Argo did not react.

“Stupid stubborn horse!”

“Don’t ever try to talk in this way to Argo, Gab...”

Xena heard her, and in a moment of clarity, with all the breath left in her lungs, called Argo, that did not take long to arrive.

“Argo! Kick here! Come on!”

Argo looked at Gabrielle, who was spurring her from the window, but she seemed she didn’t want to understand, while Xena was too exhausted to give her orders again.

“Fine! Now I will try to whistle like Xena!”

Gabrielle only managed to release squeaky sounds, that made the horse move away.

“Damn it! Ok...let’s try again...!” and this time Gabrielle managed to let Argo understand, she kicked on the wall, breaking the side excavated by the girl.

“Xena, Xena! We’re free! Xena, wake up!”

For all Gods! How can I get you up? Xena...please...help me...”

Gabrielle caressed her, then she kissed her forehead and noticed that she was not so warm anymore; then Xena seemed to wake up.

“Hold on to me, Xena...”

“You made it, Gab...I’m proud of you...” she smiled.

Xena managed to stand up on her feet, holding onto Gabrielle’s shoulders, while the girl was holding her firmly on her waist.

The warrior was too weak to walk, and the only way to hurry up was undoubtedly riding the horse, but Xena didn't have enough strength to get on, so she decided to go first.

"Xena, hold on to me! Try to get on, I'll hold you!"

"Gabrielle, I don't know if it's the case..."

"I'm stronger than you think, Xena!"

Gabrielle was firm, and the proud and determined glance of the girl inspired trust in the warrior.

With a hand, she was holding the bridles and with the other, she tried to lift Xena up with all her strength, for a couple of times she was slipping away, until she could get her on Argo's saddle.

Xena tightened Gabrielle, as if she had never done in all her warlord's life, while the girl was hoping to go away as far as they could from Laius' reign and save her woman.



They arrived to an inn, far enough from Thebes center; Gabrielle was tired, but not as much as Xena, who was exhausted.

"Xena, stay leaning on me."

Entering the guesthouse, Gabrielle noticed a group of men sitting at a table, who were looking at them laughing.

Careless, she went to the innkeeper.

"We need a room. How much are you asking for one night?"

The innkeeper seemed of the same mood of his customers.

"It depends...what you need it for?" he smiled, amused.

"You know, it never happened to me to host two women, ahah."

"There's always a first time. Now, would you tell me the price?"

"For two women, weird like you...seven dinars!"

"You're mad!"

"I repeat you, blondie, you're weird and the prices increase for the ones like you..."

"The ones like..."

"Gabrielle, give him those dinars. I need to rest..."

“Ok, Xena...”

Gabrielle placed the dinars on the counter.

The innkeeper counted them and then looked at the two women with scorn.

“That way for the rooms. Try not to make too much noise, ahahahah.”

Gabrielle barely held back her rage.

They entered in the room.

Gabrielle placed her saddlebag on a small seat, along with Xena’s armor, then they both sat on the bed.

“Luckily the room is clean and the bed seems to be comfortable...how are you feeling, Xena?”

“Better, even if...”

“Even if?”

“I’m starting to feel hungry, but I don’t want you to go among those men...”

“I’m going to take you something now!”

“No, wait Gab...maybe tomorrow we are going to search for an inn in...”

“Don’t ever think about it, Xena. You must regain strength. I’m not sure you’re ok, yet. Lay down and rest. I will be back soon.”

Gabrielle caressed Xena’s face, and she took her hand and kissed her, then the girl went out of the room.

“Hey beauty, where did you leave your friend?”

One of the men in the inn, clearly drunk, had decided to bother Gabrielle, who however did not reply to the defiance.

“I’d like some bread and cheese, please” the girl made her request to the innkeeper, careless of the laughs in the background.

“All you want for twenty dinars!”

“I don’t own such an amount and I perfectly know that is not what I should pay you! Enough!”

“Hey girl, you’re the weirdo, so you must be satisfied or else stay without food ahahaha!”

Gabrielle lost her patience and grabbed the innkeeper for the scruff, he remained surprised.

“Stop it! Give me what I asked for, at the right price!”

“Hey guys, have you seen that? The chicken has her claws...”

The drunk man got up and, together with other two, surrounded Gabrielle, who hit the drunk one with her head, managing to sneak out.

Then she run towards one of the windows of the inn, took the stick that was used to keep it open, and she started to bustle.

She gave a sting on the stomach of one of them and on the head of the other. Then she stopped.



“Do you want some more?”

The men run away, out of the inn, at the speed of light.

“And what are you looking at?” Gabrielle talked to two women who were in a corner, afraid.

“Instead of passively accepting who wants to oppress you, maybe you should do something! And you, innkeeper, prepare what I have asked you!”

“Yyy...yes im...immediately.” The innkeeper was clearly shocked by Gabrielle’s reaction and hurried to satisfy her request.

Gabrielle went back in the room, put down the food and saw Xena playing with the chakram; then she turned towards her and smiled with her bright blue eyes.

“I saw you, you know?”

“What?”

“I’ve seen how you fought against those bad guys. Sooner or later you will also be able to held my chakram, and not only using it as a rake...” she laughed lightly, self-satisfied.

“Oh Xena, forgive me, I...”

“Don’t apologize, Gab. You saved my life and I will always acknowledge you for that. You’re becoming a true warrior. I was not joking when I told you that one day you will be able to use my chakram...even if I would be probably dead when it is going to happen” this time, a veil of sadness could be caught in Xena’s smile.

“It’s never going to happen, now try to eat something...”

Gabrielle offered food to the warrior, she sat beside her and caressed her hand.

“You’re the most important person of my life, Xena...”

The warrior caressed her back, they looked into each other’s eyes, to exchange a sweet and tender kiss on the lips afterwards.

It was dawning when Gabrielle was woken up by the noise of a light rain, that was slowly watering the leaves on the trees. Initially, still sleepy, she thought of being outside, instead she noticed that the window was lightly opened, as much as needed for her to hear that sweet sound of nature.

Next to her, Xena was sleeping peacefully.

It would have been unusual to see her like that, if the warrior was not wounded, since she was always the one getting up early and waking her up, so she tried to wake her caressing and kissing her face softly several times, until she opened her eyes.

“How are you?”

“Much better, Gab”

“Let me check your wound...”

Gabrielle delicately made sure of the wound state, then she changed the medicament.

“Finally it is not infected anymore...”

Xena got up quite confidently, and Gabrielle recognized her beloved warrior.

“Thank you...you have been so precious...even if now we should go. There are still several things to fix. Larius surely moved already, to hunt us...better, what do you tell me about Iris? When I was feeling bad I vaguely heard you talking about a secret...”

“Iris’ children are alive, Xena...”



Xena and Gabrielle found themselves under Mount Ficione, exactly on the same road on which, some days before, the victims of the Sphinx were laying on the ground; now there were only burned sand and ashes.

Xena got off the horse: something caught her attention.

“It doesn’t seem to me that the Sphinxes spit flames like dragons” Xena was touching and pushing the sand with her hands, letting it slide down from her fingers.

“Look, Xena!”

Neris glided in front of the two women, while Laius was arriving from behind, escorted by his army, heavily armed.

“Xena, running away didn’t help you! You betrayed me and you will be very very punished! I knew I could not trust you for real! Your reputation will always precede you!” Laius was wearing an extremely heavy armor, and his voice was resounding inside the helmet, releasing a creaking sound.

“And you, Neris! You will never have me! Kill the Sphinx and the two traitors!”

Laius pointed his arm ordering to attack in the direction of Xena and Gabrielle, and almost fell on the ground because of the weight of his own armor, until a couple of soldiers didn’t support him.

After that, one of them stroke an arrow in the direction of the girl, but Xena stopped it skillfully with a hand, throwing it back on the King’s helmet, and it remained stuck.

“Laius, you’re ridiculous! Neris won’t kill you and you won’t kill her!”

“Look around, burnt sand and silver ashes! The dead bodies that were here until the other day are gone!”

“It is true, warrior” Neris added.

“This because among the Sphinx’s victims there were also soldiers...coming from one of Ares’ army!”

“Ares?” Laius was surprised.

Xena was not only determined, but also seemed to have something else for both parties, so she mounted on Argo’s saddle and waved to Gabrielle to reach her on the steed.

“Follow us! We are all going to meet in Thebes’s main square!”

The two women were riding quickly towards Thebes, then Gabrielle, very curious, started to make questions.

“Would you tell me what Ares has to do with it?”

“Ares wanted to kill two birds with one stone...become the new city protector, kill Laius and proclaim his heir.”

“Yes, but...how?”

“With deception, Gab...the only way the God of War knows. Very soon everything will be clear for everybody”.

“Ah, I understand...your usual old mysteries...”



Gabrielle was holding tight to Xena's waist and noticed that the wounded shoulder had been touched by the arrow shot by Laius soldier.

"Xena, stop."

"What?" Xena stopped Argo's run, then got off the horse and made even Gabrielle getting off.

"Your shoulder is bleeding..."

"And you asked me to stop for this?"

"Yes..."



Gabrielle, under Xena's eyes, started to lick her shoulder with the lips, then with her tongue she wiped the blood that had not coagulated yet.

The warrior felt surprise and excitement at the same time, watching the girl who seemed to want everything of her, and this time she did not let the desire of both fade because of the impendent mission. She pushed Gabrielle with strength against a tree inside a small forest, starting to kiss her, feeling the metallic taste of her own blood.

"Take off your armor, Xena..."

The warrior, very quickly and with ease, got rid of it, pushing this time her body against the girl's body and sliding her hands on the girl's hips, hugging her tight.

“Xena...we’re not far enough from...”

“I don’t care...” she kept kissing and touching her vehemently.

“You really feel better, Xen...” she closed her mouth with a hand.

“Don’t speak.”



Xena kissed Gabrielle’s neck with heat, who closed her eyes and smiled: her warrior was having her soul and body, careless about everything and everyone.

“Here we are Sire, but the warriors have not reached us yet!” one of Laius’ soldiers was looking around to make sure of the two women’s arrival.

“A great sovereign should never have to wait!” The King was furious and Neris was looking at him with a scornful look, while she was licking her wing.

“I will order to cut them!”

“Stop it, Laius!” Xena and Gabrielle arrived before the planned time.

“What are you going to show us, Xena?” Neris asked politely.

“Exactly here, where Crisippo’s execution took place, there are the same ashes and sand that we have found under Mount Ficione!

“And what does it mean?” Laius was losing her balance again, because of the armor.

“That you did not execute Crisippo, but an impostor instead!”

“It is not true, Xena! He was Crisippo, I’m more than sure!”

“Have you seen him dead, Laius?”

“Now that I’m thinking about it...we have only collected his ashes from the stake...”

“Those ashes were not Crisippo’s...your wife didn’t cheat on you with him, so there won’t be another bloodshed!”

Moreover, exactly when Xena pronounced those fateful words, Ares appeared, the God of War, that stroke one of his lightning against her, but the warrior was much quicker, throwing the chakram against him; this weakened the electric discharge, that faded on the ground.

“Look! The same color of burnt sand! The same silver ashes produced by your lightning, Ares!” Xena took a handful of that sand and threw it on the God’s face.

“Congratulations, my warrior princess...but this doesn't mean anything! Laius shall die! What are you waiting for, Neris?”

“Neris won't kill Laius, since Crisippo was never executed, you introduced yourself to Iris in disguise and you raped her!”

“And for what reason should I have planned all of this? It's ridiculous” he sneered.

“For useless reasons and to enslave Thebes city, and also to get rid of Neris” from below one of the Sphinx's wings, Iris showed up.

FLASHBACK: MOUNT FICIONE, SOME MONTHS AGO



During a strong storm, Iris, soaked of water and mud, was running from the King's soldiers, in the attempt of saving her children's life.

Once arrived near Mount Ficione, she placed the newborns on the Sacred Stone: the Sphinx was in front of her.

“Please Neris, take my children, Laius wants to kill them!”

“Iris, if your children are coming with me, you will not see them again...are you aware of that?”

"I don't care...I prefer not to see them again, than to assist to their death under my eyes!"

"Fine...from today they will be sons of the Reign of Seth and Laius will die for having tried to kill some innocents!"

END OF THE FLASHBACK

"So you have not cheated on me, Iris?"

"I was already pregnant of our children when Crisippo, or at least the one I thought was him, one night took advantage of me....."

"And that man was Ares..." Gabrielle added.

"I could not tell you Laius, I was too ashamed..."

"It was not your fault, Iris" Gabrielle hugged the woman, who burst into tears.

Laius took the help of his soldiers to get rid of that boring and cumbersome armor, and run towards Iris.

"Forgive me, I could have never imagined all of this..."

Laius tried to hug her, but she moved away.

"So was it all Ares' miserable plan? For what?" the Sphinx's voice thundered through the entire main square.

"For a heir and some temples in his honor" sighed Gabrielle.

"God's stuff" Laius continued.

"Or mad people, right Ares?" Xena did not hesitate to mock the God even more.

The Sphinx took the word:

"I am Neris, protector of this city, and I am not going to let a cruel and vain God make these human creatures, that I love so much, unhappy. You have earned yourself my wrath."

Neris issued a sharp sound, similar to a hiss, but more disturbing.

"I have just called my sisters for gathering, now they are flying towards Mount Olympus. They are going to make you and all you stupid Gods pay for it!"

"Sisters? This is even more ridiculous." Ares mocked at the Sphinx in a way that she did not accept at all, and when he tried to run away, Neris materialized an ice plate with a blow, making him slip, then she crushed his back with one of her paws, but Ares, who was immortal after all, managed to break free, disappearing in front of everyone.

"Stupid and miserable God! Run away is not going to help you!" Neris snorted, then she moved towards Iris with elegant and harmonious steps.

"Lady, you have suffered so much. You took care of your children with humbleness, even if distant, and I want to gift you something"



From afar, in a clear sky, two big Golden Eagles were coming: each of them was bringing a child with her. When they were gliding on the ground, Iris was astonished and Neris smiled.

“But they are not my children...”

“In the Reign of Seth the children grow fast and they become demigods. Thebes has now two Kings!”

“**I am the only legitimate** King of Thebes!” Laius intervened.

“You are not a fair man, Laius. The riddle has been solved anyway and you are free, but the Kingdom belongs to Iris and to her two children! Take or...die!”

Desolate, Laius lowered his head and accepted his destiny.

Iris run to embrace her children, between joy and tears.

That night, in what was not Laius’ Kingdom anymore, Iris organized a party in honor of her sons and the two warriors.

“I only want to tell you that I don’t know how to thank you, but instead I know. So I asked to fill your saddlebags with food and golden dinars, and just know that here in Thebes you have a place of honor. You will always be the most welcome.”

“And we could not refuse such goodness” Xena added.

“We are so immensely happy that you and your sons have reunited.” Gabrielle was definitely more romantic of the warrior, in her reply.

“Please stay here for the night, the guestroom is still yours, with a small gift for both of you.”

Iris smiled and gave her farewell.

“You’re always so practical, right Xena?”

“I’d say we have widely deserved all of this!”

“What did the Queen gift us?”

“To find out, we should enter in our room...”

“Ah, right.”



The two women entered in their room, and Gabrielle noticed as first thing that her stick was leaning on the window.

“I cannot believe it! I thought it was forever lost!”

“Are you going to use it again, Gab?”

“Why shouldn’t I?!?”

“You fought well against those guys at the inn, I think you could focus on another kind of weapon, from now on...”

“Your chakram?”

“Never! I don’t want you to think about using it to grow turnips, next time!!”

“Very, very funny, Xena!... Hey, look!”

They noticed that the room was very different than the one Laius had asked to prepare the first time; completely decorated with blue flowers and the sheets had the same exact color.

“Why all these flowers?!?” Xena was disappointed.

“They are iris flowers, and they symbolize faith and hope.”

“Hope killed men more than sword.”

“You’re always so devastating, Xena, why should hope kill?”

“Because it is illusory and ephemeral, like love.”

“Do you think that even my love for you is like that?”

Xena stayed silent. The straightforwardness of the girl and the word ‘love’ made her flinching, then she became a little gloomy and sat on the bed.

Gabrielle went closer in front of her, placing herself between her legs, and she placed her arms around Xena’s neck.



“In this way we have almost the same height...” the warrior joked a little and smiled.
“Xena, what do you think is happening on Mount Olympus with Neris’ sisters?”
“Do you really care...?”
“No...I was thinking instead that when we lay down our heights are coinciding even more...”

THE END