

DISCLAIMER: The time for any disclaimer has long passed. This story is what it is, and I'm proud of it.

7DiP Info: Started May, 1998; Finished September, 1998. The story takes place after the third season: Gabrielle had sacrificed herself to destroy Hope, falling into Dahak's pit and dying in Xena's place.

The Vesuvius eruption chapter was posted on August 24, the anniversary of the eruption in 79 AD.

To the Pompeians who are frozen in time, your fate will haunt us forever ...

SEVEN DAYS IN POMPEII

BY DJWP

Chapter 1

Xena stood before the ocean, staring out to sea. A strong wind slapped a light ocean spray against her skin, and darkening sky offered little warmth. She stood, unfeeling; staring at the disappearing sun wishing desperately that she could follow its path down into the depths of the ocean and leave this life of endless pain and torment forever.

She couldn't remember how she came to be here. She recalled mounting Argo and leaving the temple of Dahak in an empty daze. Without so much as a glance back, she left a dead Callisto, a grieving Joxer, a score of villagers, death and destruction and whatever gods were still alive to fend for themselves. She had done enough, sacrificed enough, been wounded down to her very soul. Half-heartedly, she turned Argo in the direction of the forest and then allowed the horse to take her wherever the mare chose.

The faithful war horse brought her to the ocean as though the mare knew this particular location alone could help the stricken warrior.

Of all the places, Xena found herself staring out to sea from the very spot where she and Gabrielle had frolicked upon their return from Illusia. Her heart should have been breaking apart in her chest from the weight of those memories. Somehow, though, she felt only peace.

Xena closed her eyes and let the memory of their reunion fill her emptiness.

"Home at last, Gabrielle," Xena whispered to no one but the sea.

Wiping dripping ocean spray from her face, Xena turned to walk back to the shelter of the cliff and Argo where mare was waiting patiently for her in the sand.

Xena looked up from the sand at her horse and managed a small smile.

"Well, I'm glad someone around here is thinking," she said, glancing at the large piece of driftwood the mare was standing near.

"Found some wood for a fire, huh girl? I guess we're staying the night."

Xena looked round and shrugged. She could care less where she camped - tonight or from now on. Nothing seemed to matter. Feeling her heart sinking quickly, she decided to get to work on a fire... to distract her thoughts, if nothing else.

A bit of chopping and in a few moments, a small fire was lighting the cliff wall with a soft glow. By this time, the sky had lost most of its color, turning Xena's world from vibrant gold to deep blue.

The warrior sat on a thick piece of leftover driftwood; the rest lay in a pile of chopped pieces at her right waiting to be fed to the fire. Argo stood silently, ready for her mistress to perform the rest of her usual nightly routine: removal of the itchy and sweaty saddle and then a nice rub down. After awhile, it became obvious to the mare that this was not going to happen tonight. The horse ambled off in search of some sweet grass.

Xena stared at the dancing flames for a bit before offering a piece of driftwood to the fire. At the moment, she had no thoughts and was grateful for that. She wistfully hoped her mind would remain still for the rest of the night, but knew this to be impossible. The silence would not allow it.

It was so quiet.

The fire crackled. And then there was the sound of ocean waves hitting the shore.

It was too quiet.

She removed the scabbard from her back and pulled out her sword, ready to start sharpening. The thought of doing it made her stomach turn. She threw the sword, sheath and all onto the sand at her feet.

"I can't stand the silence, Gabrielle," Xena whispered to the air.

She warmed her hands over the fire; the air was getting chilly.

"I apologize right now for all the times I yelled at you to be quiet."

Xena wrapped her arms around her upper body and began to rock slowly, back and forth.

"I'm sorry for every time I ever rolled my eyes at your stories."

She closed her eyes and pictured Gabrielle in her mind, imagining the soft smile that would grace the bard's features at the sound of Xena's words.

"By the gods, I would give anything to hear you tell one now!" the warrior cried out to the sea.

The dead can hear your thoughts.

Xena's head snapped to Argo. She found herself staring at the bag of scrolls strapped securely to the side of the saddle. Gabrielle's scrolls. Her stories.

The warrior stood quickly up from her seat on the chunk of driftwood and took quick, purposeful strides toward the horse. Argo snickered softly, lifting her head in anticipation to watch as her mistress approached. But Xena only removed the bag and returned to her seat, without even stopping to pet her nose.

Nope, no rub down tonight. The mare's attention went back to the grass.

Xena sat back down on the driftwood slab and fed more fuel to the fire, arranging the wood to produce the maximum amount of light. The flames flickered a bit higher, illuminating the warrior's features in an orange glow.

She opened the flap on the bag, pausing to run her fingers over a few scrolls with a tender touch.

"I never helped you with these, did I?" Xena realized, caressing the outside of the bag and looking up to the stars.

"Never asked what you were writing. Or bothered to take the time to sit and read one of your finished stories. I told myself it was your thing. Weapons were my thing and scrolls were your thing. I could have at least helped you with names and places, but I never even thought to ask."

Xena shook her head, angry at herself for taking so many things for granted.

"Gods, how did you put up with me all this time, Gabrielle?"

Her thoughts ran quickly out of control, turning to memories of all the nights and campfires they had shared together. In all those nights, how was it that Xena managed to focus on anything and everything, but the one thing that was the most precious to her?

"I don't even know what's in this bag!" Xena announced out loud to the ocean air, turning briefly to Argo when the mare answered the comment with a snort.

"Ya got that right, Argo."

Xena paused for a moment, staring at the bag and its contents before reaching in to pull out a rolled parchment.

"I'm going to read one of your stories every night, Gabrielle, for however long I manage to stay alive," Xena promised aloud. Hopefully not long, followed in her thoughts.

"We'll end each day together, my bard."

She unrolled the random choice, turning the parchment slightly toward the fire so that the light might better illuminate the carefully written words.

Xena's eyes scanned over the page, filling with warmth and sparkle.

"I feel so close to you now, Gabrielle. Like I'm sitting right next to you."

She lifted her head and looked out at the black ocean, the night sky. She could hear the waves better than she could see them.

"I guess maybe I am."

Her eyes returned to the parchment and she began to read:

"I should hate the sea. After all, it is Poseidon's realm that makes my stomach turn each time I feel its heartbeat underneath my feet. It was the ocean that brought us to Ithaca and the near heartbreak who called himself Ulysses. And only the sea could have damned Cecrops in the name of the ocean god to an eternity of endless pain searching for a love he might have never found.

I should fear the sea. For it once swallowed us whole and brought out the worst of our fears as we lay trapped within its depths. And it is those very depths that now holds the last of my innocence in the form of a golden ring. How easily I tossed it away, giving it up to the mer.

But mostly, it is the sea that I should curse because it carried me to Britannia and threw me into the cold arms of evil. An evil that sucked the very soul from me, leaving behind an empty heart - once so filled with love, consumed so easily by hate.

And it was to the ocean she dragged me. It was over the vast water she stood poised to throw me.

Then it was into the sea that we both plunged from lofty heights. So wrapped up in our pain and anguish, we threw our arms around each other in one last angry embrace and fell from the grace of love into the churning waters of hate.

Perhaps Poseidon had his revenge after all."

Xena looked up from the scroll as she felt herself hyperventilating. *Gods, maybe this was not such a good idea.* But she was compelled to read on and so, after closing her eyes for a brief moment to calm her racing heart, she turned her gaze back to the parchment and continued.

"But the truth of it all, is that I will forever be indebted to the sea. I vow to sing its praises and marvel at its beauty. I promise to lay tribute at Poseidon's shrines and give thanks for his gift to us which are the ocean and its entire vast splendor. I will love the great sea and give thanks for the rest of my mortal life and beyond.

For it was the ocean that cleansed us. It was its gentle waves that carried us back to one another. It was in the ocean's embrace where our broken hearts were healed and our souls reunited. The kiss of the ocean blessed us that day, even as we kissed one another.

For this alone, I could be eternally grateful.

But there is more.

It was the glorious ocean that brought us to Pompeii, and for this...the sea will always have my heart."

"Pompeii," Xena's breath exhaled and was carried away by the offshore breeze. The fire cracked in response and Xena looked at its blaze with unseeing eyes.

"Pompeii," Xena repeated and a small smile found its way to her heart.

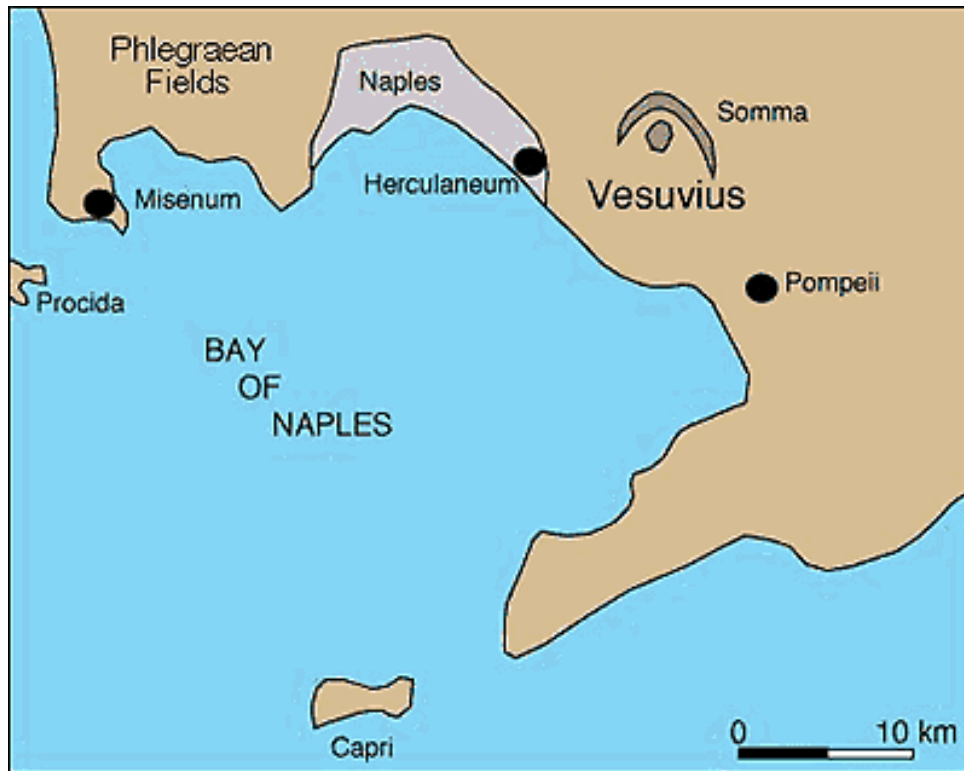
"Thank you, Gabrielle."

Xena slipped from the driftwood into the sand and sat so that her back could rest against the wood. She threw a large piece of log into the flame and then stretched her legs to make herself more comfortable.

With a happy sigh, the warrior settled in to read realizing, once again, the bard had found a way to bring her peace in the long, dark night.

SEVEN DAYS IN POMPEII

BY DJWP



Bay of Naples

Chapter 2

Gabrielle stood with her hands on the rail looking out over the bow of the ship to the shore.

"So close, yet so far," she sighed to herself. "Gods, I should hate the sea."

The bard smiled, reminding herself of all the reasons why she shouldn't. Turning her head, her gaze settled on the most important one, who stood by the main mast of the vessel arguing vehemently with the captain.

"And I'm telling you, I want at least half of our dinars back." The bard could hear the stern, but smooth voice of the warrior carried to her by the sea breeze.

Gabrielle turned away to look at the shore.

All she really wanted to do was get back on dry land; she didn't give a hoot if they got any dinars back. The bard was just happy to be alive.

They had taken passage on this ship back to Greece after they finished their mission freeing Vercinix from Caesar's clutches in Rome. They were well on their way through the Bay of Naples when a storm hit. Gabrielle guessed it was Poseidon once again trying to exact vengeance against Xena.

The storm tossed and turned them until Gabrielle was sure she was going to die from the seasickness alone. No amount of pressure on her wrist would relieve her distress. Add to that the fact that Xena had insisted on staying topside to help 'batten down the hatches' and the bard found herself in the cargo hole, huddled in a tight ball next to a wooden crate groaning from a stomach twisted in the throes of worry and nausea.

"I really, really hate the sea," was her mantra for the entire night.

Morning found the storm gone, the sea calm and the ship scuttled on a barrier reef off the coast of the small fishing village of Oplonto.

Now, Gabrielle stood on the bow in the bright morning sunshine, staring not at the small village but at the overwhelming presence of a dark mountain that loomed over all in the background.

"Mount Vesuvius," Xena stated coming up behind the bard, causing her to jump a bit. Her eyes had been following a thin, but steady stream of smoke that rose out of the mountain's sharp peak.

"A volcano," the warrior continued, gripping the railing to stand beside her friend, "That's Oplonto at its base, a small village. But the bigger city lies just a short ride up the Sarno river, just beyond. You can almost see it...see?"

Xena pointed into the distance.

"Pompeii. Ever hear of it?"

Gabrielle shook her head and squinted, trying to see the faint outline of the city beyond Oplonto.

"Well, ya gonna get to see it. We have to go there."

"Why?" Gabrielle asked, turning her head to look up at her partner.

"The ship's hull has been breached. She's going to sink."

Gabrielle eyes widened. Xena smiled.

"Eventually. We'll be off long before that happens." The warrior pointed towards the shore.

"See those long boats pulling away from their moorings?"

Gabrielle nodded.

"They'll be heading here. Scavengers. Maritime etiquette says they can take whatever they can salvage when a ship is lost, but they are bound to help all passengers safely to shore."

"The crew, too?"

Xena nodded, grinning at Gabrielle's predictable concern for the safety of all.

"Everyone. They'll lose their profits, but not their lives."

"Thank the gods for those rules."

"Well, the captain and crew are not very happy campers, I can tell ya that. They've lost everything. I don't think we'll see any of our dinars, even though we paid the full fare for passage all the way to Greece."

Gabrielle shrugged and patted Xena's arm.

"I'll just be happy to make it to dry land," she smiled back at Xena's grin. "What'll we do?"

Xena pulled a strand of hair out of her face, blown into her eyes by a soft gush of ocean wind.

"We'll have to go into the city and try to book passage the rest of the way."

Gabrielle looked back at the shore and smiled broadly.

"To Pompeii?"

"Yup," Xena answered, nodding. "The captain said that would be the best place. Most of the merchants who sailed the larger ships would be there."

"Pompeii is a big city?"

"Very."

"Lots of shops?"

"Loads."

Gabrielle's smile widened.

"Good places to eat?"

"Probably."

"I'm liking it already."

Xena smiled down at the bard and squeezed her shoulder. "I thought you would."

Then the warrior lost her grin and looked at her partner with all seriousness.

"Just remember that this is a ROMAN city. A very Roman city. After what we just did, I wouldn't be surprised if news of it has already spread to every Roman stronghold in the empire. We have to be very careful, Gabrielle."

"And YOU have to be a little less...recognizable," the bard added, examining her partner's leather and brass armor with a worried, but appreciative eye.

"I'm sure I'll blend right in," Xena stated before pushing off to move away from the railing.

"Right." The bard replied sarcastically, following the warrior to gather their belongings before the salvage boats arrived.

With a deep grunt, Xena lifted a large, heavy sack onto her right shoulder and carefully stepped out of the long boat onto the Pompeian dock. After several deliberate steps, she was able to heave the sack into a cart waiting near the dock's edge.

Gabrielle followed right behind, carrying a slightly smaller but nonetheless heavy burden of her own. The bard threw the bag into the wagon and wiped her hands in satisfaction.

"That should do it!" she proclaimed and smiled as the long boat's owner pushed one last box into its place and mopped his brow with a piece of rag.

Xena wiped back sweaty bangs from her forehead and squinted up at the sky.

"Whew, it's hot in the sun."

"Yes, hot when you do hard work," said Pontius, the salvage boat's owner. He smiled warmly at the warrior, wondering how any woman could be so strong, work so hard, and yet manage to look so beautiful even when sweating.

Gabrielle chuckled to herself, thinking that only Xena could leave a man smitten simply by helping with the cargo.

Pontius continued to smile at the warrior, until Xena became a tad annoyed under the silent gaze. She shifted impatiently to her other foot.

"Well, looks like that's about it," Gabrielle said, interrupting the uncomfortable silence.

"Yes, we're finished," Pontius agreed, still smiling at Xena.

"Good luck in the market," Gabrielle added, glancing briefly at Xena and smirking at her partner's annoyed expression, "What's the name of that street you told us to watch for?" The bard's question forced the merchant's attention away from the warrior.

"Via Dell'Abbondanza," Pontius answered, turning to face Gabrielle. "Go in here through this porta, follow the road until you come to Via Dell'Abbondanza. Turn left and just keep walking. The closer you get to the Forum, the more taverns and shops. Most of the merchants and seamen will be there. Selling, trading, eating...."

"Drinking...." Xena finished for him.

"Yeah. Drinking," Pontius added wistfully. "Hey, maybe you'd like to go for a drink with me?"

Xena's attempt at a smile failed. "No, thank you. We have business to do and we need to get to it."

"You sure?"

"Positive."

"Thank you for asking, though," Gabrielle butted in politely, even though the invitation obviously did not include her.

"Come on, Gabrielle," Xena pushed past the merchant and headed for the long boat to bring Argo ashore. She helped the mare negotiate the plank and then joined Gabrielle, who was waiting for them at the start of the short path that led to the city.

"Hey, wait a minute!" Pontius yelled, causing the pair to turn around. He threw a small bag at the warrior, which she caught it easily.

"What's this?" Xena asked, holding up the bag and giving it a shake. It jingled with the sound of dinars.

"Hard work deserves good pay," Pontius replied with a nod. "Without you I wouldn't have salvaged half as much. Thank you."

Xena looked at the bag and thought a moment. Gabrielle half expected her to toss it back, but instead the warrior tucked it into her bosom with a grin.

"Thanks," Xena said, flashing Pontius a brilliant smile. The merchant beamed.

"And thanks for the ride!" Xena added with a wave of her hand, then she tugged on Argo's reign and the three of them turned away to walk down the short road that led from the dock to the Porta Stabia, the gate into Pompeii.

"Any time!" Pontius answered, climbing into his wagon. "Absolutely anytime."

As they approached the large arched portal, Gabrielle paused to look up at the towering solid stone wall that ran along the perimeter of the entire city. Her eyes followed the massive structure that stretched out as far as the eye could see in either direction.

"Quite a battlement. The Romans must be a bit paranoid," Gabrielle mumbled, touching the surprisingly cool limestone briefly as they passed into the gate.

"The Greeks built this city," Xena replied. Gabrielle looked at Xena in surprise.

"Years and years ago," Xena added. "This battlement was built as protection against attack."

"Good protection."

"Obviously not good enough to protect them from Caesar," Xena commented with a frown.

"Caesar took this city from us?"

"Well, actually Pompeii was taken from us by the Samnites a long, long time ago. The Romans took it from them."

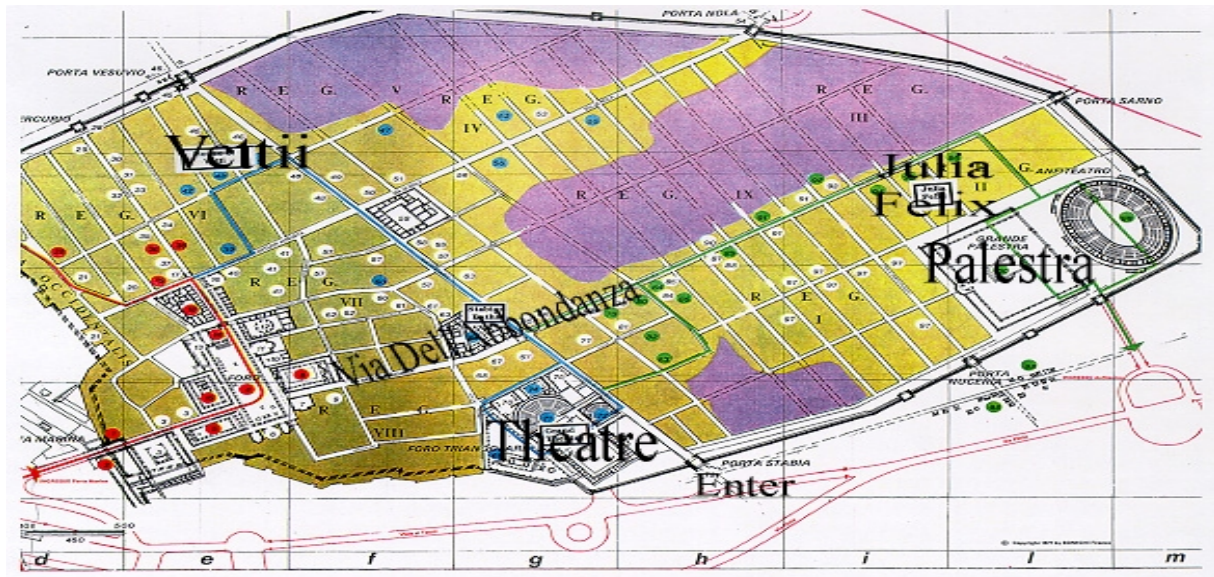
"I guess no battlement can be big enough," Gabrielle commented.

"Not against power-hungry warlords bent on world domination. Come on," Xena said, removing the small pouch from its own protective haven and giving it a jingle. "I'll buy you a drink."

Gabrielle smiled and nodded in acceptance, her eyes taking in everything they could as the warrior and bard led the mare into the shadow of the arched entrance and entered Pompeii proper.

SEVEN DAYS IN POMPEII

BY DJWP



City of Pompeii

Chapter 3

The Porta Stabia brought them onto a main street. Xena was able to read a golden plaque clearly displayed high on the wall of a stone building just to their right: Via Stabia. The warrior squinted down the expanse of street, seeing nothing but the avenue stretching out before them, flanked on each side by one and two-story buildings as far as the eye could see.

Xena felt the claustrophobic effects of an over-crowded city creeping down her spine.

Gabrielle, on the other hand, was 'oohing' and 'aaahhing' at the brightly painted facades of the houses. Their balconies and loggias were overflowing with flowers and plant life, and beautifully tiled archways seemed to adorn each and every doorway all along the boulevard.

One particularly colorful wall grabbed the bard's attention. She hopped over a cement channel filled with water that flowed along the length of the Via Stabia dividing the street in two, intending to run over and take a closer look.

An angry yell behind them caught Xena's attention. She reached out to grab the bard's green top and pull her back just in time to prevent her from being run over by a merchant's wagon.

"Pedestrians to the right!" the angry driver yelled as he passed by in a clinking, clanking rush.

Xena looked down the Via Stabia and realized that the street was indeed segregated: pedestrians to right, wagons and horses to the left.

"Watch yourself, Gabrielle," Xena said, smoothing the shoulder of the bard's green top. "This isn't Athens."

"It sure isn't. Take a look at this, Xena!"

Gabrielle grasped Xena's elbow and together they crossed over to the opposite side of the street, but not before looking both ways for oncoming traffic. Xena pulled Argo gently, waiting patiently as her mare negotiated the step over the water channel.

"There's writing all over the walls," the bard said, bringing them before a stone wall, covered from top to bottom with the scribbles and artwork of what could only be the local Pompeians.

"Ha! Look at this!" Gabrielle directed Xena's attention, pointing to a scratched phrase on the wall:

'Romula tarried here with Staphylus.'

She suddenly realized that the wall contained all manner of messages, poetic or otherwise, for any and all to read.

Then the bard heard Xena chuckling and looked as the warrior pointed out one as well:

'O Chius, I hope that your ulcerous pustules reopen and burn even more than they did before.'

"That's disgusting, Xena!"

"It's funny though."

Gabrielle chose to make no comment and shuffled down a little to point to another.

"Now, here's one I like!"

'Health to those who invite me to lunch!'

"You would."

Xena pulled Gabrielle back to her and tapped the stone with a forefinger.

'Samius to Cornelius: go hang yourself!'

Gabrielle rolled her eyes at Xena's laughter.

"You have a morbid sense of humor!"

Xena smiled with feigned innocence and shrugged her shoulders.

"Xena," the bard said, fingers tracing the etchings in the stone. "There's stuff written all over the place. Poems, comments, messages to people. Even drawings." Gabrielle stopped in front of a beautiful rendition of a mother and child. "Good ones, too."

"Now here's a comment I can really appreciate," Xena stated, pointing out a bold scribble in a corner.

'I am astounded, O wall that you do not crash under the weight of all this trash!'

They both enjoyed a good laugh. Gabrielle could already feel the stress and anxiety that, as of late, always seemed to be present beginning to fade.

"Come on," Xena placed her hand gently against the small of Gabrielle's back to prompt her away from the wall.

"We better get going."

The pair carefully crossed to the 'pedestrian' side of the road, Xena electing to keep Argo on the horse side, while she led the mare along from the 'pedestrian' side. Gabrielle grinned at the warrior who was having a hard time convincing the mare to stay on her side of the divider. *A city and its rules*, she thought to herself with a smirk as they continued their journey down the Via Stabia.

They walked in silence for a while, grateful for the constant shade the tall buildings on the each of street provided from the sun, until the houses on the left came to an end and the suddenly bright sunshine almost blinded them.

"Oh, my!" Gabrielle exclaimed, shading her eyes and looking out at a meticulously groomed lawn spread out before a massive building. "Look at that stage!"

Gabrielle could barely contain her excitement. The theatre had been built to fit into the curve of the sloping ground. There was a semicircular pit in front of the stage, and the seats rose upward from that, row upon row into the hillside. How many seats there were, Gabrielle could not begin to count. Just the thought of performing in such a venue was giving the bard heart palpitations.

"Yes," Xena said bluntly, before her friend had a chance to speak.

"What?" Gabrielle turned her head in surprise, almost missing the statement.

"I said, yes."

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, if we have time, we can go to the theatre."

If she hadn't been so preoccupied with the beauty of the building, Gabrielle might have thrown her arms around the warrior and given her a big kiss. For Xena, the bard's bright, happy smile was more than enough.

Xena gently tugged her arm, expecting the bard to resist and stare a little longer at the grand building. "Come on. The faster we get to the center of things, the more quickly we can find out about the play."

The mention of the word "play" sent Gabrielle bustling down the street. There was no way, the bard thought to herself, that she was going to be in this city and not experience the joy of watching classic drama in the atmosphere of that magnificent theatre.

Xena chuckled as she pulled Argo along, following her partner, barely able to keep up.

The theatre district came to an end and they were once again flanked on each side by stone and brick two-story buildings.

Xena managed to catch up with Gabrielle and was keeping an eye out for the street called Via Dell'Abbondanza. She imagined it would be a large thoroughfare, since it sounded like a main street in the city. And though they had passed a number of very small cross streets, none had that name on its plaque nor fit the description.

She was wondering just how far away this main street could possibly be when she noticed a great amount of wagon and pedestrian traffic mulling at the cross street just ahead.

"That looks like it," the warrior nudged her friend and they hastened their pace - Xena anxious to book their passage out and Gabrielle anxious to book seats for that evening's performance.

Sure enough, the next golden plaque announced the Via Dell'Abbondanza and they rounded the corner to turn left.

"Yow," Gabrielle stated for both of them.

The Via Dell'Abbondanza was twice as wide as the Via Stabia and a bustle of activity. Shops and stores lined each side of the street. Unlike the open-air market of Athens, the merchandise did not spill out from vendor stalls bursting at the seams. Here, each store had distinctively designed storefronts and entryways, colorfully decorated and identified with signs. Shoppers were busily entering and exiting, carrying armloads of bags that overflowed with goods and food purchased inside. The enclosed shops, however, could not prevent the wonderfully heady scents of freshly baked bread mixed with a touch of incense, fragrant oils, fruit, spices from drifting into the air.

Gabrielle took a big, deep breath and sighed.

"Aaaah, I love the smell of a marketplace in the morning."

The pair wove their way through the flow of oncoming traffic, heading in the direction Pontius had recommended.

The Pompeians were hastily coming and going, shuffling impatiently around Xena and Gabrielle and a horse who was now on the wrong side of the road. They seemed to be the only ones on the street who did not know where they were going. The pair walked toward the center of activity, trying avoid the steady stream of people who were hustling by them in both directions.

They passed all manner of stores: fabric, clothing, jewelry, furniture, weapons, pottery, food, food, food and then more food. But there were no taverns or eateries of the type that would harbor merchant seamen. Xena stopped abruptly, squinting forward into the distance.

Gabrielle had to break her step to avoid bumping into the back of the warrior. "Whatsa matter?"

"Pontius did say Via Dell'Abbondanza, right?" Xena looked up and down the busy street.

"Yup, that's what he said," Gabrielle answered, distracted by a very attractive bodice visible through an archway. She raised her eyebrows and smiled in appreciation, wondering how much such a lovely garment might cost.

"Well, there are plenty of stores all right, but I don't see any taverns." The warrior scrutinized the signs posted over the closest entryways.

"Just keep walking, Xena," Gabrielle advised, placing her hand against the warrior's back and pushing her gently, "we're bound to find a tavern. And slow down, don't walk so fast. You might miss it."

Xena narrowed her eyes and looked at the bard, wondering if that suggestion was to prevent them from missing their objective or just an excuse to allow her to window shop.

"Come on," Xena said and took off at a brisk pace.

Gabrielle sighed. *Gods, when Xena got her mind on something there was just no getting her to relax.* The bard followed, but kept a more leisurely pace. The distance between the friends grew with every passing step.

Xena halted and turned her head, suddenly sensing the absence of Gabrielle's presence. She spotted the bard's golden hair amidst the bustling crowd. Instead of following, she was staring at something through a portal.

"Gabrielle!" the warrior called. The bard's head turned to the sound of her voice. "Come on!"

With a sigh, Gabrielle reluctantly left the portal and wove her way back to the warrior. Xena had already starting leading Argo down the street.

A young woman bumped into Gabrielle's shoulder as she walked passed.

"Excuse me," the bard mumbled, but the woman was already gone. Another step and Gabrielle had to cut left to avoid another collision.

"Sorry." Gabrielle turned a bit to follow the quickly retreating form, only to walk right into another shopper.

"Hey! Watch it!" the man barked, moving the bard aside by the shoulders.

"Sorry," Gabrielle said and quickly stepped away. The man continued down the street.

"I guess you need a pair of Hermes' sandals to get anywhere in this crowd," the bard muttered. Then her eyes found Xena and watched as her partner strolled easily down the street. Even with Argo trailing behind, Xena did not seem to be having a problem. The oncoming crowds parted, opening a path for the warrior like a ship's bow through a swell.

Gods, how does she do that? Gabrielle squared her shoulders and took off with an upraised chin and confident steps, only to crash right into the first person who came her way, scattering a bag full of groceries.

"Excuse me," the young woman said with a smile before bending to pick up the items that had fallen to the ground.

The bard returned the grin and bent down with her. "No, I'm sorry. Here, let me help you."

Together they picked up the groceries and re-filled the bag.

"Gabrielle! What are you doing? Come on!" The irritation was easily recognizable in Xena's voice even at this distance.

"Sorry." They both stood and Gabrielle put a nice loaf of bread back into the young woman's package. "Gotta go."

The bard made her way quickly back to the warrior's side.

"Try and stay with me, will ya?"

"Xena, what is the big rush? You know, your legs are a lot longer than mine. It's hard to keep up with you. At this pace, we could walk back to Greece and be there by tomorrow."

"Well, we'd get a little wet," Xena said, pulling Gabrielle away from the center of the street and nearer one of the shops to get them out of the flow of traffic. "Look, I'm just anxious to make sure we can book passage out of here as soon as possible."

"Why? Has something got you worried?"

Xena studied a Roman flag, Caesar's standard, displayed proudly above an archway, flapping lazily in the breeze.

"This is a big Roman city with plenty of rich and powerful Roman residents. Let's just say I don't want to end up fighting in a coliseum again."

Xena looked at her partner meaningfully and Gabrielle paled at the thought.

"You're right, of course. Look Xena, I'm just slowing you down here. Why don't you go on ahead and I'll browse around for a while."

"Not a good idea. We'll lose each other in this crowd."

"I'll stay right in this area," the bard promised, indicating the few stores surrounding them.

"I have no idea how long it'll take me to find the tavern."

"I can fix that," the bard stated confidently. Xena raised an eyebrow.

Gabrielle looked around and spied a young boy sitting under an awning, playing with sticks and stones on the walkway. She looked back up at the warrior and grinned.

"Wait right here."

Xena watched as Gabrielle trotted over to the young boy.

"Excuse me," the bard looked down at the lad and smiled.

"Yeah?" The boy caught a stone in his hand and paused in his game to look up at the bard.

"Are there any taverns or bars along this street?"

"Yeah, sure. Plenty."

"How 'bout one where a lot of merchant seamen might hang out. My friend and I need to book passage on a ship back to Greece."

The young boy leaned over to look beyond Gabrielle at the warrior and horse waiting impatiently a few steps away.

"That'll be the Fish Head. It's just a ways down on the left, closer to the Forum. It has a big sign...."

"Let me guess. A big fish head?"

"Yeah," the boy laughed. "Ya can't miss it. Smells like fish in there, too. But that's where you'll find all the skippers and their crew. They got the strongest sweet wine in the city."

"Thanks," the bard said sincerely and turned to walk back to Xena.

"Did you hear?"

"Yeah, I heard. The Fish Head."

"On the left, just before something called the Forum. So, you go there and I'll wait here."

"Gabrielle, I don't really want us to be separated in this city."

"Relax, Xena. I'll be fine. I'll do a little shopping and you'll book us passage. We'll meet right back here, say...in an hour? I'll be here. I promise."

"You'll stay right in this area?"

"I promise."

"You won't wander off and get lost?"

"I said, I promise!"

Xena studied Gabrielle's face carefully and then decided.

"All right. But don't you dare wander off. I mean it. I don't want to spend the rest of the afternoon looking for you."

"For Zeus' sake, Xena, do you want me to write it in blood? I said I'll stay right around here. Besides, it'll give me a chance to find out about this evening's performance at that theatre. Remember, you said we could go?" Gabrielle waggled her eyebrows up and down, smiling at her friend.

"Yeah, all right. We'll go. Do you need some dinars?"

Gabrielle shook her head no.

"Well here, have some anyway." The warrior took several out of the bag, placed them in the bard's hand and then returned the pouch to its hiding place. "I'll meet you back here in one an hour."

"Right. Do you want me to get you anything? Something else to wear? A disguise perhaps?" Gabrielle asked, shifting her staff so she could count the coins in her hand.

"Just get your butt back here in an hour so I can find you."

"Wouldya stop worrying! Go on. I have some serious shopping to do!"

"All right. See ya in a bit." The warrior pulled Argo and took off with purposeful strides in the direction of the Fish Head. Gabrielle grinned at her friend's retreating back. Aahh, now I can shop in peace, Gabrielle sighed silently and headed in the direction of the first accessible store.

Xena paused after a few steps and turned to follow the bard with her eyes. Gabrielle had wandered over to a fabric store and was gazing into the archway.

Xena smirked, knowing full well that her partner was going to wander off and she probably wouldn't be able to find her for hours. The warrior's eyes drifted over to the young boy, who had resumed his game on the cool stone street.

"Hey, you!" Xena called out.

The boy looked up briefly, spotted the warrior and assumed she must have been speaking to someone else. He resumed his game.

"You, boy," Xena said again, taking a few strides in his direction.

The boy looked up and saw the warrior woman heading his way fast. He glanced nervously over his shoulder, hoping she was really walking toward someone else.

"I'm talking to you," Xena stated.

"Who me?" the boy said, pointing to himself.

"Yeah, you." The warrior covered the last few paces remaining and stood towering over the young lad. "How would you like to make some easy coin?"

"You mean money?"

"Yeah, money."

"What denomination?"

"Silver denarius,"

The boy squinted his eyes distrustfully at the tall, dark warrior woman.

"Depends. Just what do I have to do?"

Xena smirked at the question. *Smart boy.* "Do you see that girl looking into that store, just over there?" Xena asked, pointing in the bard's direction.

"You mean the one who asked me for directions? The one with the hair the color of sunshine?"

Very smart boy, Xena thought smiling. "Yeah, that's the one. I want you to keep an eye on her for me. See where she goes. Make sure she doesn't get lost. You understand?"

"Sure."

"One dinar now," Xena said, flipping the silver coin into the air. The boy caught it easily. "Two more if you can take me right to her when I come back. Deal?"

The lad looked the coin over carefully before smiling up at the warrior in agreement. "Deal."

"I'll be back in an hour. I'll meetcha right here. Ya got that?"

"No problem. I'm on it. I won't let her outta my sight."

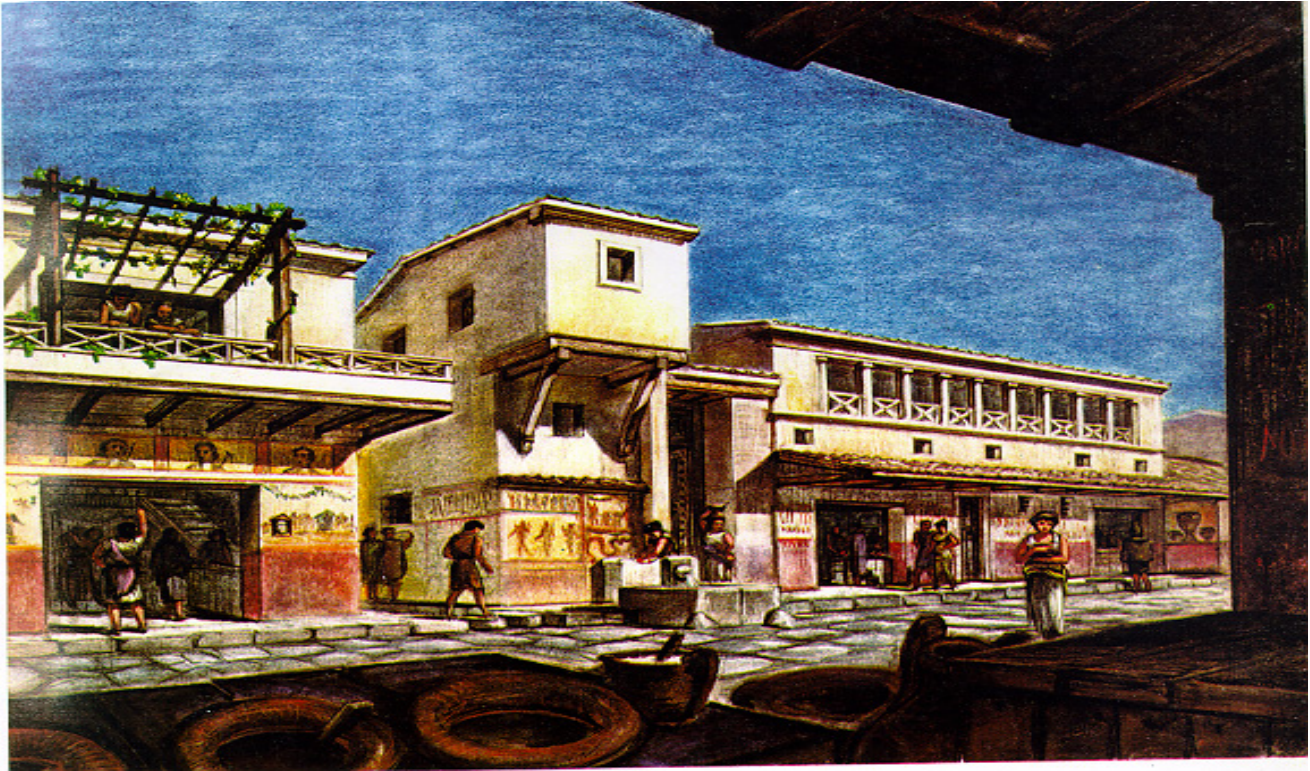
"Good. I'm counting on you."

And with that Xena tugged on Argo's rein and headed away in the direction of the Fish Head.

"Oooh boy, three dinars and alls I have ta do is watch a pretty girl for an hour!" The boy scooped up his stones, then ran after an oblivious Gabrielle.

SEVEN DAYS IN POMPEII

BY DJWP



Via Dell'Abbondanza

Chapter 4

Gabrielle paused at the water channel in the middle of the street waiting for a cart to rumble by before quickly running across to the other side. The wagon left behind the distinctive scent of pickled olives floating in the breeze.

"Definitely getting hungry," the bard thought, realizing that all the smells of this wonderful market were beginning to make her mouth water.

She ambled along without a care in the world, admiring the colorful storefronts with their painted frescoes and intricately tiled entryways. She stopped, leaning on her staff to appreciate a beautiful rendition of Mercury coming out of a shrine with a sack of money, painted beside Venus on an elephant-drawn chariot escorted by golden-winged cherubs. Underneath this drawing was the name of an establishment that boasted the best weaving and dyeing of woolen goods in the city. It hit her that this beautiful piece of artwork was nothing more than an advertisement.

Gabrielle ambled along the street, oblivious to how far she had wandered from her original spot. She came upon an eatery displaying scrumptious looking meat and vegetables skewered on a spit.

Smiling eagerly, she pointed to one and the merchant handed it over, trading it for one of Gabrielle's shiny coins. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught a glimpse of the young boy she had asked for directions. He seemed to be watching her, but when she stared directly at him, he turned away and appeared to look at something else.

Gabrielle shrugged, took a bite of the succulent shish-ka-bob and continued on her way, humming happily as she strolled.

The lad chuckled mischievously, getting into the spirit of the game, and followed along behind the bard in hot pursuit.

Some time later, the shish-ka-bob long gone and the bard's stomach beginning to complain again, Gabrielle found herself pausing at the counter of yet another eatery, eyeing the sweet cakes and wondering if she should get one for Xena, as well. The warrior loved her sweets.

"BY THE MUSES, I DO NOT BELIEVE IT!"

The bard jumped at the shout and looked around. There was a group of Pompeians heading quickly in her direction. At its center, amid a small assembly of tall, attractive and beautifully dressed young men and women, walked a short but nonetheless commanding individual. She was wearing a white toga and sandals, and sported a big smile that lit her face all the way up to her bright silver-gray eyes. The woman stretched out her arms and practically flew over to the bard. There was no mistaking that unruly head of black braids she called hair.

"SAPPHO!"

Gabrielle abandoned the sweet cakes and headed straight for her friend, almost dropping her scroll bag in the process. The entourage parted, waiting a respectable distance behind to give the great Greek poet a chance to embrace and greet her friend properly.

Sappho hugged Gabrielle, lifting her up in the air to give her a swing around.

"Whoa...I don't remember you being so strong!" Gabrielle said after her feet were back on the ground.

"And I don't remember you being this beautiful!" The poet's eyes traveled over the bard, twinkling in appreciation for every new muscle and luscious curve she observed. "You look wonderful, Gabrielle! Absolutely delicious! Doesn't she?" The poet glanced back at her friends for confirmation.

"Yes, she does," a young man answered with a smile. He had been doing some discreet appreciation of his own.

"Stop it, Sappho." The bard poked at the poet's arm and blushed at the compliment. Sappho merely grinned, enjoying the attractive pink that was creeping into the bard's cheeks.

"I am soooo happy to see you!" the poet said, grabbing Gabrielle's hand and giving it a squeeze. "What a happy coincidence. And of all places, here in Pompeii!"

A thought seemed to flash into Sappho's mind and her face lit up with excitement.

"By the Muses, you're here in Pompeii, aren't you?"

Gabrielle laughed at the statement. "Well, that's where we are, isn't it?"

"That means SHE is here too, right?" Sappho looked around excitedly.

"If by SHE, you mean, Xena," Gabrielle answered in a whisper, low enough for only Sappho to hear, "yeah, she's here, too."

"Where is she?"

Gabrielle leaned on her staff, studying the poet. That mischievous twinkle in the Tenth Muse's eyes could only mean one thing: trouble. Just what was she up to?

"Why are you so interested in where SHE is?"

"I just want to say hi!"

"Yeah, right." Gabrielle shifted the bag on her shoulder. "She went to a tavern to book us passage back to Greece. Why? What's going on, Sappho?"

"Back to Greece! Back to Greece! You can't go back to Greece! Not yet, anyway. You just got here, didn't you?"

"All right, what's going on, Sappho? What are you up to?"

"By all the muses, Gabrielle!" Sappho slapped her forehead and rolled her eyes. "You have no idea what's going on, do you?" The bard stared back at her, apparently clueless.

"Look, Gabrielle, why don't you come with me right now. We'll sit and have a drink and something to eat and I'll explain everything." The poet took the bard by the arm and started to lead her away.

"Just wait a minute now!" Gabrielle pulled away, regaining possession of her arm and leaning closely toward the poet to whisper in her ear. "I have to meet Xena. I'm late as it is." The bard suddenly realized she had no idea how much time had elapsed since they had separated.

"There's a wonderful tavern the next door down. It has great food and even better wine! Just come for a few minutes and have a bite to eat."

"I don't know...I should have been back a while ago."

"Another five minutes won't kill ya."

Gabrielle looked down the street and scratched her chin. It couldn't have been that long, could it? And she was hungry, after all.

"Well, all right. But only for five minutes. Then I have to get back."

"Great!" The famous Greek poet, known the world over as the Tenth Muse, wrapped her arm around the shoulder of her dear friend and together they led the entourage down the street and into a very beautiful and most delicious smelling establishment.

From the corner of a stone doorway, the boy watched the woman whose hair sparkled like the gold of sun disappear into a very high class tavern. He checked the sun's position and then sprinted along the Via Dell'Abbondanza to the spot where he had agreed to meet the woman who was a warrior and had eyes the color of the sky.

They sat around a large wooden table, waiting for a waitress to finish serving the drinks. When the servant was done, Sappho nodded her thanks and turned to Gabrielle.

"This place has the best sweet wine in the city. Try it. You'll love it."

Sappho raised her goblet, took a big gulp of the delicious liquid and smacked her lips. She paused and looked around the table, wondering why no one was joining in.

"What?" The poet asked and then realized her social faux pas.

"Where are my manners?" Sappho said, smiling apologetically to the group.

"You never had any," one of the young men replied, causing a round of chuckles.

"That may be true, but let me introduce you all to my beautiful young friend anyway." Sappho put down her mug and pointed to the first woman sitting just to the left of Gabrielle.

"This is Lavinia Claudia, a poet and a rich widow. Two very good things to be in Pompeii."

Lavinia nodded her head in the bard's direction and smiled at Sappho in obvious agreement.

"Next is Flavia Theodore. She's a singer but it's a good thing she doesn't do it for a living." Sappho winked at the woman, who promptly stuck out her tongue.

"This is Tiro. He's handsome and charming. Watch out for him," Sappho advised in a feigned whisper. The young man smiled broadly, obviously pleased by the poet's compliment – and her warning.

"Next to him is Ciro. Now what can I say about Ciro. Is there any one word that can describe Ciro?"

"How 'bout infuriating?" an older man with graying hair at the temples offered helpfully.

"And this is Popidius. He can call Ciro anything he likes. They live together, but don't tell their wives that."

Popidius crossed his arms and glared at the poet in annoyance.

"Bohemian," he muttered under his breath.

The poet grinned mischievously and lifted the goblet to take another drink.

"Well?" Popidius prodded, waiting for Sappho to finish.

"What?" The poet looked at them in confusion. "Did I leave someone out?"

"Your friend, Tenth Muse. If you don't mind."

"Oh. Sorry." She smiled apologetically at the bard then placed her hand companionably on Gabrielle's shoulder.

"Well, let me introduce to you the famous Greek bard..."

"Sappho, really," Gabrielle said, blushing. "I'm hardly famous."

"Yeah, but you're Greek aren't you? Who's doing the introductions here?"

"As I was saying," Sappho continued, giving the bard the eye, "we have in our midst a wonderful bard. I mean that. She weaves a tale like no other I've heard. Ladies. Gentlemen. May I introduce to you, Gabrielle of Poteidaia, the GREAr Greek Bard and chronicler of XENA, THE WARRIOR PRINCESS."

Popidius choked on his drink.

"NO!" Ciro exclaimed.

"Do you really know the Warrior Princess?" Lavinia asked, moving forward in her seat.

"Yes, I do." Gabrielle narrowed her eyes at the poet, not happy that Sappho had revealed Xena's presence in Pompeii to them all. "She's my friend."

"Friend?" Sappho asked, insinuating something else, then noticed the sad shadow that flitted briefly across the bard's features.

"Yes, she is my friend."

The poet was not pleased at all with the way Gabrielle said that. Looking closely for the first time, Sappho could plainly see the tiny bit of melancholy that shadowed the bard's normally bright eyes. Yes, Gabrielle had grown very beautiful with maturity. But at what price?

Just what has happened to her? Happened to them?

Gabrielle squirmed a little under the poet's scrutiny. "So, I thought you said we were going to eat?" The bard steered the conversation in another direction.

"So I did." The poet motioned for the servant to return and ordered her to bring them a variety of foods.

They drank in silence for a few moments, waiting for their order. Sappho studied the bard thoughtfully. The last time she had seen Xena and Gabrielle, they were floating in a beautiful lake, embraced in a passionate kiss. Food for poets.

Sappho's musings were interrupted as the waitress brought over a silver tray full of snacks and placed it on the table.

Gabrielle broke the silence by grabbing a pickled olive and popping into her mouth.

"Hmmm. I was in the mood for these."

"You're always in the mood for food!" Sappho teased and then they were all reaching in to grab some treats, the previous moment of uncomfortable silence completely forgotten.

"Oh, these stuffed clams are delicious!" Flavia commented, showing the empty shell to the group.

Gabrielle's hand snapped out to claim a clam, "Oooo, let me try one!"

"I swear, I don't know where you put it all!" the poet exclaimed.

"In my stomach!" was the bard's response, which earned a wave of laughter from everyone present. Gabrielle popped another clam into her mouth, pleased that the atmosphere had lightened considerably.

Then, the laughter at the table died abruptly. In fact, the entire tavern had become curiously quiet. Gabrielle looked at her companions quizzically, noticing that all eyes were staring beyond her.

"My, but that woman knows how to fill a room!" Sappho stated with a grin.

The bard swiveled in her seat to see what had captured everyone's attention.

Xena loomed in the doorway like an ominous shadow eclipsing the sunshine, waiting to enter the tavern. The entire room became silent as the warrior took a step out of the archway and then strolled on in. Her eyes scanned the area slowly, scrutinizing each table, her gaze finally resting on golden locks, the object of her search.

Gabrielle watched as the warrior's worried expression changed to a scowl and looked down, nodding in approval to a young boy who stood now at her side. She slapped something into the boy's outstretched hand. It was the same young lad who had given the bard directions earlier.

The boy flashed a big smile at Gabrielle, waved the money in thanks, and then scooted away.

Xena ignored the open mouthed stares of patron and employee alike as she headed directly for their table.

"I don't recall agreeing to meet in a tavern," the warrior stated, her hands on her hips as she towered over them all.

"Did you pay that boy to follow me?" Gabrielle asked, looking up at Xena from her seat, very insulted and annoyed at her partner. The warrior merely raised an eyebrow in answer.

"Need I introduce Xena, the Warrior Princess?" Sappho announced happily to her friends, extending a hand to the warrior.

Xena seemed to notice the poet for the first time.

"Sappho," the warrior stated flatly, "I should have guessed you would be here. Anywhere there's a party..."

"Did you really pay that boy to follow me?"

"So you know about the festival?" Sappho asked, chuckling under her breath at the bard.

"Well, now I know."

"Stand down, warrior. Relax. Take off your armor. Have something to eat." Sappho waved at a passing servant, ordering an extra chair and another drink.

A chair was positioned between Lavinia and Gabrielle, and Xena eased herself into the seat. She looked at her partner with an indulgent grin.

"I can't believe you paid someone to follow me," Gabrielle grumbled.

"How else was I going to find you?" Xena answered, taking a goblet from the serving girl's hand. She sipped the wine and smiled. "Hmmm. This is good."

"The best thing about this city," Sappho explained, emptying her mug and ordering another round for everyone, "is the wine. Sometimes I think the city earned its reputation as playground for the rich and famous on the virtue of their grapes alone."

"I'm surprised you don't live here." Xena's comment caused a round of laughter.

Gabrielle decided to forget about being followed and join in the fun. Xena seemed very relaxed at the moment. They'd have a discussion about trust and respect a little later.

"Did you find a ship?" she asked.

"There're lots of merchant vessels and plenty of them will be heading toward Greece. Just not until next Moonday."

Sappho nodded knowingly. "That's because of the festival."

"Festival? What festival?" The bard eyed her friend out of the corner of her eye. The poet had mentioned nothing to her about a festival ... yet.

Xena turned in her seat to face Gabrielle.

"There's a big festival going on, Gabrielle. Plenty of ships arriving, bringing people in, but not one leaving until after it's over."

Xena finished her drink, and Sappho pushed another one in her direction. The warrior spied an olive, swiped it from the tray and popped it in her mouth, following it with a sip of wine.

"Hmmm. Good."

Sappho's friends sat silently, watching the friendly exchange between the warrior and the poet. They were staring openly at the Warrior Princess, not believing they were actually sitting in her presence, watching her eat and drink and carry on normal conversation as though she were just a regular human being.

After all they had heard, it would be like watching Athena brush her teeth. It just didn't seem as though a legend of the warrior's stature would partake in boring day-to-day, earthly routines, such as eating and drinking and talking. For the love of Jupiter, they never actually really believed she existed!

Xena sat, munching on pickled olives and candied figs, oblivious to them all.

"Vettii is NOT going to believe this!" Popidius muttered aloud.

The statement caused the Warrior Princess to pause in her chewing and frown in his direction.

"Quiet!" Sappho waved her hand in annoyance at the man and smiled innocently at Xena.

Xena popped another fig into her mouth and chewed it, staring at the poet thoughtfully. "Well, since you obviously came here for the party, Sappho, why don't you tell us all about this festival. What's the big deal?"

"It's the festival of Ceres. Big, big celebration."

"Ceres?" the warrior asked.

"The Roman version of Demeter," Gabrielle explained.

"What's in a name?" Sappho commented. "It's the same god."

"If it's just a harvest festival, then what's all the hubbub?" Xena took a sip of wine and put the goblet down.

"The Romans will use any excuse for a party. They LOVE to party. They hold celebrations for one thing or another every month, if not twice. The festival for Ceres is one of the biggest, and that's saying something because Pompeians always like to party in a BIG way."

"Do they even care what they're celebrating?"

"Sure, they care. They give tribute to Ceres to ensure fertile soil and big crops. They petition the goddess for success in all their ventures, business and pleasure, so that she will bless this great city of Pompeii with her favor."

"Fertile soil and big crops, huh?" Xena sat back in her chair and crossed her arms. "So it's a fertility rite?"

Sappho grinned and nodded.

"One big, giant orgy I take it?"

Sappho smiled broadly and raised her glass, "You're a woman of the world, Xena."

"Xena, are we in trouble?" Gabrielle asked.

"It's the kind of trouble I covet!" Sappho laughed into her goblet.

"Look, maybe you could help us, Sappho." Xena sat up in her chair and leaned toward the poet. "We're going to need a place where we can lay low for awhile, until this festival is over."

"Lay low? Are you serious, Xena? This is the best festival they have! You should try to enjoy yourself for once in your life. Looks to me like you both could use it." Sappho nodded at Gabrielle and gave the warrior a knowing stare. Xena could not help but acknowledge her point.

"But, this place is going to be teeming with Romans!" Gabrielle interjected.

"Yeah. So?" The poet shrugged.

"Sappho, Xena and I were on our way *away* from Rome when that storm hit last night and damaged our ship. We didn't plan on being here. We don't WANT to be here." Gabrielle whispered, not wanting the entire room to hear.

"Ohhh! I get it! You were high-tailing it out of Rome after that thing with Vercinix!" Sappho said, way too loudly for Gabrielle's taste. Their audience snickered.

"You heard about that already?" Gabrielle said, under her breath.

"Heard about it?" Sappho laughed, putting down her goblet. "Why the entire city talks of nothing else!"

Xena sat back in her chair, at a loss for words.

"Xena, let me explain. This city is full of wealthy noblemen. They have vacation villas here and second homes. They come here whenever they can, just to get away from Rome ... and Caesar. Believe me, my friends, there is no great love for Caesar here in Pompeii."

Sappho patted Gabrielle's hand and continued.

"In fact, I've met quite a few noblemen who were present at that party Caesar held in Vercinix's honor," Sappho said, exaggerating the word honor and snorting. "They saw you there, Xena. I heard it was a beautiful dress, by the way."

The poet winked at Xena and the warrior scowled.

"More importantly, they saw Vercinix. Word gets around fast in Rome. You set a good trap, Xena. Somehow you managed to free Vercinix, execute that bastard Crassus and embarrass the great Caesar - all in the same moment. Those who knew what was happening hail you as a hero, Warrior Princess. You landed a heavy blow against the Triumvirate that day. Not to mention the performance you put on at the Coliseum. Is it true that you pulled a gladiator off of his horse with your bare hands?"

Everyone moved forward a bit in their seats. They had heard the rumors, of course. Now they would hear the tale from the lips of the Warrior Princess herself.

Sappho looked at Gabrielle, expecting the bard to take over.

Gabrielle merely looked away, her hand reaching for a goblet, finding it and bringing it to her lips. Once again that sad expression shadowed her features.

Sappho frowned. Something else she would have to question the bard about later.

"The point being that you are something of a hero in Pompeii. No. More than that. A legend. Politics is Caesar's arena and you beat him fair and square at his own game. The Pompeians love political intrigue and YOU, my dear, are its current reigning queen!"

Sappho stood, raising her glass. "A toast. To Xena, Warrior Princess. Twice now she has defeated Caesar. May his fame dwindle and hers grow."

All members of the entourage stood and raised their glasses in tribute. Xena and Gabrielle were shocked to then see almost everyone else in the tavern stand in salute as well.

"XENA!"

And they all drank.

Sitting down, Sappho smiled smugly.

"You see. You have nothing to worry about. Actually, I wouldn't be surprised if they threw you a parade."

"That won't be necessary," Xena stated, not sure she was happy with this turn of events. She was certainly relieved to find they would probably have no problems in Pompeii, but the effect the conversation was having on Gabrielle gave her pause.

"Feel better?" Sappho asked, staring directly at the bard.

Gabrielle did not answer.

"Then I guess we better find a place to stay," Xena commented, ever practical and trying to change the subject.

"You should come with me to Vettii's house," Sappho suggested. "He'll be able to help you."

Popidius open his mouth as if to speak, but Sappho shot him a quick glance. He closed his mouth and sat back in his chair.

"Who's Vettii?" Xena asked. She was reaching for another olive, but the exchange did not escape her notice.

"Aulus Vettius Restitutus. He and his brother are wealthy merchants. They have one of the largest houses in the city. He'll be able to arrange for a room." The poet paused. "You might even be able to stay there, with me," she added quietly as an afterthought.

Sappho watched the warrior for any reaction. She appeared to be thinking it over.

"It'll be hard to find room and board at this late date."

Xena remained silent.

"I'm sure he'll be happy to help you."

Xena looked down at her partner, who appeared to be waiting for the warrior to make up her mind.

"It's up to Gabrielle," Xena said.

The quiet statement took the bard completely by surprise.

"What?"

"I said it's up to you. I'll do whatever you want to do ... go with Sappho to this Vettii or we can find a room on our own."

Gabrielle was still staring at her partner.

"You mean you're leaving it up to me?"

"Why not? Whatever you think is best."

"Whatever I think is best?" Gabrielle repeated, incredulously.

"Come on, Gabrielle. Just come with me to Vettii's House." Sappho said, jumping on the opportunity to influence the bard's decision with their friendship.

Gabrielle took another quick look at Xena. Her face remained expressionless, not giving the bard a clue to as her preference.

"All right," Gabrielle decided, stating so in a small voice.

Sappho nodded, biting back a smile, and threw some coins on the table.

"Come on! Let's go to the House of Vettii!" With that the poet left her chair and motioned for her friends to follow.

Gabrielle ventured another glance at Xena before standing to follow suit.

"Is that OK?" she asked a little nervously.

"Gabrielle, I said it was your decision. But, you do realize that your friend is up to something, right?"

"Yeah. I thought so, too."

"I know you did." Xena smiled and Gabrielle smiled back.

With a push of her chair, the warrior stood, and adjusted her sword.

"Come on. Let's go find out what Sappho is hiding up her toga."

Gabrielle shuffled after Xena as they walked in single file out of the tavern and back into the street. She couldn't help but notice the stares that followed the warrior as they all left the room.

"So much for blending in," the bard muttered before slipping through the door.

SEVEN DAYS IN POMPEII

BY DJWP



Main Garden or "Peristyle"
House of Vettii, Pompeii

Chapter 5

"Here we are!" Sappho announced, bringing them to the front door of the House of Vettii.

The bard admired the facade of Corinthian columns that decorated the archway leading into the home. They appeared so real, yet they were only a basaltic lava facsimile of the type of columns that decorated real Greek temples, attached to the wall of Vettii's house for illusion only.

Sappho swung the large double doors open wide and they entered into the chilly cool of a quiet vestibule, leaving the heat, sun and bustle of the Pompeian city outside.

When the last of her charges had entered, she pulled the door closed. The latch clanged shut, echoing off the stone walls in the quiet dark of the cool room.

"Let's find Vettii!" Sappho snickered, her sandals clicking on the tile floor as she hurried across the room and exited through an archway on the other side. Her friends followed quickly.

Xena and Gabrielle, however, tarried behind. It was a painting that had captured their attention - a mural greeting all of Vettii's guests whenever they entered his home.

Welcoming them warmly was a large, colorful fresco of a very handsome, partially naked, muscular man. He was greeting his guests, not only with a smile, but with a male member depicted at complete attention and big enough to take up most of the length of the wall. And if that wasn't enough, he was having it weighed.

"Xena," the bard said, studying the painting with amusement. "Do you get the feeling that the people of this city spend entirely too much time concerned with ..."

"... the size of their crops?" the warrior finished for her, with a smirk. "Yeah. I get that distinct impression."

"So," the bard stated, examining the robust rendition with a critical eye, "do you think it's a self-portrait?"

"Whadda ya say we go find out!" Xena flashed a wicked grin at her partner and together they ventured forward to meet the remarkably endowed man of the house.

Xena suspected that this was one man who couldn't possibly live up to his reputation.

The pair left the foyer, exiting through the only archway possible. It brought them into the sunshine of a beautiful atrium. The roof was open to the sky and a fountain dominated its center. Cupid was kissing the sun and from his lips spouted a thin trickle of clear water, which arched out a short distance before plummeting into the marble base below. The abrupt entrance of the warrior and bard scared off two sparrows enjoying a splash in the clear, blue water.

Gabrielle noted two marble inlaid shrines set into either wall both painted with an image of Lares, the Pompeian god of the household. At his feet, a large serpent was depicted drinking from the offerings. The shrines, no doubt, were to honor Lares and bring health and good fortune to the household.

Xena caught a glimpse of the edge of Flavia's toga fluttering as through an archway on the opposite side of the room.

"Come on...before we get lost." Xena nodded her head in the archway's direction and together they followed.

"Oh, Vettii!! Where are you?" Sappho called out in a lilting voice as she entered an elaborate open-aired garden. The man was mostly likely to be out here, fiddling with his flowers and herbs. She stepped from the wooden walkway, out of the shade provided by a short roof and onto the well-groomed soil of the Pompeian peristyle.

Small fountains and marble benches provided places to sit and read or meditate amid the rows of meticulously tended plants and flowers.

It was on one of these marble benches that the poet did indeed find Vettii. With brown hair that showed no signs of graying and cut in the style of Caesar, he was a mature and handsome man. Long of limb and strong in build, he sat with his legs crossed sipping on a large silver goblet of wine. He was wearing a long linen toga and sandals, typical of Pompeian fashion and adjusted its folds as he rose to welcome the Greek poet as she came sashaying into the room.

"Well, Sappho!" Vettii greeted his guest with a smile. "What brings you back from your meandering so early?"

"Oh, nothing much," Sappho said, smirking at her entourage, who had entered after and were jostling one another aside, fighting for the best view. The poet rocked back and forth, heel to toe, grinning wickedly.

"I bumped into some old friends of mine," she added, trying to sound nonchalant.

"Oh really?" Vettii lifted the goblet to his lips, but paused before taking a sip. "Anyone I'd be interested in meeting?"

"Oh, I think so..."

Gabrielle chose that moment to pass through the portal, stopping to look around briefly.

Sappho took advantage of the opportunity.

"Vettii, this is the bard, Gabrielle of Poteidaia," Sappho announced with a smile and a flourish of her hand.

The bard nodded in greeting and Vettii nodded back. Then she stepped through the portal and away from the door to make room for her partner.

Xena walked in behind the bard, having to duck a little so her head and sword would not hit the archway. She froze at the entrance when she found all eyes had turned her way.

"And this...is Xena, the Warrior Princess."

Vettii's silver goblet slipped from his fingers and tumbled to the floor, hitting him squarely on the big toe.

The poor man cried out and grabbed his foot, hopping about for a moment before regaining his composure - much to his audience's delight.

"Sappho, this better not be some kind of joke!" the nobleman warned, testing his weight on the tender toe.

"Vettii. Really. Would I kid you? Besides, you're supposed to be the Warrior Princess expert. LOOK at her."

Xena moved from the archway into the garden and rose to her full stature, taking a relaxed, if annoyed, stance. She shot the Tenth Muse a less than thrilled expression.

Vettii limped slowly forward for a closer inspection.

The boots, the leather, the armor, the sword - they were all there. He noted the tall and dark, commanding presence ... and her hair, raven and flowing, framing a face ... a face so exquisite that even the eyewitness accounts he had read from various scrolls could not do it justice.

And the eyes.

Vettii moved closer to stare into the eyes. Xena sighed, sparing a look at Gabrielle. The bard had to cover her mouth to keep from laughing.

He had read that her eyes were arresting, but that was a complete understatement. Because if this was indeed Xena, the Warrior Princess who stood before him, then her eyes were more than arresting - they were chilling, riveting, mesmerizing...

"For the love of Jupiter!" Vettii's strangled voice caught in his throat and he jumped back as it dawned on him who was standing in his garden. "Sappho?"

"Pick your chin up off the floor and say hello to Xena, Vettii," Sappho motioned to the warrior.

"Vettii." Xena's velvet voice greeted him politely, prompting the nobleman into action.

"I don't know what to say ... I never dreamt that one day I would get to meet ... It is my extreme honor ... oh, my!" Vettii didn't seem to know whether to grasp her hand in a warrior's shake or kiss her feet. Xena merely waited patiently as he gushed.

"I am just beyond words. Please forgive me." He finally ended his ramblings, clasped his hands in front of himself to stop them from waving around, and smiled.

"Sappho said you were a 'Warrior Princess expert?'" Gabrielle asked, stepping forward, more than a little curious about this man's reaction. "So what exactly is that?"

"Oh. Sappho didn't tell you?"

"No. She did not," Xena answered, casting a look at the poet that would have slain an army.

"I've been following your exploits for years. Years and years and years. I consider myself something of an expert on you, actually. I'm your greatest admirer, I think," Vettii said, blushing a little.

"Second greatest, maybe," the bard mumbled while scratching her lip, looking away when Xena caught her eye.

Sappho heard it and smiled.

The merchant motioned for the group to follow him into the garden. Limping over to a marble bench, he offered Xena a seat.

"No, thank you. We have to be going. We need to find a room and board before it gets too late." The warrior took Gabrielle's arm and moved to make a polite but quick escape.

Vettii turned to the poet, surprised that she had not made the appropriate arrangement.

"Sappho, surely you convinced your friends that they should stay here with me!"

"I was getting to that, Vettii."

He turned on the warrior and bard, surprising them both with his desperation. "You must stay here with me!"

"I wouldn't want to impose..."

"No. No. NO! I insist. I have plenty of room. It'll be no trouble, really." Vettii was getting frantic, so he calmed himself and stood tall to make it a formal request.

"It would be a great honor to me, Xena, if you would allow me to offer you the hospitality of my home for the duration of the Festival of Ceres."

Sappho and her entourage were enjoying this beyond words. They had never seen Vettii so humbled. Why, the man was practically on his knees. He will never live this down, Popidius snickered to himself. I won't let him.

"Please, Xena, say you and ... Gabrielle ... will stay?"

Gabrielle was impressed. At least he remembered her name.

Xena hesitated. Should she stay in the home of a self-professed Warrior Princess expert? She eyed the poet warily. Sappho obviously had set them up in some way. But for what?

"Please," Vettii added.

The warrior ran her tongue along the inside of her mouth and sighed. The thought of staying in a stable was looking like a pretty good idea right about now.

"Sappho is staying here," Vettii offered as though that would be incentive.

Xena snorted.

"Sappho is NOT staying here," Vettii corrected.

"Hey!" the poet yelled. Vettii hushed her with a wave of his hand.

Xena looked to Gabrielle for her opinion. The bard merely shrugged.

The warrior thought about it for a few long seconds longer.

"It's up to Gabrielle."

"WHAT!" The bard strode angrily up to her partner and grabbed her arm. "Don't you dare leave this up to me."

"Why not?" Xena shrugged. "I'll stay wherever you want to stay."

All eyes turned to the bard.

I can't believe this. She wants me to be the one to say no. "OK. Fine then. We'll stay here," Gabrielle answered confidently, staring at Xena - daring her to say something.

"Fine. We'll stay," the warrior confirmed.

Vettii gave the bard a grateful smile and then turned to face Sappho.

The poet put her hands on her hips. "I AM staying here."

Vettii looked back at Xena.

"It's fine." Xena glanced at the poet. "For now."

"Excellent!" Vettii clapped his hands, summoning a servant, "I'll have my slave show you to your rooms. Do you have any baggage?"

Xena stared pointedly at Gabrielle. The bard's warning stare silenced any snide comment Xena had contemplated making.

"Everything we have is on my horse, Argo, outside. I need to find a stable."

"I have a stable here, of course. My stable boy will see to your horse. Don't you worry about one thing, Xena. I'm going to take good care of you while you are here! Very good care!" Vettii said, clapping his hands to summon his servants.

Gabrielle's eyebrows lifted, wondering exactly what this man meant by very good care. She gave her partner a sideways glance to see Xena following Vettii with a raised eyebrow of her own as he hurried away, still talking even as he walked.

"I cannot believe this! Xena ... in my home. Menander is just going to shit a marble statue when he finds out who is staying at MY house!"

And with that, Vettii intercepted an approaching servant to rattle off instructions.

Xena took the moment to pull the poet aside and glare.

"All right, Sappho. You set us up so we couldn't refuse. Why? What's going on?"

"You are SO suspicious of EVERYTHING, Xena," Sappho said, trying to remove the iron grip from her arm. Try as she might, the poet could not get the warrior's fingers to budge.

With a huff, Sappho gave up, glaring at the warrior impatiently. "Do you mind?"

Xena gave the arm one last good hard squeeze before returning control of the limb to its owner.

"Why not just relax and enjoy your good fortune, for Mnemosyne's sake," Sappho said, rubbing her bicep and taking a step away. "You are here in Pompeii during the biggest festival of the year and are staying in one of the very best houses - owned by a man who happens to think you walk on water. What could possibly happen?"

"With you, Sappho, anything is possible."

"I'll take that as a compliment. Come on," the poet said, gesturing to her friends. "Let's go find something to drink."

The warrior studied each one carefully as they left the garden, wondering whether it wasn't too late to find that stable after all.

"Well," the bard said looking at their surroundings, "if we're going to be stuck in Pompeii for a week, at least we'll stay in comfort and luxury."

"Right."

"Look, Xena. If you didn't want to stay here, then why did you leave the decision up to me?"

"Because I trust your instincts, Gabrielle."

"Lucky for you, Xena, that was the right answer. I thought you were just putting me on the spot."

Xena smiled at her partner. "Now, would I do that to you?"

"Yes," the bard answered, crossing her arms.

Xena lost her grin, feeling a little guilty. She took a step closer to the bard, placing a hand on her shoulder.

"I thought we talked about sharing in the decisions?"

"Yes, but that doesn't mean I get stuck with all the potentially embarrassing ones," Gabrielle said, feigning a pout. Her scowl was melting fast under Xena's tender gaze.

"Festivals and social occasions are your specialty, Gabrielle. I have to admit, I'm a little uncomfortable with Vettii's admiration and you know I don't trust Sappho any farther than I can throw a barrel of wine."

"Yeah, well, I could tell."

"Yeah, well, I didn't want my misgivings to keep you from having a good time."

The scowl was all but gone from the bard's face, replaced now by a smirking grin.

"You're getting pretty good at these sensitive chats, Xena."

The warrior raised an eyebrow, then smiled. "Are you buying all this?"

"Not for a minute, but thank you for trusting my instincts anyway."

"You made the right decision, Gabrielle. Vettii is a wealthy and respected man. His home is well-protected. We should be safe and no one will bother us here."

Gabrielle raised an eyebrow of her own. "I thought of that."

"I know you did."

A slave led them from the garden. Xena and Gabrielle followed the servant through an archway and into the section of Vettii's home that housed the living quarters. There were three available spare rooms in a row. The slave led first Gabrielle to one and then Xena to another, leaving one room between the two still unoccupied.

Gabrielle paused to watch Xena carefully before entering her assigned room. The warrior did not seem to react to being given separate quarters. She merely thanked the servant and then entered, leaving Gabrielle to stand in the corridor alone.

The bard watched the empty space where her partner had stood for a moment longer before entering her bedroom.

It was a small room, and amazingly austere given the opulence of the rest of the house. There were no paintings or frescoes adorning the walls. Just bare walls surrounding a bed, a table and one chair. Gabrielle leaned her staff against the wall and threw her scroll bag down onto the pallet.

Would Xena be upset that they were not sharing the same room? Should she go to her? Uncomfortable situations just seemed to be piling themselves one on top of another since they had arrived in this city.

Gabrielle paced the small confines of the room, trying to decide what to do. Though they had been through so much over the last year and had somehow managed to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles in order to continue their friendship, there was one aspect of their relationship that they had not yet resolved. They had not gone back to being intimate with each other since ... when? *Since Britannia*, the bard thought, answering her own question.

Gabrielle sat on the straw mattress of the bed and rubbed her eyes.

If they didn't resolve this issue soon, there would be no going back, Gabrielle thought as she stared out of a small window at the nice view of city and the looming presence of Mount Vesuvius visible from her room.

She and Xena would continue as friends and nothing more.

Xena looked up from the scroll she was reading. The fire had been steadily dying out and the light she had been using to read was almost gone along with it. Putting the parchment down carefully on the sand, she reached over to pick up a log of driftwood and added it to the flames. She watched quietly as the fire sputtered and reached up, moving along the dry bark in a caress that was slowly set the wood aflame.

As she waited patiently for the fire to fully catch, she stared out toward the black sea. It was cold and the sea's breath made it seem even colder.

"Did you have any idea of what I was thinking, Gabrielle? Did you understand?" Xena listened as a wave crashed against the shore. The tide was coming in.

"How many more times will you follow me into battle?" she remembered asking. "How many more times will I hurt you, Gabrielle?"

The question had answered itself after all, hadn't it?

"I was ruining your life. Forcing you to toss aside your values for what I believed was right." The warrior flipped a twig into the flames. "That thing in Rome with Crassus was a perfect example. I didn't even stop to think about the situation I had thrown you into. I just expected you to follow my plan ... follow me ... whatever the consequences."

The next twig was thrown at the sea in frustration.

"Crassus' death meant nothing to me, but it meant everything to you. You were constantly sacrificing everything on my behalf. What did I offer in return?" Xena picked up the scroll and looked at it, studying the careful strokes of ink as though she would be able to see the bard's face if she looked hard enough.

"You needed to leave me, Gabrielle, to get your life back."

The driftwood caught fire at that moment, bursting into a flame that illuminated Xena's face in a wash of golden light.

"I know you didn't agree. But that was the reason why I didn't come to you that night, Gabrielle, although the Gods knew, I wanted to."

The fire was now bright enough to provide the warrior with enough light. She shifted the pages of the scroll carefully to reveal the next piece of parchment, and continued to read.



House of Vetti

SEVEN DAYS IN POMPEII

BY DJWP



**Kitchen – House of Vettii
Pompeii**

Chapter 6

Gabrielle stood by the small window, staring out and watching the tint of the sky change as the sun began to set. The quiet of the room was disturbed by a brisk knock at the door and the voice of a servant who had been sent to bring the bard to dinner.

"One moment," she answered, shaking off her reverie and turning from the window. She reached for her staff but decided that bringing a weapon to dinner, even a wooden one, might be considered bad manners. She left it leaning against the wall and opened the door.

Xena had already been summoned and was waiting patiently in the corridor.

"Did you have a nice nap?" Xena asked, greeting her partner with a warm smile. She waited for Gabrielle, letting the servant pass to lead the way.

"What makes you think I slept?" the bard asked, looking up at her friend as they began to walk.

"It was too quiet."

"You're funny, Xena," Gabrielle retorted. "What did you do the rest of the afternoon? Sharpen your sword?"

"Something like that." Xena nodded for Gabrielle to move along so they could follow the servant who was turning to bring them to the garden.

"Well, if you ask me, I think we both could have used a bath," Gabrielle commented, sniffing the air. She took a whiff of her own underarm and gave her partner a look, letting her know that the offending odor had come from her direction.

Xena grabbed a lock of the bard's hair and brought it up to her nose to take a sniff of her own. "You're right about that."

Gabrielle pulled the strand away, patting it back in place. "At least I don't smell like sweat and leather."

"Hey, I thought you liked the scent of sweat and leather?"

Gabrielle slowed her steps, bringing both of them to a halt.

"I do, Xena. Trust me, I do," she waited, watching Xena's reaction, hoping that the warrior would say something.

And Xena almost did, except that the servant had cleared his throat and was eager for them to catch up.

Reluctantly, they abandoned the conversation to follow the slave along the peristyle's raised walkway. They followed the full length of the tiled path until it turned a corner. Here, the slave stood at an archway and bowed, motioning for the pair to enter at their leisure.

Xena waited at the door, motioning for her partner to enter first. They found themselves at the top of three small steps leading down into a large sunken dining area called a triclinium. The room's centerpiece was a beautifully carved, round wooden dining table. Most of the guests had already arrived and were lounging on the couches that surrounded the table, waiting for the first course to be served. Vettii, their host, smiled at their entrance and waved for the couple to proceed inside.

They were about to step down when a pair of slaves waiting at either side of the small doorway blocked them, and grabbed for their feet.

"Hey!" Gabrielle said in protest, trying to pull her foot away.

The slave reaching for Xena froze, seeing that the warrior had the hand that had grabbed the bard's foot pinned to the ground with a heavily armored boot. She pressed down, causing the servant to wince and stared at Vettii with a raised brow.

"A Pompeian custom, Xena," the merchant explained. "Shoes off and feet washed before dinner. You're excused from our quaint customs, of course."

Xena lifted her boot, releasing the servant. The boy shook his hand and stared at the bard with a pained expression causing Gabrielle to shoot her partner a displeased look. Sympathetic as ever, Xena chose to ignore both and continued down.

"Wait!" Vettii held up his hand, causing both Xena and Gabrielle to pause mid-step, "just be sure you enter left foot first."

Xena and Gabrielle looked at one another, switched feet and stepped down from the last stair.

"Bad luck otherwise," Vettii finished with an apologetic smile. "Xena, please. Your seat is here." He motioned to the divan on the right, next to his own. "And Gabrielle ... yours is next to Sappho, if you would." He motioned to the empty couch next to the poet on his left.

Xena strolled to her assigned seat, fully aware that all eyes were on her. She sat, stiff-backed, on the divan and adjusted her sword.

Gabrielle scooted around the table and sat on the couch next to Sappho, plopping down with a grin.

"Now, this is how a meal should be eaten!" she said happily. Following the examples of the other guests, she reclined, her head closet to the table, stretching out her legs behind her and fixing her skirt. She took a moment to arrange the cushions under her left armpit and then leaned her head on her hand with a satisfied grin.

Two slaves ran over to the new arrivals and handed each a toothpick and napkin.

"What are these?" the bard asked, examining the items, one in each hand.

"Another Pompeian custom," Sappho explained, lifting her own to show the bard. "The guests are supposed to bring their own, but we figured you didn't have any."

"You figured right," Gabrielle answered, eyeing the toothpick with interest. "Unless Argo somehow got a hold of my staff. Are there any other customs we need to know about?"

"Only eat until your plate is empty," Vettii answered happily.

"That shouldn't be a problem," Gabrielle replied, settling into the cushions with a grin.

"We're waiting for two more guests to arrive," Vettii explained, pointing out two empty sofas.

As if on cue, a servant entered the room bowing as he stepped aside to allow the last two guests to enter the triclinium.

He was the most beautiful man Gabrielle had ever seen. Tall and willowy, with flowing golden hair that tickled his shoulders. When he smiled at the room in greeting, Gabrielle found herself smiling back as though they were old friends; he had such an amazing way of engaging each person present.

Clear hazel eyes scanned the room, coming to rest first on Xena and then Gabrielle, the only two strangers at the table. His gazelingered only for a moment on the warrior, choosing instead to nod in greeting to the more amicable bard.

Gabrielle smiled widely in return.

Xena disliked him immediately.

Accompanying the handsome man was an equally beautiful woman, slender and small with hair as black as Xena's, but much longer. Her silken tresses were pulled back loosely and artfully wrapped in a golden cord. She had the regal bearing of a queen and it was obvious that the woman's breeding was impeccable.

She leveled a dazzling grin at the poet. "It's so good to see you here, Sappho."

"Good to see you, Phaon."

"Paris. Phaon. Come in, please. Sit and let me make the introductions." Vettii motioned his last two guests to their seats impatiently, anxious to get on with the meal.

Gabrielle watched as the couple allowed Vettii's slaves to remove their sandals and wash their feet. Looking down at her own dirty boots, she wiggled into another position, suddenly embarrassed that she still had them on and attempted to hide them in a tuck.

After their feet were dried with a soft linen towel, the two new guests entered the triclinium. Phaon reclined elegantly into her divan, assisted by her escort. Only when the woman was comfortable did Paris take his seat on

the couch next to Gabrielle. The newly arrived couple arranged their toothpicks and napkins to the left of their silver goblets and smiled at the group.

The bard hastily moved her dinner items to arrange them in exactly the same manner. She smiled at the servant who was reached over, carefully placing a large, golden tray filled with dozens of tiny clam shells stuffed with minced pork, pine nuts and fish pate onto the center of the table. No sooner was the tray in place than the guests began to fill their plates with food.

A very handsome male servant set down a large bowl next to the tray and gracefully mixed equal parts water and wine. After mixing the brew carefully, he placed a ladle into the golden bowl and stepped back, leaving the guests to serve themselves.

Sappho immediately reached for the ladle. Silver wine goblets etched with intricate skeleton designs were filled with the warm sweet wine, each guest taking their turn.

"Let the games begin!" Sappho announced, raising her goblet in the air.

"Healthy and bountiful life," Lavinia added.

"To the beauty that surrounds us," Paris added, raising his cup and smiling at Gabrielle.

Xena chewed thoughtfully, looking down at the empty shell in her hand and wondering briefly if it would react like a chakram when thrown. Deciding to behave, she placed it on her plate.

"To my most honored guest, Xena, the Warrior Princess." Vettii said, smiling at the gorgeous woman who was gracing his table. Even though reclining on a couch fully armored should have been uncomfortable, the warrior appeared relaxed, as though she dined this way all the time. She had simply arranged her cushions as best she could without compromise, somehow still maintaining a commanding presence. The Warrior Princess was everything he had dreamt her to be, and more.

The merchant could not believe his fortune. Clapping his hands to gain the servants' attention, he ordered more wine and more food. A tray of snails and mussels replaced the now empty wine bowl.

"Most of you know one another, but for our honored guests' benefit, I wish to introduce each of you in turn."

"Certainly, Vettii. Go right ahead," Lavinia agreed, filling her plate with a selection from both platters.

"Of course, everyone knows the incomparable Sappho." Vettii said, after following a bit of food with a swallow of wine. "However, you probably don't know who is sitting next her. That lovely young woman beside you Paris, is Gabrielle of Poteidaia. She is bard to the Warrior Princess."

"Oh, really? A bard?" Paris said, giving Gabrielle respectful consideration.

"Yes, and an EXCELLENT one," Sappho added for emphasis.

"Really?" Phaon said, very impressed. She lifted her head to look over Paris, wanting get a peek at the bard for herself. "Well, compliments don't come easily from the Tenth Muse, Gabrielle. You must be outstanding."

Xena took a small sip of wine, watching her friend and enjoying the attractive pink that was coloring her cheeks.

"She is," the warrior whispered, locking eyes and exchanging grins with Sappho, the only one who had heard the soft comment.

"Thank you," Gabrielle said to Phaon, ducking her head and pretending to fill an already full plate with more clams.

"Next to Gabrielle is Paris, Pompeii's greatest mime and favorite son!" Vettii said.

"Oh! You're a mime. I've never met a mime," Gabrielle commented, showing great interest.

"Yes, I'm an artist just as you are," Paris smiled, lifting his glass and grinning at the bard.

Xena narrowed her eyes, but managed to stop herself from testing out her chakram-shell territory against Paris's forehead.

"Paris, I thought you had committed to be at Menander's party this year," Popidius commented, hiding a smirk behind a sip of wine.

"There are no secrets in Pompeii, Popidius. We heard that things were going to be much more interesting over here. I am an artist. I go where I wish."

"And whatever Paris wishes, Paris gets. Yes?" Popidius added.

"It's one of the benefits of being famous. Right, Xena?" The mime grinned at the warrior.

"I wouldn't know."

Gabrielle grimaced at Xena's terse reply, recognizing the tone. She looked quickly at her partner, wondering briefly what she was planning to do with that empty shell she was flipping in her hand.

"Yes, well, next to Paris is Phaon." Vettii continued. "I believe you and Sappho know one another, don't you, Phaon?"

"Yes, I'm honored to call the Tenth Muse a good friend," the beautiful woman replied with a gregarious smile.

"Is that right, Sappho?" Popidius said, looking at the poet with surprise.

"Um ... yes," Sappho answered, dropping her eyes and taking a quick gulp of sweet wine.

Gabrielle couldn't believe it. Sappho was blushing. She had never seen the poet blush before. Never. Was she blushing or was she just getting tipsy? Gabrielle stared at her friend more closely, until Sappho caught her at it, and sent a warning glance to the bard to stop.

Gabrielle bit back a smile and took a quick look at Xena. Sappho's discomfort had softened her partner's mood considerably. Xena was sipping her wine with a delighted grin.

The slaves were removing the plates filled with empty shells and bits of uneaten food, replacing them with clean ones.

A fresh bowl of wine was placed in the center, joined by a huge platter containing the main meal. It was a roasted goose, surrounded by fish and smaller birds, decorated with garnishes of peacock feathers and painted quail eggs.

Gabrielle's eyes widened to saucers at the sight of the incredible meal and hurried to fill her plate.

"Careful, Gabrielle," Sappho warned, leaning over to whisper to her friend. "Your eyes are bigger than your stomach. I don't want you to have to make a trip to the vomitorium."

"The what?" Gabrielle asked in disgust.

"Keep it up and you'll find out."

Their host interrupted the side conversation. "Everyone knows Ciro and Popidius." Vettii nodded to the couple.

"Good to see you again, Ciro," Phaon greeted the man from across the table.

"And just how do you know Phaon?" Popidius glared at his own partner in surprise.

Vettii continued quickly, ignoring the arguing couple. "Next is my good friend and competitor, Lavinia Claudia."

"Keep your good friends close ...," Lavinia said.

"And your competitors closed!" Vettii added, the friends sharing a good laugh. Vettii turned, raising his goblet in Xena's direction. "And last, but not least ..."

"That's for certain," Sappho mumbled.

"... is the reason I will most definitely win the Golden Ceres this year."

Gabrielle stopped chewing. "What's the Golden Ceres?"

"My guest of honor is the most beautiful ..."

"... and dangerous," the poet added.

"... warrior throughout the known world: Xena, the Warrior Princess, Destroyer of Nations and the genius behind Caesar's recent embarrassment. And you all told me she was just a legend, made up by anti-Julius activists to sully his unbeatable reputation. Well, here she is in the flesh ... "

Sappho couldn't resist. "And what flesh it is ..."

Out of nowhere, half of a wooden toothpick had imbedded itself in Sappho's forearm.

"Ow!" the poet jumped, pulling at the splinter.

"Lean on your toothpick, Sappho?" Xena purred.

Vettii continued on.

"You all know how much I've admired her. She's the greatest military strategist the world has ever known. Not even Caesar organizes a battle plan with such creativity."

"Is she always so creative?" Popidius asked, leaning forward to reach for more wine and giving Gabrielle a knowing gaze.

"Well ...," the bard began but was cut off, having to move her arm quickly to avoid being impaled by the other half of Xena's toothpick.

She shot a look in her partner's direction, smirking at her for missing the target. "So, what is this Golden Ceres?" the bard asked, tossing the toothpick from her cushion with a grin.

"Xena," Lavinia interrupted the bard, "tell us how you became a warlord?" The total silence of the table caused the woman to add in her own defense, "well, it's an unusual profession for a woman."

"I'm not a warlord anymore."

"But you were," Lavinia insisted. "Vettii here says you were the BEST warlord in the world. Aren't you always saying that, Vettii? So, how did you become one?"

"There was an opening. I applied."

"Come on, Xena," Lavinia scoffed, "it couldn't have been THAT easy. I'm sure you had to fight your way to the top, right? Is that how you got that scar?" Lavinia pointed a finger at the warrior's chest.

"What?" Xena asked, looking down at her armor plate.

"That little scar, there on your right breast. How'd you get that?"

Xena found the scar in question, lifting her eyes slowly back to the merchant's friend.

"I don't think it's something I should talk about at the dinner table."

"Oh, too traumatic for you?"

"No. It's just not a very pleasant story and I wouldn't want to ruin your meal."

"It doesn't look like a big scar. There couldn't have been too much damage."

"No ... not to me." Xena fingered the scar absently, her mouth turning up in a sarcastic grin.

The expression caused Lavinia to swallow in discomfort. "I see."

"No, I don't think you'd want to. Trust me, it wasn't a pretty sight."

Gabrielle knew that twinkle in Xena's eye all too well. "That Golden Ceres sounds really interesting. Anyone want to tell me about it?"

"Then what do warlords do, once they stop their warlording that is?" Paris asked, licking the sweet juice left behind by a bit of goose from his fingers.

"You mean other than plunder and pillage?" Xena ripped off a piece of meat from a bone with her teeth and chewed. She looked at the bone and then sucked on the marrow.

"Well, no ... I don't mean it like that ..." Paris squirmed uncomfortably under the steely gaze of the Warrior Princess, who was watching him as she gnawed on pheasant bone, "I mean what is it that you do ... now? You know ... now that you're not a warlord?"

"She fights for the greater good," Gabrielle stated proudly and quickly. "Now, what about this Golden Ceres?"

"Embarrassing Caesar is definitely for the greater good!" Popidius announced to everyone.

"I rescued Vercinix." Xena's reply was cold. "I could care less what happened to Caesar."

"Oh, come now. You can't tell me you didn't enjoy seeing Julius squirm. Makes me get warm and fuzzy just thinking about it!" Popidius wiggled on his divan and popped a fig into his mouth.

"I would sure like to hear about this Golden Ceres thing right about now." Gabrielle said, feeling just a bit nauseous.

"And Crassus! Why, that was a stroke of genius switching him with Vercinix! Not one nobleman raised his voice to say a thing on that day!" Popidius continued, oblivious to the warrior's growing irritation.

"That's not saying much for the character of Roman noblemen - just standing there while an innocent man loses his head!" Sappho commented, surprised to see the bard's face go pale.

"He was NOT an innocent man," Xena retorted angrily. "He was a murderer whose time had come."

"Be that as it may," Popidius replied with glee. "You took Vercinix and let Crassus' head roll in his place. I guess he's not the first man to lose his head over you, is he, Xena?"

"Hey, a man died on that day," Gabrielle said, barely able to contain her horror or her guilt.

Xena's stomach knotted at the look on her bard's face, her eyes flared with anger as she dropped her bone.

"Xena," Phaon called out, "I hear you do some kind of warrior yell in your battles?" Her smooth voice reached Xena just in time. One split second more and the warrior would have been serving Popidius' head to Vettii for dinner.

"What?" Xena asked in a hoarse voice, surprised to find her hand automatically reaching for the hilt of her sword.

"Your trademark warrior cry?" Phaon prompted.

"My what?"

"You know," Sappho added, swishing her half-full cup back and forth like a sword, "that thing you do when you are CHOPPING PEOPLES HEADS OFF." The poet stared pointedly at Popidius and gave her cup one more swish across her neck.

Xena willed her muscles to relax. "What about it?"

"Well, where did it come from?"

"It comes from ... I'm not sure. It comes from my throat."

Sappho rolled her eyes.

"How do you do it?" Phaon pressed on, taking a look at Gabrielle, relieved to see the color returning to the bard's cheeks.

Xena seemed to really be thinking about this for a moment. "I don't know. I never thought about it. It's just something I do in the heat of the moment."

"In the heat of the moment? You mean, in the heat of battle?" Phaon asked.

Xena thought and then found herself taking a quick drink to hide an unbidden smirk behind her goblet, "Well, for the most part."

Sappho sat up in her seat. Was the warrior blushing? She looked quickly to Gabrielle. The bard was definitely blushing.

"Can you do it for us?" Phaon asked, smiling in appreciation at the lovely shade of red in the dark warrior's cheeks.

"What? Now?"

"Oh, yes. Please do." Vettii implored.

"I can't do it now. It's not the right moment."

"So, you have to be killing someone?" Lavinia asked.

"No!" Xena answered in a huff. "It's just not something I can do at the dinner table."

"Huh! Something else you can't do at the dinner table! Is there anything warriors CAN do at the dinner table?" Lavinia exclaimed in frustration.

"Usually, we like to EAT at the dinner table," Xena replied strongly. Oh, gods! The warrior's blush deepened.

Sappho howled.

"Well, in Pompeii, dinner is our favorite time of day," Popidius explained, "A time to relax, enjoy the company of friends, eat, drink and engage in witty repartee."

"Seems like a battlefield to me," commented Gabrielle, her voice somewhat choked.

"In a way it is, for those of us who are experts in wit," Popidius stated proudly. "The dinner table is MY battlefield!"

"Well, since I'm fighting on your battlefield today, maybe you'd like to meet me on mine tomorrow?" Xena offered, her eyes twinkling with devilish delight.

"Oh, no," Popidius looked away. She was joking, right? "I far prefer the dinner table to your battlefield. Warriors smell too much like sweat and leather for me."

Sappho had to reached over to pat a choking Gabrielle on the back.

"Hey! That gives me an idea." Ciro said, jumping in to the conversation, "If Xena can't get in the mood to do that warrior yell here, maybe we should stage a fight at the Palestra?"

"Yes, a re-enactment!" Paris excitedly agreed, "I can be the warlord."

"And YOU can be the army!" Ciro pointed to Vettii.

"We can dress up, I'm sure Vettii has some props."

"Yes, we can dress up as warlords and warriors!"

"And Amazons!" Lavinia added, jumping on the chariot.

"I can call Menander. He and his party can be the enemy! Xena you're on our side! And at the right moment, you can do your warrior cry!"

"We can do it after dessert! Paris can get us in."

"When word gets out, the whole city will be there!"

"Maybe we can charge admission?"

AIYAIYAIYAIYAIYAI LALALALALALALALALALALAL TIA AH AH HA!!!!!"

Three dropped goblets, two soiled togas and one inhaled olive later, Xena was sipping on her delicious sweet wine and basking in the silence.

"So, anyone care to tell me about that Golden Ceres now?" Gabrielle asked smugly, thinking perhaps she would finally get an answer.

Phaon waited until the servants were finished removing the empty platters from the table. She smiled, watching as a small tug-of-war occurred between Xena and a young servant girl over possession of a plate containing empty calm shells. The young servant girl won. It must have been the way she begged with her eyes, Phaon decided. They were the prettiest shade of green, the woman observed as she watched the servant girl scurry away with a proud smile.

The guests sat in an uncomfortable silence as two servant boys arranged silver trays filled with fruits and melons on the table. The pieces of fruit were cunningly carved to resemble birds, presented on nests of grape leaves and peacock feathers. Fresh, clean dishes were given out which completed the third course serving and the slaves retreated to the back of the room allowing the guests to continue their feast.

Phaon gracefully reached out to fill her plate. "The Golden Ceres, Gabrielle," Phaon began, smiling at the bard who was already munching on a piece of candied fig, "is a beautiful, solid gold representation of the Goddess and is a very coveted during this festival."

"Coveted? Why?" the bard asked as she shifted on her couch to better see the beautiful woman.

"It's the prize in a contest held during the Festival of Ceres between all the great houses of Pompeii."

"Why? Is there a story behind the statue?" Gabrielle's query caused Phaon to chuckle.

"Why do bards always look for the story in everything?" the beautiful woman asked with delight.

"That's a good question," Xena said, popping a piece of fruit in her mouth as she flashed a smile in the bard's direction.

"Because there always is one," Sappho said in defense of her peer. She winked at Gabrielle in friendly support.

"And poets are no different," Phaon stated.

"No, they're worse," the warrior replied, ignoring Sappho as she stuck out her tongue.

"The Golden Ceres," Phaon continued for Gabrielle's benefit, "represents the Goddess Ceres herself. Wherever she resides, the goddess is considered present and that house is especially blessed for the duration of the festival."

"Oh, Phaon," Paris butted in. "You make it sound so spiritual."

"It's not?" Gabrielle asked in all innocence. "It sounds like a beautiful tradition to me."

"Well, maybe it started that way, but it has become quite a bit more secular now," Popidius added with a chuckle.

"What it really means is whoever gets the statue gets to host the party on festival night. All the merchants have to pay a tribute of wine and food in tribute and the winner ends up with a stash large enough to last the year. This year it looks like the winner will be Vettii. Right, my friend?" Popidius raised his goblet in salute to the host.

Vettii returned the compliment with a proud smile and his own raised cup. "I don't want to count my griffins before they hatch, but I'm pretty sure we have it in the bag."

"A contest, huh?" Xena said. She took a big swig of wine and stared pointedly at Sappho. "And just what do the houses compete over to win?"

"Why, whoever has the most famous...", Popidius explained, turning to wink at the warrior, "... or infamous guests."

Xena put her goblet down on the table. "Say that again?"

"The Great Houses of Pompeii compete over who can get the most famous people to stay with them. With Sappho and Paris ... and most of all you, Xena, staying here, Vettii is sure to win this year." Phaon explained.

"Ha!" Popidius announced, with a snort. "Even if Menander got Julius Caesar himself as a guest that wouldn't beat the Warrior Princess! The Golden Ceres will certainly be yours!"

"Julius Caesar isn't going to be in Pompeii, is he?" Gabrielle asked in a sudden panic.

"Oh, no," Lavinia said with a shake of her head. "They have their own celebration at Caesar's Palace. Lots of gambling. An entirely different spectacle altogether."

"Now, let me get this straight," Xena said, leveling a steely gaze directly at Sappho, her voice taking on a velvety, dangerous tone. "Whoever gets the best piece of meat in town, gets the Golden Ceres which means enough food and wine to last a year? Is that the way it goes, Sappho?"

"Well, I wouldn't refer to an honored guests as 'a piece of meat', Xena, really..." Sappho began to stammer.

"Why, that's a very good way to put it, Xena," Popidius said, laughing.

The warrior's eyes caught the poet's even as she tried to look away.

"So, this was why you wanted me and Gabrielle to stay with you so badly? For free wine and a big party?"

"Xena! You insult me!" Sappho exclaimed. "That is NOT the reason why I wanted you here."

Xena raised her eyebrow.

"Well, not the only reason anyway." The poet blanched under the warrior's stare. "Gabrielle," she said turning to face her friend, "surely, you don't believe that the only reason I wanted you here was for the wine?"

"It would certainly look that way to me, if I were your friend," Popidius mumbled into his goblet as he took a drink.

"Shut up, Popidius!" Sappho said snappishly. "These people are my good friends. You wouldn't know a good friend if you tripped over one!" The poet sat up on her couch, pleading urgently with the bard. "Gabrielle, don't listen to them. You know better, right?"

Gabrielle looked at Xena. The warrior was very angry with the poet at the moment. Neither of them enjoyed being manipulated for such trivial reasons, but she couldn't find it in her heart to believe that free wine and a party were the only reasons Sappho desired their company.

"Of course not, Sappho. I know you had to have other reasons for wanting us here so badly."

"She just can't think of them at the moment," Popidius added, snickering.

"That's not funny," Sappho stated and glared at the man, "and it's not true!"

The bard reached out and put her hand over the poet's, "He's only teasing. I know it's not true. WE know it's not true, right Xena?" Gabrielle glanced at her partner, her look urging the warrior to agree.

"Right," Xena said flatly, putting her plate down on the table and pushing the food away. She was finished for the evening.

Vettii watched the exchange, suddenly getting worried that the warrior would decide not to stay. "Xena, please believe me. Contest or not, I am more than honored to have you stay as a guest in my home. I spoke the truth when I told you that I've followed your exploits through the years. I admire you greatly ... always have. Please don't let the silly customs of a materialistic people ruin your enjoyment of a beautiful festival. Your presence here brings honor to my house."

"And the Golden Ceres will complete his collection," Popidius commented under his breath to Lavinia. "He can put that statue right next to the big cross he says Caesar used to crucify Xena that he claims he has, right dear?"

"WHAT?!" Xena jumped up from her couch to tower over the woman, barely able to contain her outrage. Lavinia nearly fell from the divan in fear.

"Lavinia, what did you say?" Vettii yelled, standing up quickly with great concern.

"I didn't say anything!"

"She said something about a cross."

"I did not!"

"Popidius mentioned something about a cross," Sappho heard the comment, but did not understand Xena's anger. She looked to the bard, whose eyes were round with alarm.

Vettii's face went pale, "Xena don't listen to him. He is a wicked man with a vile sense of humor."

The warrior had turned to face Vettii, very angry and standing utterly still, waiting for an explanation.

Vettii gulped. His scrolls hadn't come close to adequately describing what it was like to incur Xena's wrath.

"I have no such thing in my collection, I assure you." He risked taking his eyes from Xena's livid glare, to give his friend a stern look, warning him to keep silent.

"Your 'collection'?" Xena asked in angry skepticism.

"My collection of religious and military memorabilia from around the world, Xena. It's artwork and statues. Nothing more, I assure you." Vettii answered, smiling, bringing his hands up in surrender.

Xena narrowed her eyes in distrust, first at Vettii then at Lavinia and Popidius, who were both maintaining suspiciously neutral expressions. Putting her shoulders back, she looked at Gabrielle. The bard recognized immediately that her friend was angry beyond words.

"I think I've had enough to eat. Thank you for your hospitality, Vettii. I'll see you in the morning." She gave one brisk nod to all, turned and walked up the stairs to leave the dining room.

"That's just GREAT!" Vettii yelled at his friends, plopping down onto his couch. "You've insulted her. The greatest warrior in the world is staying at my home and my friends come to dinner and insult her! She'll probably leave in the morning." Vettii looked at Gabrielle.

She was rubbing her temples with stiff fingers. Gabrielle never realized dinner could cause such a headache. She'd rather be seasick.

"He doesn't really have that cross here, does he?" Gabrielle asked with great concern.

Sappho looked sadly at her friend, "I think it was just a tasteless and VERY bad joke. Gabrielle, please believe me, I didn't mean for this to happen. I only thought you and Xena would be able to enjoy yourselves here. I looked forward to spending the week with you, really."

"All right," the bard said with a sigh, "I'll talk to her. We're stuck here in Pompeii whether we like it or not. But, if we do stay here, we can't have any more meals like this one. I enjoy my food too much."

"I'll arrange quiet dinners from now until festival night," Vettii promised sincerely. "I'll make your comfort and privacy my primary concern."

"Well, don't go overboard. I, for one, would like to take advantage and enjoy as much of Pompeii as possible. See the sights, enjoy that beautiful theater we passed on the way in..."

"I'll be happy to take care of that, Gabrielle," Paris offered, feeling terrible about the turn of events. He wanted to get to know the bard better. "I'll arrange for a row of the very best seats at our next performance this Friday evening. We're putting on our best play. You'll love it. I'll even arrange a personal tour behind the scenes, if you would like to see the theater. Would you be interested? You and Xena, that is."

"I would love it, but I'll have to ask Xena. Just don't make a big fuss or anything, and I'm sure it will all be fine. All right?"

"And what about the Golden Ceres?" Phaon asked, curious if they would still participate in the ceremony.

"I'm sure Xena would not want to interfere with any Pompeian customs. If you win this Golden Ceres thing, then you should have your party. Just don't do anything special on our account. And DON'T make a big deal about Xena being here. She'll just be another one of the guests, IF she comes to the party at all. I can't make any promises about that."

Vettii nodded, feeling very disappointed. "Perhaps she would enjoy some hunting? The woods around Vesuvius have excellent game."

"She probably would. I'll mention it, OK?"

"Very well."

"Yes, fine."

"Whatever you say."

All the guests nodded their heads in solemn agreement. Gabrielle stoop up from the divan and fixed her skirt.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I think I better go."

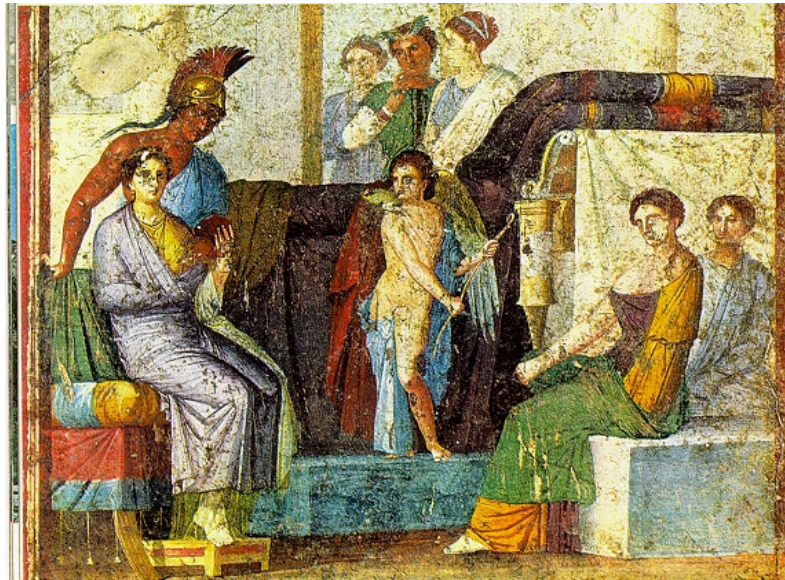
"Good luck," Sappho said as Gabrielle departed, "and thanks."

The bard turned and smiled at her friend. "Hey, that's what sidekicks are for."

She left the triclinium, heading for her partner's room, but suspecting that Xena was probably already out and looking for a room in a hotel on the other side of town.

SEVEN DAYS IN POMPEII

BY DJWP



'The Marriage of Venus and Mars'
House of M. Lucretius Fronto, Pompeii

Chapter 7

Gabrielle headed for Xena's room, halting when she came to a junction at two hallways. Her instincts told her Xena would not be in her room, but somewhere else. The bard changed direction and walking through the smaller atrium to the foyer, out of the entrance to Vettii's home and back onto the Pompeian street.

It was dark and the street was deserted. Looking first one direction and then the other, she shrugged and decided to turn right following the street to the next corner before turning right again. She had guessed correctly for she could now see, as well as smell, the entrance to Vettii's stable a short distance down the block.

Gabrielle walked at a quick pace along the quiet street, her steps echoing a lonely rhythm off the walls of the neighboring homes. It was a hot night and humid as well. The bard could hear the sounds of a happy repast coming through the candle lit window of the house across the street. The banter of a family at dinner made the bard wonder why everything always seemed so difficult for her and Xena. Why couldn't they just come to a city and enjoy a festival like the rest of the world? She stopped at the entrance to the stable and leaned on the wooden door wearily before pushing it open. By the gods, she was tired of the constant struggle.

The bard entered the stable, scratching her nose against the sudden scent of hay, straw and horses. She walked across the floor quietly, listening for a sign of her partner. Sure enough, a few stalls down, came the steady sound of brush against hide and the soft, contented whinny of a very happy mare.

Gabrielle walked quietly over to the stall and leaned against the wooden post. She didn't have to announce her presence; she knew Xena had probably heard her approaching from halfway down the street. She waited, leaning against the post with crossed arms, for the warrior to say something. But her partner merely continued to curry, so Gabrielle spoke first.

"Now, I know why you hate Romans."

The brush stopped and Xena chuckled. She turned around, smiling warmly at her friend. Gabrielle pushed away from the post and took a step forward.

"I'm sorry, Xena ..."

"What are you sorry about? It's not your fault that they're all silly, pompous, despicable, disgusting, ridiculous people who are only concerned with their own enjoyment." Xena turned back to Argo and continued brushing her mare. "Argo has more sense and sensitivity than the lot of them."

"Don't like them much, do you?"

Xena snorted, "'Bout as much as I like blood-sucking bacchae," she turned halfway to give Gabrielle a mischievous grin. "Well, that's not completely true. Not all bacchae are that bad."

"Thanks a lot." Gabrielle quipped, walking up to stand right behind her friend. "I was hoping you wouldn't hold that blood sucking thing against me."

Xena turned around, sporting a full smile. "Well, I did enjoy the bite. Didn't I ever thank you for that?"

Gabrielle grinned crookedly, "Not that I can recall. But ... you're quite welcome. It was my pleasure." Her grin transformed into a full smile. They shared a quiet laugh before Gabrielle became serious.

"I feel really bad about what happened, Xena. After all, it was my idea to stay here. And Sappho feels pretty bad about it, too. They all do, I think."

Xena lost her grin, turned back around and continued brushing Argo.

"You have nothing to feel sorry about. And Sappho ... well, I would hope that Sappho feels guilty. She should. The rest are incapable of any feelings at all."

"Can I assume you don't want to stay here anymore?"

Both Xena and Argo snorted at the same time. "You got that right."

"Would you be angry with me if I asked you to change your mind?"

Xena whirled around to face her partner, a little surprised at her request.

"You don't seriously expect me to stay here after what happened, do you?"

"Look Xena," Gabrielle said, placing a hand gently on Xena's forearm. The warrior looked down at the touch but resisted pulling away and let the bard continue. "I know you're very angry and I don't blame you, but let's think about this for a minute."

Xena shifted impatiently to one leg and raised an eyebrow, but allowed the bard to continue.

"So, they have this strange custom about some fancy statue and they used your name to win it. What difference does it make? If anything, I would think you would be a little amused that your presence as a guest in a Roman house could win out over everyone, including Julius Caesar."

Gabrielle paused, waiting for the warrior to comment. Xena merely shifted impatiently to the other leg and raised her other eyebrow. The bard was taken by surprise for a second; she never noticed that Xena could lift each eyebrow separately in exactly the same manner.

"I don't like the idea of being the winning card in anybody's game."

"I realize that," the bard agreed, nodding. "And I feel the same way. But it's not that big of a deal. It's just a Pompeian custom that means nothing to us. Besides, where else could we stay?"

"I'd rather leave the city and camp outside the walls, if you ask me."

"What? Camp in the woods, right under the nose of that huge volcano? No thank you, Xena. I don't know about you, but that thing gives me the creeps. I'd rather be inside, under a roof, where at least there's a little shelter - just in case."

"In case of what?"

"Come on, Xena. Don't tell me you don't feel the tiniest bit nervous about that thing looming over us, spouting smoke all the time?"

Xena might have answered that the bard was overreacting, that the volcano had been dormant for thousand of years, but she remained silent, losing the smirk and considering her partner's words.

Gabrielle could sense the change in mood immediately.

"We'll never find another room, not at this late date. And once we leave here, we'll have every Roman nobleman in the city trying to get us to stay with them, if only to win this silly Ceres contest. Think about it, Xena. We're better off right here. As you said before, we'll be safe and everyone will leave us alone. Besides, I'm sure after tonight, they'll be no more dinners like this one, I can promise you that."

"What about that big party, then?"

"I, personally, would like to go to that. But if you don't want to go, then we won't."

Xena dropped her eyes and played with the brush in her hand.

"There's something else, Xena." Gabrielle stated solemnly, causing the warrior to look up. "There's something going on with Sappho and I want to find out what it is."

"Whadda ya mean, there's something going on with Sappho? The woman is just looking for free wine and a big party, you know that."

"Now, you know that's not true. She was unusually quiet tonight at dinner and she hardly drank ..."

Xena grunted, having lost count herself of the number of goblets finished off by the poet.

"... Well, At least, not as much as she usually does. I really believe there's another reason why she wanted us here so badly. I want to find out what's going on. Besides, I'm kinda glad to see her." Gabrielle dropped her eyes to stare at the ground, a little surprised at herself for having revealed that particular fact.

Xena studied her friend quietly, saying nothing for several long moments.

Gabrielle waited patiently, knowing her partner was pondering over all of the possibilities, weighing the pros and cons, looking at the situation from many different strategic angles. And though Xena's conclusions usually ended up diametrically opposed to her own, Gabrielle knew the warrior always trusted her partner's instincts.

The warrior played with the curry brush for a few moments, flipping it back and forth between hands, until finally letting out a great, big sigh.

"All right," Xena agreed, with great reluctance and turned away to continue grooming the mare.

"Thank you, Xena," Gabrielle said warmly. She placed her hand on top of the warrior's to stop the moving brush. "Aren't you coming to bed?"

Xena looked at the bard for a moment in silence.

"Later."

The brush continued its path along the mare's hindquarter. Gabrielle stepped back. A good amazon knows when it's time to retreat. She turned to leave the stall, only to be stopped by the warrior's soft voice.

"Gabrielle?"

"Yeah?" The bard turned back around.

"Don't let me stop you from having a good time. If we have to stay here, I want you to at least enjoy yourself."

"The same goes for you, you know. There's nothing written that says the Warrior Princess can't enjoy herself now and again."

"You sound like Sappho," Xena mumbled, turning away.

"In this instance, I think Sappho has a point. We both need a little rest and relaxation. The gods know, I really do. Will you at least try? For me?"

"Sure. There must be something in this city I can do to keep my mind off of putting the pinch on half the population."

Gabrielle chuckled and then remembered something Vettii told her. "Vettii says the hunting is great around here. Lots of game up on the mountain slope. We can get out of the city for a day and see what the hunting is like in these parts. That sounds like fun, right?"

Xena stopped brushing.

"Gabrielle. You hate to hunt."

"I know. But I wouldn't mind doing it if it's something you would like to do."

Xena gave the bard's shoulder a squeeze and returned to the horse.

"I appreciate that, Gabrielle. Why don't you go get some sleep. We'll talk about what we'd like to do in the morning, all right?"

"Sure." Gabrielle said, grinning at Xena's back as she resumed grooming her horse.

"Good night, Xena," the bard said softly.

"Good night."

"Good night, Argo."

"pffrrgghh."

Gabrielle left the stall, leaving the warrior and the horse alone in the musty quiet. Argo stamped her foot and let out a condescending snort.

"Yeah. You're right, Argo. I'm a real push-over, aren't I?"

The horse turned her head and nibbled at the warrior's hair.

"Hey! I told you, no munching on my hair." Xena gently swatted and then scratched the wet nose affectionately, before pushing the horse away.

"All right. All right. So it's a nice stall and you'd rather stay here, too. I guess I'm outnumbered. A good warrior knows when to surrender."

Xena chuckled and patted her mare, then continued the gentle grooming. She thought about Gabrielle's suggestion to investigate the lush, green slopes of Mount Vesuvius. It wasn't a half-bad idea, but it was not, however, the local game which had piqued her interest.

No sooner had Gabrielle returned to her room and laid her weary body onto the very comfortable bed then came a soft knock upon the wooden door. The bard lifted her head up from the pillow and stared at it in surprise.

The soft knock came again and Gabrielle rose quickly from the bed, hoping Xena had followed her up after all. She opened the door a crack to peek outside.

"Xena?"

The poet shrugged her shoulders and smiled shyly. "Nope, sorry. Just me."

Gabrielle grinned and opened the door widely, welcoming her friend inside. "That's OK, Sappho. I'm glad it's you. Come on in here."

Sappho walked into room, inspecting the barren décor of the small chamber as she waited patiently for the door to close.

"Just like mine. One step up from a prison cell."

"I guess the Pompeians don't spend much time in their bedrooms."

"One would think just the opposite, judging from the size of their artwork." Sappho smiled, her smirk disappearing as she watched only the tiniest flicker of a grin pass across the bard's face.

The poet grabbed one of Gabrielle's hands as she turned around.

"Gabrielle, please tell me you forgive me for what happened tonight."

"What happened tonight? Sappho, that dinner was no big deal. Xena and I have been through a lot worse lately, believe me. Don't worry about it."

"Don't worry? Don't worry? You think I want you and Xena to believe I'm happy to see you only because it means free wine? You know that's not true, right?"

"We know," Gabrielle grinned. "But that doesn't stop Xena from suspecting you had some ulterior motive for wanting us here."

Sappho did not respond, but found some spot on the floor to inspect instead.

Gabrielle studied her carefully. "I thought so. There is something going on with you, Sappho, isn't there? You want to tell me about it?"

Sappho pursed her lips and then pulled the bard over to the bed. She sat down on the mattress and patted next to her for the bard to do the same.

"I have to admit," Sappho began after Gabrielle was seated, "that I was really looking forward to Vettii's reaction when I brought Xena to his house. I mean, he's so obsessed with her - I couldn't wait to see his face, when she walked in. She does make quite an impression in person."

"Yes, she does. But she doesn't appreciate being used as the butt of someone's joke."

Sappho blushed, looking guiltily at her hands. "I know. Please apologize to her for me, will you?"

"Why don't you apologize to her yourself?" Gabrielle asked matter-of-factly.

"You're right, of course," the poet nodded solemnly. "I will. As soon as she gets back. Do you think she'll be mad that I'm here in the room with you?"

Gabrielle shrugged. "Why would she be mad about that? But if you came here to apologize to her tonight, you'll have to go find her. She's probably still down in the stable."

"In the stable?" Sappho asked, surprised. "What's she doing there?"

"Taking care of Argo."

"She's not gonna stay there all night, is she?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Gabrielle," Sappho said, touching the bard's arm. "What's going on with you two?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, the last time I saw you, you guys were lip-locked and looking like you were going to float away happily ever after."

"Sappho," Gabrielle said, crossing her arms. "The last time you saw us, you were the one floating away ... on a boat. WE were waving good-bye to you from a dock."

Sappho smiled, realizing she had been caught. "I have friends in high places."

The bard chuckled, shaking her head. "Spying on us, eh? Is nothing sacred?"

"Not where the gods are concerned."

They shared a smile, both recalling the beautiful moment, and then Sappho watched as the sadness returned to the bard's face.

"It's been a very hard year," Gabrielle whispered.

"I can see that. You wanna talk about it?"

"Not really."

Sappho took the bard's hand in one of her own. "Look, Gabrielle, you don't have to tell me the details of what happened to you, not if you don't want to. Why don't you just tell me what's bothering you now? Sometimes it helps to talk things over with somebody else. Get a different perspective on things."

Gabrielle studied Sappho's face intently for a moment. "It's late and you're probably tired."

"It's never late and I'm never tired. We have all night. Especially if you don't think Xena will be coming to your room tonight."

Gabrielle cast her eyes downward. "No, I don't think she will."

"Why not?"

"It's just ... it's just that ...," the bard's eyes wandered around the room as if she could find the right words to explain written on the walls.

"A lot has happened to us over this past year to come between ... that."

"I didn't think anything could come between you two," Sappho commented, watching as Gabrielle shrugged yet again.

"Yes, well things change. People change."

"Gabrielle, are you not in love with Xena anymore?"

"Oh, no. I love Xena, that's not the question."

"Then what's the problem?"

Gabrielle's eyes traveled across the poet's face, wondering if she could possibly understand. "The problem is I don't think I love myself very much. At least, not at the moment."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I don't know who I am anymore. So much has happened to me over the years since I've met Xena. I've changed so much. I don't know if I like who I've become."

"And if YOU don't like who you are, how can Xena still love you?"

There was that shrug again. "I know that Xena still loves me. I just don't think she loves me ... like that ... anymore."

Sappho stood up from the bed and walked to stare out of the window.

"You know what I think, Gabrielle?" the poet said, turning around to lean against the window sill. "I think that you are no longer the innocent, naïve young girl from Poteidaia that I first met."

"I should hope not, Sappho. I've been through a lot. And I've grown up."

"You most certainly have," Sappho agreed, nodding slowly. "And you think it's that sweet, innocent girl that Xena wants and needs, don't you? Not the grown woman you've become?"

"I'm not sure," Gabrielle answered, in a small voice. She looked at Sappho, her questioning eyes lighting with that tiny bit of innocence she imagined long gone.

Sappho smiled broadly, recognizing the bard she used to know.

"Would you like to find out?" The poet asked, flashing a most wicked grin.

"Yes. I would," the bard answered firmly.

"Then, I'll make you a deal," the poet said pushing away from the window sill and standing before her friend. "You help me and I'll help you."

Gabrielle's head cocked to one side.

"You were right, Gabrielle. There WAS a reason why I was so happy to see you here in Pompeii. I need your help."

The bard's eyebrows lifted in surprise.

Sappho, the Tenth Muse, known the world over for her romantic sonnets hung her head in shame.

"I think I've fallen in love ... and I don't know what to do."

SEVEN DAYS IN POMPEII

BY DJWP



Ancient Pompeian terra cotta toilet

(putting to rest, once and for all, the fanfic cliché that Xena and Gabrielle used buckets)

Chapter 8

Gabrielle woke up in exactly the same position she had fallen asleep: sprawled across the bed, fully clothed, with her boots half unlaced, but still on.

She couldn't believe how late she and Sappho had stayed up talking. In fact, the bard was almost certain she had seen the first scattered rays of the morning sun slipping in through the window by the time the poet left Gabrielle's room to head for her own.

The bard rolled off the bed and looked out of the window. It was still early. Then why was she awake? Something must have disturbed her slumber - or someone. Taking a few quick steps to the door, she noticed it slightly ajar.

Hades-be-damned! Xena must have stopped in to check on her, saw her sprawled across the bed exhausted and left her to sleep. Now she would be gone who knows where for most of the day. And they were suppose to go hunting together!

Pacing the floor and fretting over the many possible moods that could have befallen her partner, Gabrielle finally gave in to the morning call of mother nature. She glanced around the room for the chamber pot, surprised not to

find one present. The call becoming more urgent with every passing second, the bard scurried out of the room looking for emergency assistance.

She found it in the form of a young, petite servant tending the plants in Vettii's garden.

"Excuse me," Gabrielle said, noticing that the servant was the same girl who had won the tug-of-war over the clam shells with Xena. She smiled at the bright face that greeted her.

"Yes, mistress!" the slave dropped her spade, rose. Then, remembering her place, dropped quickly in a bow back to the ground.

Gabrielle lifted the girl up by the shoulders, shifting urgently from foot to foot.

"Please, none of that now. This is an emergency."

"What's wrong, mistress?"

"Can you tell me where a ... um ... you know ... a ..."

The young servant watched the interesting dance trying to hide her amusement.

"Is there something you need?"

Gabrielle could stand it no more. "A chamber pot! I need a chamber pot!"

"A chamber pot?" the slave repeated, thinking she was losing something in the translation. She watched the bard dance a bit more, and then the candle lit over her head. "Oh! A chamber pot! This way mistress, follow me."

"Wherever we're going, we better get there quickly."

Gabrielle followed the girl to a portion of the house she had not yet visited, pushing the girl along in haste all the while. They passed by a large room whose smell Gabrielle instantly recognized as the kitchen. Taking a peek in as they shuffled by, the bard could see servants bent over various tables busily preparing the morning meal. The bard became so distracted, she nearly bumped into the servant girl when she stopped.

"Here you are mistress. I think this is what you need." The young woman smiled as she opened a door.

"Thank you!" Gabrielle disappeared into the room, leaving a chuckling servant to return to her duties.

The bard stopped short as the door closed behind her. She was in a very small cubicle and in the center was a simple white porcelain bowl partially filled by a whirlpool of water swirling in the middle, like a mini charybdis.

She studied the smooth bowl thoughtfully, considering the beautifully carved seat and grasping its usage immediately.

Dropping her britches, she sat on the bowl and instantly jumped back up.

"Yow! That's cold!"

She managed to ease herself back onto the seat and relieve her emergency, then stood to watch the water swirl as it carried the bardi-poop away.

"I wonder what they call this?"

She left the cubicle, ticking off a list of possibilities as she walked back in the direction of her room.

"Water closet? Water chair? Water bowl? Piss bowl? No, too crude. Porcelain bowl ... porcelain throne ... porcelain altar ... god ... porcelain god. Hm. I like that. Better yet, porcelain goddess."

"Gabrielle! What are you doing?" Sappho grabbed the distracted bard and pulled her into her bed chamber.

"Sappho, have you visited that thing down near the kitchen? I've never seen anything like it, not even in Athens."

The poet looked at her blankly, not comprehending for a moment. "Oh! You mean the latrine. Yeah, pretty nifty that running water. Seat's colder than Hera's tit in a brass bra, though." The poet commented, rubbing her butt.

"Latrine? That's what they call it? Latrine. Not very creative, if you ask me."

The poet snorted out a laugh. "What do you think they should do? Name it after someone ... like John?"

Sappho did not give Gabrielle a chance to respond.

"Come on, Gabrielle," the poet grabbed the bard's hand. "We have things to do, places to go. Let the shit take care of it itself."

With a tug, she pulled the bard out of the room.

SEVEN DAYS IN POMPEII

BY DJWP



Via Dell'Abbondanza

Chapter 9

Gabrielle followed Sappho as she hurried down the street to the Via Stabia. Long, wild hair bouncing with every step, the poet was traveling as fast her legs could carry her without breaking into a run. The bard was barely able to keep up.

"Sappho, for Gaia's sake! Where's the fire?" The bard caught up to the poet, grabbing her arm to slow her down. "Where are we going?"

Sappho only picked up the pace. "We have to get to the Macellum right away. I don't want to miss her."

"What's the Macellum?"

"That big market area where I met you yesterday. Well, the official Macellum is really down closer to the Forum, but the stores have spread up along Via Dell'Abbondanza so that area is included in the Macellum as well."

"Why are we going there?"

"We're going to the Tavern of the Four Gods. Phaon be there for the noon meal. She always is." The poet smiled broadly at her friend and pulled at her hand so they would move along faster.

Gabrielle stopped short.

"Just ... just hold your centaurs hooves a moment, Sappho," Gabrielle said, bringing a hand to her chest while trying to catch her breath. "You rushed me out of that house so fast, I didn't have time to get my staff or scroll bag! I don't have a dinar in my pocket and I have no idea where Xena is!"

"So?" Sappho grabbed and pulled again, but the bard refused to budge. "Gabrielle, you won't need your staff. I have all the dinars we need. And don't worry about Xena - she can take care of herself."

"I know that," Gabrielle answered, "but she'll have no idea where I went."

Sappho smiled sympathetically, "You think she'll be mad that you just up and left her alone for the day?"

Gabrielle nodded. "That and she won't be able to find me ... if she looks for me."

The poet's smile widened. "Don't you worry 'bout a thing, my dear. I took care of that."

Gabrielle wrinkled her brows in question.

"I left a trail for the warrior princess to follow," Sappho revealed.

Gabrielle crossed her arms. "You left her a note? What did it say?"

"I didn't say I left her a note. I just said I left her a trail." The poet wrapped an arm around the bard's shoulders and eased her into a walk.

"And don't you worry ... she'll follow it all right." Sappho laughed heartily at the expression on her bardic friend's face as they turned the corner of the Via Dell'Abbondanza. They disappeared amongst the throng of bustling shoppers.

Gabrielle found herself strolling once again along the busy street of the Pompeian market district. She smiled, enjoying the cool sea breeze that was ruffling her hair and bringing the scent of freshly baked bread to her nose. Her eyes took in the bright colors of the painted facades and the varied jumble of balconies, loggias and roofs projecting over the street.

She could hear the voices of a group of men sitting around a table on one of those balconies as they argued over a move in some game. Passing underneath, she smiled as she looked up, catching one of the men throwing down his hat in frustration.

The distraction of looking up almost caused the bard to trip over the legs of a man sitting against a wall. His clothes were tattered and one hand was held out, palm up, while the other absently petted the furry neck of a panting dog.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" the bard exclaimed as the man pulled his legs out of the way. The dog stopped its panting and took a sniff.

"Don't be. It's not often that a beautiful woman falls for me." The man winked and then smiled a toothless grin.

The bard grinned at the compliment. "I hope I didn't hurt you."

"Not at all. But Ceres here could use a denarius, if you got one to spare," the man said, patting his furry companion on the head.

Gabrielle reached for her pouch, but then realized she had left it at home. She was about to apologize when Sappho nudged her in the side, handing over a coin. The bard took it with a grin and passed it down to the beggar. His dog gave the bard's hand a sniff and then a quick lick as she placed the coin in the outstretched palm.

"She likes you. And she thanks you for the both of us."

"You're welcome," the bard replied, smiling at the pooch and giving her a scratch behind the ear.

"Come on, Gabrielle," the poet said, giving the bard's arm a tug, "we've got to get going."

"Eat well," Gabrielle said, gracing the beggar with one last smile before moving off to follow the poet.

"The gods smile on kindness!" the beggar called after the bard. He showed the silver denarius to his dog, hugging its neck in excitement. "Look, Ceres! Silver, not bronze. We'll both eat well tonight!" The dog licked her companion's cheek, wagging her tail happily as they both watched the bard stroll away.

They walked under the shadow of a balcony, sticking to the left side of the street until they came to an arched doorway. Gabrielle glanced up before entering, noticing the flowery lettering spelling out "Tavern of the Four Gods" painted over the archway. Beautiful depictions of Apollo-Sun, Jupiter, Mercury, and Diana-Moon bordered the name on all sides. Outlining the left of the door, top to bottom, was Venus Pompeiana with Cupid; to the right, a sacred procession of nymphs leading a litter bearing a bearded Bacchus.

Sappho saw the bard eyeing the artwork and smiled. "The Pompeians love to decorate their walls. Not a space goes unfilled." The poet pointed to a little corner just under Cupid's bow.

No more question of it - Romula, my wife, met here with her lover

Gabrielle laughed at the scratched words, her mind quickly imaging a story based on that one sentence alone.

"This is a favorite place for lovers to meet, Gabrielle," the poet explained, "and the preferred tavern for all the artists of Pompeii. You're going to love it here." Sappho bade the bard to enter. "And they're going to love you!"

They entered the Tavern of the Four Gods, pausing momentarily to allow their eyes to adjust to the change in light.

It was a large tavern, stretching out and back into a labyrinth of cubby holes and tables hidden in archways and behind columns. It smelled of the warm, sweet wine popular throughout Pompeii and was appropriately dim, lit mostly by candles flickering within silver holders at the center of each table. All but the tables closest to the entrance were occupied. There was a cluster of customers in the back of the room, filling tables that bordered a very small stage.

A poetry reading was in progress. Gabrielle smiled, recognizing the familiar meter of Greece's greatest living poet, The Tenth Muse. She gave Sappho a proud smile, but the poet merely shrugged.

Sappho scanned the room, grasping at the bard's shoulder with a sudden intake of breath.

"There she is!" the poet whispered, pulling Gabrielle over to the side of the room and hiding them behind a pillar.

"Where?"

"There, see?" Sappho pointed to a table for two, partially hidden within an archway toward the right of the stage. "At that table under the arch."

Gabrielle squinted into the dim light, her eyes finding the target. There Phaon sat, sublimely elegant in a turquoise silk toga trimmed with golden lace. Her long, black hair was loose and fell over the back of her chair, almost to the floor. She was smiling, her face shining as she related what was obviously a very interesting story to her escort, who was no doubt a very rich man. His robes betrayed an excess of wealth; his bearing that of a man of high station. And though many a woman was glancing in his direction, he only had eyes for the one at his table.

Gabrielle couldn't blame her escort; Phaon was quite simply breathtaking.

"He is more than a hero," Sappho whispered, catching the bard's attention. "He is a god in my eyes."

"What?" Gabrielle asked in a hushed tone, the poet's comment taking her by surprise.

"The man who is allowed to sit beside her," the poet continued, not really talking to Gabrielle at all. "He who listens intimately to the sweet murmur of her voice, the enticing laughter that makes my own heart beat fast."

Gabrielle grinned, listening quietly to the poet as she whispered an impromptu sonnet with a faraway look in her eyes.

"If I meet her suddenly, I can't speak - my tongue is broken; a thin flame runs under my skin; I see nothing, hear only my own ears drumming. I drip with sweat, a trembling shakes my body and I turn paler than dry grass. At such times, death isn't far from me ..."

Sappho's voice faded away as the sound of Phaon's laughter, joined by that of her companion, lifted above the ambient noise of the crowded room.

Gabrielle placed her hand gently on the poet's shoulder, bringing her out of the spell. Sappho smiled sheepishly, a blush rising up from her neck to color her cheeks.

"That's the second time I've seen you blush," Gabrielle observed with a grin. "It becomes you."

The red tint deepened as Sappho studied the floor.

"She is beautiful, Sappho," Gabrielle said, giving her friend's shoulder a squeeze.

"Too beautiful," the poet commented, leaning back against the wall and scraping the floor with her sandal. "Much too beautiful to be interested in me."

Gabrielle rested against the wall next to her, "Now, what makes you say such a thing?"

"Look at her!" Sappho flicked her arm in the table's direction. "She's the most beautiful woman in all of Pompeii. Everyday, she's here for the noon meal and every day she has a different man as her escort. Each one more handsome and richer than the next."

"Sappho," the bard said, forcing the poet's gray eyes to meet her own. "Why her?"

"Because she's a wonderful person!" Sappho answered, her eyes lighting up. "She's educated and articulate, compassionate. She has a great sense of humor and you should see her dance! She can sing, too."

"Then I gather you've done more than just worship her from afar?"

The poet became embarrassed again and Gabrielle watched as Sappho's eyes drifted back toward the floor. "Well, we've spent quite a bit of time together since I've been here."

"Really? Doing what?" Gabrielle poked her friend in the ribs.

"Nothing like that, Gabrielle," Sappho countered with a poke of her own. "Don't I wish. No, we've had noon meal, dinner, gone to parties, taken walks in the evening. Seen a few plays. Stuff like that. Whenever she has a spare moment, she lets me know and we manage to ... you know ... meet."

"That sounds very encouraging to me," Gabrielle commented with a grin.

The poet shrugged, "Yeah, well it's all been very platonic so far." She glanced over at Phaon with a wistful expression. "I just don't know if she's interested in me in any way other than as a friend."

Gabrielle bit her bottom lip to keep from chuckling. "Sounds familiar," she mumbled.

But Sappho heard the comment and turned to face the bard. "That's why I thought you could help me. I figured you could watch us together, see how she acts. Maybe you'll be able to see what I can't. Sometimes you need someone from the outside to see the truth within."

Gabrielle nodded her agreement, studying the poet's face and noting the serious expression, the heart-wrenching concern in her eyes. No one knew more than Gabrielle how blind a person could be to her own situation. But the truth sometimes hurt, and she would hate to see the sensitive poet hurt once again by love.

"Sappho, what if I don't see what you're hoping for? What if all I see is a deep respect and friendship on her part for the world's greatest poet?"

"That's what I need to find out, Gabrielle. If that's what you see, then I want to know it. Don't spare the truth to save my feelings."

Greece's greatest poet placed her hands on the bard's shoulder, giving her friend the benefit of her patented smile.

"Of all the people in the known world, Gabrielle, I trust you most of all." She gave the bard's shoulders a squeeze. "I know you'll see the truth."

"Thank you," Gabrielle smiled back at her friend, "for trusting me."

They turned together to sneak another peek at the object of Sappho's desire just as the beautiful woman's eyes wandered over, recognizing their presence in the corner.

"Sappho!" Phaon called out with a wave and a smile, causing the entire tavern to react to the name.

The poet feigned surprise and waved back, speaking to Gabrielle through a wide smile. "Oops! Caught in the act."

"Liar. You know you wanted her to see you," Gabrielle observed hiding behind a wide smile of her own.

The poet spared the bard a quick look before they headed off toward the beckoning couple.

"Don't get carried away, bardie."

They worked their way through a maze of crowded tables, as the name of Sappho passed from patron to patron, floating through the room amid mumbled cries of recognition.

Sappho and Gabrielle joined Phaon and her escort at their table. It didn't take long for the party to grow from there. As usual, Sappho managed to attract a variety of artists and friends from all walks of Pompeian life, each anxious to share a drink with the most famous Greek artist of all.

Gabrielle sat at Sappho's side, sipping on sweet wine, thoroughly enjoying the lively conversation and laughter that was filling the room all around them. The banter was lighthearted. Jokes and gossip mixed with discussion of politics, art, and the latest in Pompeian fashion, which seemed to be leaning toward a shorter, more revealing, toga. Or so an adorable woman named Osiri claimed, standing to present her own designer frock which barely managed to cover her secrets. The table howled in appreciation.

This is what the bard craved - this interaction of artists in a congenial atmosphere. Friends sitting around a table, sharing wine and the latest gossip, trading stories and discussing plays. She watched Sappho, who was obviously in her element. Her wide smile and bright grey eyes sparkled silver with pleasure as she commented on an up-and-coming poet, always providing compliment and praise, never condescending or jealous towards another's accomplishments.

The bard was enjoying a particularly fascinating debate Sappho was having with Phaon regarding a recent play by Aristophanes when they were joined by Paris at their table. The famous Pompeian mime pulled up a chair next to Gabrielle and quickly cut in on the conversation. Gabrielle was impressed. Both Phaon and Paris were well-versed in Greek classics and had a lot to say on the subject. The bard hadn't listened to such a lively discussion in ages.

Gabrielle sat back contentedly in her chair, drinking her wine and watching the interaction between Sappho and Phaon. The poet was so animated when she spoke, it was hard not to smile just watching her. Her eyes flashed when she disagreed. Her hands danced as she made a point. She threw her head back when she laughed.

Gabrielle chuckled as she drank her wine, turning her attention to Phaon. The woman beamed at Sappho, laughing in agreement at a point well made, tapping the table to make one of her own. There was no doubt that they were enjoying one another's company immensely.

The bard peeked at Phaon's escort, who had been introduced as Ceilus Secundus, a nobleman high in the ranks of the Roman Senate. Though he did not participate in the conversation, he did not

seem to mind Phaon's attention toward Sappho. The man simply sat and drank from his goblet, apparently content to simply be surrounded by the artists of Pompeii.

Gabrielle missed this. Not that she ever had this in Poteidaia, but she missed the idea of just sitting and enjoying an afternoon. It seemed as though she and Xena had not done this in ... the bard thought back through the last few years. Had they ever done this at all? Gabrielle could not think of a time when she and her dearest friend had just sat at a table enjoying an afternoon amongst good friends. The bard was not afraid to admit that she needed to socialize every once in awhile.

And so did Xena. Gabrielle suddenly found herself missing the warrior's presence, wishing Xena were by her side so she could be enjoying the day with her. It might have erased the awful tension of last night's dinner and showed the better and brighter side of Pompeii.

"A ruby for your thoughts," Paris whispered, interrupting the bard's musing.

"Oh!" The comment startled the bard and she smiled at the mime. "I was just enjoying the conversation. And the wine." She lifted her cup in a quick toast and took a sip.

Paris returned the toast. "We do this every day in Pompeii. It's an artist's paradise, second only to Sappho's school!" the mime said loudly, gathering the attention of everyone at the table.

Gabrielle grabbed the poet's arm. "Your school? You started the school we talked about?"

"Started! It's more than just 'started'!" Paris scoffed. "Why it's the best school in the mortal realm. I hear even the gods are lining up to get in!"

The bard was enthralled. "Why Sappho, that's wonderful!"

The poet smirked, "I wouldn't let the gods in, even if they did apply. It is doing well. Thanks to you, Gabrielle."

"Gabrielle had something to do with your school?" Phaon asked.

"It was her idea!" the poet announced, slapping the bard proudly on the back.

"Gabrielle, how impressive!" the beautiful woman commented, sitting back in her chair.

The bard waved her hand in dismissal. "It was just an idea. Sappho was the one who had to make it a reality."

"Whadda ya mean, JUST an idea. It was a great idea," Sappho said, poking her ribs with an elbow. "In fact, it's such a good idea that I'm thinking of expanding. Maybe start extension courses. You know, degree by courier. Or open another school in Athens. Give that Academy of Bards some competition."

"Women only, Sappho?" asked a young lady from the other side of the table.

The poet shrugged. "Maybe I'll let some men into that one. Maybe. IF there are any GOOD male poets out there who apply."

"How will you run a school in both Lesbos and in Athens?"

"I'll just have to find someone else to run the place." Sappho lifted her cup to her lips and took a nice, long sip.

"Maybe Gabrielle here could run it for you?" Paris said, patting the bard's shoulder.

Sappho looked at the bard from over the lip of her cup as she drank, raising an eyebrow.

Gabrielle looked at her hands. This was the crux of her problem, wasn't it? Did she want a life with Xena or one as an artist? An opportunity for a different destiny was being thrown in her lap. Was she willing to let it pass her by?

She just wasn't ready to let go ... of the chance for either.

So she shrugged, making her voice as noncommittal as possible. "Maybe."

The poet studied her friend's face closely. "Gabrielle, are you really interested in running a school?"

The bard merely shrugged again.

"I think it's a great idea!" Phaon commented with a grin.

Paris nodded in agreement, "Might even enroll myself, if Gabrielle's going to be running it!"

The bard purposely avoided Sappho's penetrating stare, choosing to change the subject. She looked over to the empty stage instead.

"Are there going to be any more readings?"

Phaon reached across the table to give Sappho's hand a squeeze. "Will you sing for us?" she asked softly. Her eyes were shining at the poet in the dim candlelight.

Sappho gulped. How could she refuse such a request? She took a moment before responding, enjoying the contact of Phaon's skin upon her own, eyes memorizing the delicate curves of Phaon's face as they stared at each other grinning. If her skin got any hotter, the poet imagined she was going to burst into flames and burn down the tavern.

Get on the stage? Not a chance, thought Sappho, as she smiled at Phaon demurely. I'd much rather stay right where I am.

"I have a better idea," the poet announced, reluctantly taking her eyes and hand away from the beautiful woman.

The group held its collective breath.

"Let's hear Gabrielle tell a tale of Xena the Warrior Princess."

Four stories and two encores later, Gabrielle finally stepped from the stage shaking her head, refusing to tell yet another tale. Her throat was dry and she was getting light-headed from all the wine she had consumed while trying to keep her voice. The crowd was still applauding as she walked back to her companions.

"Truly marvelous!" Paris exclaimed. He was standing and still clapping as the bard returned to her seat. "And here I thought Xena was just a power-hungry warlord. You make her sound like a hero ... like Hercules."

"She is," Sappho replied quickly. "I happen to know that for a fact. I've seen Xena in action for myself."

"She seems like a beautiful and sensitive woman to me," Phaon commented, causing the Gabrielle's head to snap around in surprise.

"She is," the poet replied, answering for the bard. "I've seen that for myself as well, although not many people have. Right, Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle was about to respond when Paris interrupted.

"Well, Xena scared the saron off of me last night! I thought Popidius was going to lose his head!" the actor said, chuckling.

"Popidius wasn't the only one about to lose his head," Sappho mumbled and leveled a knowing gaze at the mime. Phaon, laughed heartily. She had caught more than one lustful stare thrown in the bard's direction at dinner ... from both Xena and Paris.

The entire conversation was making Gabrielle very melancholy. She half listened as they continued, barely registering when the focus shifted to another topic. Turning around in her chair, she scanned the faces of the crowd still hovering around the stage looking for the one face she had thought she spied earlier.

Gabrielle had told the patrons some of her favorite adventures and the crowd had responded like a bard's dream. She could feel when their emotions changed along with the tone of her voice, could anticipate their reactions and pace her phrases accordingly. A hand movement, and their eyes followed. If she smiled, they smiled.

Gabrielle could tell that their hearts were racing with every battle scene; she heard them gasp at each plunge of a sword. And for every tender moment, there was an equally tender collective sigh.

She had become an expert in her craft. Gabrielle could recognize and admit to that now. Gone were her insecurities and she no longer worried or felt frightened whenever she stepped upon a stage.

Most of all, Gabrielle loved being a bard. Was this what she was meant to do with her life? Was this her dream, her heart's desire? And if so, then why did her eyes search the room, even as she was fulfilling that dream? Why had she imagined catching a glimpse of shining blue eyes watching her with pride as she stood on stage performing her craft?

She craned her neck to search the crowded room. What was the sense of fulfilling a dream if the one person she wanted to share it with was not present?

"Am I who I am or am I who you made me?" Gabrielle whispered to herself, still wondering about the answer to that question.

"You are who you want to be," Sappho responded, having heard the whisper and replying in return.

"We have to be going," Ceilus said in an apologetic voice, rising from his chair. He extended his hand to Phaon and eased her up from her seat. The woman nodded briefly at Sappho as she followed her escort from the table and out of the tavern.

The poet watched as Paon was led away until Sappho could no longer see the pair. She turned to Gabrielle with an exasperated look.

"It's the same thing every day," the poet said with a sigh.

"What do you mean?"

"She comes every day, stays a few hours and then leaves."

"Well," Gabrielle said with a shrug, "it's only polite to leave with the person you came with."

"True. But why someone different each day?"

"She has a lot of friends?"

"Do you think he's just a friend?" She turned in her chair to watch them leave. "I wonder who he is to her and where she is going?"

"Why not ask her?" Gabrielle commented, taking the opportunity to search among the crowd one more time for her own friend.

Sappho slapped her hand down onto Gabrielle's forearm. "I have a better idea!" she announced, her smile widening across her face in a way that could only mean trouble.

Gabrielle narrowed her eyes, recognizing that expression all too well.

"Let's follow them!" the poet gleefully whispered, shaking Gabrielle's arm in excitement.

"Sappho!" Gabrielle pulled her arm away. "Do you want her to catch you following them? Like a lovesick ..."

"... Poet?" Sappho chuckled. "They won't catch us at it. I bet you're real good at tracking, right?"

"Well, yeah ... I am, if I do say so myself," Gabrielle admitted, humbly.

"Come on!" Sappho popped up from her chair, tugging Gabrielle up by the arm.

Paris turned away from his conversation in surprise. "Hey! Where're you going?"

"See ya later!" the poet said, pulling Gabrielle along, away from the disappointed actor and out of the Taverna of the Four Gods.

Paris watched as they departed, thinking of following. The mime shrugged to himself. There was no rush. There was still plenty of time left to woo Gabrielle of Poteidaia. By Saturday night, the night of the Golden Ceres, the goddess would pair them for the ritual. He was certain of it. It was, after all, only natural.

Sappho pulled Gabrielle out of the tavern and hurried into the street. She looked first right and then left, until she spied the distinctive long, black hair of her quarry disappearing in the direction of the Forum.

"There she is!" The poet grabbed Gabrielle's hand and started off in the same direction.

"Wait a minute!" Gabrielle stopped short, pulling the poet back abruptly.

"Come on, Gabrielle! We'll lose them!"

"Just wait one minute!" The bard was looking across the street and Sappho followed her gaze until her eyes rested on a young boy playing with stones under the shade of an awning. "Wait here one second," Gabrielle said and then trotted across the road.

The boy had been watching Gabrielle discreetly, looking quickly back down at his stones when the bard's eyes turned in his direction. He pretended not to notice her.

"Hey!" Gabrielle said. The boy looked up, faking surprise.

She smiled down at the lad. "Remember me?"

"Sure," the boy replied. "You're the girl with hair the color of the sun."

The bard touched her hair and grinned. "Hmm. Thank you. What's your name?"

"Alessandro," the boy answered.

"Nice to meet you, Alessandro. My name is Gabrielle and I have a proposition for you. How would you like to make some coin?"

The boy sat up, raising his eyebrows in surprise. A stone dropped from his hand. "Er ... yeah ... sure. Um, what denomination?"

Gabrielle tilted her head, "What? Oh. Two denarius. Silver."

The boy nodded. "Whadda I have to do? No. Let me guess. You want me to follow someone?"

Smart kid. Gabrielle nodded. "Yup. You remember the warrior who paid you to follow me yesterday?"

The boy crossed his arms. "You mean the one with eyes the color of the sky?"

Gabrielle smiled. *Very smart kid.* "That's the one. She should be coming here. When she leaves, I want you to follow her. See where she goes. I'll meet you back here in one hour. Deal?"

The boy held out his palm. "Pay first."

"Pay later."

"Pay now. I meet you later."

Gabrielle held out her hand, knowing that Sappho was now standing just behind her, listening to the conversation. The poet slapped one silver denarius into the bard's palm. Gabrielle flipped it to the boy.

"One now. The other later."

The boy caught it with a snap of his hand, inspecting the coin closely. He squinted up at the bard and nodded in agreement.

"Alessandro, you better be back here in one hour," Gabrielle said, pointing her finger in warning.

"Don't worry. I'll be here. No problem."

Sappho tapped Gabrielle on the shoulder. "Come on or we'll lose them!"

Together they took off in the direction of the Forum, leaving the boy to watch their retreating backs as they hurried down the street.

The lad looked at the money and sighed. At this rate, he was going to have to buy a bigger belt pouch.

Xena's howling laughter broke the silence of the dark night, causing Argo to jump, lift her head and stare at the warrior in surprise.

She laughed, head thrown back against the driftwood log, until she was forced to calm herself if she wanted to be able to breathe.

"Why that little scamp!" the warrior princess said, putting the scroll to the side and wiping a tear from her eye.

She turned to Argo. Her mare was watching with a quizzical expression.

"I had just paid him two MORE dinars to keep an eye on GABRIELLE!" the warrior explained to the horse.

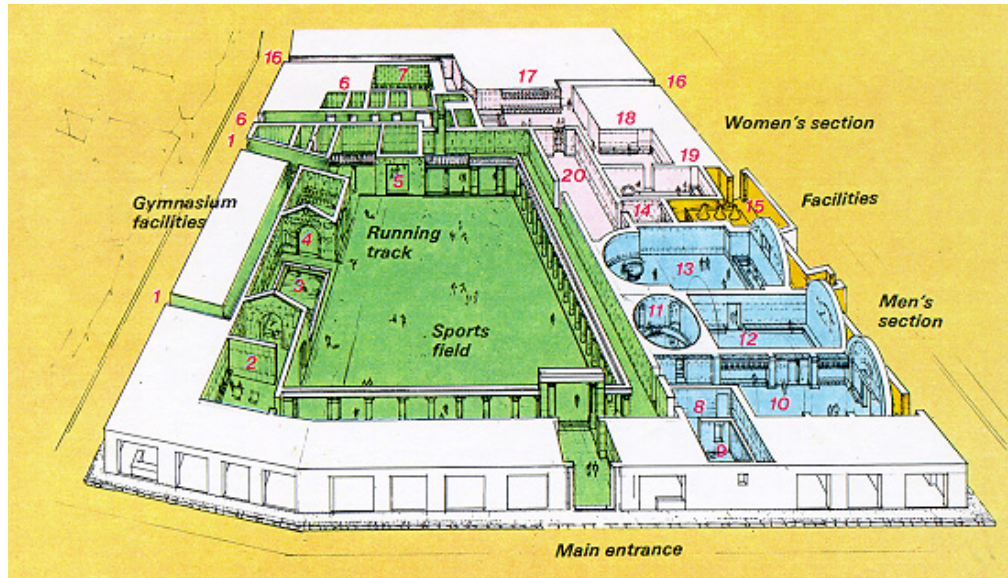
Argo snorted, turning away to finish pulling at a particularly crunchy and very satisfying piece of brush.

Xena shook her head, remembering the lad fondly and a little sadly.

"I wonder just how much money he made off of us that week?"

SEVEN DAYS IN POMPEII

BY DJWP



The Stabian Baths - Pompeii

Chapter 10

Xena lifted a piece of wood and looked at it for a moment before throwing it into the fire, sending an eruption of sparks dancing into the updraft. She watched the orange flecks sparkle and swirl until their light faded and they turned to ash, drifting back into the pit.

"I was there, Gabrielle," the warrior said as she wiped a bit of ash from her leg. "I was at the tavern. I heard you tell your stories, saw the crowd's reaction. I was watching from behind a pillar. Thought for a moment you might have seen me ... I guess you did at that."

Xena chuckled and thought of the poet. "Sappho left a trail for me to follow, and I followed it all right." She lifted her head and grinned up at the stars. "I should start at the beginning and tell you what I did that day. I never did answer you when you asked me, did I? Guess I was good at that ... keeping things from you, I mean."

She lifted her hand in the air, ready to start an excuse but decided the time for excuses was over and let her hand drop to her lap.

"I stayed down in the stable for a while after you left. I thought about coming up ... to your room." Xena twisted a leather strip from her skirt between her fingers. "I listed all the pros and cons of joining you that night. And even though there were more cons than pros, I left the stable and headed for your room."

Xena shrugged and straightened out her skirt. "I missed you."

"When I got there, I heard you talking with Sappho. Now, before you get mad, I didn't listen at the door ... although I wanted to. I knew that you needed to talk to someone about things you couldn't with me. I understood that and I had no problem with it. Sometimes, I wish I could do the same ... but it's not in my nature."

The warrior studied the stars for a few moments, trying to find the bear and failing. She could see the dipper though, and that brought her mind back to the events of the morning.

"So, I went to my room and got some sleep. You were right, Gabrielle. When I woke up in the morning, I checked in on you. You were out cold, sprawled on the bed still dressed, with your boots halfway unlaced. I didn't have the heart to wake you. It was early - just after dawn. Way too early for you. So I decided to take Argo for a ride and get out of the city. I wanted to check out Mount Vesuvius. I had never been that close to a volcano before. I had the notion of looking down into the center. I imagined it might be a doorway into Tartarus, maybe a way out should I ever get stuck there."

Xena laughed at her own joke, but Argo did not find it funny. She stomped on the sand with her hind leg to show her displeasure.

"I saddled up Argo and headed out the gate they called the Porta Vesuvio and let Argo have her rein. You enjoyed that, didn't you, girl?" Xena looked over her shoulder at the mare, who flicked her tail in agreement.

"We traveled at full speed down a well-packed path enjoying the wind whipping through our hair and the cool sun of the early morning. Right, girl? I'll give the Romans one thing - they sure know how to make roads."

"We passed lots of homes and farms. Plenty of settlements outside of the city gates. I guess the Romans didn't worry about attack. Pretty full of themselves, if you ask me. But everyone was spread out, more like home. It wasn't long before the road began to slope upward and the farms disappeared, giving way to trees and bushes. Vettii was right. The forest was lush and green. It was beautiful."

"Argo and I followed the path until it began to bend and wind. The closer we got to the top, the steeper the slope, the more the path narrowed and twisted. Until finally, the path disappeared altogether. I couldn't see the top of the volcano, the trees were so dense. I could have gotten off Argo and hiked up the rest of the way, but it was getting late and I wanted to get back before the noon meal. I thought we could have lunch together."

"I turned Argo around, promising myself that maybe I would come back tomorrow ... that we would come back tomorrow ... and try to go the rest of the way. I thought you might like a look inside a volcano."

The very thought of peering down into a pit of lava and flames made Xena's throat close up. Unbidden, an image of Gabrielle falling over the edge, Hope wrapped up in her arms filled her mind. The look on Gabrielle's face as she fell ... Xena swallowed and closed her eyes, waiting for the unwanted vision to fade before continuing.

"We were on our way back down the mountain. I rode Argo at a walk, letting her cool down and navigate the tricky parts of the path on her own while I watched the sun filter through the leaves of the trees. I've never really done that before, you know. Another thing you taught me, Gabrielle."

"It smelled so good in the forest. Like wet, green leaves and fresh soil. I remembered what you told me - what Vettii had said - that there was great hunting. I began to look around the forest, watching for fresh tracks and signs of game. Not that I wanted to hunt - there was no reason. You know, I was never one to go on a hunt for pleasure. I just wanted to see what kind of game I could find in the woods of Mount Vesuvius."

"I was having no luck and getting a little annoyed with myself, when the sound of angry voices distracted me. I tensed up in my saddle and reached for the handle of my sword. It sounded like two people arguing, so I armed myself and followed the voices until I came to a homestead tucked away in a clearing amongst the trees. There was a man and a woman having a disagreement by the side of a well. I quickly realized that my sword wouldn't be needed and I didn't want to scare them, so I put it back before I approached. I just wanted to see whether they needed my help."

"I think I managed to scare them anyway. When Argo and I came into view, they suddenly stopped fighting and the woman ran behind her husband. He stood tall though, and put his shoulders back. A man protecting his home. I'm sure I must have looked like a warlord to him."

"I put on my best smile to put them at ease. You would have been proud of me, Gabrielle. I could see them relax almost immediately. When I asked them if they needed any help, the man looked so relieved, I thought he was going to sit down right in the dirt beside the well. He didn't though. He just wiped his head with a rag. Before he could say a word, his wife walked around him and put her hands on her hips."

'Our well is clogged,' she announced.

'It is not clogged. It's dry,' the man said, starting the argument all over again.

'And I'm telling you, it's just clogged!' The woman waved her hands at the well in exasperation. 'I told him if he would just go down there and clean it out, we could have water again.'

'And I'm telling you, I'm not going to climb all the way down into a dry well!'

'You're just afraid you won't be able to climb back up!'

'And what if I can't? You gonna pull me back up?'

"I climbed down from Argo and ended the argument."

'I'll go down and check it out,' I said, volunteering for the job.

'I'm not so sure I can pull you back up, warrior, to tell you the truth,' the man admitted. I appreciate an honest man.

'You don't have to,' I said. 'I can get myself back up. And the name's Xena.'

"I could hear the woman gasp as I jumped over the wall and caught the rope. I was down in the bottom before they could say a thing. I looked around, but there was nothing blocking the water. The well was dry. I climbed back up the rope - a lot easier without having a bard hanging on, I'll say that - and was back up to the top in no time."

'The well is dry,' I announced, swinging easily over the edge of the well and landing in the dirt. I wiped my hands and smiled.

'Told you,' the husband said.

"Strange how the man actually seemed happy that his well was dry. Guess he was glad to win the argument. The woman just shrugged her shoulders and headed back inside the house."

'Who would think a well would go dry just like that?' she said, as she walked away. 'You're gonna hafta dig another.'

"The man rolled his eyes at me and smiled."

'Thanks, warrior,' he said and extended his hand to shake mine, 'I'd offer you a drink of water, but it seems we're all out. Would you like something to eat?'

'No thanks,' I said, climbing back on Argo, 'I have a lunch date.'

'Bet he's handsome!' the man called out as I turned Argo around and walked her back to the path.

'She is!' I replied.

"Argo and I returned to the path and headed back to the city. The road leveled out, and before long we were passing by the same farms and homesteads as when I headed out. The sun was high in the sky and I remembered being very happy and content at that moment. I had a good ride. I managed to help somebody, even if it was just to check on a well. I was back at the city gate by noon planning that you and I would probably have lunch together. I remember thinking that it might turn out all right after all ... our stay in Pompeii."

Xena threw another log into the fire and watched as it started to burn.

"But I also remember thinking of all the reasons why a well would suddenly go dry and wondering if anyone else was having a similar problem."

All the talking and thinking about wells and water made Xena realize she was thirsty. She lifted herself up from the sand and took a moment to stretch before heading over to Argo. The mare watched her mistress approach and brought her head around as Xena untied the water bag from its loop near the saddlehorn. The horse nudged her softly hoping for a scratch, and Xena happily obliged. She rubbed Argo's muzzle and kissed her tenderly in the warm, soft spot between the eyes.

"You thirsty, girl?" Xena asked before pouring a bit of fresh water into her hand for the mare to drink. Argo lapped up the liquid from her mistress's palm, giving her mane a satisfied shake when she was finished. Xena petted her horse's neck, then draped the strap of the water bag over a shoulder.

She stopped to stare at the bedrolls attached to the back of the saddle. She had not even considered what it would be like to have to sleep in the blankets without Gabrielle. But Xena's hair was wet and her leathers were soaked through to the skin by the damp of the ocean spray. The warrior had to admit, she was starting to feel the cold. After a moment's indecision, she unpacked the blankets and carried them and the water bag back to the warmth of the campfire.

Once there, she unfurled the rolls and laid out the coverings as though nothing were different. As if the bard would come striding over from the ocean to take her place on the blanket right next to the warrior.

Xena sat down with her back against the log, leaving more than enough room for her partner. Then she pulled up the thick, furry skin to cover her legs. After smoothing out the blankets, she brought over the scrolls and arranged them neatly where Gabrielle would have normally lain.

The warrior shifted deeper into the warmth under the heavy skin and leaned her head against the stump of driftwood, staring at the sky. She brought the water bag to her lips and drank a few sips until her thirst was satisfied, then put the stopper back into the top and flipped the bag away.

It was very quiet now.

The fire crackled and the sea hummed, but without her own voice filling the void, Xena found her heart aching once again for the company of her dearest friend and lover.

I don't have to talk for you to hear me, the warrior thought. This I know without a doubt. She had first hand knowledge that the dead could indeed hear your thoughts.

She stared at the canopy of stars and let her thoughts drift back to the events of that day in Pompeii, letting her memory make the pictures that she knew would tell Gabrielle the story.

She remembered entering the gate and trotting along Via Stabia back in the direction of Vettii's house, looking forward to meeting up with her friend and spending the day together in the city.

But when she got there, Gabrielle was gone. A servant told Xena that she had overheard Sappho talking about 'introducing Gabrielle to the Stabian Baths.' The warrior had raised an eyebrow. Gabrielle in a public bath? Now, that was something she had to see.

Xena left Argo to be tended by Vettii's groom and headed off quickly following the directions the slave had given her.

The Stabian baths were on the corner of Via Stabia and Via Dell'Abbondanza. She found them easily, by both the smell of hot sulfur water and size of the building. It was a huge structure and Xena found herself more than a little impressed as she entered through the marble archway and walked down a long corridor into the heart of the facility.

The warrior stood under yet another elaborate entrance way and stared in amazement. There was an indoor sports field and it was surrounded by a meticulously groomed running field. She watched as small groups of men practiced their discus swings, wrestled, sparred and participated in other athletic activities.

There wasn't a single woman to be seen.

Then the sound of laughter caught her attention and she turned to see a group of young women talking as they walked past the playing field in the direction of the smell of water. Xena decided to follow them.

She walked nonchalantly as the group of women strolled down a long corridor that ran along the right of the indoor sports field. Xena could still see the men playing their games in between the columns spaced at even intervals along the colonnade.

The chattering women walked by one entryway, ignored it, and kept going until they reached another down at the other end of the hall. Then they disappeared within.

This must be the woman's side of the facility, Xena thought before stepping inside.

She entered a large dressing room. Small marble cubby holes were carved in neat rows along all of the walls. Several women were sitting at benches, undressing and storing their belongings inside. Slaves were running to and fro, assisting the women with their garments and providing towels, which the patrons wrapped around their bodies before exiting through a far door.

The warrior watched the activity for a while, getting a handle on the protocol, until a slave approached her and bowed.

"Can I help you with your ... um ... robe ... um..." the servant stammered, "with your ... um ... leather ... um ... tunic?" Xena's manner of dress obviously perplexed her. The woman's gaze drifted to the sword and then to the chakram, where her eyes widened in surprise, then narrowed in scrutiny. She clearly had no idea what it was.

Xena quickly detached her sword and handed it over to the servant, who jumped when it touched her arms. The slave placed it quickly in the nearest cubby hole. The servant reached to take the chakram when Xena removed it from its hook, but the warrior pulled it out of reach. Xena placed the chakram carefully into the locker on top of her sword.

Then the servant helped with the rest of the garb, until Xena was nude. The warrior stared into the marble locker wondering if her equipment would be safe.

"You'll watch my stuff, won't you?" she asked the servant girl.

"Of course, mistress," the servant answered and handed over a towel.

"Thanks," Xena said, nodding once before heading for the sauna.

Xena entered the main bathing area and stood at the entrance to get her bearings. There were two very large pools and one smaller bath off in the far corner. The first pool had to be filled with warm water. It was the most crowded and all its occupants appeared comfortable. The second pool was most definitely hot. Xena could see the steam rising from nearly still water. Only one or two women were inside and their skin had turned red from the heat.

The third and smallest pool, sat tucked away in a corner. There was no one inside. Xena watched as one of the women from the hot pool hopped out and took a running jump into the smaller pool. She was not in there long before she pulled herself out. From the look of her nipples, Xena surmised that that pool was freezing cold.

The warrior turned her attention to the first pool. The patrons were collected in small groups and cliques, chattering and laughing, bobbing up and down like so many disembodied heads floating in the water. Their voices echoed in the large pool room, filling the air with bits and pieces of conversations that made no sense and did not seem to relate to anything of consequence.

A bunch of heads chatting incessantly about nothing at all, the warrior thought to herself with a smirk.

Xena scanned the groups, concerned only with finding one familiar bobbing head in particular.

Eventually, the warrior had to move out of the doorway to let another customer through. She watched as the woman handed her towel over to a servant and walked down a set of stairs into the warm pool.

Xena walked away from the door and to the same pool stairs then handed her towel to her own servant who she knew was still following. She descended the stairs into the bath virtually unnoticed. The warm water felt wonderful. It was body temperature and clear. Xena detected the faint odor of sulfur, but other than that, the water appeared to have been very clean despite the multitude of bodies. She imagined that the pipeline for the baths was fed by an underground spring and must have been filtered by a very elaborate system.

Well, she thought to herself, while she was looking for Gabrielle, she might as well enjoy a nice, warm bath.

Dunking her head under the water, Xena allowed herself to enjoy the cleansing warmth as the water dribbled through her hair. Then she moved about the pool freely, eavesdropping on conversations as she searched for her partner.

After circling the pool and unable to find either Gabrielle or the poet, Xena leaned back against an edge, not a little disappointed. She watched a group of women as she rested against the pool wall and let the delightfully warm water lap up against her. Eventually the clique's conversation reached her ears.

"Do you think she's really there ... or is Vettii making it up?" one woman asked as she splashed water on her shoulder.

Another fixed her hair and shrugged. "Well, I know he's desperate to win the Ceres this year, but how could he attempt such a bold-face lie? I mean, everyone would know soon enough if he didn't really have the Warrior Princess as a guest."

"I heard she has big horns!" a young girl commented, snickering.

Xena snorted. The sound went unheard as the other women in the group laughed.

"Well, I've heard them called many things," the first woman said as she cupped her large breasts in both hands and pushed them up out of the water, "but never horns!"

The entire group tittered and chortled at the clever remark. Xena found herself chuckling right along with them.

"Well, I heard she can take on ten men at a time!"

The warrior grinned proudly.

"You mean sleep with ten men at a time!" More laughter.

Xena lost her smile.

"And you haven't, Sienna?" one of the women commented, poking her friend in the side.

Sienna fixed her hair proudly. "Well, I must admit I have."

"Ah! There aren't ten men in all of Pompeii who would sleep with you!" More laughter.

"There'll be more than ten men clamoring to be at Vettii's for a chance to be with the Warrior Princess!" Sienna asked, nodding knowingly at her companions.

Xena furrowed her brow.

A more mature woman chuckled, moved forward shaking her head and begging to differ. "Well, they'll be wasting their time. I'm sure Vettii has already laid his claim to that particular honor."

Xena crossed her arms and frowned. Now, what did she mean by that? She watched as all the women nodded their heads in agreement.

The younger, more naive girl sighed. "I hear she is VERY beautiful. Mesmerizing, in fact. Do you think she really has Caesar under her spell?"

"I'd rather she had Caesar under her sword!"

The warrior couldn't help but smile at that comment.

"She beat the pants off him in Britannia. Tore his standard right in half!"

"And don't forget what happened in Rome!"

"And she conquered half of Greece!"

"And made her mark in the land of Chin!"

"She's an inspiration to all Roman women everywhere!" announced the young Pompeian, lifting her arms in the air in excitement. "I wish I were more like her."

"What?" said the mature one. "You want to be at the head of an army, conquering the world? Gausipia, you don't even like to leave your house to shop for food!"

"I can dream, can't I? Dream of being a warrior princess! Faster than a speeding arrow, able to leap over castle battlements in a single bound! The greatest warrior woman who will one day rule the ..."

Xena had had enough.

"She doesn't exist, you know," the warrior said, strolling up to the group.

They all turned to face her, surprised at the interruption.

Xena continued. "She doesn't exist ... this warrior princess you're talking about."

The women looked at her blankly.

Finally one of them spoke up. "What do you mean?"

"I happen to know that the person you are referring to does not exist." Xena crossed her arms and smiled sweetly at the group.

One of the women moved forward to challenge the remark. "Are you trying to say that Xena the Warrior Princess ... the warlord of legend ... does not exist?"

Xena raised her eyebrows and grinned. "Not the one you're talking about."

"Don't be ridiculous!" the woman scoffed. "Of course, she exists! She's staying at the House of Vettii."

Xena shook her head. "Nope. She most certainly is not."

The women stared at her in disbelief.

"Are you saying that Vettii is lying?" the younger one asked.

"What I'm saying is," Xena looked at them all, meeting each of their gazes with a direct stare, "that the woman you are talking about does not exist."

"She's calling Vettii a liar!" exclaimed another.

"Who do you think you are?"

"She has some nerve!"

The angry comments were thrown at Xena fast and furious. She allowed the women to half surround her and back her up against the pool's wall.

The oldest one of the group put her hands on her hips and stood before the dark stranger.

"Who are you anyway? I've never seen you here before? This bath is for noblemen and their wives only! Whose house do you belong to?" she demanded, looking at her friends for support.

Xena glared at her directly in the eye, giving her a good taste of what it was like to be stared down by the Warrior Princess.

"I belong to no house and no one," Xena stated, her voice reaching a low and dangerous purr.

The woman quickly backed up a few steps until she bumped into two of her friends. They had to hold her shoulders to keep her from slipping under the water.

The group backed away as one. The women may not have recognized Xena, but they certainly knew danger when they saw it.

One of them caught the attention of a slave and waved her over.

"You! Girl! Get the Head Mistress! This woman does not belong here! She's a commoner! Get her out of the bath! THERE'S A COMMON WOMAN IN THE WATER!"

The clique started waving their hands, gaining the attention of everyone in the pool. A good warrior knows when to withdraw, besides, gods forbid Xena should contaminate their precious water with her common body. So she waded over to the steps of the pool ignoring the excitement building around her.

The warrior walked proudly out of the water, taking her sweet time in climbing the stairs. Her steps lifted her body out of the pool, slowly revealing her full stature. The water cascaded over her shoulders, down her back, falling over beautiful buttocks before caressing incredibly long legs. Xena could feel as well as hear the entire bathing area descending into silence.

The Pompeian women watched with open mouths as Xena took the towel handed to her by her faithful slave and tossed it over a shoulder, not bothering to wrap the cloth around her naked form.

She walked calmly toward the exit, keeping close to the edge of the pool, ignoring the stares turning in her direction. Xena paused briefly and glanced over her shoulder at the gossips who were still watching her. Running her tongue along the inside of her mouth, Xena gave them all a view of her middle finger before she exited the room.

The young servant girl helped Xena settle her sword on her back and smiled. She was proud to have served the warrior on this day - the rest of the staff would be talking about this for moons. Xena flashed her a beautiful smile and flipped her a coin.

"Thanks!" The servant girl beamed. No one had ever tipped her before.

"There's one more thing you can help me with," the warrior said.

The servant watched her as she placed the shiny round thing to the hook at her belt. "Anything," the girl stated sincerely.

"Tell me, have you seen a young woman here today? She's about this high and has golden red hair. She would have been dressed in strange clothes - like an Amazon. Have you seen her?"

"An Amazon?" the slave asked, pronouncing it slowly as though she had never heard the term before.

Xena sighed. "Boots, skirt, short top." Xena brought her hand to just under her breasts. "Great abs."

The servant girl thought a moment before replying. "No, I haven't seen anyone like that at all. I think I would have remembered the great abs. We don't get much of that here."

Xena laughed, patting her shoulder. "Thanks, anyway."

The warrior was about to leave the facility when the group of gossips entered the dressing room. They were still chatting on about the strange woman they had encountered in the bath and who she might have been. Xena narrowed her eyes in their direction.

All speculation came to a halt when they spotted Xena, fully dressed and armored, standing calmly by her locker, staring at them from across the room.

The leather, the heavily tooled boots, the gauntlets, battle armor and sword all made her appear ten feet tall. They gasped collectively, knowing without a doubt that the real Warrior Princess was taking a deliberate step forward,

her intense gaze leveled directly at them. They huddled in a tight group, grasping at the tops of the towels wrapped around their bodies.

The gossips had indeed attracted Xena's attention, but it was not toward them that she was headed. One woman closed her eyes, expecting death to descend upon her as the warrior reached for her shoulder, only to be pushed out of the way.

Xena reached passed them all to grab at a flyer attached to a bulletin board on the wall just beyond.

She pulled at the parchment, detaching it, and walked away with it, leaving the speechless women to stare at her retreating back. (These women never tired of telling the tale of their close encounter with the infamous Warrior Princess. The only thing that kept changing with every telling was the size of her incredible sword.)

Xena did not stop to look at the announcement until she was out of the Stabian Baths and walking along the Via Dell'Abbondanza. She paused under the shade of an awning and looked down at the parchment.

It read:

"Today Only. The Bard Gabrielle of Poteidaia. Noon Meal at the Taverna of the Four Gods."

Xena looked up at the sky. The sun was high so she should still be there. She headed off down the street having read the address on the bottom of the flyer, very impressed with Sappho's ability to lead her around in such a covert way.

"A nice ride, a bath and now this ... right, Sappho?" Xena thought to herself with a grin, "That little manipulator managed to manipulate me right into a good mood." She had to admit, it was a nice plan. Xena, feeling rather good for the first time in days headed down the street toward the tavern looking forward to a little lunch and her favorite bard.

Xena's eyes popped open. She had almost fallen asleep and she did not want to do that. Not here. Not tonight. Not alone in this bedroll on this particular stretch of beach. She wanted to spend the night thinking about and remembering the bard ... and reading her story.

She lifted herself out from under the heavy fur and leaned against the log, letting the cold ocean wind slap her awake. After a few moments, the buffeting wind and the sound of the surf sharpened her senses. Xena reached for the water bag and took another sip, then glanced around, looking for Argo. She spotted her mare grazing near another patch of brush farther down the beach, twitching her ears alertly.

Xena adjusted her seat and moved her head around to crack her neck. Vowing never to fall asleep against a log again, she reached for the scrolls and shuffled them to find her place. But her mind was still processing what she remembered seeing at the tavern and comparing it to what she had read Gabrielle's version of the same event.

She let the scroll drop down to her lap and looked up at the stars.

"When I got to the tavern, you hadn't even started your stories. To tell you the truth, I was a little surprised. I had expected the place to be half empty, thinking no one really knew who you were, so how could you draw a crowd? What I found was a tavern full of people and, to me, it looked like they were all waiting for the Bard of Poteidaia."

"I always underestimated you, didn't I?" Xena smiled apologetically at the brightest star. Realizing she could see the night sky a little too clearly, the warrior's attention dropped to the fire, which was quickly going out.

Xena reached over to her dwindling pile of wood and threw several of the biggest logs into the pit. She fanned the hot ashes with her blanket, breathing life back into the fading fire, and smiled with satisfaction when the bottom log burst into flames.

She sat back, smoothed out her blanket, then returned the scroll to her lap.

"I was going to join you at your table," Xena continued, scratching her nose, "but then I heard your conversation. You were talking about Sappho's school. I heard your answer and to tell you the truth, Gabrielle, I wasn't surprised. I knew you were questioning your life with me. What sane woman wouldn't? I couldn't believe you had stayed with me this long, after everything ..." Xena's voice faded as she relived her feelings at the time.

"Hades, Gabrielle! I couldn't imagine life without you and yet at the same time, I couldn't imagine why you would even want a life with me. So, I suspected what you were going through, but that didn't make hearing it any easier ... or reading this," Xena stated, lifting the scroll slightly from her lap and showing it to the star.

"When I heard you say 'maybe', it really hit me in the stomach. I backed away from the table and hid behind a pillar. I couldn't believe you would actually consider it. No ... that's not true."

Xena thought for a moment, trying to put her confused feelings into words.

"Thinking that leaving me would be the best thing for you and actually hearing that you might have decided to do just that really took me by surprise. The reality of it slapped me in the face. I know I tend to brood over things, Gabrielle, but that doesn't mean I want the things I brood over to come true!"

"Am I making sense here?"

Xena squinted up at the bright star, not enjoying the impression that the twinkle was an indication that it was laughing at her.

"It's not funny," the warrior stated, grumbling.

"I stayed behind the pillar, watching your entire performance. I couldn't believe it! You were so good, Gabrielle. You really had that crowd in the palm of your hand. They loved every word, every expression. They got so wrapped up in the story that they forgot where they were. By the muses, I got so wrapped up in them I completely forgot you were talking about me!"

Xena laughed at herself, remembering the moment she realized that she was so involved with the stories, she had forgotten that she was in them.

"I thought that I had lost you for sure. That you were going to look around, loving the crowd, loving their reaction, loving what you were doing, and you'd realize that this was the life you wanted. The life of an artist. Not the life of a sidekick to a warrior ... and a brooding one at that!"

Xena looked up at the sky, fixing her eyes on the one shining star that had stopped twinkling, but was still the brightest of them all.

"And then ... and then I saw you looking around, searching the room. I dropped back behind the pillar a little. I felt like I was spying on you for some reason and I didn't want you to catch me at it. You kept looking around the room and then I realized that you were looking for me."

Xena smiled up at the star.

"I don't know why, but that all by itself gave me the greatest hope. I think I realized you wanted to share the moment with me. You hadn't given up on me. And I wasn't willing to let you go so easily either. If you were

willing to become a little more of a warrior to stay with me, then I could become a bit of a bard. There had to be a way we could have the best of both worlds."

"I left the tavern and spotted Alessandro." She chuckled once again, thinking of the young lad. "I paid him two silver dinars to follow you and let me know where you went. I just wanted to be sure I would meet up with you for dinner."

"So, I left the boy to watch you and headed off with the beginnings of a plan hatching in my brain."

"I felt a lot better, but that dinner last night still left a bad taste in my mouth. Besides, there was something that one of those chatterboxes in the pool said that really, really bugged me. And you know me, Gabrielle ... once I get an idea in my head, it's hard to get it out."

Xena stretched her arms before clasping her hands behind her back and closing her eyes with a grin.

"I had my own ideas about the festival and the Golden Ceres. And then, I had plans for you for after dinner, Gabrielle. BIG plans."

The grin turned into a very satisfied smirk.

Xena's lips widened into a full-fledged smile and the star twinkled. She picked up the scroll, giving it a gentle shake before settling in to read on further in the story.

SEVEN DAYS IN POMPEII

BY DJWP



**Triclinium (Dining Room)
House of Vettii**

Chapter 11

"Right," Gabrielle said, using her hands to help her talk as she and Sappho walked quickly along a labyrinth of narrow streets. "We'll just tell her that we got lost." The bard scratched her chin thoughtfully. "We were looking for a scroll shop and got lost. That's why we're late."

Sappho shook her head, causing a braid to fall down across her face. She sent it flipping back over her forehead with a snap of a finger. "We're not late. We'll be back just in time for dinner."

They turned a corner and Gabrielle suddenly recognized where they were. She had been a bit concerned, since following Phaon and her escort, that they would not be able to find their way back to the House of Vettii. The couple had led them on a chase through an unending maze of twists and turns in an exclusive residential section of Pompeii. Finally, the sleuths watched as Secundus and Phaon disappeared into the back entrance of what was apparently the nobleman's house.

Sappho and Gabrielle waited huddled in a corner for Phaon to emerge. The poet desperately wanted to know how long the beautiful woman would stay with the Roman and where she would go after that. But time was not on their side. It was getting late. Gabrielle was hungry and more than a little worried that Xena would not be pleased she had disappeared for the entire day.

In fact, knowing her partner, Xena probably had assumed the worst - that Caesar's collaborators had abducted Gabrielle. The bard imagined Xena putting the pinch on some unsuspecting soul and interrogating him at this very moment.

Gabrielle was so deep in thought, that she ran smack into an old woman as they turned another corner. She reached out to steady the old lady and was about to apologize when the crone grabbed her by the arms.

"The gods are punishing us! Our wellsprings are running dry!"

The old woman's grip tightened on Gabrielle's arms as the bard tried to pull away.

"The sea is boiling. There is a fire under your houses," the worm eaten hag cried, giving Gabrielle the benefit of a full view of her rotting teeth.

"Leave her be, you old crone!" Sappho yelled, pulling the bard away. They hurried down the street looking over their shoulders as the hag continued to yell.

"I have listened to the heart of the mountain and it beats in rage! Haven't you felt it?!"

"Gaia, there's all kinds of nutballs in this city!" the poet commented as she pulled the bard along, leaving the crazy old lady behind.

Finally, they found their way to the side street which took them past the entrance to the stable. Gabrielle recognized a familiar and disapproving snort directed at her from within as she walked by.

"I know, I know ... I'm late," the bard said in answer to Argo's comment.

They hurried down the street the rest of the way, turned left and then entered the gate into the House of Vettii.

A slave directed them to the dining room; dinner had already been served. Gabrielle waited at the top of the steps and allowed the servant to unlace her boots to wash her feet. With great discretion, the bard lifted her eyes to scan the room, expecting to find a scowl greeting her in return.

Xena was lying on her assigned couch at the table all right, but it wasn't a scowl that greeted the bard. The warrior was smiling brilliantly. Her head was turned in greeting and she was smiling. Sparkling, in fact. Gabrielle froze in surprise. Why, Xena was practically beaming at her.

"Hi! You're just in time for dinner!" Xena said, waving the bard to hurry up and sit down. "The food is great. I bet you're hungry!"

Gabrielle walked around to her side of the table, keeping a suspicious eye on her partner. Xena smiled again and tilted her head.

"Did you have a nice day?"

The bard looked at her partner, noticing her legs as they stretched along the couch. Xena was too tall for the divan and her feet were dangling off the end. Her feet? Her bare feet? She let them take her boots off?

All right. That's enough. "What's going on?" Gabrielle asked, crossing her arms.

"Sit down, Gabrielle. Have something to eat. This squab is fantastic!" The warrior pulled some meat off the bone with her teeth and chewed on it, smiling all the while.

Sappho rounded the table and dropped down onto her own divan. "What's going on?"

"I don't know," the bard replied, keeping her gaze on the warrior. "That's what I'm trying to find out."

Xena shrugged and took another bite. "Why does anything HAVE to be going on? I just asked if you had a good day. I assume you two spent the day traipsing around the city?"

"Yeah, we did," Gabrielle answered, shifting onto the couch and settling in to eat. She was still watching her friend closely. "What did you do all day?"

"Oh, a little of this ... and a little of that," Xena replied between licking her fingers. The warrior flashed her friend a happy smile.

Gabrielle and Sappho looked at each other. The poet shrugged, then motioned for a servant to fill her mug with wine.

"I hope you both worked up an appetite," Vettii commented, drawing surprised glances from both the bard and the poet. They hadn't even noticed he was at the table. "I know I have."

Gabrielle studied Vettii closely. He seemed the same - distant, aloof, rich, handsome. She looked at Xena, frowning. Her friend appeared to be very ... satisfied? The bard looked at the man again, then at Xena. Was she humming?

Gabrielle crossed her arms angrily as her appetite disappeared. She wouldn't have! She couldn't have! She better not have!

Xena glanced up just as she was about to take a bite from a drumstick.

"What?" she asked, freezing mid-bite. "Do I have something on my face?"

Yeah, a guilty expression, Gabrielle thought to herself, sending a penetrating glare in the warrior's direction. Xena felt the heat.

"What?" the warrior asked again, her eyes rounding with innocence.

Sappho blew air through her lips and looked away.

"Is something wrong?" Vettii asked as the tension in the room suddenly increased.

Gabrielle felt an uncontrollable uprising of jealous rage and was about to make a scene when an unexpected guest was ushered into the dining room.

He ran down the steps, ignoring all protocol in his haste.

"Menander!" Vettii announced in surprise, putting down his mug. "To what do we owe the pleasure?"

The man was huffing and puffing, trying to catch his breath. Gabrielle recognized the name from the dinner last night. He was one of the great noblemen of Pompeii and she had gotten the impression that he was Vettii's rival.

She noted that his elegant robe could not hide a rotund belly, and his equally round face was flush with the exertion of running. Menander ran his hand through shortly cropped, graying hair before wiping his palm on his tunic.

"For the love of Jupiter, Menander, sit down before you fall down!" Vettii said, rising up from his seat to offer it to his peer.

Menander waved him off, taking deep breaths.

Vettii took a step forward in concern. "What is it? What's wrong?"

The man nodded at Vettii, taking big gulps of air, urging him to be patient while he tried to compose himself. Finally, Menander was able to speak. His expression turned angry.

"Someone has **STOLEN** the **GOLDEN CERES**!"

Silence.

"What did you say?" Vettii asked slowly.

"I said," Menander answered, taking another deep breath, "the Golden Ceres has been **STOLEN**!"

Vettii stared at his peer in disbelief. "Menander, if this is your idea of a joke, I'm **NOT** amused."

Menander's face turned red. "I am **NOT** joking!"

"I don't believe it!" Vettii shouted, enraged, "This is ridiculous! What do you take me for, some kind of fool?"

"What do you mean?" Menander yelled back.

"You expect me to believe the Golden Ceres was stolen? From your house - from right under your nose? Just a few days before it was to be handed over to me for the festival. Now it's missing? Just like that? A little convenient, wouldn't you say, Menander?"

All heads at the table turned in Menander's direction.

"And just what do you mean by that?" Menander said defiantly, taking a step forward.

All heads turned to Vettii.

"I mean, isn't it **CONVENIENT** that the statue should disappear just days before you would have had to turn it over to **ME**?" Vettii took his own step forward, bringing him nose-to-nose with the nobleman.

All heads turned to Menander.

"And what makes you think **YOU** were going to win this year?" Menander said, snarling.

"You know damn well I was going to win," Vettii replied, snarling right back at him.

"Over-confident, aren't we?"

"Selfish, aren't we?"

"Arrogant fool!"

"Hoarding miser!"

"PETTY THIEF!"

Watching this argument was making Gabrielle seasick. She stopped looking back and forth between the two men, instead taking a glance at her partner, expecting her to intervene before they came to blows.

Instead, it appeared as though Xena was not even listening. The warrior inspected a particularly succulent bit of candied fig before popping it in her mouth and chewing happily.

Gabrielle's eyes widened and then narrowed in suspicion.

She's up to something, I just know it, the bard thought studying her partner carefully.

Xena met the bard's suspicious gaze, popping another candied fig into her mouth with a smile.

Oh, she's definitely up to something. The bard tapped her fingers against the soft velvet of her couch.

The argument escalated.

"Just whom are you calling a THIEF?" Menander asked, his voice rising in pitch.

"If the sandal fits"

"How dare you!"

"How dare YOU!" Vettii exclaimed and pointed his finger in his rival's face. "I can see right through you, Menander! Finally, someone else was going to win and you couldn't stand the thought of that, could you? You'd rather have it stolen, than lose! Well, if you think for one moment, that this is going to prevent me from having the party here this year, then you are SADLY mistaken!"

"How DARE you accuse me of stealing!!"

"How dare you STEAL!" Vettii yelled, giving the larger man a push.

Vettii pushed back. "How dare you!"

"How dare you!"

Vettii was winding up for a punch when he found his hand caught in a vise-like grip.

"All right," Xena said calmly, pulling Vettii away easily and standing between the two. "That's enough of that." She leveled a steely gaze at both men. "You're giving me indigestion."

Menander looked like he was about to yell something else, but the Warrior Princess's stare made him swallow his words.

"You! Siddown!" she ordered, pointing a finger at Vettii's divan. Vettii sat obediently.

"And you," Xena said, turning to look at Menander. The large man's eyes grew wide. "Tell us exactly what happened." She lay gracefully on her couch and popped another fig into her mouth. "Start at the beginning."

Vettii was about to say something, but Xena silenced him with an angry glare. "No interrupting," the warrior warned. Vettii shut his mouth. She turned back to face Menander. "Go ahead."

Menander wiped his hands on his tunic and nodded.

"I ... I ... I just saw it this morning. It was in my shrine. I had a beautiful shrine built in my garden especially for it. Marble base with gold leaf borders," Menander explained for the guests' benefit.

"He's had it for so many years, he thinks he owns it!" Vettii interjected, grumbling. Menander turned red.

Xena glared at Vettii. "I said ... no interrupting! Now, quiet!" She nodded at Vettii's rival. "G'wan."

"As I said, I was admiring it just this morning. It looks so beautiful on that pedestal."

Vettii rolled his eyes.

"I left to run some errands and when I came back, it was gone! Vanished. As though it had never been there! By Jupiter, I swear," Menander pointed an accusing finger in Vettii's direction, "if you took that statue, I'll have you dragged by the balls at the Coliseum!"

Collectively, all men at the table cringed. Gabrielle narrowed her eyes in suspicion at her partner, the only one having heard the snorted chuckle swallowed by the Warrior Princess.

Vettii slammed his fist on the table. "Why would I have to STEAL it when I was going to WIN it!"

"Says who?" Menander screamed.

"Says everyone!" Vettii screamed back.

"THAT'S ENOUGH!" Xena roared. Even Gabrielle and Sappho jumped.

Absolute silence.

"That's better," Xena stated. "Now. Menander. Did anyone see anything?"

Menander shrugged. "I told you. I wasn't home."

"Yes, I heard you. But you do have servants, don't you?"

Menander shrugged again. "Yes, but they're just slaves."

"Well, they do have eyes and ears, don't they?" the warrior asked in exasperation. "Did any of them see or hear anything suspicious this afternoon?"

Menander looked at Xena incredulously. "How should I know? I didn't ask them. They're slaves!"

Xena looked at Gabrielle and rolled her eyes. The warrior sat up on her couch and put her elbows on her knees, leaning toward the nobleman.

"WHY didn't you ask them?"

"I didn't think to."

"Right," Xena said, slapping her hands on her knees and rising. "It's late and I'm tired. Goodnight, all."

"Wait! Where are you going?" Vettii exclaimed, rising to his feet.

The Warrior Princess turned to face her host. "Dinner was good. I hate to lose it."

"What?" Vettii asked, not understanding.

"You're both making me sick," Xena stated and turned on her heels, ignoring Sappho's snort.

"But ... but ... what should we do?" Menander asked, pleading as he took a step after the warrior.

Xena twirled around, stopping the nobleman in his tracks.

"Do? What should you do?" Xena crossed her arms and smirked. "If I were you, I'd start thinking about how to celebrate your festival WITHOUT the Golden Ceres." She gave Gabrielle a quick look and a raise of an eyebrow before turning to depart.

They all watched in silence as the Warrior Princess left the room.

"Hmm," Gabrielle said to herself with a half-grin, looking quickly at Sappho. The poet raised her eyebrows in speculation.

Vettii and Menander stared at one another dumbfounded.

"The Festival of Ceres ... ?" Vettii began.

"... with no Golden Ceres?" Menander finished.

"Why, who ever heard of such a thing?" They finished together.

"Hmm," the bard repeated under her breath and rose quickly from her divan to follow her partner out of the room.

Sappho lifted her goblet into the air.

"Here's to dessert!" she said happily before taking a good, long swallow.

SEVEN DAYS IN POMPEII

BY DJWP



**Garden (Peristyle)
House of Vettii - Pompeii**

Chapter 12

Gabrielle followed the sound of Xena's footsteps as she hurried to catch up. She walked quickly along the edge of the garden following a path bathed in the shadows and light of the Pompeian moon. Coming upon the archway to the living quarters, she turned to enter, pausing a moment to listen for her partner.

The echoes of Xena's footfalls had ceased.

"Are you following me?" A low voice purred from an unexpected direction.

Gabrielle whirled around, gasping in surprise to find the warrior smiling at her from the shadow of a pillar.

"Xena!" the bard panted. "Don't do that!"

"Do what?"

"Don't sneak up on me like that!"

Xena moved forward, out from the shadow and into the moonlight. "I wasn't sneaking up on you. I do believe it was YOU who was sneaking up on ME."

"I wasn't sneaking. I was just following."

Xena raised her brows. "Oh, well in that case, c'mon." She put her arm around her friend's shoulder.

"Where are we going?"

The warrior shrugged. "I dunno. For a walk through the garden ... if you want."

Gabrielle smiled up at her partner. "Good idea."

And they strolled along, following the garden's path.

"So, did you have a reason?" Xena asked, grinning at the path, the moon and her arm around the bard's shoulder.

"A reason for what?"

"For following me."

"Well, yeah. I wanted to talk to you." Gabrielle said, smiling at the moon, the garden and the warrior walking at her side.

"So?"

"So, what?"

Xena chuckled. "What did you want to talk to me about?"

Gabrielle shrugged. A walk in the moonlight through this beautiful atrium, with the scent of flowers ... and leather - what had she been so upset about?

The sound of Xena's soft laughter caused further distraction.

"Well, this is a first," the warrior teased. "A bard with nothing to say."

Gabrielle gave her a narrow look. "I have plenty to say. For example, exactly what are you up to?"

Xena replied with the most innocent of looks. "Why, whatever do you mean?"

"Don't give me that," Gabrielle retorted, salping Xena in the stomach with the back of her hand. "You're up to something, I know it! C'mon, tell me what you did today!"

"You wanna know what I did today? Is that why you followed me?"

"No, that's not why I followed you ... Well, it's part of why I followed you ... Let's just say I have a few things on my mind and what you were up to today is one of them," Gabrielle said. The pangs of her earlier jealousy were disappearing quickly as Xena's warm hand began to rub and squeeze her shoulder. "And distracting me is not going to make me forget the question."

Xena squinted up at the moon and smiled. It was not quite a half moon, but the night was clear and the full roundness was visible, the circle completed by a dark shadow.

"Oh, I didn't do much. I took your advice and went for a ride."

"A ride?"

"Ah huh."

"On Argo?"

"No, on Vettii," Xena said, then noticed immediately that her partner was not finding that comment funny at all. She quickly added, "Of course on Argo."

"Where did you ... and Argo .. go?"

"For a ride in the woods."

"In the woods?" Gabrielle repeated and her mind filled with a different concern entirely. "Outside of the city?"

"Well, there aren't any woods inside of the city."

"You rode up on the mountain?"

"Yup."

"On Vesuvius?" For some reason the very thought of this filled the bard with terror.

Xena picked up on it immediately, "Does that make you nervous?"

The bard nodded. "A little."

Xena squeezed her shoulder reassuringly. "Don't worry. Nothing happened."

"Nothing? Did you hunt?"

"Nope. I kept an eye out, but didn't come across any game, really. Just went for a ride."

Gabrielle studied Xena's features carefully. She didn't know what she was searching for behind her partner's relaxed expression. After all, there was nothing unusual about going for a ride in the woods. Then why was her stomach fluttering?

"So, you didn't hunt. Just went for a ride?"

"Yup."

"Didn't come across anything unusual? Just trees and rocks and forrest type things?"

Xena laughed. "Yeah, just a ride through a beautiful forrest. What did you expect? Volcano monsters?"

"You never know with you," Gabrielle stated sincerely.

"True," Xena said with a chuckle. "To be honest, I don't know what I expected to find up there myself. I half thought I would discover an entrance to Hespastus' foundry and find him bathed in fire and lava, forging weapons for the gods."

"Thinking of stealing another chakram?" Gabrielle quipped.

"Why? Ya want one? I could go back ... " Xena said, pretending to turn away to head back to the mountain.

Gabrielle laughed aloud. "No thanks!" She grabbed onto the warrior's waist and pulled her back into place. "Besides, if I had a chakram, then I'd have to learn how to throw it. And why would I do want to do that, when I have you?"

"Oh, so you like to keep me around for my chakram-throwing skills, huh?"

"For that ... and for a few others."

Xena couldn't resist. "Well, ya know ... I have many ..."

Gabrielle reached around with her free hand and covered the warrior's mouth. "Don't ruin the moment."

Xena peeled the bard's hand away and gave it a squeeze as she laughed.

For the second time that day, Gabrielle realized how much she had missed her partner's company.

"So, did you enjoy yourself on your ride?"

"Yeah, it felt great!" Xena confirmed, smiling down at her friend. "Vettii was right. The woods up there are beautiful. You would have loved it." She gave the bard's shoulder another gentle squeeze.

I doubt it, Gabrielle thought, but she was glad that Xena had enjoyed the ride. The tiny fluttering in her stomach slowly subsided and they turned a corner, passing through the shadow of a column. Xena made a strategic decision and turned them off the path, steering them into the heart of the garden.

They strolled along a gravel walkway between two meticulously groomed flower beds. Gabrielle let the sweet scent of night blooms fill her nostrils.

"Then what?" the bard asked, breaking the silence.

Xena took a moment to smell the flowers before responding. "Then what, what?"

"Then what did you do?"

Xena shrugged. "I took a bath."

"A bath?" Gabrielle looked up, frowning. Thoughts of Xena sharing a bath with Vettii filled her head.

"Yeah. I went to the Stabian Baths. It's a public bath for the uppity-ups here in Pompeii," Xena explained, picking a petal from a flower as they passed by. She sniffed it once and smiled at the aroma before handing it down to the bard. The gesture wiped any thoughts of Vettii out of the bard's mind.

"Too many people. I far prefer my baths private," Xena added, looking down at Gabrielle speculatively.

The bard recognized an offer when she heard one. "I could really go for a nice, hot, private bath right now. Do you think the Stabian Baths are open at this time of night?"

"I doubt it," Xena replied, stopping to stand by a trickling fountain. She turned to face Gabrielle. "But I happen to know where there is one," she said with a sly grin.

"Oh, really?" Gabrielle remarked, watching the moonlight dance in Xena's eyes.

"Yeah," Xena continued, gently wiping a stray strand of hair from the bard's cheek. "A nice, quiet, private bath. You interested?"

It was at times like this that Gabrielle lost all ability to speak. All of her bardly skills went flying to the moon as she stood there in the garden with Xena, praying to Artemis that all of her insecurities and doubts would finally be put to bed.

There were so many things she wanted to say.

"By the gods, I really need a bath, Xena," was what she said.

"So, do I," came the soft reply.

The warrior was so close, Gabrielle could feel the metal of Xena's breastplate as it lightly brushed against her. She could see so many emotions passing through Xena's mind right there in her eyes. How could she have ever had any doubt?

"Gabrielle?" Xena asked in a whisper.

The bard ran her hands up Xena's arms and over her shoulders, pulling her forward gently by the nape of her neck, to answer with a kiss.

"XENA?" Vettii's voice rang out in the darkness, completely disrupting the moment.

They froze.

"XENA?" came the call again, this time much closer.

"Damn!" Xena cursed, backing away from the bard. "What do you think the penalty is for gutting a nobleman?"

Gabrielle snorted. "Nothing, if he's already dead." She wrapped her arms around her body and turned away from the warrior to face the fountain just as Vettii rounded the bend.

He spotted them.

"There you are," Vettii called, hurrying down the path as he lifted his robe to watch his footsteps. "I was hoping to catch you before you went to bed."

"You certainly did," the warrior commented wryly and crossed her arms.

Vettii looked up with uncertainty. "I'm not interrupting anything, am I?"

"No," Xena answered, slightly exasperated, "not anymore."

"Of course not," Vettii said to himself, shaking his head.

"Whadda ya want?" Xena asked, more than a bit perturbed.

Vettii smiled at the Warrior Princess. "Xena, I really need to talk with you about the Golden Ceres."

"It's none of my business."

"I know. It's just a silly festival to you, but it's very important to us. This entire situation could have far reaching consequences."

Xena shrugged. "It's a Pompeian tradition. I know nothing about it."

"I know. I know," Vettii said, imploringly. "But at the Forum tomorrow, Menander is going to accuse ME of stealing it. That is a serious accusation!"

"So," Xena said, "just tell them where you were today."

"I can't." Vettii cast his eyes to the ground. "Not without compromising a certain person's reputation."

Xena's eyes flashed in anger. "I am not going to lie for you and say you were with me ..."

"No. NO. No. That's not what I want. I wouldn't ask that of you," Vettii said, forcing a smile, secretly wishing that Xena had spent the afternoon with him. "I just want to talk with you, get some ideas on how to figure out what's going on. If we can find the statue, then everything will be fine."

"And if you can't?"

"Then I have to come up with some kind of plan to prove my innocence."

Xena huffed and put her hands on her hips.

"Please, Xena, I'm begging you. An outsider's opinion on this would be invaluable. If anyone can help me, you can."

Xena turned to her partner, trusting the bard's instincts above all others when it came to matters such as this one. Gabrielle had been listening to the entire conversation, even though she had been staring at the fountain.

She looked over her shoulder at Xena and shrugged. "He is asking for your help, Xena."

Xena huffed again.

Gabrielle walked over and touched her arm. "He's been very generous to us. I think you should help him, or at least put him on the right track."

"All right," Xena said, turning to face the man. "We'll talk. But make it quick, I have my own problems to take care of." She started to follow Vettii back along the path when she noticed that Gabrielle was not walking with them. "You're coming, right?" Xena asked, stopping to wait for the bard.

"No, I think I'll start that bath," Gabrielle replied, waving her along. "I'll keep the water warm," she added and smiled suggestively at her partner.

"I'll make it quick," the warrior promised and turned to follow Vettii back to the dining room.

"I'll be soaking in a nice, hot bath!" Gabrielle called after her.

She watched Xena nudge Vettii faster with a not so gentle shove to the back.

"Don't keep me waiting," she added with a sigh and looked up at the moon, imagining she could see it laughing at her.

Gabrielle tried. She really tried. The desire was there, and the resolve. She lowered herself into steamy waters and moaned at the touch of the heat on already highly aroused skin. All of her senses were tuned to a fine pitch in anticipation of her partner. She leaned back against the edge of the small marble pool, struck a sexy pose, closed her eyes and soaked in the heat, saving all her lascivious energy for Xena's arrival.

Hot water turned lukewarm and still she waited. She kept her eyes closed and maintained her sexy position, but her fingers began to tap on the cool marble edge.

When lukewarm water turned downright cold, Gabrielle opened her eyes and looked at her body. Her nipples were so hard, she could have tied a string from one to the other and shot an arrow. The bard sighed and lifted her shivering body out of the bath.

Taking a towel from a shelf, she wrapped it around herself and took one last look at the bathing facility. It was an intimate and romantic setting: a small, clean room decorated with frescoes of playful nymphs and nudes being chased by tiny, winged cupids. Sighing aloud, she reconciled herself to the fact she and Xena would have to take advantage of this cozy little hideaway in the rear of Vettii's villa on another night.

The moon was right to laugh. The hot bath had done nothing but soaked the urge right out of her. Now, after such a long day, all she felt was tired.

Gabrielle grabbed her clothes and walked back to her room to go to bed.

Alone.

Gabrielle really tried. She really, really tried. She decided to resume the erotic position, this time on her bed, and await the arrival of her partner. Certainly, when Xena found the tub missing one bard and the water already cold, she would run - not walk - to the living quarters and join her here in bed.

But as the night hours passed and the air in the room grew chilly, the bard found it necessary to cover her deliciously naked body with a blanket. And when her head grew weary of leaning against the headboard, she snuggled down into the pillows.

It wasn't long before the one candle that Gabrielle had kept lit to provide the room with romantic ambience melted down into a puddle and the soft sounds of a bard snoring filled the quiet darkness.

Xena stood in the doorway and watched the slow rise and fall of Gabrielle's blanket-covered body. A half-smile graced the warrior's lips as she thought about removing her leathers and wrapping herself against and around soft, warm, sleepy bard skin - her favorite kind.

It was very late and she knew that waking Gabrielle now would only mean she would have to deal with a cranky bard in the morning. She sighed aloud, reconciling herself to the fact that she would be wrapping herself around Gabrielle another time.

Xena closed the door as quietly as she could and walked down the hall, back to her own room and to bed.

Alone.

SEVEN DAYS IN POMPEII

BY DJWP



House of Julia Felix - Pompeii

Chapter 13

When Gabrielle woke up, she was not pleased. She didn't even have to open her eyes to know that Xena was not sleeping with her. Flipping the covers away, she jumped out of bed and scowled at the bright rays of sun that were drifting through the window.

She was a very cranky bard.

A knock on the door brought her attention around. That had better be Xena, she thought.

"Come in, Xena," she ordered, allowing her displeasure to show in her voice. "You're a little late, don'tcha think?" Gabrielle planted her hands on her hips and was tapping her foot impatiently. "You better have a good excuse for leaving me soaking in a bathtub, Warrior Princess."

The door swung open and Sappho entered the room. Pleasant surprise burst across the poet's face when she found a completely naked Gabrielle standing before her in the soft morning sunlight.

"Well!" the poet said sporting a cheshire cat smile, "I, for one, would NEVER be late if I knew THIS was waiting for me! " Sappho couldn't help but indulge in an eyeful.

Gabrielle's hands quickly attempted to cover a variety of private bard-parts as she dove for the bedcovers.

"Uh! Sappho!" Gabrielle squealed, pulling the covers up to her chin. "I wasn't expecting YOU!"

"Obviously," Sappho stated and waggled her eyebrows as she sauntered across the room. "Relax, my friend. I have seen you naked before, remember?"

"That was different!" Gabrielle pulled the blanket higher. "It was dark."

"There was a FULL moon - very bright, as I recall," the poet said, pulling at the edge of the cover to peek underneath.

Gabrielle slapped her hand away. "Behave!"

Sappho smiled. "Now, there's a word that's NOT in my vocabulary!"

The bard futzed with the blanket, ensuring that it was covering everything of value. "Hmm! Well, it's time you learned," she said, pouting.

"Ooooh, cranky, aren't we? What's the matter? Water turn cold on ya last night?"

The bard shot her a look. "You are NOT funny!"

"Oh, we are in a foul mood today. Listen, I know something that'll cheer you right up. Come on. Get up and get dressed." Sappho grabbed the bard's green top and threw it at her. "We have places to go ... things to do."

Gabrielle picked up the top and waved her hand at Sappho. "Turn around."

The poet rolled her eyes, but complied.

"I just saw Xena," Sappho continued as Gabrielle dressed. "She's on her way to the Forum with Vettii. Apparently, this Golden Ceres thing is a lot more serious than it seemed. They're having some kind of hearing and Vettii is going to be accused of conspiracy or treachery or thievery or something equally ridiculous."

"All this over a statue?" the bard asked while she tied a bootlace.

"Well, the statue is central to the festival. And the festival is critical for a good crop and prosperous year, yadda, yadda, yadda. You know, the usual religious mumbo jumbo."

Gabrielle smiled. "You sound just like Xena."

"Yeah, well, we both have first-hand experience when it comes to the gods. It's hard not to be cynical."

Gabrielle stood up from the bed and straightened her skirt. "Why is Xena going with Vettii to the Forum?"

"Well, for one, Vettii practically begged her. I don't think even the Warrior Princess was able to resist a grown man crying. Besides, she seemed a bit interested in why the statue was so important - other than as a trophy."

The bard grabbed her staff and tapped Sappho on the shoulder.

"Oh!" the poet said, turning around. "You're ready? Good. Let's go." Sappho opened the door and motioned for Gabrielle to exit.

"Where are we going?"

"Xena asked me to wait for you and take you to the Forum. You want to go there, don't you?"

Gabrielle walked briskly out of the room, shrugging at poet in reply.

"Maybe."

They walked quickly along the corridor. Sappho began to realize that the bard was very angry at her warrior friend.

"She told me to tell you she's sorry about last night," Sappho said, shuffling to keep up beside the bard.

"No she didn't," Gabrielle stated plainly.

They passed through the foyer and exited the house. Gabrielle pulled at the front gate angrily and swung it open. The poet closed it and rushed to catch up.

"How do you know she didn't say she was sorry?" Sappho asked after she caught up to her friend.

The poet couldn't help but notice the rhythm to Gabrielle's strut - the way the staff hit the ground in irritated syncopation with every other step.

"Because I know her. Xena never apologizes for her decisions." The next plunk of the staff was quite a bit louder.

Sappho grabbed her friend's arm and forced her to stop. "And what does that mean?"

Gabrielle shifted her stance, unsure of how much she wanted to reveal to her friend. She decided she needed to talk to someone.

"Xena had a choice last night," Gabrielle explained, her expression turning a little sad. "She could have spent the night with me. She chose to spend the night with someone else instead."

"Gabrielle," Sappho said, shaking her head. If she lived to be one thousand years old, no poem she could write would ever be able to capture the strange workings of a mind in love. "Where do you think Xena spent the night last night?"

Gabrielle pulled her arm away and continued to stomp down the street. "I'm not a child, Sappho."

"Well, you're sure acting like one! Slow down for Aphrodite's sake!" Sappho caught the bard again and swung her around. "I was with Xena last night!" she announced, stopping Gabrielle dead in her tracks.

"WHAT!"

Sappho's eyes widened as she realized how that sounded. She brought her hands up in surrender before the bard could bop her with on the head with that staff.

"Wait. I don't mean I was WITH Xena. I mean I was with Xena. We were together. Hades, what I mean is, I was there. With her and Vettii. It was the three of us." The poet slapped her own head. Good with words, aren't you, poet?

Gabrielle leaned on her staff and lifted her eyebrows. "I sincerely hope you don't mean what that sounds like."

Sappho shook her head and laughed at herself. She put her arm around the bard's shoulder and started walking along the street.

"Vettii, Xena and I," the poet resumed her explanation slowly, choosing her words a little more carefully, "spent the night at the dinner table talking about that gods-be-damned stupid statue."

"The whole night?"

"Let's just say Vettii wouldn't shut up and Xena, although she maintained polite interest, was obviously a little distracted. Although about what, I have would have no idea." Sappho's crooked smile almost got the bard to respond in kind.

"Hmmpff."

"Hmmpff, nothing. She kept crossing and uncrossing her legs, biting her nail and looking at it ... playing with her leather skirt things ... peeking out the door to check on the position of the stars or something. Finally, she promised Vettii to go with him to the Forum. I think she did that just so she could leave. And let me tell you, as soon as Vettii seemed satisfied with that plan, Xena excused herself. I think she blew out half the candles in the room, she left so quickly."

The bard tried to hide her smile, but Sappho caught it and gave her a little push.

"I'm not exaggerating, either. I stayed with Vettii a little while longer until he finally went to sleep. In the morning, I saw Xena. She was heading to the garden to meet up with him when she stopped me and asked me to stay behind and wait for you. She told me she hadn't had a chance to let you know what was going on because she didn't want to wake you. Then she asked me to ASK you if you would like to join her at the Forum."

They turned off the Via Stabia onto the market street.

"She also said you're beautiful when you're sleeping."

"She did not say that." Gabrielle eyed the poet warily, but Sappho's expression neither confirmed nor denied. "Did she really say to ask me?"

Sappho nodded.

"But she didn't tell you to tell me she was sorry."

The poet smiled sheepishly. "No. I made that up. But I'm sure she would have ... if she weren't Xena."

Gabrielle chuckled at that. The pair continued down the street toward the market, but were forced apart by oncoming traffic. Having lost Sappho momentarily in the shuffle, the bard stopped to wait for a group of shoppers to hurry by.

"Good morning, nice lady," a deep voice called out. She looked down to see the beggar and his dog at their usual spot, sitting on the street. She smiled; one more step and she would have tripped over him again.

"Good morning," she answered with a grin, "and my name is Gabrielle."

The dog wagged her tail. Gabrielle reached down to give the beggar's companion a pat and the pooch leaned into it, ever appreciative of a nice scratch.

"Beautiful day, Gabrielle," the man commented, smiling.

"Yes. Hope it holds for the festival party."

"The Festival of Ceres is for the rich. They have enough. Let the weather hold for us common folk, who only look forward to the festival in hopes of good business."

"Don't all Pompeians have parties on festival day?" Gabrielle asked, surprised at the beggar's statement.

"Who can afford parties?" The man shrugged. "Only the rich can afford to feed their friends. People like us just worry about our families." This the man said as he patted his dog's neck. "We go to the Temple of Ceres and give praise and hope that it will be enough to obtain her favor."

"Don't the noblemen go to the Temple to offer tribute?"

"The nobles give their tribute to one another. They 'plant their seed' and call THAT their tribute. The Festival of Ceres is nothing but an excuse for the rich to frolic. It's a wonder that Ceres doesn't burn Pompeii down to the ground in anger."

Gabrielle pulled a coin out of her pouch and offered it to the beggar. He, of course, took it with a smile.

"Here," she said. "Buy your family something good to eat in honor of Ceres."

"May the gods smile on you, beautiful Gabrielle."

"The gods frown on those who deny their destiny!" A growling voice yelled, causing both beggar and bard to jump in surprise.

The old crone was shaking her fists at them both.

"The sky will cry black tears! The very air we breathe will turn to fire! I can feel it already! Doesn't your chest ache?"

Her bony hands turned into a fist and she pounded her chest, coughing.

"Oh, shut up, Portia!" the beggar said, waving the old woman away. "You sound like an echo. Always repeating the same thing every day."

The crone scrunched up her face and gave both the beggar and his dog the finger. Then she stared directly at Gabrielle and her eyes grew wide. She reached out twisted and shaking digits toward the bard and grabbed at her shoulders.

"You may escape Pompeii, but you will not escape the flames," she said, hissing. Then she pushed the bard away and cackled.

Gabrielle watched the rag-covered crone stagger away, laughing, reaching out with emaciated arms to grab at other passerby as she spouted prophetic poetry. The busy Pompeians avoided her like the plague.

"What's wrong with her?" the bard asked Sappho, who had joined them and was standing at her side.

"She's crazy!" the poet answered in dismissal and pulled Gabrielle away.

"The gods favor the insane," the beggar mumbled as he watched the two women walk away. He reached to pet his companion for reassurance, but the dog suddenly jumped and began to howl.

"Now, don't you start going crazy on me, too!" the beggar said, pulling on the dog's collar to get her attention, "or I'll use this to buy cat food instead!" He showed his friend the silver dinar. The dog forgot why it was howling and licked the coin instead.

Sappho and Gabrielle came near the end of Via Dell'Abbondanza, passing merchants and shoppers as they argued over the price of bolts of finely woven fabric. The bard watched them bicker as she strolled by and smiled, always

enjoying a good haggle and nearly walked smack into Sappho's back. The poet had stopped walking and was standing in the middle of the street.

"Sappho! Watch where you're going!" Gabrielle yelled as she rubbed her head. She had bumped into her own staff.

The poet was staring at a wide staircase which led into the Forum; the center of Pompeian political, economic and religious life. Sappho reached behind and pulled the bard around her.

"Look!" Sappho said, pointing to a grand marble entryway.

Now, the bright white marble steps were wide and long and very impressive, the bard had to admit. And the Forum was more than just a single building, it was a city within a city. The political center of Pompeii was a tremendous, surrounded by daunting columns and a raised wall that protected a great number of temples and public buildings inside. The steps leading in were merely to block wheeled vehicles and horses from entering as the Forum was restricted to pedestrian traffic only.

It was twice the size of the Parthenon in Athens and easily as big as the Coliseum in Rome.

But the grandeur of the pride of Pompeii was not what had stopped the Tenth Muse dead in her tracks.

Gabrielle followed the direction of the poet's pointing finger with her eyes until she recognized the familiar graceful walk of a certain beautiful woman. She should be able to recognize her walk by now, Gabrielle thought to herself. They'd spent half the day following her yesterday.

Sappho shuffled Gabrielle to the side of the street to watch as Phaon left the Forum accompanied by an older, but nonetheless attractive, Pompeian noblewoman. The couple stepped gracefully down the marble steps, chatting companionably.

"Would you look at that!" Sappho whispered, watching them approach with wide, gray eyes. She tugged Gabrielle into an alcove to hide them from Phaon's view.

Gabrielle shifted her staff to her other hand. "Who is she with?"

The poet watched for a while as the pair walked away. "I have no idea."

Gabrielle scratched her chin and watched her friend watch the couple saunter away. "Are they going to the Four Gods for lunch?"

Sappho did not seem to hear the question. "I've never seen her with a woman before," the poet whispered, more to herself than to Gabrielle. They watched in silence as the couple strolled by.

Phaon and her companion did not notice that they were being observed from a niche in a wall by two pairs of curious eyes. Sappho waited until the pair disappeared into the crowd of shoppers farther down the street before popping out of the hiding place.

She grabbed at Gabrielle's staff which was, of course, attached to Gabrielle and pulled the bard along as she ran off in pursuit.

"Come on!"

"Hey!" Gabrielle's head jerked back as she was tugged forward.

"I want to see where they go!"

"What about Xena?"

The poet pulled the bard along by the staff. "Xena will be stuck in the Forum for hours."

"What if I miss her?"

The poet stopped short. Now isn't this a coincidence? There on the side of the street, sitting in the shade of a portico's awning, was Gabrielle's young friend. What was his name? Alessandro. He was playing sticks and stones with another young child, a girl.

Sappho ran over, dragging the bard with her all the way. The children stopped their game as the pair approached; Alessandro gave his companion a quick grin.

The poet threw down two gold coins between the children.

"Follow the warrior!" Sappho said to the boy, then pulled the bard away.

The children watched in silence as the comical pair scurried off, Sappho pulling the staff and the staff pulling Gabrielle. The boy picked up the two gold coins and looked at his sister with great satisfaction.

"I told ya, Hermia!"

Hermia grabbed one of the coins out of his hand. "You said 50-50!"

Alessandro frowned, then resigned himself to the deal and tucked the remaining gold coin away in his newly purchased belt pouch.

"OK. Now get going," he ordered, pointing with his thumb. "Just you remember ..."

Hermia jumped up and wiped her hands on her toga. "I know. I know. I follow the bard."

"And I follow the warrior."

Hermia nodded and then skipped off down the street in the general direction of her targets ... for the most part.

Alessandro watched as Hermia skipped from one side of the street to the other, happily weaving her way between the bustling throng of shoppers. He shook his head, wishing he hadn't needed to bring his sister in on the deal, but then he couldn't be in two places at once, could he?

He continued his game of sticks and stones, waiting patiently for the warrior, knowing without a doubt that she would be along ... and would most certainly want to know the whereabouts of a certain lady with hair the color of the sun.

Sappho and Gabrielle followed Phaon back down the Via Dell'Abbondanza. Keeping a safe distance, they continued to pursue the pair even after they crossed over the Via Stabia leaving the market area behind.

Sappho admitted to Gabrielle that she had never been to this part of the city. Shops abruptly disappeared as soon as they crossed to the other side of Via Stabia, as though an invisible boundary had prevented the business district from intruding into the residential area.

At first the homes were grand. Gabrielle immediately spotted a huge dwelling on a corner adorned with a golden sign identifying it as the House of Menander. She couldn't help but scrutinize the portico of the home, trying to get a peak within. But the courtyard beyond was lushly landscaped and the interior was blocked from view.

They passed a small cross street and immediately the style of the buildings changed. This part of the city was obviously not for the rich. The houses were small and set very close together. Gone were the intricate frescoes and painted murals that adorned the arched doorways of the rich and famous. Instead, the color of stone and basaltic lava painted the street in the soft natural tones.

Following Phaon without being spotted was becoming more difficult as pedestrian traffic had dwindled away to practically nothing. More than once, the sleuths had to duck into a doorway to avoid being detected.

Just as the bard began to believe that they were going to end up leaving the city altogether, Phaon and her mysterious companion paused at a doorway in a high stone wall and disappeared within. Sappho and Gabrielle quickly scooted up to read the sign above: House of Julia Felix.

"Do you know this Julia Felix?" Gabrielle asked as they both tried to peak through the iron gate and examine the dwelling within. The home was much larger than those they had seen so far; it appeared to take up almost one third of the block, perhaps more.

Sappho whistled at the apparent size; it looked like a palace.

"Whew! I think this place is bigger than Menander's. I've never heard of Julia Felix, though. Have you?"

The bard snorted. "Who me? How would I know Julia Felix? I'm just a tourist, remember?"

The bard and poet pressed their faces against the bars of the gate, trying to get a better view. A familiar figure paused as he walked in the shade of a colonnade, which ran the length of the front of the house. He recognized the two faces peering in immediately.

"Sappho! Gabrielle! What in Jupiter's name are you doing?" Paris exclaimed, laughing at their noses sticking through the gate. "Why don't you just come in?"

He left the shade of the pillared corridor, crossed the garden and hurried to the gate.

"Come on in!" he said with a smile as he opened the door to his friends.

"Well, we didn't want to intrude," Sappho explained, feeling very embarrassed at having been caught by somebody they knew.

Paris laughed at the comment. "Intrude? Here at Julia's? No one intrudes at Julia Felix's. Everyone's welcomed here. Everyone who has money that is - especially famous poets and wonderful bards! Julia will be thrilled beyond words to have you here." He ushered his friends along the gravel path, leading them up two short stairs onto the colonnade and into the entrance of the home.

As in Vettii's home, the entrance led into a small atrium, cooled by the sound of a bubbling fountain. Gabrielle watched as a beautifully carved, mischievous, horned faun spouted water from a good-sized penis grasped firmly in his hand. He sprinkled water into a sparkling marble base. As they passed by, Gabrielle peeked over the edge and was surprised to see the tiny statues of a variety of naked nymphs enjoying the shower being provided by the faun.

Paris led them through the atrium into the main peristyle, a tremendous garden filled with a rainbow of flowers and colorful shrubs. Gabrielle felt as though she had stepped through a portal and stumbled into a fantasy land.

"We must be over the rainbow," she mumbled to herself, staring at the colors in wonder.

The musing was reinforced as Gabrielle watched two women prance like fairies through the flowers in a flurry of pomp and circumstance to greet the new arrivals.

"Oh Paris! Who have you brought us!"

Gabrielle found herself straining her necks to look up at the woman who had greeted the threesome first. She was unbelievably tall. Or was it her hair that was unbelievably tall? The bard couldn't tell and found herself staring up and up and up as the woman's bright yellow coif piled impossibly high on the top of her head.

It looked like a beehive. The bard tilted her head. There were, in fact, several jeweled bees adorning it. The bard blinked. One was flitting about on a wire at the top. It WAS a beehive.

The woman fluttered large eyelashes and extended a long, thin arm to greet her guests.

"Welcome to the House of Julia," she said smoothly.

Gabrielle grasped her hand to shake it, noticing the length of her brightly painted nails. By the gods, she could barbecue shish-ka-bob on those nails.

The woman beamed. "Such strong hands! My, but you MUST be an Amazon!"

The bard smiled, shook the hand once and released it.

"And what a big staff you have!"

"Thank you ... I think."

This statement caused beehive's companion to erupt into a titter of giggles. Their other greeter was as round as she was tall. At least, Gabrielle thought to herself, I think it's a he. It was dressed in a shimmering halter and sarong, wrapped purposely to reveal a round, smooth belly. He had no less than three rings piercing his belly button. The bard lifted her eyes from the body jewelry to inspect the long black wig that ended on his shoulders and flipped up so stiffly, he could have carried a scroll around and not dropped it.

It was definitely a man; the shadow of a beard proved it. In fact, Gabrielle thought as she examined the beehive one more time, they were both men. The bard looked quickly down at the two sets of feet. Yup, definitely men. Hairy toes gave them away every time.

The bees nest put her hands on her hips. "Paris, aren't you going to introduce us?"

The reprimand brought Paris's hand away from his mouth, where he had placed it to hide the grin on his face as he watched Gabrielle's expression.

"Oh, where are my manners." Paris pushed the poet forward. "This is Sappho. I'm sure you've heard of her, haven't you? And this," Paris pushed the bard forward, "is Gabrielle. A bard from Poteidaia. She's here with the Warrior Princess. I'm sure you've heard of her as well."

Beehive clapped her hands in delight.

"Oh my, Paris! Julia is just going to DIE when she finds out who's here! Oh, do come in. Do come in." She shuffled the new guests along, stepping between Gabrielle and Sappho to push them by the small of their backs. "I can't wait to introduce you."

She ushered them along the path through the heart of the garden.

"I'm Labia Majora, by the way. And this is my friend, Bougain Villae. We are the official hostesses here at the House of Julia. We are SOOO happy to have you here. You are JUST going to have the most WONDERFUL time. Tell me, do you think the Warrior Princess herself will be visiting us? We'd just LOVE to have her here. We have the most perfect room for her. I think she would just LOVE our dungeon!" Labia Majora babbled as she herded

Sappho and Gabrielle along. The pair could do nothing but follow and occasionally glance back at Paris, who had resumed hiding his smile behind a hand.

Sappho risked a glance at the bard, but Gabrielle caught her at it. They both had to look away quickly to avoid laughing out loud. In unison, they glanced back to see a smiling Bougain Villea bringing up the rear. She waved at them with a happy smile.

The pair slowed their steps, allowing Labia Majora to walk ahead. She continued to babble, unaware that her charges were no longer listening.

"Gabrielle," Sappho whispered, "I've been meaning to ask you."

"What?" the bard replied between the teeth of a smile she was flashing at Labia, who was checking on their progress over her shoulder.

"What ever happened to your belly button ring? Didn't Xena like it?"

The bard looked down at the belly button in question, almost forgetting what Sappho was talking about. Then she remembered and it brought a big smile to her face. She had gotten a piercing the last time they were together.

"Oh, she liked it all right. Problem was ... so did Argo."

"Argo?"

"Yeah, she kept nibbling on it. Had to remove it. Couldn't take the horse drool."

Sappho was still laughing even as they arrived at their destination.

They were brought into a very large triclinium, at least twice the size of Vettii's and obviously much more than a dining room. Not only was there a large round table with accompanying divans, but the room was filled with chairs and sofas, and an assortment of pillows of all shapes and sizes.

No trappings of custom here. Sappho and Gabrielle were invited into the parlor to a party already in progress. There were scantily clad men and women of all shapes and sizes partaking of every possible festivity in every available spot in the room. Gabrielle surveyed the area, snapping her head around to look twice at a couple in a corner, fully engaged in the act of coupling and completely oblivious to everyone else in the room. And they weren't the only ones.

Gabrielle dared a look at Sappho. The poet was blushing beet red.

"Well!" the Tenth Muse said, rubbing the back of her neck with her hand and glancing at the bard demurely. "Let the games begin!"

Gabrielle was about to recommend that they bee-line out of there but fast, when Labia Majora clapped her hands together loudly thus announcing their presence to the room.

"Everyone! Everyone! Look who I found wandering in our garden!"

To their amazement, everyone ... and everything ... and all heads turned in their direction

Labia swung all of her nails elegantly in Sappho's direction.

"This is Sappho ... the Tenth Muse ... for those of you who have no culture."

"That would be everybody in the room," a fat man laughed from his chair, raising his goblet.

"That's why I felt I had to inform you," Labia explained, rolling her eyes. She turned her attention on the bard. "And THIS is Gabrielle, the bard who belongs to the WARRIOR PRINCESS herself no less."

The murmurs fluttered across the room and several men and women regarded Gabrielle with a downright embarrassing expression.

The bard poked at a chuckling poet's foot with her staff.

Suddenly, Sappho and Gabrielle found themselves being greeted by the very mysterious woman whom they had been following.

"Sappho! What a great honor it is for me to have you here!" She strolled forward and extended her hand in greeting. "I am Julia Felix and this is my home."

Sappho gulped and clasped Julia's hand, shaking it politely. The poet was at a loss for words; standing right behind Julia Felix was Phaon, staring in quiet surprise.

Gabrielle watched as a range of emotion cross Phaon's face. Surprise, a brief flicker of embarrassment, which could not hide the tiniest flash of anger, which gave way to a controlled and very well practiced, courteous smile.

Julia Felix motioned for them to enter and so they did. She led them over to the table, smiling and nodding at her patrons as they passed.

"We love your poetry, Sappho. I have a slave who sings it very well, as a matter of fact. If you'd like to have her, then just let me know and she'll be yours for the day."

Sappho shot a glance at Gabrielle. The bard's eyes were wide as saucers. Phaon was lagging slightly behind the group as Julia led them along.

She pressed discreetly between the pair so she could whisper. "Sappho, what are you doing here?"

"Damned if I know," the poet mumbled and then quickly corrected herself. "Why, looking for a party, of course!" she replied brightly.

Phaon narrowed her eyes, then regarded Gabrielle. "And what are you doing here?"

"Looking for the same party ... I guess," the bard replied as she watched a woman nibble on another's breast.

"Does Xena know you're here?" Phaon asked, whispering into the bard's ear.

The very mention of her partner's name made the bard flush.

"Of course," she squeaked. "Of course," she corrected her voice to a normal pitch. "She told us to meet her here."

Phaon raised an eyebrow. "Oh, really?"

"Oh, yes," Gabrielle continued, "Xena's heard all about this place. Told me she really wanted us to try it. She asked me to check it out first, you know. See if it meets our high standards. She's very picky about where she goes for ... for ..."

"A bath?" Sappho prompted, hoping what she just saw through a doorway was right.

Gabrielle looked at the poet quickly. Sappho nodded.

"Umm, yeah, that's right. A bath. Xena heard this was the best little bath house in Pompeii."

"The best bathhouse?" Phaon repeated incredulously.

"And she would be right!" Julia Felix said, pausing as she came to the large round table and inviting Sappho and Gabrielle to sit. "We are the best bathhouse in Pompeii. It is the biggest and the best. Besides, where else can one go where women AND men can bathe together."

"They can?" Gabrielle asked, gulping.

"Only here at my house can men and women frolic freely, without the restrictions of Pompeian customs." Julia lifted her hand and summoned a slave. Instantly several were hovering around them, offering food and pouring wine.

Julia Felix smiled at the bard. "Obviously, Xena is a woman who appreciates the more carnal pleasures of life."

"She does have many skills," Sappho stated, grunting when the end of a staff ended up in her stomach.

"Can I assume that you will attend to her needs when she gets here?" Julia asked the bard politely as she offered a tray of oysters. Gabrielle happily helped herself to one. "Or does she have a taste for something different today?"

Gabrielle choked on her oyster. She grabbed at a mug full of wine and gulped it down.

"And what about you, Sappho? How would you like to take your pleasure this afternoon?"

For the first time in her entire life, Sappho was speechless.

Phaon walked over to Sappho's couch and sat gracefully on its edge. "I will be taking care of Sappho this afternoon," she announced.

A mouthful of wine squirted out of Gabrielle's nose.

"Are you all right, my dear?" Julia asked with concern and leaned forward to tap the bard on the back.

"Yes, I'm fine," Gabrielle replied, wiping her mouth and nose with the back of her hand. She lifted the goblet and smiled. "Hmmm. Great wine."

Julia Felix returned the smile politely then looked over in Phaon's direction. "Phaon, don't you already have an appointment this afternoon?"

"You can make other arrangements, can't you, Julia? After all, this is the Tenth's Muse's first visit to our house. I'm sure you want to give her everything she wants."

Julia regarded Sappho. "Do you want Phaon?"

Sappho was certain she had lost the capacity to ever speak again in her entire life.

The poet nodded and drank quickly from her goblet, carefully avoiding Phaon's eyes.

Julia Felix rose from her divan. "Very well. I'll make the arrangements. Just let Phaon know when you are ready for your bath. I'll have Labia Majora waiting for the Warrior Princess. You'll know as soon as she comes."

Sappho watched helplessly as the bard choked on another oyster.

"Enjoy your day at my house," Julia Felix said smiling graciously and then she departed, the bottom of her long silken white toga trailing behind.

Gabrielle and Sappho watched in silence until she was gone, then their eyes locked together and they gulped in unison.

"Well," Phaon said as she folded her hands in her lap, "it seems you have me all to yourself for the afternoon." She stared at the poet, grinning at Sappho's reddening cheeks. "I don't believe I've ever seen you so reticent, Sappho." Phaon shifted closer and took the poet's hand. "This is what you wanted, isn't it?"

Sappho stared down at the hand holding hers. "No."

Phaon jumped a little in surprise and pulled her hand away, but Sappho held on.

"I mean, yes. I mean, no. I mean ... that's not what I mean." The poet sighed wearily. Never before had she ever so completely lost the ability to speak Greek.

"I mean yes," Sappho stated firmly. "Yes, of course I want you. But not like this. Not here. Not in a place like this."

"What's wrong with this place?" Phaon replied defensively.

Sappho smiled and squeezed her friend's hand. "There's nothing wrong with this place. It's just that ... it's just ... you don't belong here, Phaon. What are you doing here?"

Phaon sighed and removed her hand from Sappho's. She looked over at Gabrielle, who was sipping slowly on her wine and listening to the conversation closely.

"This is where I live," Phaon explained to both women. "Julia Felix owns me, Sappho. I am a slave."

Sappho sat up in surprise. "That is NOT possible."

"I assure you, it is," Phaon replied, smiling sadly.

"You can't be a slave. You're too ... you're too ..."

Phaon crossed her arms and looked at the poet, smirking slightly. "I'm too what?"

Sappho's mouth opened and shut, unable to find the right words. She looked over at Gabrielle, desperate for the bard's help.

"You're too educated ... and you seem so independent," the bard offered in response. Sappho smiled at her friend gratefully.

"Thank you," Phaon said graciously. "I'm just luckier than most. I have been a slave all of my life, Gabrielle. I was born into this house and Julia has raised me as if I were her own daughter. I've had the best of everything, as you can see. I have nothing to complain about."

"So, then, you are happy here?" Gabrielle asked, looking directly at Phaon and trying not to judge.

"Happy?" Phaon looked at Gabrielle and then at Sappho with a somewhat bemused expression. "Am I happy? I have never thought about that, Gabrielle. It's not a question of happiness. I have no choice, you see."

Phaon wiped a few stray strands of long black hair back over her shoulder and Sappho watched with shining eyes, thinking it was the most graceful thing she had ever seen anyone do in her entire life.

"What do you mean, you have no choice? There is always a choice," Sappho said a bit angrily.

"In Pompeii, you are either the owner of a House or you are a slave. This is the House of Julia Felix," Phaon explained, including everything around them with an elegant wave of her hand before resting it against her chest. "And I am a slave."

"I think I need a drink," Sappho mumbled. Phaon began to rise to fulfill the request, but the poet grabbed her arm and pulled her back down onto the sofa. "Don't. I'll get it." Sappho scooted off the divan and stood at the table to pour herself a goblet of the warm, sweet Pompeian wine. She downed it quickly and then poured herself another.

"I hope you don't think less of me," Phaon stated as she looked at Gabrielle

Gabrielle's eyebrows furrowed together and she shook her head. "Of course not. I'm totally against slavery. So is Xena. And there's entirely too much of it going on in the Roman Empire."

"Rome was built upon slavery, Gabrielle," Phaon said, smiling sadly. "Those who are conquered by Rome become their slaves, and Rome has conquered most of the world. It is the foundation of the empire. Without slavery, I think Rome would collapse."

"I'll have to remember to mention that to Xena," Gabrielle said. "It's been very hard for us to be here and not want to do something about it."

Phaon shrugged. "What could you have done, the two of you? You can't change the world, Gabrielle."

"Yes, you can," the bard stated with grin.

"End slavery?" Phaon asked with a snort. "Why, where would you even start?"

"One slave at a time. And I know just where to start."

Sappho twirled around, almost spilling her wine. "What do you mean?"

"Well, I was thinking," Gabrielle said and she shifted forward on the couch, sitting closer to the edge, "can't a slave buy her freedom?"

Phaon nodded. "Yes, a slave can buy her own freedom. But first, you have to have enough money to do that and then, your master has to be willing to let you go."

"And Julia Felix would probably never let you go, right?" Sappho commented.

"I don't know about that. For the right price, Julia would do just about anything."

"Well, then? What's stopping you?" Sappho exclaimed, suddenly feeling hopeful.

Phaon sighed. "Sappho, I don't have a single dinar to my name. Julia does not pay me for what I do here, you know."

"Well, she should!" the poet blurted. "I didn't mean it like that."

Phaon laughed and pulled at the poet's hand so she would sit back down on their couch. "I really do like you, Sappho."

The poet blushed beet red and looked away.

Gabrielle scratched her chin and thought. "You know, I bet I know someone who has enough money to make Julia Felix an offer she couldn't refuse." The bard raised her eyebrows and looked over at the poet.

Sappho lifted her own brow in response. "Really? Who?"

Gabrielle slumped, giving Sappho an exasperated look. Then the poet's eyes popped as though she had just been hit by a bolt of Zeus' lightning.

Sappho jumped up from the sofa and grabbed the bard's face with her hands, planting a big kiss on Gabrielle's lips before the bard had a chance to do anything about it. She pulled away making a big smacking noise and beamed at her friend.

"You are a genius, Gabrielle. An absolute genius! One day I'm going to kidnap you from that warrior and steal you away to my school where we'll live happily ever after!"

Phaon was smiling at the display. "I don't believe Xena would be very happy about that, Sappho."

"Well, then she'll just have to come and live there with us if she wants to be happy, won't she?"

The poet turned to face Phaon and got very serious. "Phaon, I don't want to force you into anything. I'm willing to buy your freedom from Julia Felix. If you wish, you can return with me to Lesbos or not. Either way, after the purchase, you will be a free woman. Do you understand?"

"Sappho, I don't know what to say."

The poet sat down on the couch and took the woman's hand within her own. "Just tell me it's what you want ... your freedom, that is ... all you have to do is wish it and it will be yours."

"It'll cost too much, Sappho. I couldn't possibly ask you ..."

"Phaon, I'm a very wealthy woman. I won't spend half as much in buying your freedom as I do in wine each year."

"Now THAT," Gabrielle said, raising her goblet in the air, "is probably very true."

"I will owe you my life ..."

"Just give me your friendship," Sappho said softly, silently wishing for a million other things.

Phaon touched the poet's cheek and smiled. "You already have that."

Gabrielle took a quick sip of wine and looked away, trying to give Sappho and Phaon their private moment.

She was feeling pretty good, actually. Sappho and Phaon were on the same couch staring into each other's eyes and she had helped that to happen. She was finally able eat a few oysters and other bits of delectable finger foods. The wine was warm and sweet; the atmosphere relaxed, if not a bit heady.

The bard's eyes scanned the room taking in the various lustful, and some downright surprising, activities with an artist's eye. A few positions she filed away in her brain for future stories - and then there were others ... well she was just going to have to try a few of them out for herself. Where was a warrior when you needed one?

Paris saw his opportunity and took it. He had been waiting off to the side, watching the conversation between the three women. Finally, it looked as though Sappho and Phaon were talking privately and Gabrielle was the odd man out. Pushing away from the wall, he sauntered over to the table, smiling when the bard noticed his approach.

"Gabrielle, don't tell me Julia Felix left you here alone with no one to keep you company?" He flashed a dashing smile at the golden-haired woman and waited for her to ask him to join her. She didn't.

"Oh no, I'm not alone," she answered, much to the mime's dismay. She nodded in Sappho and Phaon's direction and Paris looked over, wondering if she meant they were a threesome. Maybe the bard wasn't as innocent as he thought?

"Well, then would you care to make it a foursome?" He asked, hoping for the best.

The bard looked confused. "What?"

"No ... we would not!" Sappho stated strongly, standing up from her divan. She gave Paris a curiously dangerous look, pretty effective for a poet Gabrielle had to admit, and held out her hand for the bard to take.

"Come on, Gabrielle. Let's go have that bath!"

The three women exited the room hand in hand, leaving the mime behind to wonder what it was he had said wrong. Paris's consternation melted into a smile. Luck was still with him, for no where else in Pompeii but at the House of Julia would he be able to indulge in the delicious sight of a bare bard in a bath.

This wasn't a bath, this was a clubhouse, Gabrielle thought to herself as she peered around the corner of the doorway. The bathing pool was huge and full of patrons happily engaged in conversation and/or mutual bathing. To her relief, she saw nothing carnal going on in the water. There must be some unwritten law about no copulating in the pool during business hours.

Still, everyone in the pool was completely naked and Gabrielle had never bathed publicly before. She turned away from the doorway and leaned her back against the wall, sighing.

"I can do this," she said to herself, mustering up the courage to enter the busy bathing area. She looked down at her body. One hand was across her chest trying to cover as much as possible, the other hand was protecting golden locks of the curly type.

Now, how could she enter the pool looking perfectly natural and at ease and still maintain maximum coverage? She peeked around the corner of the doorway looking into the bath once again.

Everyone was pretty much occupied. Maybe no one would see her? Gabrielle spotted Paris wading in the water at the far end of the pool, near some steps. He was watching the entrance to the women's locker room with way too much interest, in Gabrielle's opinion.

She scooted back to her hiding position against the wall. Hades damn it! She should have gone in with Phaon and Sappho. No one would have noticed her then. The bard peeked out again. Centaur shit! Now Sappho and Phaon were looking for her.

What she needed was a distraction. Something to make everyone look away in the other direction. Then she could jump on in and no one would notice until it was too late. She would just wade on up to them, chin deep in water, acting like she'd been there all along.

No such luck.

"I know I can do this." Taking a deep breath, she put her hands down, stood tall, turned to take a step into the doorway and froze. Someone's warm palm had just lain itself on her shoulder.

The warm hand pulled her away from the door and Gabrielle turned to be greeted by a pair of sparkling blue eyes, an arched eyebrow and a very naked Warrior Princess.

"Mind if I join you for a bath?" Xena's contralto voice was music to the bard's ears.

"Xena!" Gabrielle said smiling, as she gave her partner's forearm a squeeze. Then her smile turned to a frown as she thought about it. "What in Hades are you doing here?"

The warrior smirked. "I could ask you the same question, ya know." Xena strolled passed Gabrielle to enter the bathing room first. "C'mon. Let's get wet."

The bard could not have wished for a better distraction. Xena entered the room and strolled confidently along the edge of the pool, drawing each and every eye to her as she walked by. The bard waited, peeking around the doorway, until the warrior had the undivided attention of everyone there, even Paris.

Gabrielle stood, poised and ready to go, until the timing was just right. Xena was approaching the far corner and all eyes were on the Warrior Princess.

Perfect!

She scurried across the marble floor as fast as the slippery surface would allow and hopped into the water, making a slight but, for the most part, unnoticed splash. Before anyone was the wiser, she had bobbed across the pool over to Sappho and Phaon and was humming and washing her armpits before anyone even realized she was there.

The poet was the first to notice.

"Hey! When did you get here?"

Paris whirled around, his face crestfallen at having missed the opportunity.

Gabrielle smiled innocently. "Water's great isn't it?" She resumed her humming and washed her neck.

Sappho regarded her friend through lidded eyes. "Right."

In the meantime, the Warrior Princess was making her descent into the water. She waded over to a side wall and brought her arms up to lean against it. Two slaves ran over quickly; one offered a goblet of wine, the other some soap. The warrior took the wine and sipped it, then motioned for the other slave to wash her back, which the servant did most happily.

Gabrielle stopped preening and stared at her partner opened-mouthed. She seemed perfectly at ease here in this environment, as though she'd been here a thousand times before.

Xena moved her hair away from her back to give the slave better access. The young servant made a quick decision and peeled off her toga, then jumped into the water and resumed her task.

"Gabrielle," Phaon said softly as she waded over. The distraction made the bard realize she had better close her mouth. She did, but she could not take her eyes off of Xena.

"Gabrielle," Phaon repeated, finally getting the bard's attention. "Xena is so magnificent."

Gabrielle could only nod in agreement. "I know."

"If I were you," the courtesan advised, "I'd go on over there before someone else lays claim to her."

Now THAT got the bard's full attention. "What do you mean?"

"It's a strict rule of the house, Gabrielle. No patron of Julia's is left alone. At least, not for very long."

"I'm alone."

Phaon smiled. "No, you're not." She nodded over in Paris' direction. "Paris has been told to administer to your needs. He just hasn't been able to figure out what you want ... yet."

"Paris?" Gabrielle turned to face the woman completely. "Paris works here? I thought he was an actor?"

"He is an actor. He is also a slave of the House of Julia. I told you Gabrielle, in Pompeii, either you are the head of a House, or ..."

"... you're a slave," Gabrielle finished for her, suddenly feeling extremely sorry for Paris. She had been avoiding him the entire time. She might have gotten him in trouble.

The bard turned in the water to look at Xena. The warrior had waved off the slave and was leaning back against the wall, arms spread, taking an occasional sip from her silver goblet. The water in the pool was as clear and blue as her eyes, and Gabrielle found herself captivated by them as Xena lowered her gaze to stare right at her.

Gabrielle felt the pull all the way down to her groin. The corner of Xena's mouth lifted in a tiny grin and the bard's mouth went dry. Suddenly the water felt as though it was hot enough to boil.

Oh, no, you don't! Gabrielle's sudden thought completely broke the trance. Not here. Not like this. What do you think I am ... your slave? You can just throw me some 'come hither' look and I'll waddle right over to wash your back?

Gabrielle shot a look at Xena that clearly communicated two things. One, she was still angry about last night. And two ... and two ... the bard was still having a hard time figuring out number two, but there was something about this entire situation that was making her angry. For starters, why was Xena here in the first place? The answer to that question led to something else that the bard didn't even want to think about. At least, not right now.

The Warrior Princess had a lot of explaining to do before she was going to get this bard to wash her back.

Gabrielle crossed her arms and turned away, ignoring the flabbergasted expression on her partner's face.

Then she waded over to Paris and smiled.

"So, Paris, weren't you saying something about giving me a tour of the theater sometime?" the bard said to a speechless mime, even as she ventured a sidelong glance in her partner's direction.

Xena was livid.

Gabrielle continued the conversation, finally drawing a timid response from the actor. She couldn't see Xena, but she could tell from Paris's expression that the warrior was impaling him with her patented glare.

"Paris?"

"Huh?" The mime tore his eyes away from the warrior and looked down into sparkling green. "Gabrielle. I think Xena is about to kill me."

The bard chuckled and patted the actor's arm. "Don't worry about it, Paris. If she does, you won't feel a thing. Now, how about that theater?"

There was a splash of water and Gabrielle couldn't resist turning to look. They all watched as Xena exited the pool. She grabbed an offered towel away from a slave and wrapped it around her body, taking unhurried but nonetheless irritated steps in the direction of the locker room.

Sappho bobbed up and down running over to Gabrielle as quickly as the water would allow.

"Gabrielle! What are you doing?"

The bard turned, feigning annoyance at being interrupted from her conversation.

"What do you mean?"

Sappho pointed to the warrior as she left the room. "Xena's leaving!"

"So. She can leave if she wants to. Or she can stay."

"Gabrielle, I don't understand you," Sappho said in exasperation.

The bard turned around to face her completely. "Look, I'm not some slave she can just beckon over to wash her back. Besides, what was she doing here in the first place? She didn't come here because she knew she would find me here. For Zeus sake, we didn't even know we were coming here! You see how she acted? Like she owned the place. Obviously, she knows her way around a whorehouse ... no offense Phaon."

The courtesan was laughing. "None taken, Gabrielle. However, you do realize that Xena was a warlord. One of the greatest, I hear. I'm sure she is no stranger to this type of pleasure."

"Maybe so, but she's not a warlord anymore. So it doesn't explain why she had to come here today."

"She's probably asking herself the same thing about you," Phaon said as she floated away from the bard, leaving her with that thought.

Gabrielle paled.

Oh gods, the bard bit her lip as she looked at the locker room door. She probably thinks I came here to ... came here to ... stupid ... stupid ... stupid.

SEVEN DAYS IN POMPEII

BY

DJWP



Mt. Vesuvius - Pompeii

Chapter 14

Having reached the end of another scroll, Xena rolled the parchment carefully and placed it on the empty bedroll beside her. She leaned over and shuffled through a few of the others until she found the next one.

She didn't open the scroll right away. Instead, she stared at the flames, watching them flicker for awhile before she reached to grab more wood to feed the fire.

"Ya know, I was pretty mad at you for that, my bard," she said, pointing the stick in her hand at the flame, then tossing it into the center. The fire said nothing in Gabrielle's defense, merely crackling as it consumed the wood.

"Though I must say, you are very beautiful when you're angry." Xena smirked, then settled back against the log.

The warrior lifted her hands in exasperation. "Why in the world would you think that I would be interested in going to a brothel?"

Argo neighed loudly in the background, voicing a definite opinion.

"Be quiet, you!" Xena scolded the mare. "Those days are over and you know it!"

If the warrior hadn't known better, she could have sworn Argo had just thrown her a raspberry.

Xena fixed the blanket covering her legs and laughed. Her thoughts carried her away, back to that day in Pompeii. Closing her eyes, she brought the memories into clear focus so that her bard could see them and remember the day right along with her.

The warrior grinned, chuckling at herself as she remembered how angry she was as she stomped along the streets of the city heading back to the House of Vettii, mumbling the entire time.

"Oooh Paris, weren't you going to give me a tour of the theater?" Xena said, mocking the bard's sweet voice as she stomped away from the House of Julia Felix. "I'll give him a tour all right. An up close and personal tour of the pointy end of my sword!"

She was so busy talking to herself, she walked right by the two small figures who were huddled in an alcove of a building.

"What did she think I was there for? A little afternoon snack?"

The warrior stopped short.

"Ares' balls, that's exactly what she thought!" The sudden realization brought a look of dismay to the warrior's face. Stupid ... stupid ... stupid.

The colorful reference to Ares' anatomy brought a muffled snicker from the shadow of the alcove. Xena whirled around to find Alessandro and Hermia trying to stifle their laughter behind small hands.

They froze, eyes round, caught in the act by the Warrior Princess.

"What are you two doing here? I thought I told you to go home?"

And she had. When she was done at the Forum (and what a waste of time that was), she had found Alessandro and Hermia waiting for her at the entrance. She thought it fortuitous that they should be there and hoped that the children had seen her partner somewhere in the area. Not only had they seen Gabrielle, but they had led Xena right to the House of Julia.

The warrior paid them two dinars each for the information and then ordered them to go home immediately. Who knew what kind of clientele the brothel attracted?

"Well?" Xena arched an eyebrow at the pair.

Alessandro stood tall. "We ARE home."

Xena's eyebrow rose two notches higher.

"We live here."

The blue eyes narrowed to slits. "Right."

These two beautiful children, clean as shiny dinars, dressed in silk togas and leather sandals, did not live in this part of town - let alone at the House of Julia.

She grabbed the children by the scruffs of their necks and pulled them out of the alcove.

"All right. Come on." She dragged them along, refusing to release them no matter how much they wiggled, until the pair settled down and was keeping pace along side her.

Xena looked down to her right at the boy, who was rubbing the back of his neck and staring up in defiance. On her left, still holding her hand, his sister skipped happily along.

"This is not a safe area," she stated firmly.

"How would you know?" the boy replied, "I know this city better than you!"

"Ya do, huh?"

Alessandro nodded. Xena thought about this for a moment and then an idea sprang into her head.

"Tell me what you know about the Golden Ceres."

"The Golden Ceres?" the boy repeated, looking up at Xena in surprise. Forgotten was his anger, now that the warrior had brought up such an interesting topic.

"Yeah. Ever hear of it?"

Alessandro snorted. Of course he had heard of it. He also had heard that the Ceres had been stolen. He looked up at the warrior in speculation. Now, I wonder what she knows about that?

"The Golden Ceres was stolen," he informed her.

Xena rolled her eyes. "I know that. Tell me something I DON'T know. Something about the statue. Ya know, where it came from. Why it's so important. That kind of thing."

The boy scratched his head. "Well, it used to belong to the temple down near the tombs. The one the common folk worshipped at - it's not big or fancy like the nobles'. Merchants used to give tribute - wine, food and such to the statue in honor of Ceres. Then one year, Caesar came to Pompeii for the festival and took it from the temple so all the merchants would have to give their tribute to him." The boy shrugged. "The nobles have held on to it ever since."

The warrior's steps slowed until she had stopped completely.

"Are you saying that Caesar stole the statue from a temple?"

"Did I say steal?" Alessandro asked in all innocence and then looked around quickly to check for eavesdroppers. "You're not one of those Caesar-lovers, are you?" he whispered.

When the warrior's expression changed to a snarl, he grinned. "All right, all right. Neither am I. Yeah, he out and out stole it. But, now," the boy said, grinning wickedly, "the tables are turned because someone has stolen it from them!"

The way she was staring at him made the lad nervous. "Why are you looking at me like that? I didn't steal it!"

The corners of Xena's mouth lifted into a nefarious grin. "Oh, I know YOU didn't steal it."

She ran her tongue along the inside of her mouth, thinking.

Alessandro watched her eyes sparkle. He could almost see the thoughts whirling around in her head and he waited patiently, hoping upon hope that she would make him a part of her plan - whatever it was.

Finally, the warrior smiled and it seemed to Alessandro that the sun had just jumped out from behind a cloud.

"How would you like to make a lot more than two dinars?"

Bingo!

By the time Xena was done putting the first step of her plan into place, Gabrielle was already back at Vettii's home. Sappho had collected a small entourage of admirers and they were gathered in the triclinium drinking wine. She stood in the atrium, just under the painting of Vettii weighing his pride, pondering which way to go: to her room or to Gabrielle. She could hear the bard in full story-telling mode and when Xena made her way quietly to peek in the dining room, she found a small group of friends gathered intimately around the table, enthralled by the bard's performance.

Xena watched for a while from outside the room, leaning against the edge of the doorway and listening to the story. The bard was obviously enjoying herself, telling her tale to an appreciative audience instead of to an audience of one, usually grumpy, listener. Again, Xena could not help but believe that Gabrielle would be much, much happier if she pursued the life of a bard and left the hardships of being on the road with an ex-warlord far behind.

Xena watched as Gabrielle's gaze drifted across the room and suddenly their eyes locked together. The bard continued to tell the story, not missing a beat, but her eyes were looking right at Xena as though she could read the warrior's mind.

She's probably thinking the same thing, Xena thought to herself and pushed away from where she was leaning to walk off.

Rather than join the party, she went to her room. It was not quite sunset and golden light filtered in through the window. Removing her sword from her back, she threw it on the bed and walked over to the window to look out. The opening faced the northwest side of the city and provided a clear view of Mount Vesuvius as it towered majestically in the background.

Xena wondered if she should join the bard and her friends for dinner, then decided against it. Gabrielle appeared to be having a wonderful time in Pompeii, surrounded by friends and admirers, being asked to perform almost daily. The presence of the Warrior Princess would only take the spotlight away from her partner, and Gabrielle certainly deserved being at the center of attention for once.

So, rather than join Gabrielle for dinner, she stood at the window, staring at the volcano. The swirling smoke that rose in a steady stream from the mountain's peak helped to distract her. Instead of worrying about her relationship with the bard, she found herself contemplating the path of the vapor as it twisted up and melded with the clouds in the sky.

She followed the trail of the smoke, its source filling her thoughts as she studied Vesuvius with a furrowed brow.

So intent on the volcano, Xena did not hear the door to her room open and Gabrielle stepped in. She didn't know how long the bard had stood there watching her watch the mountain before she spoke, but the sound of her name caused the warrior to jump a little before turning around.

"Xena?" the bard said softly and then raised her eyebrows in alarm, not expecting to have startled the warrior. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just thinking." Xena walked over to the bed and picked up her sword, pretending to fix a clasp on the sheath.

The bard, who knew better, was not buying the performance. Shaking her head a little, she stepped into the room and closed the door.

"Xena." "Gabrielle." Each said the other's name at the same time and then chuckled in unison.

"You go first," the bard said.

"Nah, g'wan. You first," Xena countered, turning around to face her partner.

"I'm sorry about what happened in the pool. I was ... that was ... stupid of me. I just ... it just took me a little by surprise to see you there, that's all."

Xena arched a brow. "How do you think I felt?"

"I know. I realized that later. You know, it wasn't what you think. I wasn't there to ... you know ... to do what people do when they go to a place like that. It's just that Sappho ..."

Xena held up her hands for the bard stop. "You don't have to say a thing, Gabrielle. I was the one who left you in Sappho's care. I should have known the two of you would end up getting into some sort of trouble."

Gabrielle seemed a little disappointed. "What about trusting me enough to know that I would have no reason to be in a place like that unless I was there for a perfectly good reason - like to help a friend?"

Xena let her hands drop and turned away, throwing her sword back on the bed. "That goes without saying."

"But it would have made me feel better if you had said it."

Xena whirled back around more than a little annoyed. "You weren't very big in the 'giving the benefit of the doubt' department either, you know. Jumped to some pretty quick conclusions about the reasons for my being in a brothel, didn't ya?"

The bard, who was about to point her finger and voice a sharp retort, decided otherwise. "You're right," she admitted, then rolled her accusing finger back into a fist before letting it drop to her side. "I jumped pretty quickly ..."

"Yeah, right into the water," Xena said, and they both laughed, relieving the tension. "I don't think I've ever seen you run that fast!"

"Not all of us enjoy parading across a crowded room in nothing but their birthday suits ... unlike SOME people I know," the bard replied, blushing.

"Oh, is THAT why you ran so fast across that slippery floor? Because you were naked?"

"Yeah, why did you think?"

"Oh, I dunno. I thought maybe Labia Majora was after you."

They shared a good laugh until Gabrielle took a step closer and placed a tentative hand against her partner's arm.

"Once again, you came to my rescue."

"Hey, that's my job."

Gabrielle let her palm slip along the length of Xena's arm until she had a hand caught within her own and played with Xena's fingertips. "You must be getting tired of it."

"Not possible," Xena answered, not bothering to pull her hand away.

"So," Gabrielle said, getting a firmer grip on a strong, calloused hand, "got any plans for tonight?"

Xena bit her lip, pretending to think. "Not sure. What are my options?"

Gabrielle lifted her eyebrows in speculation. "Well, personally," she said, pulling Xena forward and wrapping her other arm around the warrior's waist, "there is only one option I think that's even worth considering."

As though I would choose any other, Xena thought to herself. She was just about to lift the bard up into her arms and take her to bed when the sound of an urgent knock against the door filled the room.

"For the love of Zeus!" Xena said from behind clenched teeth. She pulled away from Gabrielle, but not by much. "Unless there's an army breaking down the door of Vettii's house, you better come back later," she yelled at whoever was risking their life by knocking on her door.

"How did you know?" Sappho's small voice croaked from the other side.

Xena and Gabrielle looked at each other, one in irritation, the other in alarm. The irritated warrior growled and went to the door, swinging it wide open with an aggravated pull.

She found a small poet smiling sheepishly up at her.

"Well?" Xena's ever-expressive eyebrow arched.

"There's an army at the door. They're demanding to search the house."

Gabrielle walked quickly up to stand beside Xena, worry written all over her face. Had Caesar found out about their presence in Pompeii after all? "Who are they searching for?"

The poet rolled her eyes.

"Why for that gods-be-damned, pain-in-the-arse, stupid statue, of course!"

The 'army' – a small group of guards, twelve by Xena's count - followed Menander down the hall with Vettii in hot pursuit, yelling the entire time.

Xena, Gabrielle and Sappho were not far behind, following more out of curiosity than because their presence was required.

"Where are we going?" Gabrielle asked, walking quickly beside her partner.

Xena shrugged. "Beats me."

They were marching to the far end of the dwelling, to a place where they hadn't been before.

"I think we're going to the trophy room," Sappho commented, bringing up the rear.

Xena and Gabrielle exchanged a glance and followed on in silence.

They came upon a double door at the end of a long hallway and Menander turned the latches, shoving both doors open to reveal the inner sanctum of the House of Vettii. His guards marched in and began to search the room.

"Be careful in there!" Vettii yelled, running after them. "These are priceless collectibles!" He fluttered about from man to man, trying to protect his collectibles from being touched or, godsforbid, knocked over.

The rest of the group entered the chamber, looking around in amazement. The room was filled from floor to ceiling with the fruits of Vettii's obsession.

Xena smirked as she looked around. "Hmmpf! I thought he said he collected art and military artifacts."

Gabrielle picked up a small golden statue of two women engaged in a very erotic activity, in a very unusual position. "I guess this qualifies as art."

Xena snorted. "Is that what you call this?" She waved her hand around the room. Every spot on floor or wall was filled with erotic carvings, or statues, sex toys and fetishes of all shapes and sizes.

Xena picked up a string of golden ben wa balls and arched an eyebrow. "Solid gold? Gotta be cold."

"But expensive," Sappho commented from behind the warrior. When Xena turned around to smile, the poet had taken the stance of a swordsman armed with a weapon of a very phallic nature.

"I do believe my sword is bigger than yours, " the poet announced, whipping her 'weapon' from side to side with glee.

"Wanna bet?" Gabrielle deadpanned. Their laughter attracted the nobleman's attention.

"Put that down!" Vettii yelled at the three of them, running carefully around a set of hand-blown glass leeching cups and a set of silver lancets to grab the dildo away from Sappho. "This is a very rare item!"

"Rare?" Xena said with a snort as the item was grabbed out of Sappho hands. "I've seen a million of 'em."

"I bet you have!" Sappho quipped, then let out a cry of protest as Gabrielle poked her in the butt with her staff.

The guards were finishing their inspection of the room, predictably having found nothing. Menander was turning red and Vettii had placed himself in the center of the room, looking as smug as a fetish bug in a rug.

"It's not here, Menander," the nobleman stated. "I did not steal the statue!"

"I'll tear this place down stone by stone if I have to!" Menander sputtered as he picked up a marble statue rendition of a hermaphrodite and looked underneath to search for clues. Vettii stomped over to the man and pulled the statue out of his hand.

"I said I did not steal it!" Vettii caressed the breasts and penis of the statue with loving care, staring at it affectionately. "Why in Jupiter's name would I steal it when I was going to win it anyway?"

Xena was watching the interaction with a smug expression - too smug for Gabrielle to miss. The bard stepped up beside her partner and leaned against her arm. "Xena, do you know something I don't know?" she asked in a whisper.

"Usually." Xena gently pushed a fuming Gabrielle aside by the shoulder and sauntered over to the arguing men.

"That's quite a tradition you've got going here, isn't it?" Xena commented to the two men. "Figures that Caesar would start such a thing."

They both turned to face her, insulted by the tone of voice.

"What do you mean?" Vettii asked defensively.

"Steal an effigy of Ceres from her own temple, then keep the tributes that ago along with it for yourselves."

"Does it matter where the tribute is given? It's still done in the name of the goddess," Menander explained. "And we didn't steal it. We're just borrowing it."

"Then give it back."

"Why would we do that? Besides, the contest is fun! A bit of competition! Surely, you can appreciate a battle of wits?"

"Oh yeah, I can appreciate it, all right. But if you ask me, if it were a battle of wits, ya'd both lose." The corner of Xena's mouth curved into a half-grin, matching the arch of her eyebrow. "Personally, I'm not betting on either of you this year."

And with that, Xena turned away taking several long, slow strides in the direction of the door.

"I know where you're hiding it!" Menander exclaimed, turning to sneer at his rival. "You have it in that secret room!"

The fat nobleman took off bouncing toward the back of the large trophy chamber, heading for a door barely visible amongst the clutter of Vettii's collection.

Reacting in panic, Vettii rushed off after his peer.

"No, by Jupiter, Menander, wait! It's not in there, I swear. Don't open that door."

Xena pushed passed Sappho and Gabrielle, following the two Pompeians with a perplexed look on her face.

Menander opened the small door and disappeared within. Vettii twirled around and put up his hands to stop Xena's approach.

"Now trust me, Xena, you don't need to go in there. The statue is not there. It's just a closet."

The warrior brushed the nobleman aside and disappeared within, followed immediately by Gabrielle and then Sappho.

Xena blinked so she could adjust to the light. The interior was dimly lit, like a shrine, and the room was a lot larger than she had expected for such a small door. This inner chamber contained Vettii's most private collection and it was obvious how much he valued it by the care taken in the presentation of its displays.

The warrior walked up to a collection of four swords and four knives, arranged symmetrically on the wall, and instantly recognized them as her own. The saber belonged to Xena when she led her first army, mostly young men from Amphipolis, conquering the villages surrounding her homeland and attacking mostly by the sea. It had, no doubt, been commandeered by Caesar after his betrayal. Now it was a trophy hanging on a Roman nobleman's wall. The warrior's expression darkened.

She moved to the next display, inspecting a series of standards and banners, all her own, in their many incarnations. There was the red one with her purple X. Then the black one with the silver sword dripping blood, from her days with Borias. And there were several of her most well-known banners; two simple flags, one atop the other on a pole - different shades of purple. There had been no need for symbols by that time. The world knew her flag and the color was bright enough to be seen for leagues. The collection brought distinct memories flooding back to the warrior. Her army charging, her standard flapping violently in the wind - the same wind that had whipped through her hair. Some of the poles still had dirt on them from when they had been plunged victoriously into the earth, the signal of success, a symbol of her strength, the banner of the Destroyer of Nations.

There were several outfits of armor displayed as well, spread out in perfect presentation as though suspended by an invisible body. Rough skins and a beaded vest, a long cape, torn and ripped all along the bottom, a hand-hammered chestplate too primitive to be decorated with lavish engravings. There were other chestplates from a time of greater wealth; those were jeweled and intricately designed, befitting a warlord of her stature. It was armor once worn by a woman who might have, one day, ruled the world. Xena stared at each display, thinking she could just step into them, right at this moment, and they would still fit perfectly.

The next wall presented Xena with a row of tall spears - tall enough to plant in the earth while riding a horse - with spikes long and sharp enough to hold the severed head of a man, a warning for the world to see and heed. Some of the spears still had blood crusted on the tips.

Xena's head reeled and she stepped away from the sight, bumping into Gabrielle, who was following behind her partner, staring at the displays in awe. The warrior blanched when she saw the bard.

She whirled away, trying to not see the expression on Gabrielle's face as the bard looked at the blood-covered spikes, only to find herself staring at yet another display. This one a map, one of many she used for her attack plans against Corinth. Xena stared at the map, reading the side notes and scribbles, instantly recognizing her own bold handwriting. Next to it was a missive, also written by her hand. It was a typical ultimatum, written often and without any feeling at all, and one that Xena clearly remembered: Surrender or pay a terrible price.

She reached out with a shaking hand to touch the wax that was still hanging off the end of the note. Although it couldn't be seen clearly, Xena was more than positive that it would carry her seal, a seal she still had with her to this very day. She jumped when she felt Gabrielle brush against her side, walking up to read the note.

Xena didn't think there was anymore air left in the room. The walls began to close around her. She looked at the bard with such a tortured expression that Gabrielle instinctively reached out to touch her arm, trying to calm her.

Xena jumped away, recoiling from the touch. She turned her back on her friend and faced the opposite wall, not wanting to watch as her partner got to see, first hand, the proof of her many atrocities. Here on display was her entire life as a warlord.

Closing her eyes, she took deep breaths, trying not to lose control and smash everything in sight. After a moment, she reopened them and found herself staring impossibly at the one thing she had never wanted to see again as long as she lived.

Her eyes widened in horror as she was confronted with a single item, set off from the others, on display under a special soft light in the center of the wall. It would have meant nothing if it had not meant so much. It was just a simple wooden crutch - hip high and well worn, hanging on the wall.

Xena took a stumbling step back, bumping into Vettii and practically knocking down Sappho.

The man smiled proudly as she turned to face him. She had to force herself not to lift the man over her head and impale him on one of those spears.

"Well, as you can see, I have quite the collection in your honor." Vettii lifted his arms and motioned around the room with pride. "It's taken me years to collect many of these things, some at great price, let me tell you."

Xena's nostrils flared. Gabrielle stepped forward and placed a comforting hand on her arm. "Xena," she said softly. It seemed to have an effect - a little, just enough to prevent the nobleman from being beheaded.

"I'm sorry, but I don't have much after you changed your ... focus," Vettii said, smiling apologetically. "I have a handle from a broken sword ... I think it's yours. Oh, and I managed to get a harp with broken strings. The man I bought it from told me you broke them yourself trying to play it. Is that true?"

There was no response from Xena. Only labored breathing.

"I'm trying, though. I do want my collection to be well-rounded, after all."

Sappho was staring at the man incredulously, shaking her head at his out-and-out stupidity.

"I'm a little unsure of some of the items," Vettii continued while stepping over to a table. He unrolled a map and looked at it under the light. "For example, I've been having trouble authenticating this one." He turned it toward Xena and her eyes drifted down to look at the parchment. "There's only a circle around a village and one word. I couldn't tell if it was your writing. I thought maybe you might recognize it. Perhaps, you would sign it for me. It would mean so much to me if I could add your autograph to my collection."

Xena immediately recognized the handwriting as her own. There was a circle drawn around a small, unnamed village. She had scribbled its name by her own hand as a potential target. 'Poteidaia.'

She slammed her fist down, tearing the map out of Vettii's grip and smashing it onto the table with such force that Gabrielle thought the table was going to shatter under the impact.

"I don't do autographs," Xena said, choking out the words in an angry growl. Then she pushed the table and all of its contents over onto the floor. She had to restrain herself from breaking Vettii's shoulder as she pushed by him and marched out of the room.

Gabrielle took one look at Sappho then rushed out of the chamber, ignoring the toppled table and its scattered contents.

"Vettii," the poet said, hands on hips, her silver eyes flashing anger, "you have GOT to be the biggest asshole in the known world!"

And with that the poet hurried out of the room in pursuit of her friends.

The nobleman stood alone in his shrine to the Warrior Princess, shaking his head, barely understanding Xena's reaction. He looked down at the table and the map, wondering at the anger he had seen in the warrior's eyes.

"Well, it's not my fault if she wrote it. It's not my fault if these are her things," he said to himself in his own defense and kneeled to pick up the items that were strewn across the floor.

Vettii nodded to himself, thinking back on Xena's reaction. He looked up at a shadowed archway that led to another small room, just to the left of the crutch. Barely visible in the scant light was the base of something big leaning against the wall.

It was a good thing he had decided to move that cross out of the room after all.

Dawn invaded the darkness shrouding Pompeii, turning the sky from empty black to a wash of colors that bathed the city in translucent hues. The city shimmered in the coming light; walls shifted as clouds drifted in front of the rising sun, sending flickering shadows against pale pink stone.

Vesuvius towered over all, its thin line of smoke snaked up through golden rays, a stairway to the gods. A flock of birds arched sharply in flight to avoid the column of vapor. It sent them flying in a path across the sun, their numbers creating a shadow that moved over the streets of Pompeii as they flew through the sky heading west, toward the sea.

Xena watched the flock fly by from her perch atop the roof of the House of Vettii. She had climbed up there, her only desire to avoid everyone, even Gabrielle. Most of all, Gabrielle.

She had spent the rest of the night sitting on the roof, first studying the stars, then watching Vesuvius. The mountain loomed in the background, standing in silent judgment over them all.

Xena tried to imagine life without Gabrielle, for surely the bard would leave her now. Her time as a warlord was no longer a ghostly memory, but solid and real, resurrected into the present by a roomful of relics from the past.

The shades of night were gone and the day was at hand. Time for Xena to face her future and acknowledge, once and for all, that no matter how hard she tried, she would never be able to escape her gruesome heritage.

She made an easy flip from the roof, landing on the stones of the street with a thud that echoed down the empty boulevard. Shifting shoulders to strengthen her resolve, she strode to the gate and entered the house.

It was quiet; everyone apparently still asleep. Xena walked down the empty hallway, pausing before the bard's bedroom door then deciding against entering. She walked the rest of the way down the hall to return to her own room.

When she opened the door to her room, she found Gabrielle inside, sleeping in a chair, their bags packed and ready, sitting on the bed. Xena stared, first at the bard and then at the bags, wondering at their significance. Was Gabrielle waiting to tell her good-bye?

The warrior walked into the room and stood over her friend, watching her sleep in the chair. The sun chose that moment to slip a ray in through the window and tickle Gabrielle's soft cheek. Her eyes twitched briefly in the sunlight and then she shifted with annoyance in the chair.

Xena watched all this in silence, wondering how in the world she was ever going to live without her. Maybe she should get down on her knees and ask her forgiveness? Again.

The very presence of her partner seemed to work its way through Gabrielle's dreams, nudging her awake. Green eyes opened, sparkling in the ray of sunlight as she looked up at the woman who was quietly watching over her.

"Xena?" Gabrielle's sleepy smile lifted the warrior's spirits. The bard sat up in the chair and rubbed her eyes. "Are you all right?"

Xena frowned at the question and turned away.

"I'm fine. What's all this?" she said, motioning toward the bags on the bed.

Gabrielle came fully awake and sat up in the chair. "It's our stuff. I packed while you were gone so we could get out of here as soon as possible."

"We?" Xena asked, turning around to face the bard.

Gabrielle's eyebrows knotted together. "Of course, 'we.' What did you think? I was gonna let you leave without me?"

"Gabrielle, how can you even look at me, let alone want to leave Pompeii with me?"

Gabrielle stared at Xena in confusion. "Xena, what are you talking about?"

"Last night. All those things you saw," Xena said in distressed tones. "That was all proof of the reality of my past, Gabrielle. Of who I am."

"Who you WERE," the bard stated clearly. "By the gods, Xena, after all we've been through." She shook her head and stood. "How could you think a few dusty old clothes and rusty old weapons were going to change the way I feel about you."

"But ..."

"NO, BUTS!" The bard pointed her finger up at her partner. "I mean it, Xena. The things in that room have nothing to do with who you are now. The woman who wore those clothes, killed with those weapons, leaned on that crutch ... she's dead. Dead and buried. I just wish you would leave her in the grave and STOP trying to resurrect her, 'cause if you're doing it to try to get rid of me, I have to tell you it's just not gonna work."

Xena watched the tirade in complete silence, thinking that she had, once again, underestimated her partner. By the gods, Gabrielle was beautiful when she was mad. The warrior found a smile growing on her lips as she watched the bard continue her tirade.

"Now lets GET our things, GET Argo, and GET the Hades out of this bacchae-infested, Caesar-loving, piss-house of a city before I do something I'm really going to regret, like ... what are you smiling at?"

"We're not going."

"What?"

"We're not leaving."

"We're not?"

"Nope."

"Why not? I thought you would want to get out of here."

"Nope."

Gabrielle narrowed her eyes. "Just what are you up to?"

"I have a plan."

The bard lowered her finger. "You have a plan. Of course, you have a plan. Why wouldn't you have a plan? You always have a plan. You're not going to burn Vettii's house down, are you?"

"Gabrielle!"

"Just kidding."

Xena narrowed her eyes at her partner. "Do you want to hear my plan or not?"

The bard put her hands on her hips and looked at the warrior with suspicion. "Does this have anything to do with the Golden Ceres?"

Xena's smile lit up her entire face. "Gabrielle, have you ever heard the expression, revenge is a dish best served at a festival?"

The bard's eyebrows disappeared into the bangs of her hair.

"I was forever underestimating you, wasn't I, Gabrielle?" Xena said to the stars, opening her eyes to gaze at the heavens and wondering again which one might be her bard shining back at her.

"The gods know, you had already gotten a good enough taste of the warlord over this last year. And you were still with me. I can't believe I thought you would leave me just because of a few old things hanging on a wall."

She thought back to Vettii's trophy room, to the shrine of the Destroyer of Nations and all of the souvenirs of a warlord hanging in places of honor on a rich man's wall. They were lost to the world now, sentenced by the judgment of a mountain god to an eternity buried deep within the bowels of the earth.

"Where they belong," Xena said, finishing the thought aloud.

"I'm so quick to blame everything on my past. If you had ever decided to leave me, chosen another path, it wouldn't have been because I was once a warlord, would it? I wonder how I would have dealt with that, or if I would have even admitted it to myself."

Xena shook her head to clear all the "what ifs" from her brain, then picked up the next scroll from her lap and began to read.

SEVEN DAYS IN POMPEII

BY DJWP



The Amphitheater – Pompeii
(Home of the Pompeian Gladiatorial Games)

Chapter 15

Sappho hustled along Via Stabia strolling toward the market. Her thoughts were filled with the beautiful woman Phaon and what securing her freedom might mean for the two of them. Of course, it wasn't certain that Phaon would want to leave with her or was even interested in her as more than a friend, but Sappho was willing to take a chance. If it took a million dinars to bribe Julia Felix then that's what Sappho was willing to pay.

A million dinars or, perhaps, one golden statue of Ceres.

The poet knew, without a doubt, that Xena had stolen that statue. Sure as she knew how to play a lyre, she knew that the Warrior Princess was involved up to her beautiful blue eyeballs in this sordid little affair. The question was, where would a Warrior Princess hide a Golden Ceres?

After all, it wasn't as if Xena knew many people in Pompeii. The statue was not at Vettii's house, that much was certain. So the question was, who else had Xena met since coming here who would be willing to help her?

Scooting around the corner onto Via Dell'Abbondanza, she spotted two children playing an innocent game of sticks and stones under the shade of an awning in the cool morning breeze.

Bingo!

Xena and Gabrielle strolled along Via Stabia to the market. They planned to spend a relaxing day, meandering through the city. Perhaps they would bathe together at one of the public pools or have lunch in a nice outdoor cafe. By then, Vettii's house would be empty and quiet, and they could sneak back in to enjoy the rest of the afternoon rediscovering a part of their relationship that they both had thought lost forever.

Gabrielle's staff clicked a happy rhythm in syncopation with their light steps as they walked along the street. She looked up at Xena and smiled. The warrior's black hair was flowing in the cool morning breeze and her eyes were sparkling in the bright sunshine. Sometimes, Gabrielle thought, just the simple act of walking beside her partner made the whole world seem right.

Xena glanced down at Gabrielle, catching the bard staring at her. "Watch where you're going, you'll trip over something."

Gabrielle couldn't resist. She wrapped her hand around Xena's arm, just above the elbow, lightly caressing the soft skin she found there. "Can't I walk and ogle you at the same time?"

"Not if you're going to step on the Pompeians," Xena replied with a grin and pulled Gabrielle to a stop before she could step on the legs of a beggar who was sitting against a wall.

"Hello, Gabrielle!" the beggar said. Ceres, the dog, wailed her tail.

Xena raised her eyebrow.

"Hello to you!" the bard replied with a smile. "And to you, too!" she added, including the dog with a pat on the head. "It's a beautiful day, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. You and your friend off to market?"

"Actually, we were thinking about getting something to eat."

"Try Diana's Bow. Turn right on Viccolo DiEumachia just ahead. I think you'll both like it."

Gabrielle grinned, "Thanks. Maybe we will."

"You're welcome," the beggar said, extending his hand, palm up, and smiling.

"Oh. Right." She gave Xena a nudge. The warrior was jerked out of a daydream and looked down at the extended palm.

With reluctance, Xena reached into her cleavage and produced a small pouch, out of which she drew a single silver dinar. She reached down to place the coin into the palm of a now very happy beggar.

It was halted abruptly by bony pale fingers which wrapped themselves around the warrior's strong wrist. Xena looked up in surprise into the face of a hag staring at her in anger.

"You'll give up too easily, warrior!" the old woman said in a raspy whisper, her eyes flashing with hostility.

Xena froze, staring at the craggy face which suddenly burst into a toothless smile. The old hag released her wrist, cackling at the look of alarm on the warrior's face.

"You'll give up too easily!" The old hag yelled and pointed an accusing finger at Xena. She stumbled away from a stupefied warrior in a fit of laughter.

"What in Hades was that all about?" Xena asked, watching the old woman as she staggered down the street.

"That's just Portia. She's crazy. Don't let her bother you," the beggar answered, not wanting the distraction to prevent him from getting his tip. He raised his hand up a bit higher until it finally got the warrior's attention.

"This whole damn city is crazy, if you ask me," Xena said as she slapped the coin down into the dirty palm. "Come on, Gabrielle. Let's go."

Xena stomped off without looking back.

The bard leaned on her staff with a sigh. "Great. Just when I thought it was going to be a nice day." She shook her head sadly and followed her partner.

"Xena, slow down!" Gabrielle called out. The warrior halted her steps and waited for the bard to catch up.

"You didn't let that crazy old woman upset you, did you?" the bard asked as she placed a comforting hand on the warrior's arm.

Xena's expression told her that she had. Gabrielle grinned. "Come on, you probably just need something good and warm in your stomach."

"Yeah, like a big goblet of that good, spicy hot wine they have here." Xena sniffed and let herself relax. "Only good thing about Pompeii is the wine."

"Yeah, and the stuffed clams aren't so bad either. I'm starving! Let's get something to eat. When was the last time you ate, anyway? Or slept for that matter? I swear Xena, if I didn't watch you every second you'd keep going until you dropped from exhaustion or hunger or both!"

The warrior allowed herself to be led in the direction of the nearest cafe by a very persistent bard.

"Like Sappho says," Xena replied with a grin, "plenty of time to sleep when you die."

Gabrielle regarded her with a frown. "That's not funny and I never did find it funny, and I'd appreciate if you would never repeat it again because I never will find it funny."

Xena pursed her lips. "Whatever you say."

"Now that, I like!"

"Xena! Gabrielle!"

"Speaking of a satyr," the warrior mumbled under her breath as Sappho came running up to them.

The poet took a few moments to catch her breath and then grabbed at Xena's arm. "Come on! There's something going on I know you are just going to love!"

Xena pulled her limb out of the exuberant poet's grasp. "We've already got plans."

"Xena, believe me. You are NOT going to want to miss this opportunity!" Sappho pleaded.

"Sappho," Gabrielle said, trying to get the poet to read in between the lines. "We already have something fun to do today."

"Oh really? More fun than ... say ... kicking half a stadium full of pompous Pompeian butt?" Sappho replied, hands on her hips, staring directly at the Warrior Princess.

Gabrielle sure knew the answer to that one, but Xena gently pulled her arm away from the bard. A very wicked grin spread across beautiful features as Xena took a step closer to the poet.

"Just where do I have to go?" she asked as her eyes flashed with an evil glint.



Grande Palestra - Pompeii

Sappho led them to the same area of the city as the House of Julia Felix, almost to the Porta Sarino before making a right turn. They found themselves staring at the amphitheater of Pompeii - the huge arena used for sports and gladiator contests, hunts and battles with wild animals, spectacles of the type which had been introduced to Pompeii by the Romans.

These exhibitions were so popular that the amphitheater was built big enough to hold the entire population of the city in one sitting. Gabrielle sucked in her breath, thinking that Sappho was leading them to Pompeii's version of the Coliseum so that Xena could participate in one of these brutal events. This would be the last place in Pompeii that she would want to go.

Much to the bard's relief, they avoided the huge arena completely and turned, instead, to an equally large building that filled their vision just to the right of the amphitheater. It consisted of an enormous square surrounded by a high wall complete with battlements. On the inside, along three sides, was a portico of Ionic columns. In the middle was a large swimming pool around which grew a double row of tall trees.

The pool, however, was not the center of activity. For surrounding it on four sides was a meticulously groomed lawn bordering the pool with luscious green grass. And on this field, which stretched out in all directions the full length from the pool to the portico, were men participating in all manner of athletic games, from archery to wrestling.

"This is the Grande Palestra," Sappho informed them. "The exercise field of the noblemen. Today is games day. They're getting their minds and bodies ready for the big festival tomorrow night." Sappho took a step closer to the warrior, watching her as she observed the physical activities occurring on the field with keen interest. "I'm willing to bet there isn't an ugly butt out there that can beat the Warrior Princess." Sappho wiggled her eyebrows up at Xena when the warrior looked down.

"Wanna go in?" Sappho suggested, grinning widely.

Xena pushed her aside and strolled into the Grande Palestra. Sappho took a step to follow, rubbing her hands in anticipation, but Gabrielle grabbed her friend and pulled her to the side.

"Thanks a lot, Sappho!" the bard whispered angrily.

"What? I thought she would enjoy the opportunity."

"We had other plans for the afternoon."

"Well," Sappho said with a smirk and a poke in the bard's ribs. "Imagine what fun you'll have after she gets through with 'em. I imagine her juices will really be going after this!"

Gabrielle leaned on her staff and watched the poet run after Xena into the Palestra.

"Hmmpf," Gabrielle said to herself, a knowing grin lifting the corners of her mouth into a full smile. "She's right about that."

By the time Gabrielle trotted up to stand beside the warrior, an argument had already begun. Apparently, Xena was not welcome on the playing field. There was a small group of men, naked save for the cotton wraps that protected their valuables. One short, wiry man held a scroll and was writing down the names of participants as they entered the playing fields. He was shaking his head at the warrior and staring up at her sternly.

"Explain it to me one more time," Xena repeated slowly, her voice dropping to a dangerous growl.

"There's nothing to explain," the man squeaked, then cleared his voice to sound more commanding. "The rules say no womenfolk on the playing field."

"No womanfolk, you say? And why is that?"

"Because that's the law!" A large, overweight man bellowed in support of his comrade.

The sight of a woman in leather and the ensuing argument was quickly getting the attention of everyone on the field. Several of the games had ceased and small groups of men were meandering toward the excitement.

"Are you telling me that you are afraid to let women participate in these games?" Xena said, taking a step so close to the small man that he had to look up at her - way up.

"We're not afraid," the man choked out in reply.

"Oh no?" Xena asked as she took another step even closer, causing the man to practically stumble over.

The larger nobleman stepped up, catching his friend by the armpits.

"Why in Jupiter's name would we be afraid to let women play?" he said loudly, loud enough for everyone who had gathered to hear. He smiled in satisfaction at Xena as the crowd answered with laughter.

"Then you're not afraid of women?"

Xena's question was answered by more guffaws and laughter.

Xena looked the fat nobleman dead in the eyes. "Then it's just ME you're afraid of?"

The fat man gulped, his expression revealing that maybe he should be, but his mouth responded before he could think.

"We are not afraid of you or anyone!"

"You're not?" Xena replied loudly, letting her voice echo above the men. The replies confirmed the brazen statement.

By this time, both Vettii and Menander had made their way over to the crowd, which was growing by the second.

Xena looked at Vettii and smirked. Before the nobleman could warn any of his compatriots whom they were up against, she turned to face the man with the scroll.

"Then I challenge the noblemen of Pompeii to a contest!"

There was laughter mixed with howls of outrage.

The fat man quieted the crowd with his arms and stepped up to the leather-clad woman with a grin.

"You. You are challenging a Palestra full of Pompeii's finest athletes to a contest?"

Xena looked around at Pompeii's finest.

"Oh, yeah. You bet."

"You and what army?" The fat man's sarcastic question caused another round of scathing laughter.

"Just little ol' me."

Xena's expression revealed no reaction to the cynical chortles that rolled through the crowd.

Vettii took a step forward and tapped the fat man on the shoulder, "Excuse me, Flabius, but do you have any idea who this is?"

Flabius pushed Vettii away. "Who cares? How dare a woman make such a brazen challenge in front of all the noblemen of Pompeii! I say we put her in her place!" He took a step closer to Xena. "What's the challenge?"

Xena stepped away from the man and began to pace the circle that had gathered around her. She talked loudly, so that everyone could hear, even the women who were gathering in the seats over the portico in the balconies above.

"I challenge the law of Pompeii that says women cannot exercise on the fields of the Grande Palestra. I'll go up against your best man in each of your main events, whatever they may be."

"Ask her what the stakes are, Umpiricus," Flabius demanded, poking the little man holding the scroll with an elbow.

"What are the stakes?" Umpiricus asked.

"The stakes are, I win in every event. If I do, then from now on women shall be allowed access to the field."

"And if you lose?" asked Umpiricus. He had been writing down the challenge even as the woman spoke the words.

"If I lose?" Xena repeated, stepping towards him with a sneer. "If I lose, then you will have the honor of being the first to ever beat me in competition."

Umpiricus snorted. "What kind of stakes are those? Who are you anyway?"

"The name's Xena," the warrior replied, stepping up to look over the little man's shoulder. "That's Xena with a capital X!"

The quill suddenly began to tremble as he scratched out the terms of the agreement,

Flabius' jaw dropped open. The crowd became silent. Sappho was jumping up and down on her toes, rubbing her hands together with glee.

"THIS is going to be GREAT!" the poet exclaimed.

The crowd parted as the group of officials, followed closely by the Warrior Princess walked to the first event on the playing field.

"There are five main athletic disciplines," Umpiricus explained. "There's the discus, the spear, the broad jump, archery and wrestling."

Xena nodded her head as the man talked, her eyes scanning the field scanning the areas set aside for each particular event. She could see they were approaching the area designated for the discus throw on the right side of the field.

Already the field was emptying, a crowd forming around the edges to watch the challenge. Up above them, in the balconies overlooking the field, women were gathering. The once small crowd was growing slowly as news of the challenge was already making its way through the rumor mill of the city.

Gabrielle took Xena's sword as the warrior removed it from her back. There was a slight wind and Xena's hair was flowing gently in the breeze. Gabrielle could see her blue eyes sparkling with happy anticipation. There was no doubt that her warrior was enjoying this immensely.

The bard had to laugh to herself. Xena was about to kick their collective butts. Sappho was right. This was going to be GREAT!

Umpiricus stepped up to the discus-throwing square and stood in its center.

"Xena the Warrior Princess has challenged the noblemen of Pompeii to a contest on the fields of the Grande Palestra! In the name of Ceres, in whose honor we train for the upcoming festival and Jupiter, King of All Gods, and in the name of Mars, who gives us strength to endure all challenges, we hereby accept the terms of the contest as stated!"

"The first of five events is the discus toss. The city's champion is Frisbius! Step forward Frisbius and stand in the name of Pompeii!"

A tall, muscular man stepped forward, waving to the cheering crowd and shooting Xena a leering smile. He had, in his hands, a round disc the same size as Xena's chakram, but solid and made of heavy clay. He shifted it confidently in his hands, letting Xena see that it was a lot heavier than it looked.

The warrior smiled indulgently at the display and put her hands on her hips. She was not impressed.

Frisbius stepped into the center of the bordered square. He flexed his muscles, put the discus in the palm of his right hand and heaved his arm back once, then twice. On the third swing, he allowed his body to follow his arm and heaved with all of his might, letting the clay saucer fly.

All eyes watched the spinning disc hover in the air, covering an amazingly long distance before it crashed into the lawn, taking a good bite out of the grass. The men erupted into applause. Umpiricus paced out the distance, checking familiar marker points as he stepped.

"101 paces!" he announced and scratched out the number with his quill.

The men cheered. The women in the balcony argued worriedly.

Frisbius stepped out of the throwing area and waved to his fans. He watched with a smirk as Xena was handed a new discus, chuckling at her surprise as she checked the weight of it out in her hands.

The warrior removed the far lighter chakram from her belt and handed to Gabrielle. The bard looked at the weapon and then at the discus which appeared to be so much heavier in the warrior's hands. However was she going to throw that thing?

Xena stepped up to the square, took her place in the middle, and centered the discus in the palm of her hand.

Instead of dropping her right arm back, as Frisbius had done, she dropped it across her body, swinging it down, letting her entire body dip at the knees and lift back up. She bent once, twice and the third time a huge grunting heave brought her arm snapping around with so much force, her entire body twirled around once, using the momentum to send the disk airborne.

It screamed through the air, making a noise never heard before in the history of the Palestra. The discus bounced off a column on the right side of the playing field, shot straight across the lawn and over the pool, trimming several branches from the bordering trees as it whizzed by.

It hit a marble bust of Caesar right in the nose, cracking it off with a resounding thud and a shower of flying sparks, which sent the discus careening directly for a group of watching bystanders. They all ducked as the projectile screamed just over their heads.

It hit the back of the playing field, just above the main entrance, which propelled it right at the head of Umpiricus, whose papers were tossed in every direction as he had to duck and cover.

With a heavy thud, the discus embedded itself into the dirt of the lawn exactly one pace further than where Frisbius' saucer had landed.

The audience of women watching in the balconies above burst into cheers.

Umpiricus looked up from his prone position, his nose covered with grass.

"How am I to measure that?!"

Frisbius was furious. "That throw is invalid! Her style was unorthodox!"

Xena adjusted her skirt and retrieved her chakram from a very proud bard.

"I threw it, didn't I?"

Silence.

Umpiricus lifted himself up from the grass, brushed himself off, picked up his scroll and quill, and trotted over to the embedded disc.

The Palestra waited in absolute silence for the verdict to be given.

Umpiricus looked up and announced.

"The discus toss goes to Xena, Warrior Princess by one pace!"

The gallery of women screamed its approval. Gabrielle looked up at the noise, seeing that the number of onlookers was quickly growing to epic proportions.

The men on the field burst into packs of grumbling arguments. But the referee was adamant and ignored all the yells of dispute as he stomped by.

"The next event is the javelin throw!" he announced and marched off in the direction of that part of the playing field.

Xena left the distraught Frisbius pounding his fists into the dirt. All grumbling ceased as the group moved en masse.

Umpiricus stopped at a chalk border line and stood to face the crowd.

"The second event is the javelin throw, in the ancient tradition of the great hunters of Pompeii! Our city's champion is Spearus. Step forward Spearus and do honor to Pompeii on this day!"

A very lithe Spearus strutted forward holding a beautifully crafted javelin in his hands. He nodded respectfully in his opponent's direction before turning to stand just behind the line chalk in the grass. Xena watched his technique, noting how he stood toe to the line and then took three carefully measured paces backward.

Spearus stood at this new position and hefted the long javelin into his hand, balancing it just at his shoulder. He leaned back, stretching the javelin behind him, and then took three quick hops forward before letting the weapon soar through the air. It cut a graceful curve upward and out, traveling a remarkable distance before arching downward and then finally embedding itself into the earth. The twang of its impact could be heard all the way across the field.

The crowd of men on the lawn of the Palestra roared their approval. The women in the balcony groaned at the distance covered.

Meanwhile, Umpiricus measured.

"202 paces!" He announced to a thrilled crowd of noblemen. "A new Palestra record!"

The women lamented. So did Sappho. Gabrielle looked up to find the entire balcony on all sides was now filled.

Xena stepped up to the line and took Spearus' arm in a warrior's congratulations.

"You hold the field record," she said, nodding at his smile. "But not for long!" He lost his smile. "I need a javelin!" She announced, looking around at several men who were standing just behind with javelins in their hands.

"You! Give me your javelin!" she ordered a lanky man just to her left.

He jumped. "What? Me? You want my spear? You can't use my spear! It was a gift to me from Caesar himself!"

The words were no sooner out of his mouth than he was flying through the air right along with his spear. He was still holding on even after Xena had grabbed it and immediately given it a mighty heave, sending him and the weapon arching through the air to the amazement of everyone watching.

All eyes followed his path as he soared overhead.

The javelin and the man landed with a pang exactly one pace beyond the spear of Spearus. The man's grip slipped along the length of the shaft as he dropped down onto the ground.

Umpiricus was already there, measuring the distance.

"The Javelin Throw goes to Xena, Warrior Princess, by one pace!"

The men on the field groaned. The balcony of women erupted into cheers. Gabrielle looked up to find a mezzanine of scarves flurrying in approval as the Pompeian women screamed.

Xena gave the cheering crowd above a brief wave before following Umpiricus to the next event.

"Next event is the broad jump!" Umpiricus announced, grinning at the warrior. Xena inspected the field with a furrowed brow. She had never seen anything quite like it.

It was a pit of sand, about fifty paces long, and that was all.

"You want me to hop over this little bit of sand? That's it?" she asked, turning to face the tiny referee.

The man laughed. "You're allowed to take three strides up to the pit and then you must leap. Where your heels meet the earth, that's where I measure."

"And if I go past the sand?"

The man shook his head, "No one has ever jumped beyond the sand pit. It's not possible."

Xena chortled and looked down at her partner.

"That's what they think," Gabrielle mumbled as she followed Xena to the pit.

They walked up to the jumping area and Xena tapped the referee's shoulder once again.

"Let me get this straight. You measure from where my heels hit the ground, right?"

"Right!" Umpiricus began to announce the event, but Xena interrupted him one more time.

"From where I jump to where my heels hit?"

Umpiricus looked up at her with annoyance. "That's what I said. What's the matter? Don't you think you can do it?"

"Oh, I can do it all right," Xena replied with a grin, watching as the audience on the field lined up around all sides of the sand pit, leaving one side open for the participants to run.

Umpiricus walked up to the edge of the launching point and announced:

"Next event is the broad jump! The city's champion is Hiphopites! Hiphopites, step forward and jump in Pompeii's honor."

A very trim and tall Hiphopites stepped out of the crowd and approached the line of the sand pit. He stood before the pit, facing it, and then did an about-face, taking three jack-rabbit hops away from the edge.

He turned back around to face the pit and spit in his hands.

Like a graceful gazelle, he took off in three long, loping strides before launching himself into the air. He flung his arms and legs up and out, stretching his limbs as far as humanly possible before the arc of his fall forced him to plant his heels firmly into the sand, just shy of the opposite end of the pit.

It was the longest jump any of them had ever seen. Umpiricus whistled. The men roared. The women groaned. Xena grinned.

She pushed past the crowd and took her place at the edge of the pit. Xena didn't even bother to take three running steps. She crouched down and sprang up, surprising everyone with the shriek of her battle cry. Hiphopites had to scramble out of the pit; she hadn't even given him time to get up.

All eyes followed the warrior as she launched herself into the air, flipping once, then twice overhead, traveling the full distance of the pit before the arc of her flight brought her down feet first onto the head of an onlooker standing at the other end.

Before he could even react, she had sprung off of that head then landed on another before flipping over one more time and ending her flight by planting her heels gracefully into the grass more than 50 paces beyond the sand pit and the crowd.

She turned to look over her shoulder with a smile at the herd of men who were regarding her in awed silence. Xena apologized with a pout at the two unwilling assistants who were lying in the grass, rubbing their heads.

"Xena wins the Broad Jump!"

The men erupted into angry shouts.

"She cheated!"

"She did flips!"

"She used heads!"

"Her method "

"... is unorthodox," Gabrielle finished for them with a grin.

"Her heels landed in the ground 50 paces beyond the sand pit," Umpiricus stated bluntly. "Besides, even if I measured from where she hit the first head," Umpiricus explained as he stood over Xena's first victim, still lying in the grass, and tapped on his noggin with the tip of his quill, "she would still win."

The men became silent.

The women overhead roared. Sappho jumped up and down with glee and hugged the bard.

"The next discipline is archery," the referee announced as he trudged away toward the area of the field which held a row of targets, recording the results of the last event in his parchment as he walked.

The crowd moved across the lawn toward the archery field, filling in the spaces behind another painted line, the border that marked the shooting line for the archers. Someone handed Xena a bow, which the warrior flexed easily, getting a feel for the tension.

"Not taut enough," she said and returned the weapon to its owner. The crowd around her mumbled and another volunteer handed over a weapon. This was a much larger bow made of thick, red wood. The weapon creaked as Xena drew it back experimentally.

The warrior grinned in approval and its owner bowed.

Umpiricus stepped up to the line.

"The next event is bow and arrow. Pompeians are blessed by the Goddess Diana with a strong arm and a sure eye. The best of us in this discipline is Popidius! Step forward Popidius! May your aim be true in the name of Pompeii!"

Gabrielle and Sappho looked anxiously at one another. They had not seen Popidius since that unfortunate dinner the first night. The bard looked over at her partner. Xena was grinning with a certain glint in her eye that Gabrielle did not like one bit.

The bard watched her partner with suspicion as the warrior quickly asked for an arrow, even as Popidius was stepping up to the line. When, Xena asked for two more, somehow loading all three on the bow in highly unorthodox manner, Gabrielle stepped forward ready to intercede, had not Sappho held her back.

Popidius stood at the line, strong and tall. He lifted his bow into position, drawing the arrow back with a steady pull and pointed its tip at a colorful round target more than 200 paces away.

He paused and aimed, the field of noblemen held their breath, the balcony full of women covered their mouths, and he let the arrow fly.

It cut through the air faster than the eye could follow, streaking a path across the field and embedding itself deep into the very center of the target, so very far away.

"Boarseye!" someone yelled and then the men let out a resounding howl.

Popidius gave his bow to a friend and trotted down the field to the target to inspect the hit. He was followed closely by Umpiricus who intended to see the mark for himself.

Popidius stood before the target, running his finger from the center along the shaft of the arrow, pulling down and releasing it at the very end, so the arrow would snap up and down with a musical twang. He turned to face his audience with a self-satisfied smile.

Gabrielle's concern turned into full-on anxiety when she saw her partner raise her bow.

It took less than a second for Popidius to realize that there were three arrows careening in his direction. He backed up in panic, spread eagle against the target, afraid to move a muscle.

The first arrow split the shaft of his own, embedding itself exactly in the center just to the left of his face. He stared at it as his arrow crumbled into pieces and Xena's vibrated in its place. The second hit under his right armpit. The third landed between his legs, pinning his loin cloth to the target just at a point where there was thankfully enough fabric. Despite the fact that he still had his manhood, Popidius screamed two octaves higher than his normal range.

Umpiricus, who was standing just to the left of the target, watched the shaft of the arrow between Popidius' legs quiver in its place.

"Xena wins!" he squeaked. No one dared argue with a shot like that.

The crowd of women above erupted to a chorus of whoops and hollers.

Xena and Umpiricus headed off to the last event, leaving Popidius where he stood, pinned spread eagle to the target by an arrow through the loin cloth.

The men grumbled, ignoring his whimpering pleas for help, as each one shuffled by.

The group moved across the field to the wrestling ring. The last event. Gabrielle scanned the faces hoping for a glimpse at the Pompeian champion for this event.

He was hard to miss. A huge man, a tremendously huge man - in fact, he was a mountain of a man. The bard gulped as he sauntered by, certain that the ground was shaking underneath her feet. He stepped up to the ring, which was a round platform, raised almost two meters above the lawn.

She watched in awe as the man somehow managed to lift his huge bulk of a body onto the wooden stage and prance around, flexing his muscles and adjusting his loin cloth. He winked at the bard as he gave the cloth a tug.

Xena frowned, not appreciating the action.

She gracefully flipped herself up, landing on the stage with a solid thump and proceeded to remove her armor. An evil smile answered the many catcalls which accompanied her actions. She threw her armor down to Gabrielle, followed immediately by one gauntlet and then the other.

The warrior proceeded to pace around the ring, wiping her nose, flexing her own muscles and giving her bustier cups a lift, one at a time. The performance was answered by a balcony full of cheers and yodels.

Umpiricus stood before the ring and raised his hand for silence.

"This is the last event. If Xena wins, then Pompeian law is changed forever and women will have access to our playing field. Lose, and we gain the reputation of defeating the Warrior Princess herself in fair contest! The final discipline is wrestling. Hand-to-hand combat is the true test of a warrior! Our own champion is Gluteus Maximus! Stand for Pompeii and make us proud, Gluteus!"

With a nod of Umpiricus's head, the wrestling match began.

Gluteus Maximus took a wide stance in the center of the ring, flexing his muscles and grunting as Xena circled him with light, dancing steps. He lunged at her experimentally, but the faster warrior woman easily danced away, letting his momentum tip him off balance.

The women in the balcony began to yodel in true Xena fashion, sending a wave of warrior cries out over the Palestra like a call to the wild.

Gabrielle began to prance back and forth, mimicking the motions of her partner as she circled.

"Come on, Xena! That's right. Don't let him catch ya. The bigger they are the harder they fall, right? That's it! Circle, step, float like a butterfly ..." the bard skipped away as the warrior avoided another lunge, "... sting like a bee!"

Just to the bard's left, Sappho was prancing in much the same manner.

The men began to yell out instructions, some of which were neither pleasant nor called for. The crowd was getting ugly, but not as ugly as Gluteus Maximus.

He took a quick lunge at the Warrior Princess, catching her in his arms and squeezing hard as he lifted her body off the mat and into the air.

Xena gasped for breath. Her arms were pinned to her sides. She struggled against the big man's arms, but it was to no avail. He was strong, very strong. And stupid.

The last thing he saw was the smile on Xena's face just before she butted him in the head. The blow sent the man reeling backward, the hold on the warrior completely forgotten.

Now he was angry. He shook his head to clear it and touched the growing lump on his forehead. It hurt.

From the other end of the ring, Xena grinned wickedly and blew him a kiss. The man howled in rage and stomped forward with the lumbering steps of a giant.

Xena waited a split second. Then, with a resounding cry, she bounced once on the balls of her feet and took off at full speed directly for him.

Gluteus Maximus laughed in triumph, certain his superior weight was going to crush his opponent to the mat. He lunged forward, arms outstretched, full steam ahead.

Gabrielle froze in horror. The women above gasped their collective breaths. Sappho covered her eyes.

At the last moment, Xena dropped to the floor, sliding feet first in between the legs of the giant wrestler.

Her slide took her under and through and he ended up running right over her. That is, until Xena reached up and grabbed his loin cloth, giving it a solid tug that brought the thong down around his ankles in one yank.

He barely had a chance to cover the family jewels as his forward momentum sent him flying from the ring, the white cloth still wrapped securely around his feet. He landed with a resounding thud face first in the grass right between the bard and the poet.

"Looks like a full moon," Sappho commented and gave the wiggling globes a poke with her foot.

"Xena wins!" she yelled to the balcony.

The Palestra filled with a cacophony of screams, yodels and warrior cries. Hundreds of silken scarves flitted through the air, thrown down to the triumphant Warrior Princess.

It didn't take long for the balcony to empty and a multitude of women to fill the fields, dancing across the lawn in jubilation. They jumped into the pool and splashed water in celebration. The ring was swarmed with women of every shape and size, crowding the men away and overtaking the field.

The warrior was lifted from the ring by a score of feminine hands and placed on a pair of sturdy shoulders. She allowed herself to be carried in a circle around the pool, waving at the scores of women who were flinging off their sandals and dancing barefoot in the grass.

Eventually, the disappointment of the men disappeared and women wrapped their arms around them, kissing them and making them join in the dance.

Before long, what was once an athletic practice field was one big party.

Sappho and Gabrielle were twirling one another around in circles, yelling and laughing until the earth began to spin and Gabrielle had to sit down in the grass to wait for it to stop. They laid back on the cool lawn and giggled until a pair of dark, heavy leather boots came into view.

"Just what are you two doing?"

Gabrielle looked up to find a sweaty Warrior Princess staring down at her. She jumped up from the grass and threw her arms around her friend, giving her a great, big hug.

"Xena! That's was terrific!" The bard held on tight as the warrior hugged her back.

"Hey, I'm all sweaty!" Xena said, voicing a weak complaint.

"And that's a bad thing?" Gabrielle pulled back to stare at her friend. "Are you hungry?"

"Hmmm. Starving!"

Sappho jumped up from the ground. "Come on! Let's eat! Dinner's on me!"

Together the friends made their way through the exuberant crowds, which now just seemed to be celebrating for the sake of celebration alone and were no longer interested in the Warrior Princess.

They strolled at a leisurely pace, triumphant, across the playing field of the Grande Palestra, passing out of its massive gate virtually unnoticed, yet leaving a piece of Pompeii forever changed in their wake.

"Bbbuurrrp!"

Sappho gulped a half-swallowed mouthful of wine and stared at the Warrior Princess in shock.

"Xena! Warrior princesses don't burp!"

The warrior leaned back in her chair, patted her stomach and smiled contentedly.

"BBBBUURRRRP!"

Gabrielle put down her spoon and stared at her partner. "Xena, must you?"

"Bbbyesssurp!"

The poet's next sip of wine spurted out of her nose. "By the muses, Xena. That takes talent!"

Xena beamed proudly. "In my day, I could send a full corp of calvary charging with one belch!"

"One of your more ruder skills, I suppose," Gabrielle muttered while sucking on a crab leg.

"Oh, I have others!" Xena stated, eyes widening mischievously.

"I'm sure you do."

Xena lifted her leg and leaned to the side. "I could demonstrate."

The bard dropped her crab. "Please don't!" Gabrielle answered hurriedly. She pushed the leg down and straightened Xena back into the chair. "Barbarian," she mumbled.

"Yeah, but I'm your barbarian," Xena replied with a charming smile.

Gabrielle picked up her crab leg and continued to search for succulent pieces of meat. "Well, if I'm going to keep you, I'm going to have to teach you some manners."

"Oh, really?" Xena asked and leaned forward. Her smile widened. She was obviously enjoying the way Gabrielle was playing with the crab leg, watching her sparkling green eyes study the shell as she searched for the best way to crack through to the sweet meat inside. "And just what would you teach me?"

"Well, for one," Gabrielle replied, still giving her full attention to the shell of the leg, which she was just successfully splitting open, "I would teach you not to pick your nose in public."

"I'm not supposed to pick my nose?"

"No," the bard said, pulling a nice, juicy piece of crab out and dangling it triumphantly in the air. She licked her lips in anticipation.

"What about if I pick your nose?" Xena asked in all innocence, leaning over to poke a finger up a bardic nostril.

"Xena!" Gabrielle exclaimed and swatted her hand away. The distraction was enough to allow Xena to swipe the crab meat from the bard's fingers with one bite before her bard could even realize what had happened.

"Hey! That's my meat!"

"Hmmm!" Xena hummed happily. "Sweet!"

Sappho drank her wine as she watched the interaction with a big grin. She hadn't seen them this at ease with each other since they'd arrived. Even then, they seemed to maintain a respectful distance. All that had gone wrong in Pompeii was apparently bringing them closer together. The poet silently wondered whether one day she and Phaon would be sitting at a cafe table, playfully flirting with the pieces of delicious crab as bait.

A golden ray of sunlight reflected off a shiny object, hitting the poet in the eye. She had to squint to see what had caused it and noticed that the sun had shifted position and was soon about to set.

"By the muses, it's almost sunset!" Sappho said anxiously. She sat up in her seat and filled her goblet with wine, explaining as she emptied the cup between gulps. "We have to get going or we're going to miss the opening act."

Xena and Gabrielle stopped tugging the last crab leg between them and stared at the poet.

"Miss the opening act of what?" Gabrielle asked.

"You wanted to see a play, didn't you?" Sappho responded.

Xena used the surprised response of her partner to the mention of the play and snatched the last piece of crab. She popped it into her mouth, chewing victoriously.

"I let you have it!" Gabrielle grumbled and then turned back to Sappho. "Play? What play?"

Sappho stood. "You told Paris you wanted to see a play, right? Well, it's Friday night. He got us the best seats in the house. It's gonna start. You coming?"

Gabrielle looked at Xena expectantly. She knew all Xena really wanted to do was go back to Vettii's house, but she really did want to see a play. After all, they'd spent the afternoon doing a "warrior thing". The least they could do was spend the evening doing a bard thing.

Xena lifted a tender, plump crab leg that she had hidden under a napkin, out of view. Cracking the shell open expertly, she removed the succulent meat offering it to her partner by bringing the white meat up to her lips.

"We spent the afternoon doing warrior-type things," Xena said, smiling widely at the brightness in her bard's eyes. "We can spend the evening doing a bard-thing. If you want to see a play, then a play it is!"

With sparkling green eyes, Gabrielle snatched the meat from Xena's fingers with one bite. The feel of the bard's soft lips as they brushed against her fingertips had been the most erotic thing Xena had experienced in years.

Xena closed her eyes and smiled, remembering that moment with exquisite clarity.

She also recalled that the rest of the evening had been almost as perfect. Gabrielle's expression as they entered the theater and were ushered all the way down a sea of steps to the best seats in the very front of the stage; the high warbling, imitation warrior cries and the waving scarves that greeted them as each and every woman in the house recognized who had just walked in; her bard's shining, proud eyes when she looked up at her; these details were etched forever into her memory.

"I can't remember the last time you looked at me like that, Gabrielle," Xena whispered to the sea, smiling as the waves crashed against the shore, bringing the sound of the women's cheering and applause back to her mind.

"I was your hero once again, wasn't I?"

SEVEN DAYS IN POMPEII

BY DJWP



Grand Theatre - Pompeii

Chapter 16

Gabrielle wiggled, trying to make herself as comfortable as possible on the hard stone bench. Folding her hands in her lap, she sighed happily, looking around at the enormous theater and the even more impressive stage.

Imagine performing in such a place, she thought to herself and spared a glance up at her partner. Xena was sitting straight-backed with legs crossed patiently waiting for the show to begin.

"I hope you won't be bored," Gabrielle whispered, leaning over so Xena could hear.

"I won't be."

"After all, serious drama is the highest form of art. Sometimes it's hard to follow, it can be so metaphorical."

"I'm sure I'll understand it just fine."

"If there's something you don't get, just ask."

Xena glanced down at her friend and raised a brow. "Do you have any idea what play we'll be watching tonight?"

"No," Gabrielle admitted, "But I'm sure it'll be one of the classics. After all, look at this place! Only Aristotle, Sophocles, Aristophanes would be worthy of this theater." An idea popped into the bard's head and she grabbed Xena's forearm in excitement. "Maybe we'll get to see Prometheus Bound! Wouldn't that be fun?"

"A blast," Xena mumbled, but smiled at Gabrielle anyway.

"Well, if anything goes over your head, just let me know. I'll be happy to explain," the bard said, giving her partner's forearm a gentle squeeze.

Xena was about to make a cynical retort concerning height when the curtain began to lift and the crowd quieted.

"It's starting," Sappho leaned over and whispered.

A hush fell over the theater. Gabrielle sat, back straight, posture perfect, her face shining with anticipation for some great theater to begin.

Any dreams Gabrielle might have had for a night full of classic Greek drama were dashed when a large, man-made, horse rolled out onto the stage. It turned its rump to the audience, lifted its tail and out popped Paris, dressed as a caricature of Caesar himself. He fell, ass first, on to the floor followed promptly by a resounding fart.

"BWAAA HAHAHA HAHAHA!"

Gabrielle looked up in surprise at Xena who, like the rest of the audience, was howling with laughter.

Back on stage, Caesar was trying to stand, none too successfully because he kept slipping on piles of brown fodder, parting gifts the horse left behind as it exited the stage.

Caesar slipped once again and rose with a face full of the stuff.

"BWAAAA HAHAHA HAHAHA!"

Gabrielle stared at her partner in amazement. "You think this is funny?"

"Let me know if you don't understand somethin'," Xena said, wiping the tears from her eyes. She would have said more, but Brutus had just walked onto the stage and bent over.

"BWAAAA HAHAHA HAHAHA!"

Gabrielle folded her arms across her chest. "THIS is Pompeian theater? It's nothing but a farce!" she exclaimed, looking at Sappho for support.

The poet was trying to catch her breath to answer, but the look on the bard's face only made her laugh more.

Xena glanced down, noting the look of disappointment on her bard's face. She grabbed Gabrielle's hand, entwining their fingers together, and gave a small squeeze.

"Come on, Gabrielle, relax. So, it's a comedy."

Up on stage, Caesar was being bounced between the bosoms of two robust women.

"Rude, perhaps. But you have to admit, it's very funny." Xena pulled the bard's hand, giving her a shake and staring at her, daring her to smile.

Before she could stop herself, a crooked smile began to work its way onto Gabrielle's lips. The grin gave way to a full belly laugh when Caesar's wife hit him in the head with a frying pan.

"That's more like it," Xena whispered, giving the warm hand another squeeze and refusing to let it go.

Gabrielle finally relaxed and actually found herself beginning to enjoy the show. She was chuckling in spite of herself at the antics on stage, but mostly she was enjoying watching Xena enjoy the play. Between being able to see

her partner laugh louder than she had ever seen her laugh before, and having her hand held, the bard didn't think she could have asked for anything more.

"Excuse me. Which way is the ... latrine?" Gabrielle asked a young man who was kneeling in front of a wall.

He lifted his head from his work, scribbling something on one of the few bare spots left on the painted stone in the rear of the theater.

"Keep walking. First door on the right," he answered and turned back to his task.

Gabrielle peered over his shoulder at the writings, which were everywhere. "What are you doing?"

The young man paused and looked back up at her. "I feel like leaving a message."

Gabrielle nodded, trying to understand. "But it's such a beautiful wall. Why does everyone want to write all over it?"

He smiled, recognizing that she must be a tourist and unfamiliar with Pompeian customs. "It's art. And what better place for art than in a theater? Look at it. The hearts and minds of all of Pompeii, immortalized forever as words on a wall."

"Huh. I never thought of it that way." Gabrielle bit her lower lip, thinking it over. She leaned closer, trying to read the words he was writing.

All the world's a stage and all men and women merely players ...

"That's good," she said, smiling down at him. "Are you a bard?"

He shook his head. "Nah, but I'd like to be. A bard or a scribe. Unfortunately, my father is in the Navy. He's an admiral. Wants me to follow in his footsteps, serve Caesar and Rome."

Gabrielle gave the young man's shoulder a squeeze. "You should follow what's in your heart. Your father will love you no matter what you choose to do."

He smiled up at her, surprised at the insightful words. "You think so?"

Gabrielle nodded. "I know so. I know because that's what happened to me. My parents expected me to live a certain kind of life, but I had other ideas. I followed my heart and even though they really don't understand, I know for certain that they still love me. They always will."

He seemed to think about this for a moment, before letting a handsome smile grace his features. "Thanks!" he said, wiping his hand on his pant leg and rising to shake the bard's hand. "My name is Pliny. Pliny, the Younger. My dad is Pliny, the Elder. Maybe you've heard of him."

Gabrielle took Pliny's hand and gave it a friendly shake. "No, I haven't heard of him. But then, I'm not from around here."

"I figured as much," Pliny said with a smile. "Here." He handed his quill and ink to Gabrielle. "Would you like to write something?"

Gabrielle took the quill with a delighted smile. "Thanks. Maybe I will."

She pressed the tip of the quill to her lips and thought deeply for several seconds. Her eyes scanned the wall, finding an appropriately clear spot amidst the scores of messages.

Finally finding adequate space, she dipped the quill in the ink and wrote.

Xena, you are the warrior of my heart. - Gabrielle

"That's nice," Pliny commented as he looked over her shoulder. "Are you a bard?"

"Yeah," Gabrielle answered with a big smile as she returned the quill and ink. "I have a feeling you will be, too, one day. Thanks for letting me write something."

"My pleasure. And thanks for the words of support."

Gabrielle gave him a small nod and left the wall, heading in the direction of the latrine.

"Your words will be here forever!" Pliny called after her and then bent back to finish the rest of his own message.

By the time they got back to Vettii's house, Gabrielle was exhausted. Although Sappho had invited a handful of people for late-night drinks in Vettii's triclinium, Xena and Gabrielle gracefully excused themselves and headed back to Xena's bedroom.

No sooner had they entered the chamber than Xena flung herself onto the bed with an exhausted moan.

"What a day!"

Gabrielle walked into Xena's room and stood in the middle, feeling a little bit ... what? Uncomfortable? Excited? Her stomach rumbled in answer.

"Don't tell me you're hungry?" Xena exclaimed, lifting her head from the pillow to stare at Gabrielle incredulously.

Gabrielle blushed and grinned. "That, amongst a number of other things."

Xena answered with a sly grin. "Why don't you sneak out to the kitchen and get us a tray of snacks?"

Gabrielle nodded briskly in agreement and turned to dash off on her mission.

"Bring the snacks back here," Xena ordered, stopping the bard mid-step.

"Right."

"Don't take too long."

Gabrielle shook her head. "I won't."

"Don't talk to anyone on the way. Especially Sappho."

Gabrielle smiled. "Right."

"And come right back here."

"I'll be right back. I promise."

"Good," Xena said and let her head drop back against the pillow. Her head popped back up quickly. "DON'T let Sappho talk you into anything."

Gabrielle grabbed the door handle and pulled. "Not tonight," she answered with a big grin.

Xena's reply was a bright smile and the return of her head to the pillow.

Gabrielle let the door close itself gently behind her as she left.

"Don't forget some wine!" she heard the Warrior Princess call as she hurried down the hall.

True to her word, Gabrielle avoided the dining room, Sappho, and the after-show party altogether. Two nice servants helped her put together a tray of delicious tidbits. With a flask of wine tucked under her arm and a tray full of food in her hands, she tiptoed passed the triclinium and made her way back to the living quarters completely unnoticed.

Pressing her back against the door, she let herself into Xena's bedroom.

"As you commanded, Warrior Princess!" the bard said brightly as she entered the room.

She was greeted by a loud snore. The Warrior Princess had fallen dead asleep, in full armor, boots and all.

"I don't believe it," Gabrielle mumbled.

Xena's chest rose and fell, emitting another soft noise that sounded more like a purr.

The bard put the tray down on a table and quietly stood over her partner, watching her sleep.

"How many nights have you gone without sleep this time?" she asked quietly and got another snore for an answer.

"Well," Gabrielle sighed.

She pulled a chair up to the table, sat, and rubbed her hands together. Picking up a piece of cheese and onion bread, she paused before tearing it in half and glanced over at the bed.

Xena's peaceful face twitched once and then came the sound of another gentle gurgle.

"A woman cannot live on love alone," Gabrielle stated before popping the bit of bread into her mouth.

SEVEN DAYS IN POMPEII

BY DJWP



**Maidens breathlessly awaiting the Unveiling of the Golden Ceres
- Pompeii**

Chapter 17

The ground was knocking. Huge booming, knocking sounds. And rocking. Rocking so hard, that Gabrielle could not stand. She reached for Xena, but the warrior's hands slipped out of her grasp. She screamed that Xena was falling, but it was she who was falling instead.

Gabrielle sat up abruptly in bed, still hearing the pounding noise though the echoing booms had somehow reduced themselves to the sound of knuckles against wood.

There was someone knocking at the door.

By the gods, what time was it? She glanced outside and tried to note the position of the sun. Almost setting. Almost sunset? By the gods, they had slept the day away!

There was still someone knocking at the door.

Gabrielle hopped out of bed, the motion stirring the still sleeping warrior to consciousness.

"Gabrielle?" Xena asked, looking around the room sleepily for the bard.

"There's someone at the door," Gabrielle replied, pulling the door opened with a tug.

"What time is it?" Xena asked groggily from the bed.

"It's late. Time to get up! You want to sleep forever?" Sappho asked from the hallway. She took one look at Gabrielle and her mouth dropped open.

The bard looked down at herself, not understanding the problem.

"Look at you two!" Sappho exclaimed. "You spend all day in bed and you're still DRESSED!"

Xena lifted her head up from the pillow and looked down the length of her body. Leather, armor, gauntlets, boots -- they were all still on.

Sappho stared at Gabrielle with an incredulous expression.

The bard smiled sheepishly, inspecting her own clothes. They might be a little rumpled, but she was indeed still wearing them.

"We were tired," Gabrielle said in an attempt to explain.

"You and I are going to have a nice, long talk," Sappho said with her hands on her hips. "Come on. Get up. I'd say hurry up and get dressed, but I see THAT won't be necessary." The poet rolled her eyes and gave them both a wry look. "You're not going to want to miss this. The merchants are on their way to present Vettii with their tribute. Looks like Vettii has the Golden Ceres after all."

"That's what he thinks," Gabrielle stated, turning to give a smiling Xena a wink.

Sappho led them to the main garden, escorting them past the archway that led back to the Atrium and the entrance of the house. As they walked by, Gabrielle was not surprised to see Alessandro talking with Vettii by the fountain. She caught Xena's hand and brought the scene to her attention. They both watched as the nobleman handed the boy a small pouch and then patted him on the head.

Xena looked down at Gabrielle and they grinned at one another -- big, huge cyclops-just-ate-a-griffin type grins.

What they didn't notice was Sappho watching them with a smile of her own -- a big, huge titan-just-ate-a-cyclops smile.

They gathered in the main garden -- Vettii, Menander, other prominent noblemen and honored guests, including Sappho, Xena, and Gabrielle. Now it was just a matter of waiting for the council of merchants to arrive to validate the presence of the Golden Ceres.

Gabrielle eyed the marble pedestal in the middle of the peristyle. It rose up amid a base of colorful flowers and stood proudly at the center of attention, waiting patiently for the moment of unveiling. Gabrielle looked closely at the silken scarf covering the statue. It certainly looked like something was under there.

She bent over to try and peer underneath the cloth, but it was no use -- she could not see.

"Ah, ah, ah," Xena said, wagging her finger. "No peeking."

At that moment, three merchants were escorted into the garden and Vettii clapped his hands. The crowd hushed and the nobleman gave his rival a triumphant smile.

"Well, Menander," Vettii said, rubbing his hands together. "Looks like I win this year."

"I knew you stole it!"

"I did not steal it. It was given to me by the Fates. The Golden Ceres was destined to be mine this year."

"Right," Menander said as he rolled his eyes. "Whoever believes that, I have some swamp land in Manchuria they'd probably be interested in." He waved his hand at the dramatically hidden statue. "Just get on with it, would you?"

"Noblemen of Pompeii and honored guests," Vettii began as he turned to address the crowd. "As is the tradition every year, the merchants have come to pay tribute to the Goddess on this the day of the Festival of Ceres. This year, Ceres graces my house with her presence. May the tribute bring all of our Houses fertile land and plentiful bounty!"

He brought his hand to the very top of the veil and grabbed a tiny corner of the silk. With great flourish, the covering was whipped away to reveal

... a beautifully rendered, meticulously carved, gold painted statue of a hermaphrodite. Although no one person could possibly be that well-endowed in so many respects, the attention to detail was amazing.

The silk scarf fluttered to the ground as Vettii stared at his favorite statue in horror.

"Well," Menander said, snickering, "I don't think Ceres will be pleased."

A round of laughter broke out amongst the gathered crowd.

"It was here. I just had it!" Vettii stammered. "That boy! I just paid that boy!"

"A good merchant always checks what he pays for," Menander stated and then waved at his rival in disgust.

"But I did"

Menander and the rest of the merchants were losing their patience, "Well, obviously something went wrong with your dirty little plan. Serves you right!"

"Well, if HE doesn't have the Golden Ceres, then WHO does?" a merchant asked.

Gabrielle looked up at Xena, expecting her partner to speak up, but the warrior said nothing. Quite unexpectedly, Sappho stepped in and stood by the pedestal.

"I know where it is," she announced, surprising the Hades out of Gabrielle. The bard's mouth dropped open.

Xena smirked.

"Come on!" Sappho said, waving at the group with her hand, "Let's go. I'll take you to it."

The poet marched out of the garden with a large group of impatient merchants and one very angry Vettii on her heels. Xena and Gabrielle brought up the rear.

The crowd's mumbling echoed down the halls of the House of Vettii, drowning out the bubbling water of the fountain in the atrium, and filling up the street as they shuffled outside to mount their waiting horses and carts laden with tribute.

Above all the noise could be heard the frustrated queries of a VERY agitated bard.

"Xena, this was NOT part of the plan. What's going on? What does Sappho have to do with this? Where is the Golden Ceres? Why do you have that smirk on your face? And how could you let a young boy see a statue like that?"

The bard's questions came non-stop, but Xena's only response was to arch a brow and follow the crowd.

The procession marched along the streets of Pompeii, the Tenth Muse leading them along Via Stabia and turning down Via Dell'Abbondanza in the direction of the Palestra, away from the Market. To Gabrielle, it looked like a parade; a long pageant of horses packed with food and carts filled with wine. Wherever they were headed, it was going to be one big party. Fitting that Sappho should be at the head of such a procession.

Questioning mumbles became loud and angry when Sappho stopped at the front gate to the House of Julia Felix.

"This is THE BROTHEL!" Vettii yelled. Arguments broke out everywhere.

Xena strutted up to the front of the line, the bard at her heels. In one movement, she drew her sword and clanged it on the wrought iron gate. The resulting ring brought everyone to silence.

Sappho gulped. For one brief moment, the poet had thought she was about to lose her head.

Xena looked down at her with an indulgent smile.

"If this is where the statue is, then this is where it is. Right, Sappho? Who are we to say which house Ceres chooses to honor?"

Vettii was red in the face. "This is no place for the Golden Ceres!"

Xena stepped up to the man and glared at him. "And what difference is this house from yours?" Her gaze took in the rest of the procession. "It seems kinda fitting, if you ask me." Her eyes rested on Sappho and Xena nodded in the direction of the door.

The warrior entered the gate, followed by Gabrielle. Sappho lagged behind, waiting as the noblemen and merchants through marched through the door. When the last of them were in, she looked around quickly and waved at a bush.

Xena halted Gabrielle and pulled her over to the side of the gate, letting the rest of the crowd pass them by. They watched through the wrought iron as Sappho placed a pouch full of coins into the waiting hand of a boy hiding in the bushes - Alessandro.

Sappho gave the young lad a pat on the head and turned away, entering the courtyard with a very satisfied grin.

Xena waited quietly, watching, until the poet disappeared into the front door before she followed, reaching a strong warrior hand back to grab a handful of Gabrielle's top and pull her along.

This time, the ceremony took place in the infamous bath house of Julia Felix. The large pool was surrounded by towering candles, and the pedestal was in the center of the pool, rising out of the water like the rock of Gibraltar. A soft evening breeze fluttered the crimson silk veil that was covering the statue in preparation for the ceremony.

Gabrielle walked up to the edge of the pool beside her partner and crossed her arms.

"All right. So you changed your mind." She looked up at Xena, who was watching the crimson silk sway in the breeze with a carefully neutral expression. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Xena glanced down at Gabrielle and squeezed her shoulder. "I didn't change my mind."

"You didn't? Then if you didn't change your mind, that means that Sappho stole the statue from you!"

Xena did not have a chance to respond. Julia Felix arrived in the pool room attired in a crimson silk dress similar to the veil that was adorning the statue. She swished through the room, flanked on either side by Labia Majora and Bougain Villae. The pair were throwing rose petals in her wake.

Julia paused by Sappho and handed her a sealed document with a wry grin. The poet beamed and waved the parchment in Gabrielle's direction with a happy smile, then tucked it safe and sound in the folds of her toga.

Gabrielle leaned towards Xena to whisper an explanation. "Those are probably --"

"Phaon's papers of freedom?" Xena finished for her.

The bard scowled. "How is it that you know everything?"

Julia Felix clapped her hands and the crowd quieted. She strode up to the side of the pool and smiled at her guests.

"Noblemen of Pompeii and honored guests," Julia began as she turned to address the crowd. "As is the tradition every year, the merchants have come to pay tribute to the Goddess on this the day of the Festival of Ceres. This year, Ceres graces my house with her presence – a house worthy of Ceres's blessing. May the tribute bring all of our houses fertile land and plentiful bounty!"

With two claps of her elegant palms, a pair of muscular slaves pulled on a rope and the crimson veil was raised to reveal ...

... a beautifully rendered and meticulously carved pewter statue of the Warrior Princess. She was poised in the arc of a powerful swing, ready to fling her mighty chakram. The attention to detail was remarkable.

Julia Felix choked. Labia Majora fainted; her wig rolled away as she hit the ground.

"Very nice," Gabrielle commented, raising her eyebrows.

"You like it?" Xena asked and she flashed a big smile at her partner.

Before the merchants could begin to yell, a man dressed in the robes of a priest entered the bath house. He cleared his throat, getting everyone's attention in the process.

"In case you are wondering," the man's deep voice boomed across the room, "the statue of Ceres is at the Temple. Bring your tributes to the Villae, where they belong."

The merchants muttered a hearty approval and they filed out of the House of Julia Felix, leaving the sparkling pool, the statue of the Warrior Princess and two furious hosts -- who were all dressed up, but had no where to go.

Vettii was fuming. He made a hasty lunge for the door, but was stopped mid-step by the strong arm of the Warrior Princess.

Xena pulled him back with little effort. "And where do you think you're going?"

Vettii tried to pull his toga out of the Xena's fist, but her grip was as solid as hardened lava. "I'm going after that boy! He tricked me and took my money!" he spat out angrily as he tried to pry Xena's fingers open. Not successful, Vettii attempted another run for the door anyway.

Again Xena pulled him back, again with very little effort. "Oh, no, ya don't. Ya made a deal with him fair and square. He brought you the statue, didn't he?"

"Yes, but ..."

Xena shook the nobleman. "No, buts! He brought you the statue and you paid him. Deal closed. What happened after that wasn't his fault."

"Yes, but ..."

"I said NO BUTS!" With a mighty heave worthy of her own statue, Xena tossed the Pompeian nobleman unceremoniously into the pool.

Vettii sputtered, flailing to stay at the surface until his own billowing tunic lifted up and entangled his head and arms, submerging him once again.

Meanwhile, Julia Felix was chasing the Tenth Muse. She was lunging at the poet, but Gabrielle was blocking her efforts using her body to protect her friend and keep the mad madam at bay. Xena came up behind Julia and grabbed her by the dress.

"Whadda ya think you're doing?" Xena asked calmly.

"We had a deal!" Julia Felix stated with a snarl. "She failed to keep up her side of the bargain. I want those papers back, Sappho!" Julia growled and tried to push the Warrior Princess away. She might as well have tried to move Vesuvius. Xena grabbed her by the embroidered bodice and held her in place with one hand.

"Oh, no, ya don't!" She gave the madam a shake to get her attention. "Now you listen to me. Sappho kept up her side of the bargain all right. She brought you the statue. You saw it didn't you?"

"Yes, but ..."

"No buts! She brought you the statue. You gave her the papers. Deal closed."

"Yes, but ..."

"I said no buts!" Xena shook her again, so hard, the Julia Felix's luxurious hair came toppling from her head. Xena couldn't help but snort, as she stared at the wig laying in a heap on the ground.. Even she hadn't realized that Julia Felix was a man.

"Well! Now, I won't feel so bad," the warrior said with a wicked smile.

Julius Felix gulped. "Feel so bad about what?"

"About doing this!"

Xena heaved up, lifting Julius Felix off the ground and tossing him into the water, crimson silk gown and all. She reached down and threw his wig in after him.

The well-endowed Julius Felix sputtered in the water, watching helplessly as his breast floated like two islands of tissue paper away. The wig hit him solidly in the face, submerging him once again.

"Thanks, Xena," Sappho said sincerely and patted her friend, the warrior affectionately on the arm. Together, they watched the two Pompeians flounder in the water. "I appreciate this. I really do. And here I thought you were going to be mad at me for disrupting your plan."

Xena turned on the Tenth Muse. "I am." She snatched at the Tenth Muses' toga and lifted her up in the air.

"No! Wait Xena! Don't! Phaon's papers. The ink will run!"

Xena reached inside Sappho's tunic and an evil grin graced the warrior's features.

"That's not nice, Warrior Princess," Sappho said, blushing fiercely.

Xena pulled out the sealed parchment and handed it to her partner.

Sappho's face grew stern. "Xena, Warrior Princess. Don't you dare throw me in that water!"

Xena lifted higher. The poet began to struggle, her feet kicking uselessly in the air.

"Xena! I mean it!" Sappho froze. The expression on Xena's face meant only one thing. She squinched her eyes closed and held her nose. A second later she was sailing through the air. She hit the water with a such a slap that even Xena couldn't stop from cringing.

Sappho sputtered to the surface and managed to swim to the side of the pool, pulling herself to rest between the equally soaked Julius and Vettii.

The poet wiped a wet and tangled web of black hair out of her face, only to realize it wasn't her own. It was Julius' soggy wig. Sappho handed it back to the madam with a gratuitous smile. Julius Felix promptly splashed the Tenth Muse in the face. Not only did the water hit Sappho, but a good portion of it went up Vettii's nose as well.

The pool erupted into a splashing battle.

By the time the three of them had run out of breath, and their splash fight had subsided, Xena and Gabrielle were long gone.

Sappho pulled herself up and out of the pool and then reached down to give Julius Felix a hand.

"Come on! It's time for dessert!"

SEVEN DAYS IN POMPEII

BY DJWP



Via De Sepolcri
“Street of Tombs”
Pompeii

Chapter 18

The city was washed in the crimson glow of a blood-red sunset. The last rays burned the sky as hot as the heavy August evening air. Xena and Gabrielle followed the street named Via De Sepolcri, Street of the Tombs, as it wound its way to the far end of the city finally leading them out through the Porta Ercolano.

They walked in silence, out of respect, passing rows of mausoleums and tombs etched with the names of soldiers, gladiators, fathers, wives, mothers and children laid to rest here just outside of the city walls. Like the dwellings for the living of Pompeii, the homes of the dead were decorated with fine paintings and mosaics. There were stuccos of gods and goddesses, cupids and nymphs and, in some instances, portraits of the dead souls themselves floating above dinner parties being held in their honor, final feasts to send them on their way to the other side.

By the time they passed the last tomb, the sun had disappeared from sight and the sky was turning the color of plums.

They were not alone on the road of souls. Ahead and behind them walked small groups of Pompeians, all strolling in the same direction: to the Villa of Mysteries -- a temple built to worship a variety of gods from all parts of the world: Greek, Egyptian, as well as Roman. Because of this diversity, the temple was larger than most. Also, because of this, the temple was a religious haven for the common people of Pompeii. The selection of gods was a representation of the rich heritage of the city itself.

"Looks like a good turnout for the festivities," Gabrielle stated, commenting on the many groups of people that were traveling the path to the temple.

"Should be," Xena replied. "Alessandro told me the Golden Ceres has been in the possession of the noblemen for years. This is the first time in a long time that the people of Pompeii have been to this temple for the festival."

Gabrielle smiled up at her partner, thinking once again how proud she was to be a part of Xena's life. "You did a good thing here, Xena. You gave these people back an important tradition and brought meaning back to the Festival of Ceres."

Xena snorted. "You think I did all that, huh? All I did was pilfer the statue from Menander's house. It followed its own path back to the temple ... with a little help from a very smart boy. Speaking of Alessandro, where is he anyway? He was supposed to meet me here at the gate." Xena paused before the entrance to the Villa, searching the gloom for her young Pompeian friend.

"Here I am!" Alessandro announced, popping out from behind a bush and giving Gabrielle a start.

"Me, too!" Hermia added as she jumped up. The small girl smiled up at the two women, swaying shyly from side to side with her hands behind her back.

The bard caught her breath and grinned at the boy. "You scared the daylights out of me!"

Hermia pouted. "I scared ya, too, didn't I?"

"Yeah, you did too," Gabrielle added as she ruffled the young girl's hair.

Alessandro beamed up at the warrior with a proud face. "How'd I do?"

"Ya did good," Xena answered, placing her hand on his shoulder and smiling. "The statue IS in there, isn't it?"

Alessandro grinned wickedly in response, "Oh, yeah. It's in there. I made sure of it."

"WE made sure of it," added an insulted Hermia.

"You make a good team," Gabrielle commented.

"We do at that," Alessandro said with a laugh, glancing at his sister. "I sold them the statue and she snuck in and stole it back."

Gabrielle laughed, just imagining the two of them at work, until her thoughts traveled to the colorful statue that was used to replace the Ceres at Vettii's House. Her brow furrowed. "Alessandro! You let your sister see that ... that ... that ... other statue?" Gabrielle asked the lad in disapproval. Surely she was much too young to be handling something that crude.

"What statue?" Alessandro replied, a little puzzled. "Oh, you mean the hermaphrodite? We have three of them just like at home, one in every room. It was no big deal."

"You do?" Now the bard was really embarrassed. "Well, there's no accounting for customs in a strange city."

"They were good choices, Alessandro. Especially that last one," Xena grinned at the clever boy and winked. "I like your taste in art."

Alessandro frowned. "I hope I can get that statue of you back! No one but me has one of those, not even Vettii! I got it when we went to Athens last year. Bought it on the side of the road from a merchant. He was a strange guy. Fast talker. Had lots of Xena stuff. Claimed he had a corner on the market. Can't think of his name ..."

"Salmoneus," Xena and Gabrielle answered together.

"Yeah! That's the guy! You know him?"

Xena smirked. "I'll have him send you another. I'll see to it personally. Deal?"

"Yeah! Deal! Thanks!"

"All right, then." Xena reached into her cleavage and produced the small pouch of coins. She gave it a shake. "Here ya go. Good work." She tossed it to the lad and he caught it with a confident swipe of the hand.

Alessandro looked at the bag in his hand and then looked up at the warrior.

"No thanks," he said and handed the bag back to Xena. "You keep it. Getting to see the look on Vettii's and Felix's face was payment enough. Besides, I got plenty of dinars from the both of them."

"You're a smart kid, Alessandro," Xena said while she placed the pouch back in its spot between her breasts.

"Me, too!" Hermia whined.

"You, too!" Xena added. "Now, I'm counting on you...on the both of you...to make sure that statue stays in the temple."

Alessandro stood tall. "You can count on us, Xena!"

So did Hermia. "Yeah!"

"Good." She held out her arm to the boy. It took him by surprise for a second and then he smiled proudly, grabbing Xena's arm in a warrior's shake.

Xena bent down and extended her arm to do the same for Hermia, but the girl would hear nothing of it. She flung her small arms around the warrior in a hug, planting a firm kiss on Xena's cheek.

A very surprised Xena glanced up at her partner. Gabrielle was smiling from ear to ear. Xena gave the small girl a gentle hug in return and then stood.

"G'wan you two. Go home. It's getting dark."

"It's already dark!" Hermia corrected.

"G'wan!"

Alessandro nodded and grabbed his sister's hand. Together they walked back in the direction of the city; the boy walking proud, the girl skipping with light steps and holding her brother's hand. Their small bodies quickly disappeared into the gloom of dusk at the edge of the street of tombs.

A chill ran up the back of Gabrielle's spine. "I hope they'll be all right."

"They'll be fine," Xena replied as she opened the gate to the temple. "They're city kids. They probably know every nook and cranny in Pompeii. Come on. I thought you said you wanted to attend this party?"

"I do."

"Then let's go." Xena held the gate wide for Gabrielle to proceed inside. She was about to follow her partner when she noticed a shadow on the road, emerging from the edge of the darkness. The slightly squishy sound accompanying each footstep gave her identity away.

Xena waited and held the gate open for their soggy friend.

Sappho smirked at them both and wiped her nose as she slogged by.

"Laugh now, warrior," the poet grumbled good naturedly. "Remember, I don't get mad ... I just get even."

"Ooooh. Very poetic. No wonder you're famous. Come on in. I'll get you a towel."

"Don't do me any favors."

Xena clanged the gate closed and looked ahead for the bard, but Gabrielle had already gone inside. She took a step forward to catch up, but Sappho stopped her with a touch to the arm.

"Xena, come with me. Let's mark the occasion."

"What?"

The poet motioned for Xena to follow and so the warrior did. They approached a smooth wall a short distance away. In the darkness of night, it could barely be seen. But once up close, the artwork and messages covering it from one end to the other could be read clearly.

"Here," Sappho said, picking up a brush and a bowl filled with gold paint from a pedestal to their right. There was variety of colors to choose from, bowls filled with paints were laid out specifically so people could leave messages on the wall. "Let's immortalize the return of the Golden Ceres to the temple with a verse. What do you want to write?"

"Me?" Xena exclaimed, pointing at herself. "You obviously have me confused with a certain golden-haired bard."

Sappho smiled widely. "Oh, I think I know the differences between the two of you by now. You're tall, she's short, right? So, tell me, Xena, Warrior Princess, what do you want to write to commemorate your visit to Pompeii?" She dipped the tip of the brush into the bowl and poised herself at the wall, ready to take dictation.

"How 'bout ... Xena was here, but now she's gone, she leaves the statue, to carry on."

Sappho rolled her eyes. "Better stick with the sword, warrior. Now, pay attention! I'll write something. See if you can get the hang of it." The poet looked closely at her warrior friend, making sure she had her full attention, then she turned to the wall and wrote:

*Why, when I gaze on Phaon's beauteous eyes,
Why does each thought in wild disorder stray?*

*The Muse forgot, and lost in melting lay
Mute, on the ground my Lyre neglected lies,*

*Lost is the wretch, who in her fatal spell
Wastes the short Summer of delicious days,*

*O ye! who in this sacred Temple smile
Know that, stung by hopeless passion, -- Sappho dies!*

The Tenth Muse finished the last word with a flourish and looked over her shoulder at the warrior, who was reading her words as she wrote.

"Well? Whadda ya think?"

"I think it has too many words," Xena stated simply and grabbed the brush out of the poet's hand. "Here. Give me that!"

Sappho watched as Xena dipped the brush into the golden paint and strolled over to a bare section of the wall.

With a tiny bit of her tongue sticking out of the corner of her mouth, the warrior wrote on the stone. Sappho walked over to watch, recognizing the bold strokes -- the same handwriting that was on the maps of villages plundered, back in Vettii's secret trophy room.

Gabrielle - you are the bard of my soul
- Xena

The Warrior Princess signed her name and stepped back to look at the simple words with pride.

"Whadda ya think?"

"I think you have many skills, Warrior Princess," Sappho stated honestly. "Come on. We have a party to go to!"

The parchment had fallen out of Xena's hand. She couldn't remember when she had stopped reading, but it had been a while since her eyes had lost focus of the words on the page and her memories had taken over.

The fire was all but out, and Xena was lying next to an empty bedroll, drifting somewhere between dreams and heart-breaking reality.

Not far away, Argo swatted her tail against the tickle of a fly on her rump. The sound barely registered with Xena. The warrior was finding it hard to keep her eyes open and the constant hum of wave against shore was not helping.

"I had a dream, Gabrielle," Xena said softly. A very light breeze was blowing, a gentle whisper of the coming dawn. "I dreamed of a night in Pompeii, not too long ago. Do you remember?"

She closed her eyes and the corners of her mouth turned up into the slightest of smiles.

I'll never forget it.

SEVEN DAYS IN POMPEII

BY DJWP



**Villa of the Mysteries
Pompeii**

Chapter 19

Xena worked her way around a small group of Pompeians. She strolled across the marble floor of the large chamber - the main hall for worship in the temple. The warrior did not stop to admire the many panels of superbly painted figures nor did she stop to ponder the mysterious Dionysian ritual depicted upon them. Her target was the golden red head of hair hovering near the food.

Gabrielle was having a hard time deciding which dish to try first, there were so many. Xena stepped behind her, watching silently as the bard tapped her chin and tried to decide. She grabbed a piece of bread and dipped it in the garum sauce, a spicy Pompeian specialty, then brought it up to her lips to take a big bite.

"Hmmm," Gabrielle hummed musically as she chewed. She scooped the bread into the sauce for another dip, but Xena wrapped a strong hand around her smaller one, bringing the motion to a halt.

"It's not polite to double dip, ya know," Xena said, her voice a deep purr. "At least not without sharing." She pulled the bread out of her partner's hand, eating it with a satisfied grin.

"Hmmm," she said, mimicking Gabrielle's musical hum.

"It's not polite to steal food, either."

"Who's stealing? This is sharing."

"No," Gabrielle answered as she took another piece of bread, dipped it, and held it up to Xena's lips. "THIS is sharing. Open." Xena opened her mouth obediently and the bard popped it in. "You have a lot to learn barbarian."

"Hey, you two!" Sappho called as walked towards them, struggling not to drop the three full goblets she had in her hands. "Have a drink. On me."

Gabrielle reached to help the poet with her load, almost spilling one of the goblets in the process.

Sappho squawked. "Easy or it really will be on me. I'm wet enough already ... No comments from you, warrior princess, thank you very much."

Gabrielle steadied the goblet, waiting until the liquid inside settle down before handing it to Xena. She took the other cup from the poet and raised it in the air.

"To a plan well executed," the bard said as a toast.

Xena snorted. "You mean a plan almost ruined by one love-sick poet."

"Hey, I think things worked out just fine," Sappho said in her own defense. "Besides, you seemed to know what I was up to the whole time. How you manage to do that, Warrior Princess, I'll never know."

"We've been together for more than three years and I still haven't figured that out," Gabrielle admitted.

"It's no secret," Xena said. "Like I told ya, all you have to do is pay attention. Sometimes, it's the little things that count."

"You mean, like a little boy and a little girl?"

"Exactly," Xena confirmed with a wide smile. "It also helps to keep one eye on a little poet who likes to get in trouble."

"Why, whomever do you mean, my dear?" Sappho asked with the utmost innocence. "The most important thing is that that temple got the statue and I got Phaon's freedom." She raised her goblet. "To Phaon's freedom ... and one day, freedom for all slaves."

"Here, here!" Xena added, raising her own cup as well.

The three friends smiled and drank down the contents of the goblets, grinning at the unexpectedly pleasant flavor of fruit.

"Hmmm!" Gabrielle exclaimed. "This is GOOD! What is it?"

"Traditional festival drink, made from flowers and fruit. I thought you would like it."

"What's it called?" Xena asked as she smelled the inside of the cup to try and identify the ingredients. Her brow furrowed a little at the strange odor.

Sappho shrugged. "Hey! Speaking of Phaon, where are those papers? I'd like to give them to her."

"She's here?" Gabrielle asked, getting excited for Sappho.

"Yeah. So is Paris. So are a lot of people. Even Julia Felix is here. A little soggy, but here. Vettii and Menander, too. I saw them over by the statue talking to the temple priest."

Xena scowled. "I'd better go over there. I want to make sure the statue and the festival stay where they belong."

"Right," Sappho agreed.

Xena turned to her way through the crowd. As she left, she could hear Sappho tell Gabrielle, in a voice breathless with excitement, "Come on, my friend. Let's go give Phaon her freedom."

Xena smiled as she made her way toward the altar.

Gabrielle followed Sappho through the hall. They wove their way around small groups of happy celebrants, all chugging down goblets full of the traditional punch. She spied Phaon talking with Paris in a corner of the room. The poet halted by a table and quickly dipped her cup into a bowl of punch, gulping it down in her nervousness.

"Ugh!" the poet said, making a face. "Don't they have any wine around here?"

Gabrielle laughed at the poet's anxiousness. "Tired of the party punch already?"

Sappho finished off the last drop from her cup and then put the goblet down on the table.

"Well, here goes. Wish me luck." The poet straightened her toga and then looked at her friend. "Gabrielle, what do you think she'll do after she gets her freedom? Do you think I should ask her to come with me to Lesbos?"

"Sappho, I don't have any idea what Phaon might want to do with her freedom. I hardly know her." The bard's answer was not what the poet wanted to hear and her face showed it. "But I do think you should ask her if she would like to go to Lesbos. If you don't, she might not know that she even has that option."

Sappho's features brightened considerably. "So, you think I should at least ask?"

Gabrielle nodded, smiling.

"So, what do you think I should say? How do you think I should ask?"

The bard shook her head in amazement. "Sappho of Lesbos, you are the most famous poet in the known world. Renowned, even by the Gods, as the Tenth Muse. Imitated by your peers, honored by scholars. Your verses are recited by kings and queens in empires from here to Chin and back. And you're asking me what to say?"

The poet scowled. "Writing about loving someone and telling someone you love them are two different things."

"I know. Parchment can't break your heart, can it?" Gabrielle replied, giving her friend's hand a squeeze. "But then, it can't keep you warm on a cold night either."

Sappho smiled sadly. "Yes, it can. But I've been sleeping with scrolls for too long. Time to practice what I preach, right?"

"Right," Gabrielle replied, grinning.

Sappho started forward, then seemed to lose her confidence and shuffled back.

"You think I should risk it? I mean, I could just give her the papers and say, 'have a good time.'"

"Sappho."

"I mean, I could wait and see if she says something to me first. Maybe she'll ask me for a job?"

"Sappho, do you want her working for you?"

The poet blushed. "No."

"Just give her the papers, see what she does ... take it from there. If the moment feels right, invite her to leave Pompeii with you. Trust your instincts, Sappho. I know one thing: If you don't ask, you'll never know."

Sappho nodded and adjusted her toga ... again.

"How do I look?"

"You're beautiful, Sappho," Gabrielle answered sincerely.

The poet turned abruptly and started to stomp away. "Now, I know you're lying!"

Gabrielle grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her back. "Sappho, I've seen grown women throw their underwear at you."

"When I'm on stage ..."

"And off stage." Gabrielle turned Sappho and gently pushed the poet in the direction of her heart's desire. "A very smart poet once told me that I should never doubt love. She said, and I quote, 'At the first possible moment, tell her how you feel. Make sure she knows and understands that the strength of your love is there for her to lean on, should she ever need it ... before something happens and it's too late.' "

Sappho looked over her shoulder at her friend and smiled, remembering the words. "I need to follow my own advice, huh?"

Gabrielle nodded. "And so do I."

The poet took a deep breath and hurried over, cutting into the conversation between Phaon and Paris. Gabrielle watched as the mime stepped politely back, out of the way in deference to the famous woman. Sappho was blushing as she talked and Gabrielle could tell that her gregarious friend had suddenly turned shy as Phaon was forced to lean in closer in order to hear the poet mumble.

Gabrielle snorted softly in amusement. Sappho's love was so obvious, written as it was, not on a scroll, but instead all over the famous poet's face. Smiling, her thoughts turned to Xena as she watching the scene play out before her. It was indeed time that she followed her own advice and let her partner know how deeply she still loved her.

She turned, mind set on finding Xena and her eyes strayed from the couple landing on the mime. Paris was staring her, smiling. Gabrielle groaned as Paris took their eyes meeting as a cue to leave the Sappho and Phaon, and join her instead.

"Ah, there you are, Xena. We were just talking about you," Vettii said with a smile. He picked up a silver goblet from the table at the base of the altar and handed it to the warrior. "Here. You must join us in a drink. It is traditional."

Xena lifted her hand to refuse, but the priest took the cup from the nobleman's hand. "Please. I must insist. It would be an insult to the goddess not to partake in the festival." He offered the goblet to Xena.

She took the cup and lifted it to her lips. The priest smiled and raised his own. "May Ceres bless us."

They all drank until their cups were empty.

"Well," Menander said, putting his goblet down on the altar. "I guess this will change things from now on. You are in agreement, right Vettii?"

"Yes. Yes. I said I was."

"What agreement is that?" Xena asked, suspicious about what they had negotiated.

"I've had the honor of being the stag for the last three festivals," Menander explained. "Part of the contest was that the winner of the Golden Ceres also got to be the stag for the ceremony."

Vettii looked at Xena and blushed. "I really wanted to be the stag this year. Especially since you were here."

Xena put her cup on the altar. "What are you talking about?"

"The ceremony tonight," the priest explained. "We have agreed that Vettii will get his turn to be the stag. From this point on, all the noblemen will take turns at the honor. This will mark the end of the competition for the statue. After this, the Golden Ceres will remain here and the ceremony will reside in the temple, where it belongs."

"That's very good," Xena said, "But why is it so important for you to be this stag and what does it have to do with me?"

Vettii and Menander smiled at each other. The priest took a step in Xena's direction.

"We have a ceremony to honor Ceres. To describe it simply ... the stag represents virility and the maiden -- fertility."

Xena raised an eyebrow. "I see. So you get to be the stag?" Vettii nodded enthusiastically. "Who gets to be the maiden?"

The priest smiled. "You do."

Xena's eyebrow dropped to a dangerous scowl. "That's not funny."

"It's not meant to be," the priest replied in a very serious tone. "You have no choice. We all must play our parts in the ceremony. It is the will of Ceres. You will have very little say in the matter once Ceres touches your shoulder."

Xena took an angry step toward the three men. "What are you saying?"

The priest smiled and lifted one of the silver goblets. "The drink. It's ceremonial. Everything will become clear very shortly."

Xena's eyes widened as she stared down into the empty cup. She looked up and glanced anxiously around the room, simultaneously trying to find Gabrielle and get a clue about the contents of the drink.

Her eyes rested on a large bowl on a pedestal in the center of the temple. Celebrants were walking up to it and filling their goblets with punch. Xena watched as a young woman lifted a bone ladle and filled her cup to the brim. The warrior's gaze zeroed in on the flowers floating on the surface of the elixir in the bowl.

"Blue lotus," Xena whispered.

"That's correct," the priest answered. "But try not to think about that. Just enjoy yourself. I think we'll be ready to start in just a moment."

Xena stared in shock at the priest's back as he turned to light some incense. She thought back to the chatterbox women at the baths. What had they said -- that all the men would be clamoring for the chance to be with the Warrior Princess?

A soft touch on her shoulder startled her.

"Don't worry," Vettii said as he caressed her skin. "Just relax and enjoy the ride. I knew it was meant to be the moment I saw you."

Xena shrugged his hand away and looked worriedly around the ceremonial chamber.

Where was Gabrielle?

Acolytes were running to and fro, preparing for the festivities to begin. They were bringing in couches and pillows and placing them all around the large square triclinium. Others were swinging golden incense holders, filling the air with a heady smoke.

The warrior's nostrils flared at the invasion of the scent.

She couldn't see the bard anywhere. Her eyes scanned the room anxiously until the gaze she rested on the next best thing.

Sappho.

She must have known what this was all about, Xena thought angrily. She pushed Vettii to the side and headed straight for the poet.

Sappho handed the parchment to Phaon. The beautiful woman smiled in puzzlement at her friend until she broke the seal and read the words written by Julia Felix's own hand.

Phaon looked back up at Sappho in absolute amazement. She threw her arms around the Tenth Muse; Xena could hear the happy sobs of the now freed slave even as she was taking long, angry steps in their direction.

And then the room tilted. Xena quickly lost all momentum. She came to a halt just before reaching the couple and stared mutely at them. Sappho was shining. There was a blue glow emanating from around the poet in small pulses, growing slightly larger with every beat.

Xena looked at Phaon. The now free woman was glowing as well, but her color was different -- not blue as Sappho, but an iridescent green.

"Xena?" she heard Phaon ask, her voice sounding as though she were in a tunnel. "Are you all right?"

Xena looked at Sappho. The poet was smiling wildly

"That drink. Blue lotus," Xena was barely able to say.

Phaon smiled, nodding. "Yes, I know. It's a powerful hallucinogen, part of the tradition. It'll be all right. Just relax. How many have you had?"

No answer.

Phaon took a step closer to the warrior, wary of the look on her face.

"Xena, how many have you had?"

The warrior simply stared at her.

Phaon smiled and patted her arm. "You'll be fine. You're in Ceres' hands now. We will all be in her hands shortly. I only had one, so it'll take me a little longer."

Xena watched as the green glow pulsed around the beautiful woman, growing in intensity as the warrior studied her closely.

"Two," Xena finally said, answering a question she wasn't sure that anyone had actually asked. Was that her own voice? Where was Gabrielle?

Phaon chuckled. "Good. Two is good."

A warm trickle traveled down the length of Xena's spine like a sensual caress. She couldn't help but close her eyes and moan at the sensation.

Phaon grinned as she watched the warrior roll her head back and smile. "It's beginning."

Xena managed to get a hold of herself and push the sensation away. "I'm going to kill you, Sappho," she mumbled.

"Hey, I thought you were a woman of the world, Xena. You're the one who said you wanted to come. I assumed you knew what this was all about and well aware of you were getting into. By the muses, Xena, it's written all over the walls!"

Xena looked over at the murals. There it was, the wordless story of a solemn rite, depicted by portraits of followers in various stages of the profound ceremony, from the drinking of the elixir to the consummation of ritual intercourse. To Xena, the painted figures seemed to shimmer and come to life.

"You are starting to glow, Xena," Sappho said in wonder. "Bright as the sun. Such a color coming from you -- I've never seen anything like it. Tell me, what do you feel?"

Another shiver traveled the length of the warrior's spine, extending outward across her limbs. "Where's Gabrielle?"

Phaon's eyes widened in surprise. "Gabrielle? Xena ... do you feel a need for Gabrielle?"

A need? That wouldn't even begin to describe what Xena was feeling at the moment. The warrior opened her eyes and Phaon gasped.

"In the name of Ceres, Xena! You have been chosen!"

Sappho stepped up and looked deeply into the eyes of the Warrior Princess. "Xena, your eyes are on fire."

"Xena," a male voice spoke from behind her. Sappho and Phaon looked up. Xena turned around. "Let me look at your eyes." Vettii smiled, grabbed Xena by the shoulders and pulled her closer. He studied Xena's face intently. "You were meant for me." He lifted his hand and caressed her cheek.

Vettii stroked the warrior's skin, smiling at the wondrous color that was flowing all around her. Her expression, however, remained blank and unfeeling.

Xena felt nothing at the touch, but she could see that Vettii was glowing a brilliant, iridescent green, matching the color of Phaon exactly.

The nobleman lost his smile when he realized his touch was having no effect on the warrior at all.

"You were supposed to be meant for me."

Xena lifted her hand and pulled his palm away from her face.

"Guess again," she said, giving him a firm push out of the way.

She was very worried about Gabrielle now. The chamber was large and crowded with people. Her progress was hampered even more by the assortment of divans and large pillows that had been brought in and placed in circles throughout the room.

All around, couples were forming. Men and women were joining hands and walking to various sofas as though their places had been assigned.

Xena glanced over her shoulder and saw Vettii and Phaon walking hand in hand to a couch. They were oblivious to everything around them, including Sappho, who was watching them with a glazed expression from a small couch where she sat alone.

But Xena could not concern herself with that now. Her mind had one thought and one thought only.

Where was Gabrielle?

She could barely walk. She needed to sit down. This was not good. This was dangerous. What if there was an attack? Xena tried to lift her arm to get to her sword, but it was no good. Her hand would not grasp the handle. She had no strength to pull the weapon.

Where was Gabrielle?

Her eyes scanned the crowded, throbbing room in confusion.

She needed a plan.

First step, find Gabrielle.

Second, she needed to find Gabrielle.

Third, she needed to get Gabrielle out of here ... fast.

Her eyes searched the room frantically for her partner.

And then she found her. Gabrielle was talking to Paris. The mime had his back to her and his height was blocking the bard from view. Though the warrior could not see her, Xena could see the shining glow of her bard. She would recognize it anywhere.

Gabrielle.

Get away from Paris.

Her mind screamed but her voice seemed disconnected and her mouth refused move. The room tilted and Xena forced her legs to walk. She staggered past a couch, ignoring the moans from the couple who were beginning to make love right .

If he touches her, I'm going to kill him.

She might not be able to manage her sword, but she sure as Hades knew that she could slit any rat's throat at 30 paces with her chakram even blind drunk.

Her fingers fumbled for the weapon, freezing when a sensation flowed across her skin so strong, she had to groan.

Paris was saying something. Gabrielle was sure he was talking, but he wasn't making any sense. Something about how they were meant to be together. The bard's eyes wandered unfocused on the features of the face before her. Yes, she thought to herself as she stared at the strange, soft glow pulsating around Paris' head, I am meant to be with someone.

But it's not you.

Gabrielle looked over Paris' shoulder and spotted Xena across the room. The warrior was glowing as bright as the sun.

Xena felt a wave of rage pass over her as she watched Paris bend his head to nibble on Gabrielle's neck. The warrior's only desire now was to see her chakram sticking out of the mime's back, but her stubborn limbs refused to obey. She could not move. If her rage were a monster, it would have devoured the entire room.

Couples everywhere froze in horror, each experiencing their own impression of the manifestation of such anger. It shot across the room in a myriad of colors, disrupting the flow, paralyzing all energy.

Sappho gasped at what she saw. Xena was exploding. She was Vesuvius and she was exploding!

But Gabrielle did not appear afraid. Sappho watched as the bard gently shoved Paris aside. She walked up to her partner and placed a calming hand on the warrior's arm. Sappho smiled and relaxed back onto her pillows as the angry burst of colors emanating from Xena subsided to a warm glow.

"Gabrielle, are you all right?" Xena asked, looking with great concern into her partner's eyes.

"I'm fine. I feel funny, Xena," Gabrielle responded, suddenly noticing how soft and warm Xena's skin felt beneath her touch. She began to caress the arm absently.

The sensations that simple touch created sent the warrior's mind into a whirl. She fought back the urge to moan, then heard someone close by do it for her.

"It's the drink." Xena's voice sounded raw, even to her own ears. "It was laced with a very powerful drug."

"Hmmm?" Gabrielle's hand had wandered from the arm up to a strong shoulder and then her fingertips were traveling along Xena's collarbone, leaving little electric jolts in their path.

More groans echoed throughout the temple chamber.

"We have to get out of here," Xena rasped.

Gabrielle's palms were massaging whatever bare skin she could find. She ran her fingers up and under Xena's epaulets and pushed them aside, trying to connect with as much flesh as possible.

"I don't think I can leave, Xena." She ran her hands up along the warrior's neck and onto her face, stroking her cheeks. "I don't think we're meant to."

Xena's senses were threatening to overload. Her skin was on fire. Gabrielle's touches were making her knees shake. She had to sit down. She had to touch her. They had to get out of here.

"Gabrielle, we have to get out of here. It's just a drug. If we concentrate, we can get to safety."

"We're safe," Gabrielle whispered as she moved herself against the length of Xena's body, planting small kisses on the skin just above a breast. "We're together."

Xena was helpless against the feel of Gabrielle's lips on her skin. She groaned and let her arms encircle the woman.

An answering chorus of moans echoed throughout the hall.

"Oh, gods, Gabrielle. Please stop."

"I can't."

Xena barely registered the fact that two acolytes had stepped up and were removing her sword and chakram. They placed them carefully next to a couch not far from where the couple now stood.

Gabrielle moved her attention to Xena's neck; her hands traveled up and across bare shoulders then she grasped Xena roughly around the back of the head, pulling her closer so she could reach to kiss the tender flesh.

Xena thought she was going to pass out. Her legs wobbled, threatening to give way. She pulled Gabrielle into her body, grateful for the added support, feeling as if they could melt into each other. Gods, the woman felt delicious against her.

Gabrielle paused and stared up in amazement at her partner. They were both completely out of breath.

"Xena," she said softly. Her fingers reached up and lightly played with the warrior's soft lips. "I can't stop ... I don't want to."

There was no choice in the matter. Gabrielle's lips were irresistible. Xena found herself staring at them, wondering how anyone so beautiful could possibly want to be in her life.

Their lips were touching before Xena could stop herself. An indescribable feeling of warmth coursed through her body. Her lips moved over Gabrielle's, delighting in the sweetness she tasted there. It had been too long, Xena thought as she tighten her arms and pulled Gabrielle closer.

And then Gabrielle opened her mouth slightly so their tongues might touch. Xena's world exploded into color. A growl escape from the back of the warrior's throat and her strong hands traveled all over the bard's sculpted back, feeling their way across shirt and muscle down to the soft skin just above the skirt. With a mind of their own, her hands grabbed at the coarse material of the skirt, pulling up roughly, wanting to remove the obstacle to warm flesh. She needed to feel skin and was rewarded with a moan from Gabrielle as her hands slipped their way under cloth to the smoothness waiting underneath. Xena clutched at the flesh and pulled Gabrielle roughly against her, grinding their bodies together.

"Xena, please," Gabrielle groaned.

Xena broke off their kiss and pulled her hands away, letting the skirt drop. She held Gabrielle in a gentle hug and waited for their breath to return. Looking over the bard's head, she noticed the couch waiting for them, beckoning to them. She kissed the top of her partner's head and then guided them to the sofa.

"We have to sit down," Xena managed to choke out.

Gabrielle nodded mutely and followed Xena's lead. She allowed Xena to gently steer her backward until she felt the couch against her legs.

She sat, sighing gratefully, and lay back, smiling at Xena as the warrior removed her armor.

For Xena, there was no one else in the room. They were alone. They were at their campsite. They were in a room in a tavern. They were anywhere but in a strange temple in a strange city surrounded by strange people.

The warrior's entire attention was focused on her lover, who lay before her smiling. Gabrielle opened her bodice and offered herself for Xena's consumption.

Without even knowing how, Xena was suddenly naked. And when she gently laid her body on top of Gabrielle's, basking in the incredible sensation of skin upon skin, the entire room responded with moans.

On the other side of the chamber, with a clear view, Sappho watched as Xena lowered herself, covering the bard's naked body with her own. The warrior melted into Gabrielle, moving against her, groaning. When they kissed, Xena's hair fell down and mixed with Gabrielle's golden locks. The poet held her breath when Xena slid lower, letting her dark hair glide over Gabrielle's golden shoulders. And when Xena captured a tender nipple with soft lips, a chorus of moans sang out across the chamber in answer to the bard's.

The ceremony was in full swing, and Xena and Gabrielle were at the heart of it.

Sappho somehow found the will to turn her head and look at Phaon and Vettii. Though the sight of them lying together broke her heart, she did not have the strength to look away. Sappho could do nothing but lay on the couch and watch as Vettii hungrily kissed and took possession of the woman she loved.

A sudden flash caught her attention. The poet forced herself to lift her head up from the pillow and look away from Phaon and Vettii making love to the altar.

Impossibly, the golden statue of Ceres moved its legs.

Sappho blinked to clear her eyes, staring in amazement as the gold figurine descended from the pedestal and started to walk across the room. With every step, the icon grew in height until she was as tall as Xena.

The Goddess strolled through the chamber, smiling in approval at every couple she passed.

Sappho watched in awe, speechless, when Ceres paused at the edge of her divan and looked down at the poet, who was lying on a sofa alone.

"I'm sorry, Sappho," the golden goddess said. Her voice was smooth, her words like music. "It was not meant to be at this time."

"Will it ever?" Sappho somehow found her voice to ask.

The goddess smiled in surprise. "You can speak?"

Sappho gulped, not sure she would be able to do it again. "Will it ever be meant to be?"

The goddess laughed. "If you can speak, then you can sing. It would please me if you would sing for my festival. I am very happy with the way things have turned out."

"I'm not," Sappho mumbled.

The goddess laughed again. "If I answer your question, will you sing for me?"

The poet nodded and suddenly a lyre appeared in her hands. She looked up at Ceres and waited.

"You and Phaon do have a destiny together," Ceres said, but she was not smiling. "Now sing."

Ceres floated away from the Tenth Muse. Sappho watched her hover over the central sofa. Xena was kissing Gabrielle softly. The warrior's large hands were touching the bard's beautiful body everywhere and so gently; the poet had no idea that Xena was capable of such tenderness.

Ceres paused, floating over the entwined bodies of Xena and Gabrielle. The Goddess glanced back at the poet and nodded at her from across the room, smiling in approval of her song.

Sappho continued to sing as the golden goddess reached down and touched Xena's shoulder. The warrior looked up, surprised. The poet half-expected Xena to jump up, ready to fight, but the warrior did not. Instead, Xena reached out to accept a gift from the goddess herself. Ceres placed something in Xena's hands ... and then, with a bright flash, Ceres was gone.

SEVEN DAYS IN POMPEII

BY DJWP



The Lost Chapter

Seven Days in Pompeii

Chapter 20

Xena felt the tap on her shoulder, but she just didn't want to acknowledge it. She was much too busy at the moment, much too busy. Her tongue made another slow circle around Gabrielle's nipple while her hands re-acquainted themselves with parts of Gabrielle she had thought she would never be able to touch again.

Running a palm under Gabrielle's leg and across a wonderfully firm buttock, Xena paused for a moment to caress the skin in tribute. Gabrielle shifted her legs to allow better access and Xena sent a quick, silent thank you to the gods for long arms as her fingers slid under and around, able to reach soft wetness. Gabrielle moaned at the touch and Xena could not stop from delicately nipping on the tender nipple still in her mouth.

There was that gods-be-damned annoying tap on the shoulder again.

Xena ignored it, ran her fingers across silky wetness and took another gentle bite. Gabrielle's groan was echoed by a variety of others throughout the chamber. A single finger ran the length of Gabrielle's lips, opening them and revealing the depth of the bard's true desire. Xena lost all breath at what she found waiting for her and let her fingers play in the moisture for a while.

The soft touch on the shoulder became a firm grasp. Xena found herself pulled away from Gabrielle and sitting up in surprise.

Her first thought was to kill whoever had separated them.

Her next thought was to lay back down on Gabrielle.

Xena moved to return to what she was doing, but a hand stopped her. It had to be a hand, Xena thought as she looked down at her shoulder, because it had fingers. She looked up in hazy, drugged confusion at the owner of the hand.

Ceres floated over the couple and smiled down at the warrior indulgently.

"Whoever you are, this had better be good," Xena said, her voice a growl.

"You have an unquenchable fire about you, Xena. No wonder Ares is drawn to you."

Xena squinted up at the golden apparition hovering over them. An impulse to protect Gabrielle came over her, so she shifted her body to place it between the bard and the goddess.

"At ease, warrior," Ceres said, laughing. "I mean you no harm. At least, not tonight. I am very pleased with you, Xena. You have returned my festival to the temple where it belongs. I'm grateful to you for that and I wish to reward you."

The goddess reached a golden hand down and caressed Xena's cheek. Then she slipped her fingertips under Xena's chin and lifted the warrior's face up to look into her eyes. Ceres' touch shot through Xena and went right to her groin, causing her to grunt as if in pain. The sound made Gabrielle rise up from the bed in alarm and hug Xena protectively from behind, trying to pull her away.

"Don't touch her," Gabrielle said in a deep, warning voice.

Ceres laughed out loud. The sound was like an echo bouncing from one wall of the chamber to another until it seemed as if everyone in the room was laughing as well.

"You are a matched set," the goddess commented with an approving smile. "And I thought Aphrodite had promised to keep her fingers away from you both."

"We don't need Aphrodite's touch," Gabrielle stated firmly as she pulled Xena out of Ceres' reach. "Or any god's help."

Ceres scowled. "So you say. Until something bad happens, and then your laments can be heard all the way to Mount Olympus."

Xena opened her mouth to speak, but the goddess raised a glowing finger, stopping her cold. "No, no, no. Best not say something you might regret later, warrior. I'm in a good mood. Don't press your luck."

The raised finger flashed and Xena found herself holding a gift. She studied the item for a moment before raising her eyes to look up at the goddess in surprise.

"A gift for tonight," Ceres said, smiling wickedly. "For tonight only. It will be gone when the sun rises. So take advantage of my good mood."

Xena frowned. She hated gifts from the gods. They were never free; they always came with a price.

"So dour, Xena," Ceres said, admonishing the scowl which was gracing Xena's features. "Don't you trust me?"

"In a word ... no," Xena answered bluntly.

"There are no strings attached," Ceres said with a wink. "I promise you. Use the gift, Xena. I'll be insulted if you don't."

So much for no strings attached, Xena thought as she watched Ceres float away, back toward the watching Sappho and the altar. Xena turned the offering over and over in her hands. She should toss it away, far out of reach, but the very thought of using it was derailing her better judgment. She felt her excitement grow just holding it.

Ceres floated backward to the altar, smiling as she watched Xena fondle the toy in her hands. She chuckled at the warrior's inherent distrust. Her unwillingness would make the experience all the better. Ceres paused by the poet, the lone observer in a room full of couples.

"Stop watching and sing, Sappho," Ceres commanded. "I want this night immortalized in verse."

"Yes, goddess," Sappho replied as she lifted the lyre to her bosom and caressed the strings with practiced fingertips.

Ceres closed her eyes and smiled at the music that came forth.

"Good. That's good. Keep doing that. Yes, just like that," Ceres said as she floated back, growing smaller with each step, until she was poised on the pedestal and once again became a golden statue.

As soon as the goddess was frozen in place, Sappho gave her the finger.

The poet fell back against her pillows and pouted, but continued to play.

Gabrielle shifted onto her knees so she could see over Xena's shoulder.

"What is it?" she asked, eyes round with curiosity.

Xena turned it over in her hands.

"It's a dildo. A sex toy," she explained. Her eyes widened in surprise, when Gabrielle reached around to caress it. The sight of the bard touching the toy was so erotic, Xena could hardly breathe.

"I've never used one before," the bard whispered in Xena's ear, sending a chill straight down her spine. Gabrielle drew her fingertips across the length of the smooth surface. "It feels nice." She stroked it again. "How does it work?"

Xena's eyes could only follow the bard's hand as she petted the toy.

Gabrielle kissed the warrior's ear and chuckled at the silence. "Xena, tell me how it works," she whispered.

"Umm," Xena said, starting to speak but finding her lips surprisingly dry. All the moisture in her body must be going somewhere else, she thought as she slowly licked her lips.

"Xena, tell me," Gabrielle implored.

"You, umm ... this is a double-ended dildo. This side ... the shorter side goes inside of me," the warrior explained as she held up the short phallus that protruded out of the inside of a leather cuplike harness. "I slip this side inside of me and then the straps go around my hips." She pointed to the other side of the cup, from which protruded the longer end of the dildo. "The cup fits around me and holds it in place, so I can use the long phallus on you."

"Like a man?" Gabrielle asked with such innocence in her voice, the warrior's heart nearly burst.

"No," Xena replied softly as she reached behind to caress the bard's hair. "Like a woman making love to a woman using a dildo." She could feel the bard smiling against her ear.

"I want you to use it on me."

Xena shook her head, ignoring the urges of her body. "No, Gabrielle. We've never used one before and it's been a long time since you've been with a man. It might be uncomfortable. I don't want to hurt you."

"You've used one before?"

"Yes."

"Did you like it?"

"Yes, very much."

Gabrielle shifted behind Xena and reached under her arms, taking the dildo out of the warrior's hands.

"Wouldn't you like to use it on me?" Gabrielle asked in a silky voice as she slipped one hand up to caress Xena's breast.

"Mmmm, you know I would," Xena replied, leaning into the touch. Gabrielle continued to play with the breast as she slid the dildo down Xena's stomach until it reached her short, black curls. She played with the toy there for a few moments.

"I trust you, Xena," Gabrielle whispered. The hand that had been playing with a breast dropped down and placed gentle pressure against the inside of Xena's thigh. Xena yielded to the touch, leaning back and spreading her legs. Gabrielle slid her fingers up along the inside of the thigh until she felt wetness.

"You're so wet, Xena," the bard groaned. "I know you want to do this."

Xena could do nothing but moan in response. Any thoughts of protest were halted when Gabrielle spread her lips open and placed the tip of the dildo just inside.

"I want you to do this," Gabrielle demanded and she slid the dildo in.

The sensation was so intense, Xena could hardly breathe. She leaned against the bard, throwing her dark head back when Gabrielle squeezed her nipple and pulled the shaft of the dildo out and in again. Xena arched her hips to meet the thrust, crying out when Gabrielle repeated it. And then did it again. And again.

The bard stopped her thrusts, leaving the toy nestled deep inside Xena. She gave the dildo a slight twist and pinched a nipple simultaneously. Xena nearly cried.

"Now I want you to do that to me," Gabrielle said and she released her hold, moving away from her lover. The loss of contact made Xena whimper and open her eyes. She looked over her shoulder to find Gabrielle shifting into a comfortable position on the sofa.

Xena's breathing was ragged. She knew that she was half a step short of losing control and watched with hooded, dangerous eyes as Gabrielle lay against a pillow and smiled at her reassuringly.

"Xena, do it," Gabrielle whispered.

Xena glanced down at the dildo. One end was inside of her. She could feel herself pulsing around it. The cup was not all the way against her, so she reached down and grabbed the shaft of the phallus and pushed it the rest of way in. The little twist she gave it to settle it in caused her to growl.

She stood quickly and reached around to bring the straps up over her buttocks and across her hips, attaching them to the top of the leather and securing the device in place. When she was finished, she stood tall and took a second to adjust everything.

The sight of the warrior standing froze Sappho in the middle of a verse. The music stopped and her voice was lost, for standing before her was surely a hermaphrodite, god and goddess together; elemental powers of creation combined into one being.

Sappho's heart leapt into her throat and stayed there as Xena cast eyes dark with passion her way. The warrior's gaze lingered a moment and the poet stopped breathing. Xena looked like a goddess, flowing wild with the power of the River Ocean. Surely, she must feel it. Sappho could have sworn she saw Xena smirk at her in reply.

Xena turned away from the paralyzed Sappho, releasing her from the mesmerizing gaze. Remembering Ceres's command, the poet quickly resumed playing and watched in awe as Xena lowered herself onto the bard. She turned her head to Phaon and Vettii. The pair had stopped moving and were waiting. Sappho looked at the other couples spread out across the room. They, too, were halted as though in wait.

Gabrielle welcomed Xena into her arms. She smiled as Xena leaned down and accepted a sweet and tender kiss. Xena let their tongues play together for a moment before withdrawing. She kissed her way down to Gabrielle's neck and tasted the salty skin, breathing in the airy, fragrant smell of the bard she knew so well.

"I love you, Gabrielle," Xena whispered in her ear. She reached a hand down and gently urged Gabrielle to part her legs. Gabrielle complied.

The same hand found its way to the head of the phallus and guided it in between Gabrielle's lips.

Xena kissed the soft neck again before placing her lips just at her lover's ear. She let her warm breath divert Gabrielle's attention a little, increasing the distraction by gently licking and biting an earlobe. Smiling when she felt a shiver, Xena brought her lips around and captured Gabrielle's for another breath-stealing kiss. She pulled away slowly from the kiss and waited until Gabrielle opened her eyes.

"I love you," Xena whispered again and then pushed the tip of the dildo gently in.

She stopped when she felt Gabrielle tense in reaction. Xena paused where she was and waited for the discomfort to subside.

"Relax," she said softly and kissed Gabrielle again, forcing her to concentrate on her lips. The sweet kiss took the pain away and Xena could feel Gabrielle beginning to respond. She placed her lips against the bard's ear once again to whisper. "Just relax, Gabrielle. It'll be a little uncomfortable at first, but then it'll get better." She looked into Gabrielle's eyes. "Do you trust me?"

Gabrielle caressed her cheek and smiled. "Always."

Xena took the opportunity and leaned all of her weight against the dildo, pushing it the rest of the way into Gabrielle. The bard gasped and Xena watched as her eyes widened in surprise at the sensation of suddenly being filled.

"It's all right," Xena said quickly. "It's me. Just me." She kissed her forehead, cheeks and lips, whispering softly to her, but she could feel Gabrielle's legs stiffening against her hips, trying to close. She let her body relax against Gabrielle, covering her in safety, waiting for her lover's anxiety to fade.

Xena was careful not to move, waiting for the pressure to subside, knowing that it would. She leaned her body into the bard's, using her hands to caress her face, kissing her lips, drawing out her tongue, getting Gabrielle to kiss her, anything to try to distract her.

"It's all right," Xena crooned. "Relax. The pain will pass and then we'll both feel good, together."

"It will?" Gabrielle asked in a small voice, short of breath.

"Yes, I promise. We'll just rest like this a while. See what happens. If you don't like it, I'll stop. I promise. All right?" Xena asked, searching her lover's eyes for permission, wanting to be sure she still had it.

Gabrielle nodded, trying hard not to think about how uncomfortable she felt. "It feels like the first time."

Xena smiled, petting her bard's sweet face. "I know. That's because it's been so long. You're not used to it."

"You mean, it didn't grow back?" Gabrielle said, grinning mischievously.

Xena chuckled and kissed Gabrielle thoroughly. "No, sorry to disappoint you, but you're not a virgin again." She looked at the bard affectionately. "Practice makes perfect, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle found herself giggling, surprised at how quickly she was getting used to having Xena inside of her. "You mean, the more we do it, the better it will feel?"

"Yes," Xena answered, kissing her lips and moving her hips ever so slightly. She smiled at the resulting moan from the bard. "You like that?"

"Yes," Gabrielle answered, suddenly breathless again but for a different reason. She looked up with wonder into Xena's shining eyes.

Xena smiled down at her, feeling the tension ease in Gabrielle's legs. The bard was relaxing, spreading herself wider, so Xena shifted again, taking the cue. The bard's arms went around her neck and she buried her face into Xena's hair.

"Oh, that feels really good, Xena," Gabrielle whispered.

Xena kissed her head and then her cheek, then her mouth, caressing soft lips with her tongue.

She lifted her hips slightly away from Gabrielle, drawing the phallus out just a little before sliding it back in. This time, she felt her own end of the dildo move slightly within her. The sensation sent a jolt to her core.

"Oh, Gabrielle," Xena rasped. She pulled out and pushed in again, wanting to repeat the feeling, smiling when she felt fingers digging into her shoulder blades.

"That's it, Gabrielle," Xena lifted her hips a little further and pushed in a little deeper. "Do whatever you have to do. Bite me. Scratch me. It's OK." She was rewarded with the feel of Gabrielle digging her fingers into her skin and moving her hips on her own. The bard's strong hips pulled the end of Xena's dildo almost halfway out of her and then plunged it in so sharply, it took the warrior's breath away.

Xena braced herself against the couch and pulled out of Gabrielle. She pushed in, meeting the bard's upward thrust with a grunt. Gods, this felt so incredible. Xena's lips found their way to Gabrielle, tasting the bard's excitement grow as their thrusts increased.

The moans of the couples in the room grew as they began to take on their own rhythms, separate from the heart but still connected by the pulsing excitement. Sappho could hear ragged breathing and grunts coming from everyone in the room.

She was surprised at her own arousal and had to look at her hands to make sure she was still playing the lyre and not touching herself. Though her fingertips were still on the strings, Sappho could feel her own climax building as though she were being touched by everyone in the room. She lay back against the pillow. The music halted as she abandoned playing the instrument altogether.

Gabrielle was completely relaxed under Xena now. Pain had mixed with pleasure and she was kissing the warrior wherever she could reach, urging her on, trying to tell her with whispers and groans that she no longer needed to be gentle.

Xena could feel them spiraling upward together with every thrust.

The more Xena pulled away, the farther out her own dildo slid. The harder in she pushed, the more she felt the thrust deep inside herself. It was so exquisite knowing that Gabrielle was feeling exactly the same way. Xena closed her eyes and let their rhythm take over.

Xena's large hand slid along the length of Gabrielle's body, pausing to play with a nipple for a while, pinching and turning the pink flesh in her fingertips until the bard cried out in pleasure. Xena's hand left the breast and slid its way along soft skin, paused at the hip, grasping it to life and push as they slid in and out of each other so deliciously. Gabrielle was rolling her hips now and the motion was rotating the dildo deep within Xena, causing her body to shudder and clutch in reaction.

Xena's hand ran swiftly along a smooth leg to hook just behind the knee. She rubbed her palm up and down across the soft skin under the leg as she thrust. Gabrielle reacted to the sensation by spreading her legs more widely and giving Xena more room. The warrior took the invitation and thrust deeply, pushing the phallus into them both as Gabrielle bit her neck.

Xena threw back her head and groaned. Her cry mixed with all the others that resounded throughout the chamber.

Gabrielle answered with a moan, sinking her nails into the skin of Xena's back. Xena pushed, keeping the phallus deep inside them both and they groaned in unison as Xena moved her hips in round circles, sharing with Gabrielle what she had been feeling. Gabrielle grabbed onto Xena's shoulders and let the sensation wash over her.

Then Xena pulled out all the way and waited, playing with the tip of the dildo at Gabrielle's opening. Gabrielle began to whimper and clutch at Xena's shoulder. She entered Gabrielle, throwing all of her weight into the thrust. Gabrielle met her halfway with a thrust of her own. They cried out together, feeling their urge beginning to rise, feeling the ache build, driving them on.

Xena pulled out again. She removed her hand from under Gabrielle's leg, brought it up, gliding it over her lover's stomach and sliding it down between their bodies. Her thumb found it's way to the center of Gabrielle's excitement and she began stroking and rubbing against it as well as thrusting, slow and deep.

The added sensation of Xena's thumb touching her so intimately was too much for Gabrielle. She raked her nails across Xena's back, scratching the skin, drawing blood. The pain seemed to urge the warrior on, for she cried out and began to thrust harder. Gabrielle felt herself rising. Rising and falling with every thrust. She could feel the walls inside of her begin to contract and pulse. Xena pushed in and rubbed her thumb against her at the same time and Gabrielle lost all coherent thought. She could only clutch at Xena's back and lifted her hips up as all sensation tunneled down to one point right between her legs ... and then the world exploded into color and her body convulsed, sending waves of pleasure rolling through her soul. She wrapped her arms more tightly around Xena, pulling her in close, feeling the warrior's own orgasm begin, experiencing the shudders through the connection of the dildo deep inside them both.

Hearing Gabrielle's scream and feeling her lover tremble sent Xena over the edge. Her body contracted and she was no longer able to control it. The spasms flowed over her muscles, causing them to clench and throb. All she could do was hold on to Gabrielle.

For one brief moment, Xena felt her heart stop – stop and melt away, to be held safely in the hands of the woman in her arms. No one had ever reached inside her and touched her so deeply. In that one shuddering moment, the warrior entrusted her heart to Gabrielle, surrendering her soul forever.

Slowly, the calm returned, the intense throbs began to cease. Xena laid against Gabrielle's fully spread legs, breathing heavily and waiting for her strength to return. Her body was still responding with tiny, small jerks to the sudden throbs that clutched at the dildo deep within. She felt Gabrielle twitch and knew that her lover was feeling the same.

Gabrielle was holding onto her, sobbing and stroking her hair. Xena managed to lift her head and soothe her lover.

"Shhhh," Xena whispered, kissing Gabrielle softly, pouring everything she felt, all the tenderness, into that one kiss. "I've got you." She felt small arms pull her closer and understood the need. She was frightened herself by what she was feeling.

Xena snuggled her nose into Gabrielle's hair and let her body rest where it was. Her own tears left salty tracks down her cheeks. She mixed their teardrops together with another gentle kiss.

"I love you, Gabrielle," she said, smiling at the feeling of Gabrielle kissing away her fears, "By all the gods, I swear I do."

SEVEN DAYS IN POMPEII

BY DJWP



View of Mount Vesuvius - Pompeii

Chapter 21

First, Xena opened her eyes. Next, she tried to move. Both of these actions were a big mistake. The room took an unexpected twirl, so Xena laid her face back into the pillow of golden locks where it had been in the first place.

She closed her eyes and breathed deeply, trying to regain her equilibrium. This was going to be one Hades of a bad hangover, the warrior thought to herself. She opened her eyes slowly this time, giving her brain a chance to grow accustomed to the light, then rolled rather than rose from her partner.

Now on her back, the warrior turned her head to look at Gabrielle. The bard was sleeping peacefully, her face glowing in its repose. Xena watched her lover's nose twitch and a small hand popped up to scratch it. The bard frowned as though missing something, then felt around until her hands found her partner. She rolled over and snuggled into the warmth of Xena's shoulder with a contented sigh.

Xena smiled and kissed the top of Gabrielle's head, petting the golden strands absently. A thought occurred to her and she glanced down at the lower part of her body. It must be dawn, she thought, because Ceres' gift was gone. She kissed the bard again and slipped out from her lover's arms to rise.

The warrior stood and looked around the room. There were bodies everywhere; entangled couples scattered throughout the ceremonial chamber. Xena stared at the statue of the Golden Ceres and frowned.

"I hope you're happy," she said aloud. No one in the room stirred, not even the statue.

Her eyes scanned the chamber and found Sappho lying alone on a sofa. She walked over and stood at the edge of the couch, looking down on the poet. Sappho had a lyre wrapped up in her arms as though she were holding as a

lover. Xena raised an eyebrow. Strange, she thought. Then she noticed Phaon and Vettii passed out together on a divan nearby and Xena shook her head.

"I guess you're not so happy," Xena commented. She studied Sappho quietly, surprised at herself for feeling a little bit of sympathy toward the Tenth Muse.

Xena bent down and gently picked up Sappho. The poet was so small and light, she felt like a child in her arms. She had such a peaceful expression on her face, she even looked innocent. Xena chuckled, knowing better.

The warrior turned around with the small bundle of trouble secure in her arms and strode out of the chamber in search of a room.

She found one not far from the main chamber. There was a hall with a row of unoccupied bedrooms, sparse in their decoration but useful in purpose. Xena used her leg to push open the door and lowered the still sleeping Tenth Muse onto the mattress of a small bed. Sappho mumbled something and clutched the lyre closer to her chest. The warrior pulled the covers over the poet, lyre and all, and left the room.

Xena retrieved their clothes next, finding all the items scattered about their sofa. She sighed in relief when she found her sword and chakram, safe and sound at the side of the divan where the acolyte had put them. The warrior brought those items to a room next to the poet's.

Her last chore was to retrieve the bard. Xena gathered her lover into her arms, smiling when Gabrielle wrapped trustful arms around the warrior's neck and planted a soft kiss on her breast. She carried Gabrielle through the chamber, stepping over sleeping bodies, trying very hard not to wake anyone. All Xena wanted to do was retreat to a room and sleep, undisturbed, for a few more hours with her bard in her arms.

Mission accomplished, Xena smiled to herself with satisfaction as she laid Gabrielle down onto the nice, soft bed. The bard snuggled into a pillow as if she had been there all along. Xena slipped into bed next to her and pulled the covers over them both. With a contented sigh, the warrior pulled the bard in, wrapping her in a safe cocoon of arms and body. Xena closed her eyes and smiled. She had forgotten how much she loved the little sounds that Gabrielle made whenever she held her this way.

Xena fell asleep with a softly snoring bard snuggled in her arms and the rising sun creeping in through the window, warming her back.

She was being kissed. She could feel a trail of soft, moist lips covering her eyelids, her nose, her lips, her neck.

"Mmmm," Xena mumbled as her eyelids fluttered open. "That's a nice way to wake up."

Gabrielle slid her body completely on top of Xena's, gently nudging her partner the rest of the way awake with a big, wet kiss.

"Mmmm, mmmm," Xena mumbled, responding to the bard's playful tongue. Her hands glided down Gabrielle's back and grabbed onto a set of deliciously smooth buttocks. She gave them a squeeze and shifted the bard into a better position.

Gabrielle pulled away from the kiss, smiling down at her partner. "Now THAT's what I call the breakfast of champions!"

Xena smiled, pleased that Gabrielle appeared to be so bright and cheery after a full night of debauchery. "Well, you seem to be able to handle your orgies quite well."

Gabrielle laughed and wiggled her hips suggestively. "Is that what that was?"

"You betcha. A full-fledged Roman orgy." Memories of the night before flooded through Xena. If Gabrielle kept it up, she was going to be ready to go another round. "So, you gonna write about it?"

Gabrielle pursed her lips and thought about that for a moment. "Hmm. Yes, but that particular story will have to go in my X-files."

Xena raised her eyebrows. "Your X-files?"

"Yes," Gabrielle replied, wiggling her own. "The very private, super-secret Xena files. Written for mature audiences only."

"X-files, huh?" Xena shifted slightly and pulled the bard up so she could nibble on her neck. "And just how many stories do you have in this X-file?"

"Quite a few now." Gabrielle stretched her neck, giving Xena better access and closed her eyes.

Xena froze, her eyes popping open.

"Quite a few? What else have you written about?"

Gabrielle laughed and took over where Xena left off, kissing the warrior's neck and touching some very nice spots on Xena's body.

"You remember that time in Thebes in the back of that stable?"

Xena relaxed a little, recalling the night, the smell of hay and the smell of ...

"It was the first time you ever ..." Gabrielle's warm breath tickled against her skin.

"Mmmm, I remember," Xena answered, closing her eyes and smiling at the recollection. "That was a long time ago."

"Too long," Gabrielle answered. "I've almost forgotten what it feels like."

"I can remind you," Xena said hoarsely and flipped the bard over on her back to lean in for a long, slow kiss.

"You know," Gabrielle said as Xena was nibbling her way to a breast, "when I woke up this morning, I almost thought last night had been a dream."

"A good dream, I hope," Xena replied, pausing just long enough to make the comment.

"Yessss," Gabrielle answered and she lost her train of thought for a moment when Xena's lips drifted across her breast. "But it felt so surreal, I was afraid that it had been ... a dream, I mean."

"That was the drug," Xena replied as she planted soft kisses on the tip of a nipple.

"But, was it real, Xena?" Gabrielle asked with such worry in her voice that it caused Xena to stop what she was doing and raise herself up to look at the bard.

"What do you mean?" Xena asked.

Gabrielle caressed her cheek and thought carefully before she spoke. Xena waited patiently, trying to read Gabrielle's thoughts in her eyes.

"Did you mean what you said, Xena, or was it just the drug?" Gabrielle asked softly, watching the warrior's expression carefully.

"I don't understand. What did I say?"

"You told me you loved me," Gabrielle replied, taking her hand away from Xena's face.

Xena still didn't understand. "Gabrielle, I've told you I love you before."

Gabrielle smiled sadly. "Yes, you have. But never like that."

"I don't understand."

Gabrielle touched Xena's cheek again, smiling at the serious scowl of her partner. "You've said you love me, but only in life-and-death situations or when you're sorry for something." Xena turned her face away, but Gabrielle brought it back with a touch. "You've never said you loved me when we were ... you know." The bard blushed.

Xena smiled at the pink color spreading across her lover's cheeks, suddenly understanding. "You mean, I've never said I love you while we were making love ... in the throes of passion, you mean."

Xena's smile made the bard look away in embarrassment. This time it was Xena's turn to bring her back with a gentle touch.

"And now you're wondering if it was just the drug that made me say it."

Gabrielle nodded shyly. Xena studied her face carefully.

"You don't think I love you, do you?"

The bard shrugged meekly, knowing she was about to voice one of her biggest fears.

"I think you did once, but not any more."

"Why? Because of Solon?" Xena asked, barely able to choke the question out.

Gabrielle shook her head. "Not just Solon, but because of everything. Because I've changed so much."

Xena couldn't believe it. The irony of the bard's statement was too much. Gabrielle's eyes widened in surprise when Xena started to chuckle.

"What ... what are you laughing at?"

Xena bit her lip and got control of herself. She shook her head and then leaned down to give Gabrielle a soft kiss, but the bard pushed her away.

"Xena, this isn't funny."

"Oh, Gabrielle, but it is, when you stop to think about it. All this time, you've been worried that I don't love you any more because you've changed so much ... and I've been worried that you don't love me any more because I haven't changed at all."

Xena watched Gabrielle's frown turned into a crooked grin as the bard thought about what she had just said.

"Do you see what I mean? We've both been behaving like we've been smacked in the head with Aphrodite's left foot."

The crooked grin turned into a full-fledged smile and Gabrielle laughed. Xena thought she had never seen anyone more beautiful in all her life.

"Gabrielle, I'm not the world's foremost expert on love, but I do know this: what we have, it's worth fighting for. Hades, I think it's worth dying for. I don't think our problem is whether we love each other. I think the problem we are going to have is finding a middle ground to walk on -- a place for both bard and warrior. I don't know where that path lies -- somewhere between peace and war, I guess -- but I'm willing to look for it. Are you willing to look for it with me?"

Gabrielle nodded quickly, tears filling up in her eyes. Xena kissed her then, wrapping her up in her arms and kissing her until no air was left in the room to breathe.

"And as for the other," Xena whispered as she let her fingers walk a lazy path along Gabrielle's body, "let me assure you, it was not the drug."

Xena gently parted her legs and touched Gabrielle in the sweetest of places.

"I love you," she whispered.

Not much later, Gabrielle cried out the same.

Xena opened her eyes. It was the sound of a horse's whinny that woke her. Gabrielle was still sleeping, lying completely on top of Xena, head pillowed by a soft breast. Xena hugged her close and smiled, enjoying the feeling of warm, naked bard against her skin.

The sound of a whip and another horse cry rattled her nerves. Xena kissed a golden head, then slipped out from under. A few quick steps and she was looking out the window, stretching in the warm light of the morning sun.

She paused in her stretch, scowling when her eyes found the reason for all the commotion. Not far down the road, a merchant was trying to lead his horse and cart into the city. The horse, for some reason, did not seem to want to go. It was whinnying and rising up on its hind legs, backing the cart up against some loose rocks in its effort to retreat. The owner was shouting out commands and snapping a whip in the air in frustration.

Xena watched as the owner reached out and grabbed at the reins, trying to pull the stubborn animal forward. At least he wasn't whipping the horse, Xena thought, then she would have to go out there.

The sound of a wheel snapping echoed in the street. Looks like the man wouldn't be going to market this morning, the warrior thought to herself with a smirk.

A large shadow passing over the road brought Xena's eyes to the sky. A flock of birds were flying by. Their cries filled the air and then faded as they passed overhead. She followed their flight until they disappeared over the top of a sleepy villa, heading toward the sea.

She looked out to the horizon, following the misty line where sky meets earth, appreciating the view. Xena could see over the tops of the villas all the way to Mt. Vesuvius and let her gaze wander until her eyes found the mountain. As always, it stood as a silent sentinel over everything below.

Xena yawned as she studied the volcano. It seemed to stare back at her, a distant purple shimmering against the blue of the sky.

She paused and squinted. Something about it looked different. She dropped her hand from her mouth and stared at the mountain.

Another flock of birds flew by.

Xena narrowed her eyes, focusing on the slopes and trying to determine what had changed. Her eyes followed the line of the trees, searching beyond the leaves, studying the boulders, examining all that could be seen all the way up to the top of the mountain

She stared at the peak of Mt. Vesuvius. Every detail was so clear, so vivid -- the summit stood out in sharp contrast against clear blue, for there was not a cloud in the sky.

The hairs on the back of Xena's neck stood up and her eyes widened in fear.

Not a cloud in the sky? Where was the steady stream of smoke that Xena had been studying for days?

A dog howled.

The sound of a cart crashing and a whinny caught Xena's attention. The wagon had overturned and the horse had broken free. She watched it gallop in the opposite direction, away from the city, as fast as it could.

A second howl joined the first. And then a third.

Xena listened to the howls and stared at the volcano's peak, her mind racing. Dried up wells, no game, migrating birds and the smoke ... the volcano had reminded her of a smith's forge, hadn't it - the smoke evidence of releasing pressure.

But there was no smoke rising out of the volcano now.

Her heart began to pound as every warrior sense in her body screamed out a warning.

"By the gods!" Xena choked out. She could feel the danger rushing at her like an attacking army, surging toward her through the window. Xena backed away so quickly, she banged into a table, knocking it over.

The crash woke up the bard. Gabrielle sat up in alarm and looked around the room.

"What was that?"

Xena was grabbing for their clothes in a panic.

"Gabrielle! Gabrielle, get up!"

The bard was completely taken aback by the look of fear on her partner's face. Xena found the skirt and threw it at the bard.

"Gabrielle, get up and get dressed."

Gabrielle caught the skirt, fumbling with it in her hands. "Xena, what is it? What's the matter?"

Xena tossed the green top at her. "I said GET DRESSED NOW!"

"Xena, what in Hades is going on?" Gabrielle had never seen her partner in such a state of panic.

Xena was pulling on her leathers, pushing herself into them as fast as she could.

"By the gods, Gabrielle, just listen to me. Get dressed. We've got to get out of here!" She ran over to Gabrielle and started putting the top on the bard for her.

Gabrielle batted her away with her hands. "Would you would you just ... STOP THAT!" She grabbed Xena's hands and forced the warrior to be still. "Xena, just stop a minute and tell me what is going on!!"

"Gabrielle ... Gabrielle, please listen to me," Xena said, trying to calm herself. She took deep breaths, realizing she had to get herself under control or she would never get them out of this. Finally, she calmed herself enough to make sense. She grabbed Gabrielle by the shoulders and looked in her eyes.

"Gabrielle, do you trust me?"

Gabrielle looked closely at Xena, still seeing panic. She cupped the warrior's face in the palms of her hands. "Xena, please tell me. What's wrong?"

Xena's agitation grew. They were wasting time. She shook the bard by the shoulders. "Answer the question. Do you trust me?"

The bard sighed and dropped her hands. "With my life, Xena. You know that."

Xena took another calming breath. "Then listen to me and believe me."

"Believe what?"

"Vesuvius, Gabrielle. The volcano."

A dark foreboding wrapped itself around the bard's heart and gripped it so tightly that she could hardly breathe.

"The volcano? What about it?"

"Mt. Vesuvius, Gabrielle ... by the gods, it's about to erupt."

SEVEN DAYS IN POMPEII

BY DJWP

Chapter 22

Xena kicked open the door to Sappho's room.

"SAPPHO! GET UP!"

The poet jumped so high, she almost fell out of the bed. She did manage to send both lyre and covers tumbling to the floor.

"By the gods, Xena, what is your problem?" the poet said, gasping for breath. She looked around the room and knitted her eyebrows. "How the Hades did I get in here?"

"I put you here. Now, I'm taking you out!" Two long strides and Xena was pulling the poet out of the bed by a handful of toga. She lifted the Tenth Muse off the mattress and shoved her toward the bard.

"Let's go." Two more long strides and Xena was out of the room, leaving a speechless poet behind.

She twisted around in Gabrielle's arms. "What? Did she wake up with Echidna this morning? Talk about wrong side of the bed -- geez!" Sappho stared at Gabrielle, waiting for an explanation.

Gabrielle looked just as worried and panicked as Xena.

"Gabrielle, what's going on?"

The bard started moving Sappho toward the door.

"Xena thinks the volcano is going to erupt."

Sappho stopped dead in her tracks and twirled around to stare at her friend in disbelief.

"So do I," Gabrielle said, staring right back at her, her expression one of deadly seriousness.

Sappho needed less than a heartbeat to decide.

"Then let's get the Hades out of here."

Xena marched into the main ceremonial chamber, not worrying about making noise, not bothering to step over couples. She poked as many as she could, trying to stir them into consciousness.

"EVERYONE UP! WAKE UP! LET'S GO! WAKE UP!"

The disruption started a wave of movement across the floor as bodies began to disentangle and lift their heads, searching for the cause of all the commotion.

Xena strode through the room, clapping her hands and trying to make as much noise as possible. She whistled between two fingers -- a noise that would have summoned Argo to her side from miles away. It had the satisfying effect of jolting the remainder of the room abruptly awake.

"Augghh! What's going on?" Vettii said, grasping his head between his hands. "Stop that noise! Are you trying to kill us?"

"If ya don't get up, you'll be as good as dead," Xena said as she stood over the Vettii and Phaon. The beautiful woman took one look at the seriousness of the warrior's face and rose up in alarm.

"Xena, what's wrong?" she asked as she pushed Vettii to the side so she could get up.

"We have to get out of here," Xena replied and then stepped away to address the room. "WE HAVE TO GET OUT OF HERE!"

Mumurs of protest and question started filtering through the crowd.

Phaon stood and got the warrior's attention by grabbing her arm.

"Xena, what's going on?"

Xena pulled away, ignoring the question, and continued to walk through the room.

At that moment, Sappho and Gabrielle entered the chamber. The poet ran over to Phaon and turned her around.

"Xena thinks that Vesuvius is going to explode," Sappho told her.

Vettii jumped up from the couch, hearing the comment. "WHAT! That's ridiculous!" He ran after Xena. "You woke us up for this? That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard!"

Xena whirled around and glared at the nobleman. "Vettii, that volcano is getting ready to erupt. I can feel it coming."

Vettii snorted. "You can FEEL it coming? What are you, a prophet as well as a Warrior Princess?"

Xena turned away in anger, but Vettii grabbed her arm.

"Xena, that volcano has been dormant for hundreds of years."

Xena looked down at her arm, snarling at the hand grabbing it. Vettii released his grip quickly and took a step back.

The warrior stared at him, a deadly, cold seriousness unmistakable in her eyes. "And I'm telling you that that volcano is about to blow its top. Now you can come with me if you want to live. Or you can stay here and die. It's up to you."

They glared at each other, eye to eye, but Vettii could not stare down the warrior. He looked away and turned to the room.

"XENA THINKS THAT VESUVIUS IS GOING TO BLOW!" He announced. A chorus of chuckles filled the room. "SHE'S TRYING TO SAVE US." More laughter.

He turned to Xena. "So, where would you go, Warrior Princess?"

"Ya got a boat?"

"Of course I have a boat."

"Where is it docked?"

"At the Porta Stabia, on the Sarno River, of course."

"Well, it's mine now," Xena stated and pushed past the nobleman, ignoring the chuckles.

"What do you mean, yours? Are you presuming that you can take my boat?"

"If you stay here, you won't be needing it."

Xena looked around the room, at all the faces watching her, some with expressions of amusement, others etched with concern.

"I'M GOING TO THE PORTA STABIA AND I'M TAKING VETTII'S BOAT. IF YOU WANT TO LIVE, YOU'LL COME WITH ME," Xena announced and looked at Vettii.

He flipped his hand at the warrior. "Go ahead, take it. But you'll be getting calluses on your hands for nothing."

"I already have calluses on my hands." She walked over to Phaon and stood before the beautiful woman. "Are you coming?"

Phaon studied Xena, gauging everything she had heard about the warrior and what she had learned herself so far. She glanced at Sappho; the poet was as serious as she had ever seen her.

Sappho took a step forward and touched her shoulder. "Phaon, please. Come with me."

"Do you believe Xena?" Phaon asked.

Sappho nodded emphatically. "I trust Xena with my life and more."

Then Phaon regarded Gabrielle. No question there.

She was free, Phaon realized suddenly, she could go where she wished.

"All right. I'm coming with you."

Xena counted heads and sighed. It was a small group; 10 altogether including themselves. She turned around and faced the road into Pompeii. So many people in the city. What was she going to do?

"You can't save them all," Gabrielle said. They were standing outside the Villa of Mysteries, waiting for the last of those who were willing to leave to join them.

Xena turned to the bard, dread clear in her eyes. "I'm not even sure I can save us." She faced the group assembling behind them.

"All right, listen up." The mumblings ceased. "I don't know how long we have, but I know one thing for sure: We have to get far away from here as quickly as possible. Phaon, I want you to lead these people. Take the fastest route through the city, go directly to the Sarno River port. Can you do that?"

Phaon nodded solemnly. "Aren't you coming with us?"

Xena shook her head. "I have to go to Vettii's house."

"But --"

"No buts. Take these people directly to the port. Get Vettii's boat ready. I'll meet you there. I won't be long."

Phaon looked at Sappho. "You're coming with me, aren't you?"

Sappho turned to Xena for permission. The warrior gave a brief nod and then faced Gabrielle. "You're with me."

"I certainly hope you didn't expect me to be anywhere else," the bard replied.

Her remark earned a brief grin from the grim warrior.

Xena stepped to the side of the road and waved the group along. "All right, get moving. Remember, straight to the dock and get on the boat. As soon as I get there, we're leaving. I won't wait for anyone."

Xena and Gabrielle watched solemnly as the group, led by Sappho and Phaon, started walking toward the city. At first, their steps were slow. Then, a series of dog howls echoing through the empty streets caused the majority of them to jump in alarm and they began to run.

"Did you feel that?" Xena asked, looking in the direction of Vesuvius.

The bard shook her head. "Feel what?"

"A slight tremor -- underneath our feet." Xena's face held a renewed sense of urgency. "C'mon. Let's get Argo and get to the boat!"

The tremor Gabrielle felt, however, was not under her feet. It was the tremble of her heart as a dark foreboding invaded her bones. Xena took off for the Porta Marina, the entrance into the city, with the bard right on her heels.

When Xena arrived at the stable, Argo was in a state of panic. The mare had kicked down her stall and was pacing the length of the entryway, trying to find a way through the closed stable door. When the warrior opened the latch, Argo nearly ran her down.

"Easy, girl!" Xena put up her hands, trying to calm the mare. The horse backed away from the stable door, rearing up on hind legs, her eyes wild with fear. It took a moment for the horse to recognize the human at the entrance, but Xena's voice and her calm tone eventually won over. Argo came to her senses and Xena was able to grab the reins.

By the time the warrior had pulled the clearly agitated mare around to the front of the house, Gabrielle was outside with her scroll bag and staff in hand. With some difficulty, the bard tied the bag to the saddle and they mounted. Gabrielle barely had time to wrap an arm around the warrior's waist when the horse took off, ignoring all Pompeian rules of traffic. As the mare's hooves kicked up dirt from the street, they rounded the corner of Via Stabia, galloping for the dock.

The market area was more difficult. Although it was Sunday and the day after a festival, there were still plenty of Pompeians traversing the streets. Xena had to slow down the mare and weave her way through. Several times the warrior had to soothe her skittish horse; both the crowd and the sense of danger were almost too overwhelming.

When Argo nearly kicked a passerby, Gabrielle became concerned.

"Xena maybe we ought to get down?" the bard suggested.

"No, we just have to get through this intersection and we should be all right."

It was the sound of her name being called that caught Gabrielle's attention. She looked through the crowd and spied Alessandro waving at her from his usual spot under the awning.

"By the gods, Xena! Alessandro!"

Before the warrior could do anything about it, Gabrielle was off the horse and running in the direction of the boy.

"Gabrielle! Wait!" Xena called out in vain. The bard was already lost in the crowd. Xena pulled on the reins, trying to get Argo to follow, but the horse refused. Argo knew what direction she wanted to be going, and into the crowd was not it.

"Damn it!" Xena jumped down and had to forcibly pull Argo along.

"Hi, Gabrielle!" Alessandro said, smiling happily at his friend. "Where you guys going so fast?"

Gabrielle ran up to the boy and pulled him to his feet.

"Alessandro! Where is your sister?"

"She's home. Whatsa matter?"

"Home? You have a mother and father, right?"

"Yeah, sure I have a mother and father. What's this all about?"

Gabrielle turned the boy around by the shoulders and pushed him forward. "Take me to them."

"You want me to take you to my house?"

"Yeah, c'mon."

Alessandro shrugged. "All right. But it's this way," the boy said, pointing with his thumb.

Gabrielle turned him to face the opposite direction and pushed him along. "Let's go!"

Xena managed to pull Argo through the crowd, finally getting to the awning where she had last seen Alessandro - just in time to see Gabrielle and the boy run around the corner onto another street.

"DAMN IT TO HADES!" Xena pulled Argo, but the horse was refusing to budge. She stared at her mare, first in anger, then in sympathy. Petting Argo's soft nose, Xena decided it was time she and her mare had a little talk.

"I know, girl. All you want to do get out of the city, right? But if Gabrielle is going that way," Xena said, pointing at the street, "then that's the way we're going. I won't be separated from her. You got that?"

Argo snorted and Xena mounted the saddle. It only took one click to send the mare trotting after the bard.

Alessandro came to a gate and pointed with a smile.

"Here's where I live!"

With a click of the latch, he threw open the gate and marched inside, proud to have the bard in tow. Hermia was playing in the garden. She looked up from her mud castle, squealing with delight when she spotted Gabrielle.

"Hermia! What are you doing!" a voice called out from inside the home. A few seconds later, a woman walked through the doorway with a baby in her arms. She frowned at the sight of her young daughter wrapped up in the arms of a perfect stranger.

"It's all right. I'm a friend," Gabrielle called out, returning the hug from the young girl. The bard smiled at the kindly woman, noting that she was very obviously in the late stages of pregnancy.

"Yeah, she's our friend!" Alessandro confirmed.

Their mother sighed with relief. She offered the bard a smile and shifted her child to the other hip. "Thank goodness. You never know these days, especially with these two."

Gabrielle chuckled and placed Hermia back down on the ground. "You have two very beautiful and very friendly children. Make that three."

"Don't I know it. And it's soon to be four," the mother answered with a grin as she patted her extended belly.

Gabrielle took a step forward, hand extended. "My name is Gabrielle."

"Hello, Gabrielle. My name is Lena." They shook hands and Lena took a moment to inspect Gabrielle's clothing, including the staff in her hands.

The bard saw a bit of nervousness return to the woman's eyes. "Listen. I'm a stranger to this city --"

"I could tell."

"Your children helped my friend and me with something very important. And we're very grateful to them for it."

Lena looked at the bard quizzically.

"But that's a story for another day. I hope." Gabrielle pulled a piece of hair from her mouth, blown there by a breeze. "The reason I'm here is because we're all in terrible danger."

Lena's eyebrows rose. "Danger? What kind of danger?"

Gabrielle paused for a moment, thinking. She had no doubt what kind of reaction she was going to get.

"Now, I know you don't know me, so what I'm going to tell you may sound ... unbelievable. But let me assure you, the danger is real."

"What danger?"

"Gabrielle, what's going on?" Alessandro could see the concern in the eyes of the woman with hair the color of the sun. He could see she was serious, and though he barely knew her, he trusted her. "Just tell us."

Gabrielle swallowed. The best way to say something was to just say it, right?

"The volcano is going to erupt."

"What?" Lena exclaimed, chuckling. "Vesuvius?"

The bard nodded.

Lena looked down at her children. Hermia was playing with something in the dirt. Alessandro was studying the bard's face, but the boy was not laughing.

Alessandro took a step closer to Gabrielle. "Does Xena think Vesuvius is going to erupt?"

Gabrielle nodded. They stared at each other for a long moment before Lena interrupted.

"Who is Xena?"

"She's my friend," Gabrielle replied.

Alessandro had heard enough. "Mother, you better listen to them."

"What?"

The boy pulled on his mother's dress. "I trust them, Mother."

"We don't even know them, Alessandro. They're strangers."

"No, they're not. They're our friends. Get Father. It's better to be safe than sorry, right?"

Lena looked down at her daughter, then at the baby in her arms, and then toward the sky, in the direction of the volcano. Mount Vesuvius stood in the distance, covered in the silvery-green of olive-groves and forest.

"Wait here. I'll get your father."

Lena cradled her baby and hurried back into her home. Seconds later, she returned to the garden followed by her husband. The man was a Roman soldier. By his uniform, the bard could tell he was not a high-ranking official, but he was not one of the infantry either; perhaps a tribune.

Gabrielle gulped. "Great," she mumbled under her breath.

"What's all this about Vesuvius?" the Roman demanded, marching out to meet the bard.

Lena placed a hand on her husband's shoulder and brought him to a halt. "This is my husband, Cicero. Cicero, this is Gabrielle."

"How do you do," Gabrielle said, extending her hand in greeting.

The soldier ignored it.

"How dare you come into my home and put my wife and children into a panic about the volcano!"

"Look, sir, I'm telling you, that volcano is about to explode and when it does, it's going to take the entire city with it. Now, I came here because I care about Alessandro and Hermia. All I want to do is take them ... and you ... to safety."

Cicero eyed her suspiciously, but his manner became a bit less hostile. "What makes you think that Vesuvius is going to erupt?"

"I have a friend. She's really good at reading the signs --"

"Oh, great!" Cicero exclaimed, throwing up his hands. "Are you talking about Portia? That crazy, old crone!"

Gabrielle laughed once. "No, my friend is no old crone. And I don't mean those kind of signs. She's a warrior ... a soldier just like you. She's really good at understanding her enemy and reading the signs of danger. I know you know what I'm talking about, right?"

Cicero became even less hostile, a little more convinced. "Go on."

"She's been seeing things all week. Wells going dry. Birds taking flight. No game in the forest. Have you noticed any of these things?"

Cicero nodded once and looked at his wife. Lena agreed. "There's barely a trickle in the fountain today."

"She's noticed that the animals have been acting strangely. Dogs howling, horses skittish. This morning, she saw a horse refusing to go into the city. If there's one thing she's taught me, it's that you should always trust your horse." Gabrielle studied the soldier's face for his reaction.

The man was almost there.

"Gabrielle?" Xena took that moment to step in through the open gate and into the garden. "Gabrielle! What do you think you're doing!" And then she saw Alessandro.

"Alessandro!" the warrior breathed a sign of relief. "Has she told you? Are you coming?"

The boy nodded enthusiastically. "Yes. Gabrielle's convinced my father. Right, Father?"

Alessandro turned to look up at his dad, but the soldier had drawn his sword. He pushed the lad behind him.

Xena lost her smile. Gabrielle turned around and took a surprised step backward.

"Is this your friend?" Cicero asked with a snarl. He pointed the sword, making a small circle with the tip. "I know who you are. I saw you in Rome ... at the Coliseum."

"No, wait," Gabrielle said in protest. "You don't understand."

Xena pulled her partner back by the shoulder and stepped in front of her. The Roman pointed his sword at her chin. Xena let him.

"You're Xena, the Warrior Princess."

"That's right. You got a problem with that?"

"You're an enemy of Rome."

Xena sneered. "That depends on how you look at it. Right now, I'm your best friend."

"Oh, yeah? How so?"

"I'm willing to save you and your family. We're taking a boat and getting out of here. I suggest you put aside our differences and come with us." She put her finger on the tip of the sword and attempted to gently push it away.

The soldier flipped the blade from Xena's hand and returned its threatening point to the warrior's sternum.

"The only place I'm going with you is back to Rome. In the name of Julius Caesar, I place you under arrest, Xena, Warrior Princess."

"Don't curse in front of children!" With a high pitched yell, Xena jumped and landed a solid front kick, sending the sword flying from Cicero's hand. The blade twirled upward, embedding itself into a thick tree limb directly overhead with a resounding twang. Cicero watched it vibrate for a moment before he realized that he was now unarmed.

"Get in the house!" He ordered as he gathered up his wife and children and pushed them toward the doorway.

"But, Father!" Alessandro shouted.

"I SAID GET IN THE HOUSE!"

"Wait!" Gabrielle cried. She tried to go after them, but Xena held her back with a firm grip. "Wait! You can't do this! You have to come with us!"

"YOU'D BE THE LAST PERSON ON EARTH THAT I'D TRUST WITH MY FAMILY!" the Roman soldier yelled as he shoved his family inside.

"No! Wait! You can't ..."

The bard's cries were cut off as Cicero slammed his front door closed. Gabrielle turned to her partner.

"Xena, you have to do something."

Xena shook her head. "Gabrielle, what can I do? I can't force them to come."

"Yes, you can."

"What can I do?"

"You can put the pinch on him."

Xena smiled sadly. "You know I can't do that."

Gabrielle shook her head from side to side, tears filling up her eyes. "Xena, we can't leave them." The realization that they were going to save very few people finally hit the sensitive bard. "All these people. An entire city. Alessandro, Hermia, that small baby ... what will happen to them?"

"They're in the hands of the Fates, Gabrielle. I'm sorry. If you weren't with me, maybe ..." Xena frowned. She could kill the father and save the rest. What's one more death to atone for, she thought, then shook her head to chase the notion away. "We don't have time for this Gabrielle. There's nothing I can do about them now. But there is something I can do about us. C'mon. We tried. You tried. You did your best. Now we have to go. All right?"

Gabrielle nodded and let Xena pull her by the arm, away from the house and through the gate.

Xena mounted an impatiently waiting Argo and reached down, pulling the bard into place behind her on the saddle. Gabrielle wrapped her arms around Xena's waist. The bard looked back at the villa with tears spilling from her eyes as they galloped away.

Argo would not be denied now. Neither crowds nor traffic could stop the mare from galloping through the streets of Pompeii, traveling as quickly as the road would allow. Several times, pedestrians had to duck out of the way to avoid being trampled.

At this point, Xena did not care. Her only thoughts were to get herself and Gabrielle to the boat. She guided Argo around a group of laughing shoppers, disregarding their shouts of anger as the horse galloped past.

They rounded the corner of Via Stabia at top speed, almost running over a rag-covered old woman.

Portia twirled out of the way, stumbling back against a wall. She raised a fist and started to yell an obscenity when she recognized the backs of the retreating bard and warrior. The curse turned into a cackle.

"Run, warrior, run!" the old hag screamed. "There's no escape for the likes of you. Death will always be at your heels, just one step behind!"

Portia staggered out into the middle of the street, laughing and waving her fist at the retreating warrior until a group of Pompeians walked past, pushing her out of the way.

"Get out of our way, you smelly old woman!" a nobleman ordered.

"Watch who yer pushing!" the crone said, leering at the group. Then her eyes turned to Vesuvius, looming in the distance, and widened with fear.

"THE TIME IS AT HAND!" she yelled as she lifted her hands to the sky. "HAEPHASTUS' HAMMER IS ABOUT TO STRIKE! ARE YOU PREPARED TO DIE?"

"Oh, SHUT UP, you old cow!" the nobleman barked. The group turned their backs on the soothsayer, laughing at her as they walked away.

Portia watched as they casually strolled along, oblivious to her warning. She stood, hunched over in the middle of the street with tears streaming from her eyes.

"The gods punish those who turn their backs on destiny," she whispered, drawing her cloak around her as she faded into the shadows.

Xena leaned into Argo's stride as they passed into the shadow of Porta Stabia's arch. The warrior welcomed the strong smell of river water as they exited the city.

She pulled the mare to a trot and guided her along the path leading to the dock. The thud of hooves on dirt changed to the empty echo of wood as the path turned to wharf. Xena brought Argo to a halt and squinted into the sunlight. Although almost noon, the dock was empty. Obviously no one was planning to do any work the day after a festival. There weren't many vessels tied to the moorings. In fact, there were very few; and there were no merchant ships whatsoever.

"Where is the boat?" Gabrielle asked.

Xena searched the line of the dock until her eyes rested on a stretch of ships moored neatly in a row. There was a great deal of activity on one of them.

"Over there!" She maneuvered Argo south, along the wharf.

As they got closer, Xena noted that the boats tied to the moorings were sleek and long. Her heart sank in her chest.

"They're all racing boats," she mumbled, bringing Argo to a halt and helping Gabrielle from the saddle.

"That's good, right?" the bard asked, hopefully.

"Yeah, good for us because they're fast," Xena answered as she kicked her leg over the saddlehorn and jumped down. "Not so good for Argo."

Xena studied the long boats carefully. They were narrow and built for speed; no more than 10 rowers per side and a drummer at the head. She had no doubt that the vessel would cut through the water of the river and get them out to sea in no time. But the craft were meant to win races, not carry horses.

There was absolutely no place for Argo.

Xena held out her hand. "Give me your staff."

The bard whirled on her partner. "Xena, what are you going to do?"

The warrior didn't answer, just held out her hand. Gabrielle reluctantly handed over the staff and watched as Xena attached it to the saddle.

"Xena," Gabrielle said as her partner tightened down their belongings. "Maybe we could put her in one of the other boats and tow her with us."

The warrior shook her head. "She won't be able to keep her footing. She'll panic."

There was silence as Xena finished her task and then turned to face the bard.

Gabrielle was having none of it. "Xena, don't you even THINK about staying behind with her."

Xena chuckled. "Don't worry. I'm not going to do that. She'll be better off on her own. When there's a storm, let the horses run, right? She'll get to safety, even if we don't."

Gabrielle breathed a heavy sigh of relief and nodded solemnly.

Xena checked the saddle one last time, deciding at the last minute to toss a water bag to Gabrielle. She said a brief goodbye to her faithful mare, petted her nose and promised to meet up with her as soon as she could. That said, the warrior swatted the horse on the rump.

"Now get going! G'wan."

Argo hesitated before taking off, instinct for preservation battling with the desire to be with her master. She trotted backward and forward, undecided about which way to go.

"Get going, I said!"

There was no denying the command. Argo took off like a griffin out of Tartarus, heading west along the Sarno River toward the sea.

"C'mon," Xena said as she watched Argo gallop away. "Let's get the Hades out of here."

The small group was in the boat, waiting. The sky was as clear blue as they had ever seen it; the water as calm as glass. One of the men looked toward the volcano and studied it carefully. It might as well have been a painting, it was so serene.

"Is she sure about this?" he asked aloud. The group began to mumble.

Sappho sat on a bench, watching as the warrior and bard ran toward them. "If she says something's going to happen, then believe me, something's gonna happen."

The responding mumbles were not ones of agreement.

"Look at it this way," the poet said, turning in her seat. "The worst thing that will happen is we'll get a nice boat ride and a good workout today."

"Yeah, and half the city laughing at us when we get back."

"At least we'll be alive."

That shut everyone up.

"What's going on?" Gabrielle asked. She accepted Sappho's helping hand and stepped into the vessel.

"Oh, nothing. The natives are getting restless."

Gabrielle studied the group, one at each oar station. They stared back at her blankly as she looked them over.

"Lively bunch we got here," the bard mumbled. "Any of you know how to row a racing boat?"

All heads shook negatively.

"Great," Gabrielle said and blew a strand of hair away from her face.

"All right, what have we got here?" Xena stood on the dock, looking over the sleek boat. She frowned. 10 people, 20 stations. "We can fit more people," she said, stating the obvious.

"There's no one else here," Phaon answered.

Xena looked over her shoulder. The dock was empty. The only sound was the boats gently knocking against wood as they swayed at their moorings.

"Phaon, where are all the merchant vessels?" Xena asked.

The woman shrugged, so a merchant answered for her. "They moor out at sea. Sarno dock is for loading and unloading only."

Xena nodded once. "All right, then. Let's put out to sea and see if we can't get one of the merchant ships to listen to us. I'll sit in the lead. Gabrielle you sit right behind me. Follow my strokes and we should do just fine. Sappho, I want you at the drum."

"What tempo for rowing, Xena?"

Xena thought for a moment and then replied, "Start at half-heartbeat. We'll speed it up as we get used to it."

The poet nodded and picked up the mallets.

Xena reached down to untie the thick rope from its mooring post when her skin began to crawl. She could feel something coming. Something was coming and it was heading directly for them. She whirled around and stared in the direction of the mountain, her senses jolted to full alert.

"Xena?" the bard's shaky voice asked from behind her. "What is that?"

It was a low rumble, slowly building. Xena could feel the vibration under her feet, building steadily in intensity and moving quickly toward them like a herd of stampeding horses. A deafening groan from the very bowels of the earth filled their ears until it was all they could hear.

And then the ground heaved beneath Xena's feet, throwing her backward onto the wood of the dock. Her world was jerked violently away and she lost all sense of equilibrium. Try as she might, she could not stand, for it felt as though the ground had turned to liquid and was shifting beneath her in waves.

"It won't be a good day," the beggar said to his dog. "People with hangovers don't usually feel like giving money away."

He walked to his usual spot on Via Dell'Abbondanza and started to sit, wincing at the pain in his bad knees. The dog tugged on her leash and almost caused the beggar to fall down.

"Hey, easy now! You know it's hard for me to sit!"

The dog yanked again, harder this time, and started to growl.

"What is your problem?"

Ceres started pulling on her leash frantically, yipping and twisting in her collar trying to get out.

"By the gods, Ceres, what is wrong with you!" He looked around the area for the source of the dog's agitation, but there was nothing unusual. "Whatsa matter? Is there a male dog around you're not in the mood for?"

The beggar smiled at his pet. The dog burst into a fit of barking.

"Well, that's just about enough of that!" the beggar said. He tied the dog's leash to a nearby post and then eased himself down toward the ground.

The dog's howling ceased abruptly. She stood at stiff attention, facing Mount Vesuvius.

And then the earth rocked underneath their feet. The dog crouched down and howled in fear. The beggar was thrown back against the stone wall, knocked unconscious, leaving a trail of blood as he slid down the wall to the dirt.

Lena and Cicero were arguing in the kitchen. Alessandro and Hermia sat in their chairs at the kitchen table, following the shouting with solemn faces.

They hated it when their parents argued. The baby in Lena's arms began to fuss and cry, so she left Cicero in the middle of a sentence to put the child into his crib.

The soldier waited silently and glared at the two children. Alessandro and Hermia looked briefly at each other but said nothing.

The argument picked up right where the couple had left off when Lena returned.

"Why would you even think of trusting an enemy of Rome?" Cicero finished.

"How do you know she was an enemy of Rome?"

"Because I saw her myself. She was a prisoner!"

"And what does that mean? I swear to Mars, Cicero, sometimes you are just so naive! She could have been trying to save Rome, for all you know!"

"Save Rome from what?"

"From CAESAR!"

"Don't be ridiculous!"

"Don't you be ridiculous!"

"Now, who's being ridiculous!"

"You are, that's who!"

"Um, Mother? Father?" Alessandro said, interrupting. "Um, what if the volcano explodes?"

"Alessandro, my son," Cicero said, kneeling down to face the boy at eye level, "there's as much chance of Vesuvius exploding as ..."

"You becoming a general?" Lena finished for him.

Hermia covered her mouth with her hands to hide a laugh.

At that moment, the ground seemed to lift below their feet. Then the most deafening sound that Alessandro had ever heard filled their ears and shook the house down to its foundation. Their home shuddered, increasing in intensity until the boy thought the walls were going to disintegrate. And then a violent jerk threw them to their right. They all crashed to the floor, unable to stand, and the house began to rock.

Dishes crashed all around them. Goblets flew out of their cupboards. Chairs fell over. The walls creaked and groaned, threatening to collapse.

"GET OUT OF THE KITCHEN!" Cicero yelled as he managed to get to his feet. He ran to his wife and helped her up. Alessandro was already up and helping Hermia. Together, they stumbled through the doorway of the kitchen into the garden, searching for a safe place to hide.

Xena managed to roll onto her knees and struggled to get to the boat, but the earth twisted again, throwing her brutally onto her back. The deafening rumble rattled her very bones.

"Xena!" Gabrielle screamed as she was thrown to the floor of the vessel. The boat rocked back and forth, rope creaking in protest as it strained against its ties to the dock. The bard felt Sappho stumble against her, so she reached out for her. They held tight as the boat was tossed about like a toy in the hands of the gods.

Julia Felix could hear only her own screams and the sound of shattering glass. She stumbled through the doorway into her bedroom followed by the two slaves, Labia Majora and Bougain Villae, who had been repairing her hair.

"We must go back to Rome! I should have listened to Xena at the festival!" she screamed and grabbed onto a slave as they were thrown against a wall. "Fetch all the valuables -- the silver and gold, the statues of Isis, everything you can carry. Quickly!" she shrieked at Labia Majora and fumbled for her jewelry box. The floor wrenched and sent the widow and her valuables tumbling to the floor.

"You fool!" the slave screamed. "Don't you see what's happening? We have no time to save your baubles! We have to get out of here!"

"You do as I say," Julia cried, "or I'll see that you are whipped!"

Then the ceiling screeched as a crack spread across it from one end to the other. They looked up and watched in horror as the ceiling split and crashed down upon them, silencing them all.

Up on the slopes of Mount Vesuvius, a woman ran screaming out of her home toward a dry well; her husband right behind her. They huddled together and watched in horror as their home crumbled to the ground. And then the earth howled and cracked open beneath their feet, swallowing them whole.

Finally, the earth seemed to settle, though it still protested with muffled groans. Xena's heart was racing as she felt the ground become solid once again. She lifted herself slowly from the dock, breathing a sigh of relief when her eyes found the bard's.

The boat was still there, intact. Xena turned toward the city. Pompeii was still there, though she wasn't sure how intact. She could hear the screams filtering out from within.

"Xena, let's go!" the bard yelled.

"No, wait!" Xena held up a hand as she stood. "We can fit more people on the boat. Here they come."

Gabrielle lifted her gaze and watched as a wave of people ran screaming through the Porta Stabia.

"This way!" Xena yelled. "Hurry!"

Several men heard the shout and ran in their direction.

"Gabrielle, fill the seats," Xena ordered. "Get as many on board as possible, but let me know when we're full. We don't want to get too heavy."

The bard nodded her assent as the warrior helped the first of the Pompeians into the craft. A crowd began to form on the dock as people fought over possession of the other boats.

"Xena," Gabrielle said in a warning tone she watched the situation with concern.

The warrior was feeding her a steady stream of people, trying to reach for as many women and children as she could. Her efforts were turning into a scuffle as men began to fight for position on the boat.

"Get back!" Xena huffed and knocked a frenzied merchant to the side. "I said get back! We can only fit so many! Go to another boat!"

"Get out of my way!" a finely robed nobleman ordered. He swung his hand at the warrior, intending to land a vicious slap, only to find his wrist caught in an iron grip. Xena's fist filled his vision. The solid punch broke his nose, sending him to the ground.

The fierceness of the blow and the splattering of blood brought the crowd to a sudden halt.

"Anyone else want some?" Xena asked through clenched teeth. The crowd backed up warily.

"Xena, one more!" Gabrielle called.

The warrior nodded and drew her sword, pointing it at the crowd.

"You!" she said to a woman who was holding a young child. The woman smiled briefly and stepped forward. "The rest of you GET BACK!" Xena stood guard as Gabrielle helped the last passenger into the boat.

Then Xena heaved a mighty swing, cutting through the boat's mooring rope as though it were butter. She leveled the blade at the crowd of angry men as she backed toward the craft.

"This boat is full. Find another," she informed them with a growl.

The men surged forward hesitantly, trying to decide whether or not to take matters into their own hands.

And then the earth roared and the world turned upside down.

Xena was thrown forward, stumbling into the crowd. She fell into the people, sending the men tumbling to the dock like a set of bowling pins. Xena rolled helplessly as they were all tossed from side to side.

"I warned you, didn't I, you fools!" cried a hoarse voice above the rumble. Xena looked up to see a familiar figure standing just at the edge of the arch. It was the crazy soothsayer, Portia. She staggered forward, her hair standing out and twisted like Medusa's, as though full of snakes.

"The gods are punishing us, can't you see that?" she shrieked above the roar. "Did you really think there was any escape?"

Suddenly a fierce rumble shook the ground and Xena looked up to see the great wall of Pompeii buckle and lurch. It swayed in loping waves, groaning at the effort. Then a huge cracking sound filled the air and Xena watched in horror, unable to turn her eyes away as rocks tore from the wall and hurled through the air, tumbling down all around them.

Xena rolled along the dock, trying to avoid the downpour, feeling the bite of stone against her arms and legs.

"XENA!"

She heard the bard screaming, as though from a distance. The warrior looked up to see the boat drifting away from the dock, tossing violently in the waves of a sea gone mad. Xena turned back to the wall. Portia was dead, her body crushed under the weight of the wall's debris, as were many others. Xena watched as the blood of dozens began to soak the earth.

"XENA!"

Cicero thought the safest place for his family would be their garden, but the entire colonnade began to sway and the columns were threatening to fall. What was worse, a light rain of hot ash had started to fall. He could feel a tingling, burning sensation as the ash touched his exposed skin.

Hermia started to cry.

"INSIDE THE HOUSE!" he ordered. "INTO THE STORAGE ROOM."

He herded his family out of the peristyle just as a marble column split and crashed to the ground, destroying a bed of bushes and flowers.

It was snowing smoldering ash on Pompeii now. Hot dust filled the air and poured down over the city, covering everything with a layer of gray within seconds. The rain of ash was so thick that it became difficult to see. Gray blanketed the streets, covered the alleyways, filled every crease and crevice as it drifted down to the ground.

The falling debris coated the still body of the beggar with a light dusting of soot. As the intensity of the downpour increased, the body was covered as though by a soft white blanket, until finally, the beggar became invisible under a mound of smoldering ash.

The dog's strangled barking was lost amid the rumble of the earth and the screams of the Pompeians. The animal twisted and rolled, furiously trying to reach around and bite through her leash. The hot cinders that fell were burning her skin and there were raw, bare patches on her coat where she had gnawed at her own fur in her frenzy.

The dog convulsed on the ground, frantically trying to escape, sending splatters of ash and embers flying all around. Eventually, the downpour became too much, covering even the dog in a blanket of desperation.



Xena stood shakily, swiping at the deluge of soot and ash that was impairing her vision. Another shift of the earth almost sent her tumbling. She took a few steps back and then ran forward, launching herself from the dock, straining with her arms to reach for the boat as the earth groaned at her departure.

Her body hit the side of the vessel with a thud. A hand gripped hers and held on tight as the warrior's legs splashed into the churning river water. Then Gabrielle and Sappho were grabbing at her leathers and pulling her aboard.

Xena rolled into the craft, resting in its center, trying to catch her breath, choking instead when she swallowed a mouth full of soot. The vessel was rocking as it drifted away from the dock farther downstream.

"Are you all right?" Gabrielle asked, concern filling her voice.

"I'm fine," Xena's answer was brief and she pushed herself to her feet. "All right. Let's man the oars. Sappho, give us a steady beat. I want EVERYONE who can row at an oar. Follow my movements! Let's go!"

Xena eased herself into the lead position, at the right of the drummer, and waited until Gabrielle had seated herself directly behind.

She looked at the boatload of passengers. The vessel was almost too full. Every seat was taken: Children sat on the laps of their mothers, others were squatting in the center of the craft, balancing over the spine. Everyone was covered in a layer of gray soot. The warrior gritted her teeth and took a firm grip on the wooden oar, hoping they would have the strength to gain enough speed.

Xena hefted the oar up and out of its docked position, determined that they would make it out to the open sea. "All right. Follow me!"

Sappho began the beat. Xena took one deep breath and began to row. Her oar dipped into the river and she pulled. The others followed, hesitantly at first, then more confidently as all oars joined in sync and the boat began to glide across the water, gaining speed with every stroke.

"That's it!" Xena huffed out between breaths. "Stay with me! Don't forget to breath! Row! Row! Row for your lives!"

Xena watched the dock recede from view as they pulled away. The crushed bodies and broken wall disappeared into the landscape as the distance grew between them.

Her vision filled with the sight of Vesuvius as it rose into view over the horizon of the city. The mouth of the mountain was outlined in a blaze of red flame, and glowing rocks bubbled out below a gigantic plume of smoke and ash.



By the time they made the mouth of the river, the sky had turned an odd shade -- not gray like storm clouds, or black like night, but dirty-brown --

"Like death," Gabrielle thought, as she rowed. "The color of the grave."

And there was an odd scent to the wind, a strange stench like rotten eggs. They rowed into the open ocean, the wind picking up and filling their nostrils with the horrid smell. The bard's muscles were beginning to tire and she could tell by the pace of the rest of the oars that others were tiring as well.

"KEEP ROWING!" Xena ordered, as if smelling their fatigue in the air. "WE'RE NOT SAFE YET!"

The ocean water was in a state of chaos. The sea heaved in bizarre patterns -- not in waves, but as though it were a gigantic cauldron of boiling scum. The bow of the boat crashed against the uneven whitecaps, impeding their progress.

"PUT YOUR BACKS INTO IT! DON'T STOP!"

"Xena, which way?" Sappho yelled, pausing in her drumming. Oars stopped their motion the moment the beat died away.

Xena was going to yell at the poet, but decided it was as good a moment as any to take a short breather. She had to make sure that their efforts headed them in the right direction.

"The closest town is Stabiae," one of the passengers yelled as he pointed southwest.

They watched as a small number of racing boats crossed the mouth of the Sarno. Xena's eyes followed a line of three vessels as they rounded an outcrop of land and headed southwest, toward Stabiae. She could see a crowd of desperate people yelling to them from the shore.

The beach was filling with people, all trying to flee the city. Xena watched as they waved and screamed, frantic in their pleas, but there was nothing to be done. Their fates were sealed.

She studied the volcano instead, watching the rising plume of gray smoke as it stretched out across the sky. The cloud was definitely drifting southwest, starting a downward arc over Pompeii.

"No," Xena said as she sensed the direction of the wind. "No, the wind is blowing southwest. Stabiae is at risk. We're better off going in the opposite direction. What's across the bay?" she asked, turning in her seat to face the merchant.

"There's Neapolis --"

Xena shook her head. "Too close."

"There's Misenum. The naval base."

Gabrielle was not happy. "Xena, we can't go there."

Xena stared north, thinking. "There'll be help there. Food, shelter, supplies. They'll be better prepared for a disaster than a normal village. These people need that, Gabrielle. All right, that's enough rest. We're heading northwest to Misenum. NOW ROW!"

She nodded to the poet and Sappho picked up the beat. Soon all oars were dipping into the churning waters of the Bay of Naples, their progress slow and grueling as they cut a path through jagged whitecaps and an ocean of angry waves.

Even Xena's back was beginning to ache. She eased up on the rowing and looked out to land, trying to gauge the distance they had covered in the last hour or so.

Great billows of thick, gray smoke were still churning out of the mouth of Vesuvius. The eruption column ascended high into the air, broadening outward like a great mushroom. The wind spread it mostly southwest, fanning it out over the slopes of Vesuvius. It appeared bright in some spots and in others dark and thick, the clouds a deadly combination of cinders and earth.

It seemed that the worst of the billowing vapors were tumbling over Pompeii, covering the city in a sheet of gray. And, judging by how quickly the cloud was spreading, Stabiae would probably suffer the same fate.

Though ashes were still drifting in the air all around them, Xena knew they had chosen correctly.

"TAKE A REST!" She yelled out and stilled her oar. The rest of the contingent complied gratefully.

She looked behind her, to Gabrielle, and smiled briefly. "Pass around the water. Take small gulps. It's all we got."

Gabrielle nodded and took a small sip from the waterskin before handing it to her partner. Xena did the same and then passed it forward to Sappho.

The warrior looked over to Phaon, who was sitting at the station across from her. The woman nodded in the direction of the volcano.

"Is it over? Are we safe?"

Xena wiped her mouth with her hand and shook her head slowly. "I don't know. I've never been this close to an eruption before. By the gods, we were so close --"

-- we could taste it," the bard finished for her.

"You said a mouthful," Sappho commented, leaning wearily against the drum. She looked at Phaon with concern. "Do you want to rest for a while. I can row, you can keep the beat."

Phaon chuckled, "I have as much rhythm as a drunken warrior -- no offense, Xena."

"None taken."

"I'll have us rowing around in circles. Best you keep the beat, Tenth Muse."

"All right then," Sappho said as she twirled a mallet in her hand. "But I'm so happy right now, I might play an Amazon Mambo!" She lifted the mallet and struck the drumskin to make her point.

A tremendous crack accompanied the beat, resounding through the depths of their souls as though the core of the earth had just split in two.

"By the gods! Look!" Gabrielle screamed out and pointed to Vesuvius.

They watched in horror as the top of the mountain seemed to lift away, as if in slow motion, rising upward into the sky. It broke into a million pieces, gaining momentum as it ascended, mixing blazing rocks and debris with thick, ash-laden smoke. The clouds turned black and angry red. Broad flames shot out in several places through the churning black smoke. The deadly column rose higher and higher in the air, spreading out for miles and miles across the sky before turning downward to rain death upon everything below.

The explosion left a gaping, spurting red hole -- a deep wound to the heart of the earth.



"Oh, my gods!" Xena muttered as she watched the ascending spread across the sky.

She heard the first splash of rock hit the water to her side of the boat and realized with a sinking sense of dread that they were not far enough away.

"TAKE COVER!" Xena yelled as more stones began to splatter around them. She put up her arms and felt the scratch of debris battering her skin.

Passengers dove for the center of the boat or tucked into their seats, trying as best as they could to shield themselves from the rain of black pumice stone.

Suddenly, they were not only in danger of being pummeled by the vast amounts of fragments that were falling from the sky, but the sea had also begun lift and stir, rocking the small vessel from side to side as the ocean shuddered in agitation.

A large, fiery stone whisked by Xena's head. She ducked just in time to hear it hit the water, hissing on impact. The battering of small light stone was changing quickly to cinders and black pieces of burning rock.

The warrior turned around and threw herself across her partner, covering Gabrielle's body with her own to protect her against the storm of stones that was falling all around them.

The bard tried to push against the warrior in protest, but a firm, muffled voice kept her still. "Keep down, Gabrielle!"

A soft grunt followed the command, then Gabrielle felt Xena's weight slump heavy on top of her.

Popidius was running through the streets of Pompeii. He was trying to find Ciro, having spent the first hours of the eruption huddled in a corner of the Grand Palestra. He felt the crack before he heard it; an ear-splitting sound that stopped him dead in his tracks. He knew it was Vesuvius, but he was afraid to look back -- to look the beast in the face.

Popidius turned slowly and brought his eyes to the sky in time to see a fiery boulder screeching directly for him. He held up his hands in a vain attempt to stop the inevitable.

The rain of fiery boulders quickly changed to a downpour of smaller pebbles and pumice. The shower of rock poured down upon the city, thudding and cracking into the already settling ash. It filled the streets like a black tide, rising up against walls, spilling over into windows, filling the rooms of homes and stores. The flat roofs were covered with it within seconds. It spilled over the tops and poured down into courtyards.

The Grand Theater filled up like a gigantic pan. Black and gray pumice covered the seats and stage in a cloak of rock. The seats disappeared. Walkways leveled out. The debris rose quickly against a wall in the rear of the theater, slowly covering the many poetic messages written throughout the years. The words written by a bard eventually disappeared under the hail of volcanic debris.

Inside the storeroom of their home, Alessandro and his family huddled in a corner, listing to the incessant thundering of rock against the roof and walls. They flinched with every crash, gripping each other tightly, praying that it would soon end.

Hermia screamed when the door to the enclosed room burst inward under a rush of volcanic rock. The dark matter flooded into the area, filling the space quickly. They scrambled to their feet and rushed atop barrels and crates, trying desperately to escape the deluge. The pumice tumbled in on them, rising up the walls, pushing everyone toward the ceiling. They scrambled and slipped on the stones, trying to stay above the black swell of stone -- just trying to stay alive.

Finally, the rain of debris lessened, trickling down to a few random splatters in the water, then stopped entirely. As the boat continued to rock, soft moans echoed in the quiet as the passengers began to relax their limbs and lift their heads.

Gabrielle heard a groan from the body covering her own.

"Xena!" she cried out hoarsely. "Xena!" She started to lift the dead weight up, relieved when she felt the warrior shift on her own. "Xena! Are you all right?"

Xena sat up and looked at the bard in a daze. She reached around to the back of her head, grimacing at her own touch. When she pulled her hand around, her fingers were slightly slicked with blood.

"Xena, you're bleeding!" Gabrielle jumped up and reached for her partner.

"No. No. I'm all right. It's nothing." The warrior shook her head to clear the cobwebs away. "We have to get rowing," she said to the bard, then looked around at the passengers on the boat. "Is everyone all right?"

"No," Sappho said as she unwrapped herself from Phaon's arms and pointed toward the center of the craft. "He's dead."

The merchant was lying in the center of the craft in a pool of blood, his head crushed by a pitted, black boulder, the stone visibly embedded in his skull.

Gabrielle looked away. Xena sighed, then chastised herself for being grateful that the rock had hit him instead of crashing through the hull of the vessel.

She stood up and worked her way over to the body.

"Give me a hand," she said to the man next to her.

"What are you going to do?"

"Throw him overboard."

The man started to protest, but the warrior's stern glare stopped him cold.

"You don't want to row his dead weight all the way to Misenum, do you?"

The man gulped and helped Xena toss the corpse over the side of the boat. They watched in silence as the body disappeared into the depths of the still churning ocean.

Xena wiped her hands on her skirt and looked up at the passengers. They stared back at her blankly.

"All right," she said, sighing. "We lost one. Let's make sure we don't lose any more. I can't imagine what Vesuvius might throw at us next, but I don't want to wait around here to find out."

Xena stepped her way carefully back to her position at the bow of the boat, managing to avoid the spill of blood. She sat down wearily and looked out across the bay.

There were other ships on water; merchant ships mostly and a few racing boats. Some were safe, their sails fully hoisted and fat with wind, racing in the same direction as they, for the safety of the naval base in Misenum. Others were sinking or adrift, their masts and sails engulfed in blazing infernos.

She was tired to the very core. Looking at her hands briefly, she noted the redness around her own calluses. If she was uncomfortable, the warrior could only imagine what the rest of this boatload of Pompeians must be feeling like. Xena turned to study her passengers for a moment, realizing she had no idea which ones were slaves and which ones were nobles. Frankly, she didn't give a Hades-damn if one were the Queen of Sheba.

"LET'S ROW!" she ordered and bent to the task.

Xena let her body keep the rhythm and tried to ignore the burning of her muscles by watching Vesuvius as it shifted into yet another phase of its eruption.

The widening of the volcano's vent seemed to change the dynamics of the flow. The tower of boiling gases and smoke was dissipating. No longer was there a tall column of ash hovering in the sky.

Instead, the volcano appeared to be bubbling, heaving out avalanches of glowing vomit that shot up but immediately fell back onto the upper slopes. Hot clouds of throbbing lava rolled down the side of the mountain, enveloping the towns beneath in a blanket of thick, black, gaseous death.

Paris staggered out of the Villa of Mysteries. He had survived the quakes and the deluge of burning rocks. The temple was, for the most part, intact. The gods had protected him and he thanked them profusely as he stumbled outside.

But why was it so dark? He could barely see as he felt his way around the wall of the garden. And why did his chest feel so heavy? Drawing in deep breaths, Paris suddenly felt as though his limbs had turned to lead. A goddess must be leaning on him, he thought, as he slumped against the wall, next to a short sentence written by a warrior, and slipped down to the ground.

"Time to sleep," he mumbled as he slid across the wall, smearing the writing and closed his eyes.



Menander led several noblemen along the Street of Souls. Thank Jupiter he had found a lantern, for if he had not, they would not be able to see at all. It was hard to believe that he was outside. He should have been squinting in the sun; instead his eyes were straining through a haze of brown muck as he tried to lead the small group somewhere safe.

They froze upon hearing a chorus of wails and moans. The cries were coming from a large mausoleum, just to their right. He peeked in, lantern first. Several people were there, crouched together against the far wall having sought shelter from the hail of rubble. But the group had gone suddenly quiet. The oil lamp cast a pale glow over the tomb.

Vettii sat huddled in a corner. Menander watched as his rival choked and gasped, then his eyes closed and he went silent. His fingers loosened and something fell from his hand onto the dirt floor.

Menander stared at the metal object. It was the Golden Statue of Ceres.

The lantern fell from his hand, crashing to the ground as Menander suddenly choked. The nobleman followed shortly after it, his body hitting the dirt with a heavy thud, dead before he even hit the ground.

Alessandro lifted his head from Hermia's shoulder and looked for the door. It was barely visible. The black rock had filled up the room almost to the ceiling, but somehow they had managed to stay on top.

He cleaned some debris from the hair of his crying sister and scanned the room for his parents.

His mother was lifting herself out of a near grave of rock. His father was helping her.

"Are you all right?" Cicero asked his son.

Alessandro sniffed and wiped his nose. "I think so."

Cicero nodded once and then pulled his wife the rest of the way out of the rubble. Her breathing was distressed so he had her lie down, not an easy thing to do considering her pregnancy. Lena shifted, trying to find a comfortable position on the rough, jagged stone. Cicero sat down wearily beside her and sighed.

"It sounds like it's stopped," the soldier said as he stared at the ceiling, half expecting the pummeling to start again. "Come here." He waved his hand at his children, beckoning them over.

Alessandro helped his sister crawl across the pumice. They lay down wearily between their mother and father. Hermia was still sobbing softly.

Cicero wiped at a black stripe of soot on Alessandro's cheek, helping to make an already dirty face even dirtier. The soldier smiled at his son.

"Now, that wasn't so bad, was it?"

Alessandro smiled back at his father, glad that they had stayed together. But the thought made him lose his smile. The baby, he thought. They had forgotten about the baby.

Almost at the same moment, Lena became hysterical as she came to the same realization.

"My baby! Oh, Sweet Juno, my baby! Oh, Cicero! The baby is still in the crib! We left Tiro in his crib!" She scrambled in the rock, trying to stand, but Cicero caught her in his arms and held her still, rocking the weeping woman gently.

"It's all right. We'll get out of here in a minute. Just stay still and calm down."

"Father, what is that smell?" Hermia said as she crinkled up her small nose.

Alessandro took a sniff and covered his mouth. His lungs felt like they were burning.

Hermia began to cry. "Father! My chest is burning! Make it stop!"

But Cicero was too concerned with his wife, who had suddenly slumped in his arms. He lay her down as she gasped for breath and suddenly realized that he was having difficulty breathing himself.

Alessandro watched his father lay his mother to the ground and then slump next to her. The last thing the woman did was raise her apron to her mouth in a vain attempt to keep the offending fumes at bay.

He realized that his sister was no longer crying. He looked over at her. Hermia's face was tranquil and still as though she had fallen asleep. Sweet dreams, he thought and smiled sadly.

He felt very calm now. It was becoming difficult to breathe. The rotten-egg stench was in his throat, his nose, his eyes, everywhere.

What a waste, he thought. All those dinars. And he closed his eyes.



The shore was no longer visible to the naked eye. Oplontis, Herculaneum, Pompeii; they no longer existed in this world. A black cloud had descended, blown by the breath of Hades himself from the depths of Tartarus, covering all in eternal night.

"... darkness fell, not the ark of a moonless or cloudy night, but as if the lamp had been put out in a closed room. You could hear the shrieks of the women, the wailing of infants and the shouting of men; some were calling their parents, others their children or their wives, trying to recognize them by their voices. People bewailed their own fate or that of their relatives, and there were some who prayed for death in their terror of dying. Many sought the aid of the gods, but still more imagined there were no gods left and that the universe was plunged into eternal darkness for evermore."

-Pliny the Younger, 79 A.D.
(as he witnessed the eruption from Misenum, August 24, 79 A.D.)

Xena pulled hard on her oar, feeling with great satisfaction the increased surge of speed as all oars dipped into the ocean in unison, propelling them onward. They were gaining momentum quickly -- almost too quickly.

Xena pulled again but gave her full attention to the bay, suddenly noticing a change in the water's condition. The whitecaps were gone; the water had gone still.

"By all the gods on Mount Olympus," Xena cursed under her breath as her oar stilled. The other passengers faltered in their rowing, bringing their oars stationary in confusion.

"Xena, what's wrong?" Gabrielle asked, noticing that the warrior had stopped rowing, her own oar stalling in response.

Xena was looking out across the bay and had begun to stand.

"For the love of Zeus, are all the gods against us today?" the warrior yelled out in frustration. Xena had to steady herself as the vessel shifted in direction.

At first, they were still gliding towards Misenum, even though all the rowing had ceased, but a sudden shift in the water abruptly changed their direction. The ocean was dropping away, ebbing back to shore. They could feel the boat falling and being pulled in the opposite direction as the sea surged away.

This is it, Xena thought, there's nothing I can do.

"Gabrielle!"

The bard was on her feet. Xena reached back frantically and pulled Gabrielle forward into her arms.

Sappho dropped the mallets and grabbed onto the drum, trying to keep herself upright as the boat dropped, caught up in a horrific rip-tide.

"Xena, what's going on?" the poet screamed.

Xena held onto Gabrielle tightly, trying with all her might to keep them both in the boat.

"A huge swell ..." the warrior gasped out. "The beginnings of a tsunami."

The boat was moving fast now, being pulled backward by the swell as it sucked up the water in the bay. The other passengers began to scream as they grabbed onto whatever they could to keep themselves onboard.

"Maybe it'll roll right under us," Gabrielle yelled out hopefully.

And then they saw it. A wall of water rising upward out of the sea. It pulled them toward it even as it rushed at them, making the climbing wave appear to be racing for them twice as fast. Every second it grew; they dropped lower.

"WE'RE GOING TO DIE!" someone screamed out from the rear of the boat.

The boat began to tilt upward as they began to climb, pulled up the slope of the watery mountain by the force of the tide.

Sappho fell away from the drum. Phaon caught her in her arms and held her tight.

Screams began to rise above the tremendous roar that was growing in pitch as they climbed higher.

Xena looked up to the top of the rumbling swell as it towered over them, into the churning, translucent waters of the mountainous wave. The boat listed upward as the wave lifted them into its arms, and for a brief instance, Xena felt a moment of incredible calm.

She tightened her arms around Gabrielle and pulled her close. Placing a large hand on the back of a sun-gold head, she turned the bard away from the sight of the roaring wave. With eyes staring up and glittering with a reflection of the watery hand of Poseidon, Xena stood tall and prepared herself for the inevitable.

"Ares protect us," Xena whispered.

The boat reached the apex of its climb and the water turned against them. They flipped over, suspended for a moment in the air as oars and people began to fall away. And then the hand of Poseidon came crashing down.

SEVEN DAYS IN POMPEII

BY DJWP

CHAPTER 23 (CONCLUSION)

She had the strange sensation of floating. Her mind was peaceful and her body felt weightless as though she were flying through the sky, dipping and weaving to avoid the clouds. It's very cold up here, Gabrielle thought, and the black void began to sparkle with tiny pinpricks of light. Must be the stars, the bard imagined and was surprised when she realized her eyes were open and she was, indeed, staring at the dark night sky.

Only she wasn't flying through the firmament, she was looking up at it as she drifted in the ocean, gently rising up and down as waves passed underneath. She was clutching something. Wood? Oar? Body? She didn't know. But whatever it was, it was keeping her afloat, so she gripped it more tightly and tried to move her head.

That was a mistake, Gabrielle thought as she involuntarily let out a moan. Her head was killing her.

"Easy now," a familiar voice said, though the bard couldn't tell where it was coming from. "Just stay still. They'll have us out of here in a few moments."

And then she was being lifted out of the water and the night grew darker still as she, once again, drifted into unconsciousness.

"Hmmm! I smell nutbread!" Gabrielle cried with delight as she entered the house and put down a basket of blackberries, freshly picked from the forest outside.

Xena wiped her hands off on her apron. "It'll be done in a moment," she said with a smile, then grabbed a handful of the juicy fruit from the basket and stuffed it in her mouth. The berry juice squirted through her grinning lips and dribbled down her chin.

"Hey! Save some for me!" Gabrielle slapped at Xena's hand as her lover reached for another fistful. Xena caught the offending limb instead and pulled Gabrielle around the edge of the table. She wrapped Gabrielle up in long arms and began spreading the dribbling juice from her chin all over the bard's face.

"Hey!" Gabrielle squealed, trying to wiggle out of Xena's arms, but the warrior held fast.

"I mought you thaid you wanted thome," Xena mumbled through a mouthful of berries.

But Gabrielle had already given up trying to get away. Instead, she caught Xena's juicy chin with hungry lips, and licked and nipped at every drop of berry juice she could find.

Xena swallowed the last bit of berry meat and then let the bard taste a blackberry-flavored tongue.

"Mmmm," Gabrielle moaned as she tightened her arms around Xena's neck, searching deeper for more.

Xena leaned into the bard, pushing her back against the table. She reached around and swiped at the plates and dishes and nutbread ingredients, sending them flying. All manner of cooking items clattered to the

floor as Xena cleared the table. With her lips never parting from Gabrielle's, she gently pushed the bard, laying her onto the table's surface.

Questing hands found their way to the ties of a green top. Xena broke their kiss so she could watch as the halter slowly lifted to reveal the milky white breasts of her beautiful bard.

Gabrielle smiled as she watched her lover's eyes sparkle with appreciation. "You're going to burn the nutbread."

"I always burn the nutbread," Xena whispered. She bent her head down and bestowed a light kiss upon a perfect nipple. When she lifted her lips away, she looked at her lover with the utmost seriousness.

"Is this what you wanted, Gabrielle?" Xena asked, eyes searching the bard's face.

Gabrielle frowned, wondering why the playful sparkle had turned so serious.

"What do you mean?"

"All this," Xena said, looking around the room and then back at her lover. "This house. A home. Nutbread. Berries. Is all this what you really want out of life?"

Gabrielle studied the somber scowl and raised her hand to caress Xena's cheek.

"None of this really matters, Xena. My home is wherever you are. There are days when I might wish for this ... sometimes ... when I get tired. And there are days when I look forward to the road and all of its adventures."

"That's why you followed me, wasn't it? Because you wanted adventure?"

Gabrielle grinned, looking at her lover mischievously. "Is that what I told you? And you believed me?"

Xena nodded. Gabrielle chuckled and ran her palm across Xena's cheek again. "And all this time I thought you knew everything. Xena, don't you know by now ... all I ever really wanted ... and all I'll ever really need ... is you." The bard lifted her head and bequeathed her lover a tender kiss.

"Now, what about dessert?" Gabrielle watched as Xena's solemn expression disappeared with the flash of a brilliant smile.

"Here's to dessert," Xena said and she lowered her body onto the bard's, capturing her lips again for a searing kiss that made Gabrielle's head spin.

"Here's to dessert," Xena said again, but her voice had changed. It was no longer Xena's, but belonged to someone else who had a different, higher timbre entirely.

"Xena?" Gabrielle asked as she opened her eyes, wondering what had happened to the warm body that had just been leaning against her. And why was she no longer being kissed?

"Gabrielle!" the voice said and the bard felt a weight settle onto the table right next to her. She shifted and realized that there was a pillow behind her head. When did Xena put a pillow on the table?

Gabrielle looked around and realized she wasn't on a table at all but was in a bed. And it wasn't Xena looking down at her, it was Sappho.

The poet smiled at her friend. Gabrielle blinked up at her in confusion.

"Hi, there," Sappho said warmly and picked up the bard's hand, giving it a squeeze. "It's good to see you

open your eyes. We were starting to get worried about you."

Gabrielle winced at the pain in her head and tried to lift herself up. "Where's Xena?"

"Easy, now!" Sappho said, pushing the bard gently back by the shoulders. "Not so fast. You took a pretty bad whack to the head. If you sit up too fast, you'll get dizzy."

Gabrielle closed her eyes and waited for the room to stop spinning. As soon as she could, she opened them again and stared at the poet.

"Where's Xena?"

Sappho fixed the blanket, bringing the covering up to the bard's shoulders.

"The healer says you have to stay in bed ... at least, for a day or two."

Gabrielle caught Sappho's hand and pushed it away from the blanket.

"Sappho, tell me where Xena is right now."

The poet looked away. "I don't know."

Gabrielle lifted herself up to her elbows, ignoring the resulting spin.

"What do you mean, you don't know?"

"I ... um ... that is ..."

Another weight shifted the bed and Phaon leaned into view.

"We were picked up out of the ocean by a rescue ship from Misenum. Thank the gods the admiral -- Pliny the Elder, I think his name is -- he sent out several ships to try to rescue survivors. They pulled just about everyone out of the sea."

"Everyone? Then where's Xena?"

Phaon lifted the bard's hand into her own. "Everyone except Xena, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle became agitated. Sappho grabbed the bard's shoulders and tried to settle her down.

"I'm sorry, Gabrielle. We tried. We really did. I made the captain circle and circle, and we looked for her." Sappho shook her head, tears filling up her eyes. "She was nowhere to be found. We had to leave and get everyone to the base. We had lots of wounded, not to mention you had this nasty head wound that needed to be attended to."

Gabrielle began to shake away her hands trying to rise, but Sappho held firm.

"I'm sorry, Gabrielle. We couldn't find her. We had to leave. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

Sappho pulled the bard into her arms as Gabrielle started to cry and pound at her with her hands.

"No! I don't believe it! She's out there! She has to still be out there! We have to go back! We have to go back!"

Sappho held Gabrielle tightly in her arms and let her hit and thrash until the bard became too weak. Eventually the injury won out, causing Gabrielle to collapse, the blackness of unconsciousness embracing her once more.

Sappho carefully lowered her friend to the pillow and started to cry. Phaon wrapped her arms around the poet and let her weep.

"She saved us, Phaon. She saved us all and now she's gone. Why did we live and Xena die?"

"Shhh," Phaon said, rocking the poet in her embrace. "Only the gods know why. We could have been killed in any number of ways if not for Xena. We have to be strong now and help Gabrielle. It's the least we can do."

Sappho nodded, sniffing and wiping her nose.

"I'll try," she said as she reached to wipe away golden bangs from a blood-reddened bandage.

"You won't try, Tenth Muse. You'll do." Phaon smiled at the poet. "We both will."

"There she is," Sappho said as she stepped inside the tent, immediately finding the bard's golden head. Gabrielle was walking through the shelter checking each and every wounded person lying on a pallet. Some were unconscious still, others moaned, still others smiled up at the passing bard, glad to be alive despite their injuries.

Sappho watched as Gabrielle kneeled and said something to a wounded man, causing him to laugh.

"That's the third time she's walked through this tent today," Sappho said to Phaon, who was standing to her rear.

"Go and get her," Phaon said. "Let her know what Pliny told you."

Sappho nodded once and weaved her way across the tent, stepping carefully through row upon row of wounded survivors.

"Gabrielle," she said as she came upon the bard, "you should be in bed."

"I feel fine," Gabrielle replied and continued her rounds. Sappho followed after her.

"You've been through here three times already!"

"I might have missed her."

"How about the other tents? Have you been through them three times each as well?"

Gabrielle paused as she thought. "No, I think I missed that last tent on the end. I think I'll check that next."

Sappho put her hand on an arm, causing the bard to stop and turn.

"Gabrielle," Sappho said with a sigh, "We're about to start feeding everyone. You'll only be walking through all the tents handing out food again. Why not rest until then?"

Gabrielle pulled her arm away. "Because I don't want to. Because I want to look ... and keep on looking until I find her."

"And if you don't?"

"I'll find her. I know I'll find her." The bard's haunted eyes scanned the hundreds of wounded. "I've got to."

"Listen, Pliny said another boat is coming in." The bard's expression perked up. "He can't tell which boat it is from here, but he can see the mainsail. He's hoping it's his father, but it could be a different ship. At the very least, it should have more survivors on it."

"How long 'til it docks?"

Sappho shrugged. "Maybe an hour. Instead of searching the tents, why don't you come back with me to the mess hall? We can help prepare the food and you can watch the harbor from there. Whadda ya say?"

Gabrielle glanced around the room one more time, looking at the score of men, women and children who lay helpless and wounded on pallets.

"All right. What about the orphans' tent? Have they been fed?"

"Phaon's helping with that now."

"Come on," Sappho said, gently taking hold of her arm. "There's a lot to be done and not a lot of people to do it."

"All right," the bard answered softly.

"I'm going to sing to the children later this evening. You wanna join me?" Sappho asked hopefully as they walked away.

"Maybe."

But the bard was thinking she'd have time for one more search through the infirmary before it was time to go to sleep.

Gabrielle stood at the gangplank, watching as more survivors walked or were helped ashore. She waited quietly, watching each person as they passed. Most were weary and haunted, and had a look in their eyes as though half-dead.

It had been three days since the eruption and ships were still returning to Misenum with refugees on board. Each boat, however, had fewer and fewer, and the bard watched with a sinking heart as the last walking survivor from this boat placed his sandal on the shore and limped away.

Gabrielle's heart stopped as she watched two Roman soldiers carefully maneuver their way down the gangplank carrying a stretcher between them. The body on it was covered by a blanket. She waited until they stepped ashore before stopping them.

"Wait!" she said. They stopped. "Who is that?"

One of the soldiers shrugged. "Who knows? We found her floating in the sea. She was alive for a while. Died just as we got to shore. We didn't want to throw her over board so close to the dock -- she'd only float in. We'll burn her with the others."

The soldier noticed the stricken look on Gabrielle's face.

"Why? Do you know her?"

Gabrielle gulped and reached for the blanket. "I hope not."

Her hand shook as she grabbed the edge of the cloth and lifted it away.

The bard looked down at the bloated and burned face of another of Vesuvius' victims. It was no one that she knew.

"Thank the gods," she breathed as she slowly drew the blanket up to re-cover blank, staring eyes.

The soldier grunted and nodded to his mate. Together, they carried the body away.

The bard didn't know whether to cry or laugh. She wiped her hand across her eyes and stared out at the ocean. In the distance, she could faintly see the outline of Vesuvius. Its image was forever altered by the eruption. The volcano's towering pinnacle had been blasted away, leaving behind half a mountain and a jagged crater that was emitting a steady stream of white smoke still.

The water was calm now. As calm as the mountain, almost as though nothing had ever happened.

"I hate the sea," the bard mumbled and then turned away.

Gabrielle headed back toward the mess hall. She might as well help out with the feeding, she thought as she climbed the hill that led to the refugee camp.

As she came over the rise, she noticed Pliny the Younger sitting on the top of a rock, staring out to the ocean. He had a scroll in his lap, but he wasn't writing as the bard had seen him doing for so many days now. He was crying.

She hurried over to her young friend.

"Pliny ... Pliny ... what's wrong?" she asked, taking long strides to reach him as quickly as possible.

The young man wiped his nose with the edge of his sleeve. "It's my father ... I just found out ... he died ... he's dead."

Gabrielle sighed sadly and patted his shoulder. Her mind drifted briefly to Alessandro and Hermia as she pondered their fate. So many deaths these last few days. When will it be over? "I'm sorry, Pliny. What happened? Did they tell you?"

Pliny nodded and tried to wipe away the tears that had splashed onto his scroll. He only succeeded in smearing the ink.

"Took his ship as close to Herculaneum as he could. He was trying to pick up people from the beach, but the embers started raining down and the air got hot. So he took in whom he could and sailed away, down to Stabiae. Made it there, too. No problem. Despite the waves. He was a great seaman."

Pliny shook his head in disbelief. "Who would have thought? I mean, Stabiae is farther away than Neapolis, but Neapolis is fine!"

Gabrielle nodded knowingly. She had heard the stories.

Pliny waved his hand at the sky. "The gods-damned wind from Tartarus. Took the gases with it and killed everyone!"

Pliny's tears started anew. He lifted the scroll to show the bard. "I'm writing it all down. Everything. I want the world to know how brave my father was. He sailed right into the eruption to try and save people, then died himself."

"I know," Gabrielle said, rubbing the sobbing boy's shoulder. "If he hadn't sent all those ships out, I might not be here as well. So many deaths, Pliny. You're not the only one who lost their loved ones."

Pliny looked up at the bard sadly. "No sign of Xena?"

Gabrielle smiled. "Not yet. But she'll be here soon. I'm sure of it." She patted Pliny one more time on the back. "Write your story. The world needs to know what happened here. Pompeii and Herculaneum are gone. Make sure they are not forgotten."

Pliny wiped his nose one more time as he watched the bard walk away, then he blotted the tears from his parchment with the same sleeve and continued to write.

Sappho was up to her elbows in soapy, sudsy water. Her braids and hair were flopped down over her eyes and made scrubbing the dishes next to impossible. She blew at the strands impatiently and when that didn't work, she swiped at them with her hand, only succeeding in getting a face full of soap bubbles.

She could hear Phaon chuckling at her from the food line.

"It's not funny!" the Tenth Muse yelled out, trying to wipe a sudsy nose on her shoulder. "These hands were meant to play the lyre ... not wash dishes." She lifted the aforementioned hands out of the water and shrieked. Her skin was as wrinkled as old prunes.

"Get back to work, Tenth Muse!" Phaon ordered, laughing. "We need more dishes and goblets."

Sappho stuck her hands back in the suds with a grunt and started to scrub. "I think it's my turn to serve the food."

"I think you should just continue to wash," Phaon said over her shoulder.

"Why? I did OK when I served the food."

Phaon snorted. "You did just great. Only you gave out nothing but wine! You had everyone drunk in a half an hour!"

Sappho shrugged, biting back a smile. "Yeah, but they felt a lot better, didn't they?"

"Just wash the dishes, Tenth Muse."

Xena's eyes fluttered once, then twice, and then opened, as she slowly came to awareness. Her mouth was full of sand. Funny, for some reason, she imagined her mouth had been full of blackberries. She lifted her head and spit out the grit, coughing at the effort.

An ocean wave crept up along her legs. The unexpected coolness of the water startled her and she rolled over onto her back. It was a bright, sunny day. She turned away, trying to shield herself against the brightness with her hand and already aching head began to truly throb. Another wave snaked lazily up over the skin of her legs, so she lifted her knees in an attempt to pull away from the cold.

A hot, searing stab of pain made her forget all about her headache.

"Aggh!" she moaned and sat up in alarm wondering what was causing so much pain. Her answer was sand-soaked blood and a deep gash in her leg from the top of her knee all the way up her thigh.

She reached down and tried to gingerly touch the wound, but it was crusted with sand and swollen from the saltwater.

"That's gotta hurt!" a deep, sarcastic voice said.

Startled, Xena looked around, trying to find the source of the voice. All she saw was beach stretching out to either side. She had washed up on the shore, gods knew where, but she was on land.

Then her skin began to crawl.

Xena snarled and tried to stand.

"Areesss," she said with a hiss. "Show yourself."

"It took you a minute," the God of War said as he materialized. "Longer than usual. But then, you have been unconsciousness on this beach for a couple of days. I guess I can make allowances for that."

"What do you want?" Xena barked at the god. She pushed herself against the sand, trying her best to get to her feet. She didn't want to appear weak before the War God.

Ares put out a hand. "Hey, don't get up on my account. Besides," he snickered. "I kinda like you on your back."

"What do you want, Ares?" Xena growled, still trying, though unsuccessfully, to get to her feet.

The God of War knelt beside her, surprisingly sympathetic to her obvious pain. "Don't try to get up, Xena. That looks pretty bad." He smiled when Xena relaxed back into the sand.

"Maybe for just a minute," she whispered, her head spinning with pain.

Ares reached out a hand to touch the leg. "Do you want me to take care of that for you?"

"DON'T TOUCH ME!" Xena shouted as she slapped the God's hand away.

Ares withdrew his hand and stood. His face twisted into a sneer. "What's the matter, Xena? Afraid you'll owe a favor to the God of War? It's a little late for that now."

"What are you talking about?" Xena stared at the God as he circled in front of her, chuckling.

"I heard your prayer."

"Prayer? What prayer?"

"You prayed to me, Xena," Ares answered smugly.

"I wouldn't pray to you if you were the last god on earth."

"One day, I just might be. But that's neither here nor there. You did pray to me. Pray ... plea ... call it what it whatever you want. In your hour of need, you called on me."

Ares stretched out his arms and took a big, deep breath. Then folded them across his massive chest and grinned proudly. "You don't know how good that made me feel."

Xena stared at him, the moment suddenly becoming crystal clear. She frowned and looked away toward the sea.

"You couldn't have heard me."

"Oh, but I did."

Xena squinted up at the War God. "Don't you have anything better to do than follow me around all the time?" She tried to move her leg and winced.

"Xena., Xena, Xena. Don't you know, I always know where you are ... what you're doing. You're my favorite ... my chosen. When are you just going to accept that? It is, after all, quite an honor." He frowned, noticing her discomfort. "Here, let me fix that for you." But she pulled her leg out of his reach.

"I SAID, DON'T TOUCH ME!"

Ares frowned and lifted his finger away. "I heard your plea, Xena. What was it you said? 'Ares, oh, Ares, please, please help us! Ares, save us? Ares ...!'"

"I said, Ares protect us ... I think."

"Ares, protect us," the War God repeated, smiling as he gloated. "That was it."

"It was a slip of the tongue."

"Sometimes the best slips ... are of the tongue."

"I take it back."

"Too late."

Xena stared up at him, almost afraid to hope. "What do you mean?"

Ares rubbed his beard and smirked. "Why, I answered your plea, of course, Xena. What else can I do when my Chosen summons me?"

Xena was silent. She just looked out to the sea, knowing what she so desperately wanted to ask, but she didn't want to give the God of War the satisfaction.

After a few moments of silence, Ares continued.

"I saved you, Xena."

"I can see that," the warrior stated flatly.

"I saved them all."

Xena looked up at him, unable to hide the shining hope in her eyes.

Ares stared at her for a moment, thinking that even wet and wounded, Xena was the most beautiful creature he had ever seen.

Finally, he relented. "Yes, I saved the irritating blonde."

He could see the gratitude in her eyes, though he knew he would never hear it.

"She's in Misenum, along with the rest of the survivors." He took advantage of the moment and watched her expression soften to one of appreciation.

"Oh, and there's something else."

Gratitude was replaced by suspicion.

Ares reached behind him and suddenly was pulling on a set of reins in his hands. He brought a tired, but nonetheless alive, Argo forward for the warrior to see.

"I believe this belongs to you."

"You saved Argo, too?"

Ares thought about it, but decided not to ruin the moment. "Normally, I would take the credit, but the mare deserves better. She got herself well out of trouble. A lot better than her mistress, I must say. I merely brought her here to where you are."

He dropped the reins and let the horse meander over to Xena. The warrior petted the mare's soft nose, as Argo leaned down to nuzzle her hair.

"One more thing," Ares said, smiling at the sight.

"Ares, one more kind deed and I'm liable to think this is all an hallucination."

Ares ducked his head and extended his hand.

"I believe this is yours as well."

The God of War's large hand was holding Xena's chakram. Xena glanced quickly down to her belt. She hadn't even realized it was gone.

Xena took it from Ares, half expecting him to pull it away at the last moment, but the God of War handed it over without flinching a muscle.

"Couldn't have that falling into Poseidon's hands, now could I?"

Xena nodded once. "I owe you."

"No, you don't," the War God said quickly.

The warrior looked at him with surprise.

Ares regarded her sternly. "We're even now, Xena. For my godhood and any other trouble you claim I might have caused along the way. We're even."

Ares held out his hand. Thinking about it for a moment, Xena accepted and allowed the God to gently assisted to her feet.

"Just remember what I'm saying, Xena." Ares eyes were devoid of humor, deadly serious. "No more favors. Whatever happens in the months to come, you and I are on equal footing. Don't call on me again unless you mean to join me in my efforts."

Xena tried to extricate her hand from the War God's grasp, but he held onto it firmly, unwilling to let go of the link between them.

"I'll never go back to you, Ares," Xena said as she stared at him defiantly.

Ares gave her hand a little tug. "Never say never, Xena," the God of War stated with a smirk, then let the warrior's hand go. Xena shifted onto her wounded leg with an unbalanced jerk.

Ares laughed at the expression on her face when she realized he had just healed her wound, and then he was gone.

The warrior stared at the empty spot where the God of War had just been, his laughter still echoing in her ears. Although Ares had said they were even, she couldn't help but wonder what this encounter was going to cost her.

"Come on, Argo," Xena said as she placed her foot into the stirrup and hoisted herself into the saddle. She pulled on the reins, bringing Argo around to face in the direction of Misenum. "Let's go get Gabrielle. Yah!"

With a commanding kick of the warrior's heels, the mare took off, sand flying from her hooves as they raced across the beach.

Xena leaned into Argo's gait and rode like the wind, once again both cursing and thanking the god's involvement in her life.

"... the nymph, Echo, saw Narcissus, a beautiful youth, as he pursued the chase upon the mountains. She loved him and followed his footsteps. Oh, how she longed to address him in the softest accents, and win him as her love. She waited in the woods, hoping that he would talk to her. She had her answer ready. Finally the youth, being separated from his companions and hearing that he was being followed, shouted aloud, 'Who's here?' Echo replied, 'Here.' Narcissus looked around, but seeing no one called out, 'Come!' Echo answered, 'Come.' As no one came, Narcissus called again, 'Why do you shun me?' Echo replied with the same question.

'Let us join one another,' said the youth. The nymph softly answered with all her heart in the same words, 'Let us join one another,' and hastened to the spot, ready to throw her arms about his neck, but Narcissus had gone, having heard no reply to his questions.

He had left her. So she went to hide in her bushes in the recesses of the woods. From that time forth she has lived in caves and among mountain cliffs, waiting for Narcissus' return, replying to all who might call out, in the hopes that it is he."

Gabrielle smiled at her audience, letting their laughter and applause fill her heart if only for a brief moment. It was standing room only under the large awning, and although the evening's entertainment was meant for the children, old and young alike had crowded in to listen to the bard.

The sun, close to setting, painted both sky and ocean in soft hues of pink and blue. A light breeze and a gentle tide added to the serenity, making it hard to believe that just a few days earlier, the world had been threatening to tear apart at the seams.

The bard took in the many faces that smiled back at her. They were happy for the moment; their bellies full, a safe haven -- if only a tent -- and an hour of entertainment. It was the least she could do to soothe their souls. Soon enough, they would have to face the fact that their homes, and in many cases, their families were gone.

She stepped away from the front of the crowd and a chorus of groans followed. They didn't want her to leave just yet.

"All right," she said, smiling at the group. "Just give me a short break and I'll tell another."

Her audience's reaction was applause, which faded to happy conversation as the bard walked away from the tent to rest.

She stood on the jutting seawall and looked toward the ocean, watching the sun dip into the sea.

"Xena, where are you?" Gabrielle whispered. The color of the sky shifted to deep turquoise, turning the sea a dark, dark blue. She took a deep breath. Gone was the rotten egg scent that had lingered for days. The leeward wind whipped back her hair, blowing all sound away. As a result, she didn't hear the footsteps approaching her from behind.

A hand on her shoulder startled the bard out of her reverie.

Sappho smiled at the bard's crestfallen expression when the hand turned out to be hers instead of the warrior's.

"Gabrielle, are you all right?" the poet asked.

"I'm good," Gabrielle answered and she turned back to face the ocean. "My head feels fine ... I just ... it's just that I wish Xena would get here already so I can stop worrying about her."

The poet sighed and stepped up beside the bard. "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

Gabrielle nodded slowly.

"Seems like the eruption has made the sunsets more intense. The colors are so vivid, must be all that ash floating in the air. The sunset over Lesbos is beautiful as well. You'd love it, Gabrielle. Every evening, the sun falls into the ocean and bathes the island in a sea of color."

The bard grinned and watched a cloud turn gold as the sun shifted behind it. "I'm sure it's very beautiful."

"I want you to come there with me," Sappho said and then smiled fully. "With us."

Gabrielle turned to face her friend. "Phaon is going home with you?"

"Yes, she told me that she'd like to."

"Sappho, that's wonderful."

The poet shrugged. "I don't know how wonderful it is, exactly. After all, it's not as if she has anywhere else to go. I'm still very unsure how she feels about me ... she's a hard one to read, that one is."

Gabrielle grabbed her friend's hand and gave it a squeeze. "At least you'll have more time."

Sappho's smiled that mischievous smile of hers. "That's exactly what I was thinking. So, what about you? If you say yes, then I can die a happy woman."

"What are you talking about?"

"About you. About you coming home with me. There's a ship leaving for Greece tomorrow. A merchant ship. We should take advantage of it because I'm not sure when another one will be heading that way. I'm

asking you to come to Lesbos with me. I have a school, remember? A school that could really use the best bard in the known world as a teacher."

Gabrielle scowled and shook her head, pulling her hand away from the poet's. "I can't leave here, Sappho. I have to wait for Xena."

"Gabrielle," Sappho said firmly, taking a step closer to the bard. "You are going to have to come to terms with the fact that Xena is not coming."

Gabrielle turned away. "You're wrong."

Sappho grabbed her arm. "Gabrielle, what are you going to do? Wait here forever?"

Gabrielle pulled her arm away and started to walk angrily back toward the tent. "No, as a matter of fact, I'm not."

Sappho started walking quickly after her. "Then where are you going to go? What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to look for her, that's what I'm going to do." The bard was taking long, hard steps away from the poet.

"JUST WAIT ONE GRAPE-PICKING MINUTE!" Sappho yelled, catching up with the bard and twirling her around by the shoulder. "Just where are you going to look?"

Gabrielle stared hard at the poet for a long moment. "She must have been injured and then washed up on the shore. She's probably lying somewhere right now, hurt and waiting for help. I'm going to follow the shore back toward Pompeii."

"Gabrielle, you can't go back to Pompeii. It's still dangerous. Vesuvius could erupt again at any moment."

The bard raised her finger and waved it sternly in the face of the Tenth Muse. "Now, you listen to me, Sappho. In the morning, I'm heading out. I should have left earlier, but I wanted to make sure she wasn't brought in by a ship. First thing in the morning, I'm going to look for her. DON'T try to stop me."

"Gabrielle, I can't let you ..."

"I said ... DON'T!"

Sappho grabbed the angry finger and pushed it away.

"What I was GOING to say was, I can't let you look for her alone. Phaon and I will come with you."

"That won't be necessary."

"Oh, it is VERY necessary, bard ... and DON'T you try and stop us," Sappho said, glaring at her friend. "Besides, Xena will be angry at me if I let you leave here alone ... when you find her, that is." Sappho grinned. "And the one thing I don't want is the Warrior Princess angry at me."

"Sappho, Xena is always angry at you ... for one thing or another."

"I know," Sappho answered with a huge smile. "It's something I cultivate ... rather well if I do say so myself. After all, she is very beautiful when she's angry."

The two friends smiled at each other and the Tenth Muse put an arm around the bard.

"Come on. Let's go back to the tent. We have an audience waiting."

Sappho was singing. They had persuaded the Tenth Muse to perform under much protest. This was the first time Gabrielle had ever seen Sappho shy away from the stage. Strange, she thought, recalling the lunch they had shared at the Tavern of the Four Gods and Sappho's reluctance to perform there as well. Maybe the poet was afraid Phaon would discover that all of her songs lately had been written about her? If love could turn the Tenth Muse shy, then surely love could move mountains, Gabrielle laughed to herself.

By the gods, she did have a beautiful voice. Gabrielle let the singing wash over her, relieving the days and days of stress they had undergone. A Roman soldier, of all people, had offered Sappho his lyre, and now the area was not only filled with refugees, but Romans themselves were also crowding around the open tent, all straining for a chance to hear the Tenth Muse sing.

Of course, the performance did not come without a price. Sappho insisted that everyone present share a drink with her under the awning as the sun set. Perhaps Gabrielle alone knew what a performance at sunset meant to the poet.

Sappho finished the song and accepted a goblet from one of the soldiers who had volunteered to help hand out the wine. She waited for the last of her audience to be served and then raised the cup into the air. The tent grew silent as they awaited the poet's words.

"Raise your cups, friends and drink, lest we forget that though we stand here today in life, under the gods' wrath our hearts lay buried in death. So, drink and mark this day for all days hence and on. For if we vow so on this day each year to sing, believe me, in the future someone remember us ..."

In solemn silence all who were present raised their goblets toward Vesuvius in tribute and drank. Gabrielle could hear the whisper of the ocean as it rushed along the shore and the flap of the awning in the breeze, the only sounds that could be heard. She drank the sweet wine from the goblet. She would never forget the flavor and whenever she tasted it, it would always bring her back to the Tavern of the Four Gods. Or it would remind her of the smells of the market and she would, once again, walk among the ghosts of shoppers along the Via Dell'Abbondanza in the lost city of Pompeii.

Gabrielle was so wrapped up in the moment that she had not noticed Sappho choke on her wine and suddenly go pale. The bard looked up to find the poet staring beyond the heads of her audience and out to the beach.

"By all the muses and gods and nymphs and every other cursed creature that lay claim to our souls – would you look at that!"

Goblets were slowly lowered as all heads turned to see what it was that had sent the Tenth Muse into such a tizzy. Gabrielle stretched onto the tips of her toes, trying to see over the heads, but her view was blocked.

"I've said it once, and I'll say it again: By the gods, that woman knows how to make an entrance!" Sappho announced, a huge grin spreading across her face. Gabrielle looked up at the shining eyes of the poet as Sappho stood on the small stage and smiled back down at her.

Gabrielle dared not hope for what she suspected. The bard pushed her way through the audience, tripping forward in the sand as she finally cleared the crowd. It was then her eyes beheld the most wonderful sight she could ever pray to see.

In the distance, riding like the wind through the waters of the ebbing tide, Xena galloped toward them on Argo. She was a magnificent sight atop the golden mare. Her black hair flowed back from her face as she leaned comfortably into the horse's gait.

Even at this distance, Gabrielle could see the smile that spread across the warrior's face when she spotted the golden-red hair in the front of the crowd. She pulled back on the reins, slowing Argo to a trot and turned the mare away from the edge of the water to angle towards them.

Gabrielle had no intention of waiting for Xena to make up the distance. With a spray of sand, the bard took off for Xena, arms flailing as she tried to keep her balance. She even tripped once or twice along the way as she ran, somehow managing to keep her footing without missing a step.

The warrior pulled Argo to a halt at the sight of her partner making a beeline for her. She jumped down from the mare and barely took two steps before the bard rammed into her. Gabrielle catapulted into her arms and wrapped her up in a hug that would have strangled a Cyclops.

Xena didn't care. She caught Gabrielle in her long arms and tumbled back, the bard's joyous momentum crashing them both into the sand.

Sappho gave Phaon a hand onto the stage so she could see. Together they watched as the bard tackled Xena to the ground in a heap of arms and legs.

The entire audience laughed at the sight.

"And kings ask me why I sing about love," Sappho mumbled to herself as she watched the reunion. She stole a look at Phaon and silently pondered her own future.

"I knew you would come. I knew you would come. I knew ..." the bard said breathlessly as she rained a series of kisses all over Xena's face. Argo snorted in disgust at the display, then leaned down to nuzzle the bard's hair and get in on the act.

"Hey!" Gabrielle swatted at the wet nose that was tickling her face and getting it all slimy. Argo caught a piece of hair and chewed on it. "Hey! No, chewing on the hair, remember?" Gabrielle pulled her hair out of the mare's mouth, then gave her a happy tickle. Satisfied, the horse ambled off in search of some grass.

"Eewww, she made my face all slimy!" Gabrielle said in protest as she wiped her hand across a wet cheek.

"No, I think that was me," Xena said, smiling up at the wet face. She wiped her fingers along Gabrielle's cheek and then up to the bandage on her head. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. This is nothing, really. Just a bump."

"Uh huh," Xena said, not believing a word of it. "Let me take a look." But Gabrielle swatted her hand away as she tried to lift the bandage.

"Later. We'll do that later. Right now, I just want to ..."

Xena watched as her bard's face got all serious. "You just want to what?"

"I just want to ... gods, Xena, I really thought I'd lost you," Gabrielle said as she buried her face in Xena's dark hair.

Xena patted the golden head, listening to the soft sobs for a moment.

"Hey, hey, come on now." She gently lifted Gabrielle away, grinning as she watched the bard wipe her running nose with a lock of long, black hair. "I'm fine."

Gabrielle raised her torso slightly and gave the warrior's body the once-over just to be sure.

"See? Not even one scratch," Xena said.

Gabrielle looked at her partner suspiciously. "How is it everyone else is bruised from head to toe, and you don't have a scratch on you?"

"Just lucky, I guess."

"Lucky, my ass. You'll tell me every detail of what happened later. And I do mean every detail, Xena."

"Yup. Every detail. I promise," Xena said, then gently pulled the bard to her for a kiss. When they parted, Gabrielle's eyes had gone all misty again.

"You were gone so long, Xena, I was really beginning to think I'd lost you this time."

Xena wiped away a tear that had escaped from Gabrielle's eyelash and shook her head.

"Not possible, Gabrielle. Not any more. Nothing can separate us now. Armies, death, gods, Vesuvius ... nothing can come between us. If I have to crawl through the fires of Tartarus on my hands and knees to find you, I would, Gabrielle ... don't you know that by now?"

Gabrielle nodded as tears filled up her eyes. She would have replied with something just as poetic had not Xena pulled her down and captured her lips in a delicious kiss that made her forget they were rolling in the sand in front of an audience full of Romans.

Xena smiled at the sensation of the bard's soft lips upon her own and wrapped her arms more tightly around Gabrielle, silently vowing to never, ever let anything come between them again.

The image of them rolling on a beach at sunset brought a smile to the lips of the dozing warrior, until the sensation of warmth caressing her skin caused Xena to stir. She opened her eyes to find the sun had risen over the edge of the sea, bathing her in the soft light of dawn.

The fire had burned out. There was only the sound of the morning tide rolling in along the shore to fill the silence now. She turned her head to look at the bedroll by her side. Though covered with a scattering of scrolls, it was otherwise empty. Xena lifted herself up and leaned wearily back against the log of driftwood. She looked at the empty beach stretched out before her. She had imagined her solitude invisible last night in the dark, but now, in the harsh light of day, it was painfully clear just how alone she really was.

"You'll give up too easily, warrior!"

A ghostly cackle filled her mind and she found herself sitting up and looking around in alarm.

All she could see was a wave cresting and slapping against the sand. Was her mind playing tricks on her?

"You'll give up too easily!"

An image of the craggy face of the old hag soothsayer filled Xena's mind as she remembered who had yelled those very words to her not long ago.

"I never give up," Xena said, insisting out loud to whatever ghosts were present.

"Death will always be at your heels ... one step behind. You'll give up too easily!"

Xena threw back her covers and stood angrily.

"I SAID I NEVER GIVE UP!" she yelled to the taunting image in her mind. It disappeared, laughing.

The warrior stood at attention, defying the ghost to approach her again, but the air only whistled as a breeze blew through grass.

Satisfied that the voice must have been a part of the dream, Xena knelt down and started to collect the scrolls.

She was rolling them up and replacing them in the bard's bag when a noise made her freeze in place. Slowly, she looked up. An image of Gabrielle's face, eyes brimming with tears, filled her mind.

"I'd thought I'd lost you forever."

"Not possible, Gabrielle," she heard herself saying. "Not any more. Nothing can come between us."

Xena looked away, ignoring the apparition. I'm really losing it, she thought, as she stood up with the scroll bag in her hands. But her own words would not leave her.

"If I have to crawl through the fires of Tartarus on my hands and knees to find you, I would, Gabrielle."

"WHAT?" she said out loud.

"You'll give up too easily, warrior!" the gravelly voice accused her again.

"I SAID I NEVER GIVE UP!" the warrior screamed. Her anger almost caused her to throw the scrolls at the sea. Then her eyes widened in understanding.

"If I have to crawl through the fires of Tartarus ..." Xena whispered, her mind working frantically to sort through the details. "By the gods!"

Her path became as clear as the ocean in the sunlight. She gripped the scroll bag and took off in a dead run for Argo. The warrior came up on the horse so suddenly, she startled Argo awake. The mare skidded sideways for a moment in surprise.

"Come on, Argo!" Xena yelled as she grabbed the horse by the bridle. The warrior pulled the mare away from the shelter of the cliff wall and mounted her in great haste.

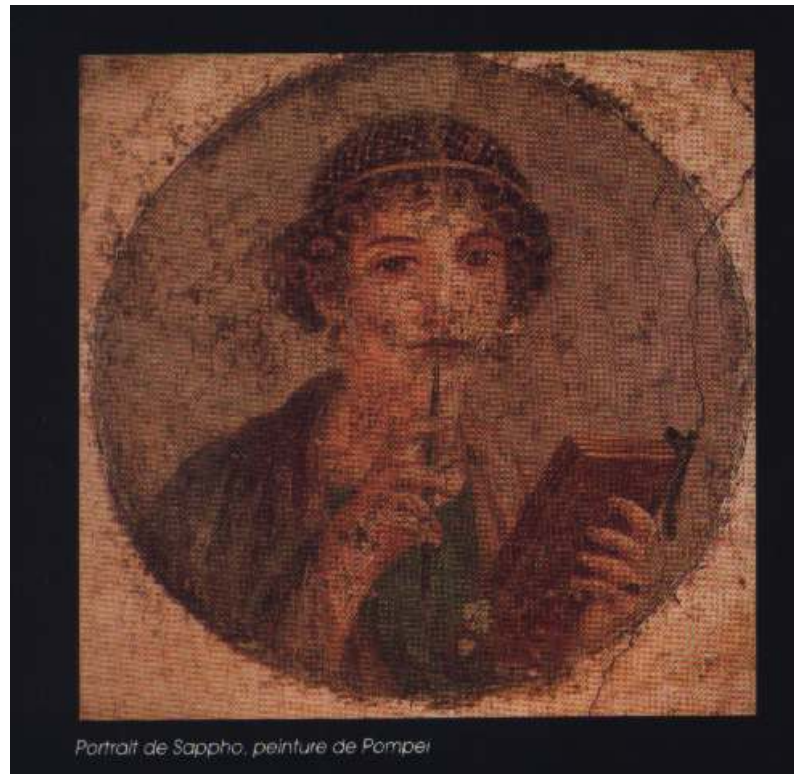
Xena yanked on Argo's reins and kicked her in the flanks with her heels. The horse bucked at the urgent command and sprang forward toward the beach, running over the bedrolls and smoldering fire pit in her haste.

Xena pulled back, bringing Argo to a halt. The mare snorted loudly in protest at the sudden change of direction. The warrior gazed over her shoulder at the two bedrolls left crumpled in the sand.

"When this is over," Xena vowed, "either Gabrielle will be with me to share our bedrolls once again ... or I'll have no use for them at all."

She drove her heels into Argo's flanks again, sending the horse surging forward.

Xena spurred Argo to the very edge of the water and then turned them in a thundering gallop north, back to the Sister Peaks and the Temple of Dahak.



Portrait de Sappho – peinture de Pompeii
79 A.D.

The End
Thank you for reading!
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