

Contemplation

What if you had three days and nights to contemplate your life decisions? What if you had just three days and nights between you and the rest of your disparate or sequestered life? Would you be able to do it, would you come out at the end of it into the sunlight or rain, certain, fixed, and absolute? Gabrielle looked up the mountain and asked the questions of herself. And she didn't know the answers.

It took a week to climb the mountain, to reach the cavern at the top. Gabrielle carried a pack of supplies and a large flask of water that she'd have to replace as she went. The food would have to last her the trip and the stay. Provision for the return was never made: she didn't understand why that was. Aphrodite had told her about the cavern, and the information had been extracted painfully, slowly, and not without a certain amount of pain on either side. Sometimes Gabrielle wished – almost wished – that her own life had been a little less complex. But indecision was the name of the game, and as for not wanting complexities... she could always have stayed at home.

The Amazons knew something about such things, journeys of the spirit as well as the body. Gabrielle knew all about the purification rites of the Amazons, but even those weren't going to be enough this time. Been there, done that. Bought the tunic... Gabrielle almost managed a smile at the thought, and then lost the smile as she trod down on a particularly sharp stone, and almost turned her ankle. She was dressed like a pilgrim: she had left the clothes of her old life far behind. Aphrodite had wanted to accompany Gabrielle. Knowing Aphrodite, she'd have turned up in a golden cart led by snow-white horses, and they'd have left the perfume of incense along the rutted paths. Gabrielle managed a smile, and slipped on another stone.

She had been walking for six days. She fully expected to reach the cavern by nightfall. Since leaving the odd, almost-empty village that sat beneath the mountain she had seen no-one, heard no human voice. There were very few animals, but she had seen the buzzards that flew over the crest of the mountain. Carrion birds, tidying birds. If she slipped on this path she'd never be found: maybe she too would end up as just a pile of broken, whitening bones, found by the next pilgrim. It wasn't a cheery thought: Gabrielle had never felt lonelier in her life. She had never longed so desperately for company... and never been so sure that she would have spurned any offer.

The parting from Xena had not been easy. Gabrielle had thought she'd known every expression that crossed the tanned, high-cheek boned face, but she'd been wrong. It had been contempt that she'd seen when she'd told Xena that she was leaving. The piercing blue eyes that had smiled on Gabrielle so many times had turned as icy as the wind that now rose from the valley. And Gabrielle couldn't tell Xena about the dreams she'd been having. Oh, Xena

believed in dream prophecies; she just didn't know why Gabrielle had to leave. So Gabrielle had lied, and told Xena that she needed time to herself, that there were things she needed to get sorted out. She told Xena that she was going home, that the village would be right place for her. And Xena had, incredibly, believed her. Before Gabrielle left, a pack over her shoulder, Xena standing by the path-side, one hand on Argo's broad back, Gabrielle had tried to come out with some half-truth that wouldn't hurt the warrior. But her words – unusually for the bard – had only come stumblingly forth. “Gabrielle, if you're afraid...” Gabrielle shook her head. “Life with me is never going to be easy, Gabrielle,” Xena had said. “But you knew that when you first followed me. I never made you any promises. If you want to go back and be with your own people again permanently, I won't hold it against you.”

But Gabrielle had only shaken her head. The words wouldn't come out right no matter how clearly she saw her position and what the course of action she needed to take. “And you don't want my company to the village?” Gabrielle shook her head again. Of course she didn't: if Xena came with her, it'd be patently obvious within the first day's march that Gabrielle had another destination in mind. “Look, Gabrielle, I know your family aren't in love with me...” Oh, what an ironic choice of words. “But I don't have to see them. I could stay in the next village. And then when you're ready to come away again, you can send me a message and I'll come for you.” A pause, a heartbeat, possibly two. Gabrielle looked at the ground. “Uh, if you don't want to come...” the warrior princess stopped, believing for the first time that she was really losing Gabrielle. Xena took a mental step back from herself, and let anger win over affection. Her voice became curt, careless. “Well, it's your life, Gabrielle...” She'd let the words fade out.

“Yes,” said Gabrielle. “It's my life.” And that was the ironic thing: it no longer was. What had begun as a warm liking, an admiration, tempered with a little hero-worship had progressed much much further. And Xena couldn't see it. Smart as Xena was in so many ways, she couldn't see the situation for what it was. She'd never met anyone like Gabrielle before. She was kindly with her, sometimes a little short on sympathy when Gabrielle fell over her feet for the umpteenth time, but never angry, never rough. And as the days passed, Gabrielle had realised just how deep her own feelings went. If you see someone every day, she told herself, you're bound to notice them more. But that wasn't true. In the days of village life, Gabrielle had always been looking beyond her immediate surroundings. She knew every detail of her own life, that of her parents', that of her sister... and it simply washed over her and away. But Xena... No, life with Xena really was living, not existing. And Gabrielle had broken her own rules: she had meant to be a companion, a helpmeet (whatever that was), perhaps one day even something of a warrior in her own right. She had not meant to fall in love with Xena.

It had all happened so innocently, the friendship growing unsteadily, in fits and starts, nurtured with goodwill on Gabrielle's part and by a grudging acceptance on Xena's. And it had been an ordinary day, they'd been sitting by the fireside, Xena relating – at Gabrielle's request – some details of her history. Gabrielle had looked across the flames at a moment the warrior was preoccupied. And in that moment, everything had meshed: the dark hair flowing back, the strong, sensuous face, the high cheekbones, and the wide, generous mouth. Before she knew it had happened, Gabrielle had fallen in love.

When Xena glanced up and their eyes met, Gabrielle had flushed to the hairline. Fortunately the high colour didn't show in the muted firelight, and Gabrielle had quickly looked away, but Xena must have noticed something. She was different with Gabrielle after that. The next morning they had been less easy with one another. Xena had seemed preoccupied, and Gabrielle had been tongue-tied. And as they'd journeyed on, love ate Gabrielle up like a fever. She lost weight, she couldn't sleep, and the strain of her situation began to show on her face. Twice in the last week Xena had asked Gabrielle if she wanted to see an apothecary when they reached the next village. Gabrielle had just shaken her head. This was not a condition to be treated by a clever use of herbs. Xena was good with medicine: had Gabrielle had an arrow-wound, a cut, a severe bruise even, Xena could have – would have willingly – treated her. As it was, there was nothing Xena could do. And the conversations between them became more difficult with each passing day. Anxious that her feelings should stay hidden, Gabrielle forced herself to be more cautious in her movements. Whereas once a point in conversation might have been stressed by the touch of an urgent hand on Xena's forearm, Gabrielle restrained herself from all physical gestures. Xena seemed oblivious to the physical changes, but she must have picked up on Gabrielle's change of mood. They were quieter with one another, and then quieter still. Indeed, they'd been the edge of silence and sign-language when they'd struck camp at the edge of the olive field, and Gabrielle had gone off for a walk by herself.

At the far edge of the olive grove she'd stopped, suddenly so desperately sad that she felt her knees give. She dropped to ground, folding her arms and resting her bent head on them. The well of misery overflowed. Gabrielle did not see Xena watching her from a distance, and then soberly walking away. She rubbed away the tears angrily, painfully. And when she looked up, Aphrodite was standing there in the early-evening light. "Oh, Gabrielle," she said, sadly, "what am I going to do with you?"

The words were said so kindly, and came so unexpectedly that Gabrielle lost the control she'd been pulling about her like a coat, and embarrassed herself by losing her grip on the emotions she'd been containing for the past weeks. Her grief welled up from somewhere in her solar plexus, and every tear hurt. Gabrielle had never cried easily, and she'd never seen Xena cry. And

Aphrodite had come closer, and put her arms around Gabrielle, and had stayed there until Gabrielle's sobbing finally ceased. "And they wonder how the sea came about," said Aphrodite, gently joking. "You could probably convert the deserts."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I'm amazed that you've held on so long. Oh, Gabrielle, why don't you just tell Xena how you feel? She isn't going to run and hide."

"It's not fair," said Gabrielle. "It wouldn't be fair to her. I didn't sign on for this. I'm letting her down more and more with each passing day. She took me on as a companion, not some lovesick puppy that flounders along in her wake. If she knew how I felt, she'd send me back. What possible use can I be to her? I have to be like her. I have to be strong, and self-contained, and resilient. I wanted to become a warrior! Of all the ironies. Now every time I see her fight, I'm so obsessed with her not getting hurt that I'm no earthly good to her. I love her so much that it hurts, and I can't touch her because I know that if I do, everything I feel is going to show. Oh, Aphrodite, what am I going to do? I can't stay with her, and I can't go back to the village. I feel as if my heart's breaking all the time and there's going to come a time when I can't..."

Aphrodite's compassion was so obvious that Gabrielle felt herself on the verge of howling again. Forcefully she took herself in hand. But Aphrodite said, "Gabrielle, if you go on like this, you're going to do yourself harm. You must do something."

"I know!" Gabrielle sprang to her feet, her face flushed, her eyes miserably red. "I know I have to do something. But I don't know what to do!"

Aphrodite's expression of concern was a poor approximation of her real feelings. Since she'd first seen Gabrielle she'd had been aware of a funny affection for the girl, unknowing as she was. She'd seen in Gabrielle the potential for true extremes of feeling, and sometimes she worried about them: the passions that ran deep and almost invisible in the warrior ran through Gabrielle's very fibre. In Gabrielle's distress Aphrodite relived the memory of other lovers, young and passionate as this one, who'd opened their veins, or submitted to the power of the waves, when they loved. There was never going to be anything moderate about Gabrielle's passions, and they would always lay her open to hurt.

Aphrodite had become very fond of Gabrielle, and now she saw that the girl's situation had become precarious. Desperate times call for desperate measures... Aphrodite disliked the expression. She preferred 'love as deep as the grave', or indeed anything that didn't smack of the schoolroom. And besides, love as deep as the grave was real possibility: Gabrielle was losing

weight, there were deep shadows beneath her eyes. She was unsteady on her feet. The pain in her eyes was becoming tangible. “Will you trust me?” The words were out before Aphrodite had the chance to counsel herself. But it was too late for that; Gabrielle was desperate for a solution, and she was already looking to Aphrodite for answers. Aphrodite had left herself no choice.

“Gabrielle, there is an option open to you. It’s not one I often mention, let alone advise,.. because it’s almost the hardest thing any person can do. But I think it might be the right choice for you.” She was aware that Xena would soon be coming over to see if Gabrielle had fallen over a tree-root and concussed herself, so little faith the warrior princess now had in the girl. So she had less time than she would have liked. “Gabrielle,” the words tumbled out, “Gabrielle, have you ever heard of the mountain of the soul?”

A short silence. Gabrielle cast back her memory for references to such a place, but nothing clear came to mind. She shook her head. “No, never,” she said. “What is it?”

“It’s a place of... of solitude and of decision.” Aphrodite didn’t know how to describe the place without saying too much. “There’s a very rough path that leads up,” and a much stranger one that leads down, she didn’t add. “It takes a week to reach the top of the mountain, and when you reach the top, there is a cavern. You go inside and stay there for three nights and three days, and then you... leave.” Gabrielle looked curiously at her. Most of her tears had dried.

“I’ve never been there myself,” Aphrodite lied, “but I’ve heard of it. The cavern walls are made of quartz. What little light strikes it seems to multiply. You take enough food for the journey and for the stay...” and not for the return. Aphrodite shook herself. “It’s a place as old as time. Some say that it’s almost a place out of time. I’ve heard it said that the three days spent inside can seem longer than a lifetime. Some say that the three days pass in a moment. I don’t know... While you’re there, if you are resolute, you get to see inside your soul. I don’t know... it’s a very hard journey, and it can be an even harder stay, but it might be what you need.” If you even survive the journey, she thought, watching Gabrielle. Gabrielle was growing weaker: her frame was not going to survive been eaten up by love much longer.

“You think that going there might help me?” Gabrielle’s voice held a tiny aspect of hope. Aphrodite trod warily around that hope.

“It might. But I have to warn you, Gabrielle: seeing one’s soul can be a terrible thing. It might be something you’re not meant to view. But for someone as trapped by love as you are, it might be a solution. It’s up to you.” But the die had been cast from the moment Aphrodite had spoken her first words, and she knew it. She saw decision light up Gabrielle’s face. It was better than the

expression that face had shown before: Aphrodite was relieved at the change. And frightened, too.

Gabrielle sat silently, her decision fresh upon her. Three nights in a lonely cavern. Three days at the top of a mountain it'd take a week to climb. Three days in the darkness, waiting to meet the darkness inside. An opportunity to glance into her own soul. It would be lonely, it would probably be dangerous, and it was what she was going to do. Deep inside her cloak she kept the torn and faded map that Aphrodite had given her. Gabrielle hugged the map to her as though it were a talisman.

The evening that followed Gabrielle's meeting with Aphrodite and Gabrielle's decision was easier than any of the recently shared days had been. Now that Gabrielle had a course of action to take, she could relax a little. At supper and for the first time in weeks, she and Xena chatted easily about inconsequential things, laughing together over a shared joke; even Xena's stern expression softened. Any passer-by might have thought that the two were friends.

And then of course had come the lies. How could she tell Xena where she was really going? In one of her first attempts at fiction, Gabrielle constructed the story of a need to return to the narrow confines and dictates of the life she'd left behind, stressing the need to go alone. And Xena had translated the reasons for Gabrielle's visit home in the worst possible light. The cheerful night beside the fire quickly became a distant memory. Gabrielle took the path toward 'home', and Xena didn't even stand still to watch her go. Half-a-dozen yards on, Xena had paused, hesitated, and turned to watch her former companion's seemingly happy, eager strides in the opposite direction. Aphrodite watched them both. The pain she had seen in Gabrielle's face had struck at Aphrodite's heart, but the loss on Xena's took away her breath.

Part II

The path spiralled the mountain. It was never easy, sometimes difficult, sometimes torturous. No-one would even consider the ascent without a very good purpose, Gabrielle thought. She had half-a-dozen minor injuries from falls on and about the path. Stones seemed to dislodge and come spinning down out of spite alone. Her hands were rough from the heathers and roots that struck up from the sides of the path, bruising her when she made contact with them. She had fallen more than once; her knees were bloody and raw. Her fair hair was dark with sweat, and her clothes stuck to her.

Gabrielle stopped at night when she was too tired to walk another step, and most nights she simply slept where she'd fallen. There was no making camp: there was no reason for taking that much trouble. Gabrielle supplemented her

meagre food supply with the dark berries that grew along the path-side. These berries were bitter, and they stained her lips, but they were better than nothing. She ran short of water but on the fourth night, the rain suddenly teemed down as though it would never stop. It left Gabrielle soaking and chilled but it left her something to drink. When it wasn't full of rain-clouds, the sky was merely ominous.

It was early evening on the seventh day that she reached a place where the path suddenly narrowed and ended, and the sky cleared. A little pale sunlight reached through the clouds. Gabrielle stopped, then dropped down beside the path, where a puddle of rain-water lay. Careless now about such things, Gabrielle dipped her fingers into the cold element and scooped up enough to wash her face. A little refreshed, she stood again, and turned toward the craggy opening in the dark rock ahead of her. She could not remember having seen the entrance when she'd first stopped, but she was stupid with fatigue: she could have fallen off the mountain as easily.

She crossed the patch of scrubland that stood between her and the cavern. The rock loomed above her, an out-reaching of stuff like black marble, shiny to the touch and bitterly cold. Gabrielle shivered, cast a last look behind her, and walked inside.

The ceiling loomed above Gabrielle, planes of quartz glittered in the fading light. The cavern floor was sandy, soft to the feet. Gabrielle walked to the centre of the cavern, where light fell through from a gap in the ceiling, high above. She settled herself on the sandy ground, her legs crossed, a little dirt adhering to her various grazes. She put her head back so that the light touched her face. She stared into the light until black spots appeared before her eyes when she blinked, and then she just waited.

As she sat there, the images of Xena, images that Gabrielle had fought to suppress throughout the previous week, welled up until they became a tide. Xena's smile, the wry, mouth-turned-up-at-one-corner smile that she used when she was pleased with Gabrielle, the raised eyebrow that boded amusement, or fury... or a return to battle. Gabrielle felt the images all around her: Xena asleep, the rather severe look that was her usual expression expunged, a softness showing, instead. Xena's rueful smile, the way that the light shone in her blue eyes, the scars on her arms and back and legs from countless battles... The fine broad hands, the long, fine fingers. The occasional hug that she gave Gabrielle, Xena's body feeling to the girl flexible as a whip, fine as wine. Sitting up in the darkening cavern, Gabrielle fell into a state more like unconsciousness than natural sleep.

And she dreamed. She dreamed that she and Xena were walking through a meadow. The sun was shining warmly above them, and they were perfectly at ease with one another. They were silent only because they had no need for

conversation. And then Ares appeared, walking with them, chatting, smiling, winning... He reached for Xena's hand and she took it, and he pulled her close into an embrace that rapidly descended into a kind of carnality Gabrielle had never even dreamed of. And in the dream she could do nothing, could say nothing, was rooted to the ground like an inconsequential stem of grass.

Ares bore Xena to the ground and began stripping her of her clothes. Xena seemed to be fluid with Ares' grip, neither fighting nor complying. The image of the two became more and more a blend of colours and shapes until Gabrielle could no longer make sense of the two individual bodies. And then the blur became a bloodstain that stretched across the meadow, bathing the warm green in a crimson so vivid that it hurt Gabrielle's eyes. She turned away from the image, and awoke. The sun was shining brightly down onto her face. She had tipped gently backwards at some point and was lying awkwardly on the smooth floor of the cavern. She was painfully stiff and she stumbled when she stood up.

She forced herself to eat a little breakfast, but she had no appetite. The supply of food was dwindling: she'd have about enough for the next few days and that was all. For the first time she tried to think clearly about what Aphrodite had said on the issue of supplies for the way back down, but she could remember nothing. Then she picked up her water bottle and saw that during the night she had knocked the stopper loose: the water had trickled out on the floor, staining the sand. She made a small exclamation, made the smaller because of the dryness of her mouth. She turned back toward the mouth of the cavern, and saw another of the berry-bearing plants. She went slowly across and, suddenly aware of the limitations the situation had thrust upon her, took only a few of the berries, and ate them sparingly, one at a time. They quenched her thirst only a little, but they were better than nothing.

For the first time she looked more carefully around the cavern. She had thought the floor to be level, but now she saw that that impression was wrong: there were roughly-carved steps at the back of the cavern, and they led down. Gabrielle tried to see where the steps reached, but the sunlight was faded there, and she had no candle to light her way. Cautiously she stepped down a step, and then another. A third step and the darkness seemed to well up all around her like a tangible thing. She sat on the edge of the step and looked down.

The darkness rippled. Gabrielle stared down into it and saw Xena – seemingly close enough to touch - at the head of her army, her sword-arm upraised, her face livid, her eyes bright with the thought of bloodshed. She saw the willing armies that followed the warrior princess, she saw the broken bodies of Xena's victims littering the ground. Again the green was flooded with red. And it seemed to Gabrielle that as she raced Argo across the ground, Xena looked directly into Gabrielle's face, and that the princess grinned in pleasure and threat. Gabrielle could not look away. She watched Xena draw a fellow-

warrior into a wild embrace, saw an expression of bacchae-like lust on Xena's face.

The image dimmed. Gabrielle took another step. Nothing in the young woman wanted to move at all, but the darkness compelled her. Another image came toward her. She saw herself as she had been, saw herself in the village, going about her usual daily duties, but as her image grew clearer, she saw lines of age, of discontent, and of unhappiness etch their way across her face. Then her face was her own again, and the expression in the green eyes was vivid, immediate. Her own self was watching Xena riding away from the village. And Xena rode away without a single backward glance. And Gabrielle felt tears in her eyes for the first time since the night she'd talked with Aphrodite.

She ignored the tears, allowing them to course through the dirt on her cheeks. She turned and climbed back up the steps, although travelling such a short distance seemed to take all her strength. When she stood again in the cavern she realised that she was shaking all over. She dropped to the ground, trying to contain the shivering, and felt the first wash of fever break through her body. Gabrielle had never felt so lost or so lonely. She lay there on the ground, the fever racking her, until another dream eclipsed her immediate condition.

This time she saw Xena asleep, her hair falling away from her face, a tattered blanket covering her. Gabrielle ached to touch her. As the feeling flooded through her, the image of Xena wakened, opened her eyes and reached out to Gabrielle. Gabrielle did not hesitate, her dream self stepped forward, felt the warmth of Xena's arms around her. She felt the warmth of Xena's skin against her own, softer than she could have anticipated. She looked into Xena's eyes and saw reflected in them every lover Xena had ever taken, and every act she had ever shared with them, from the softest kiss to the most blatant sensuality. As she kissed Xena she felt passing through them every one who had come before her, and as the kiss went on and on, she felt herself begin to shrink, to lose substance and to dissipate, eclipsed by everyone who had passed before her.

She woke. She took more berries from the bush. They tasted harsh as she crushed them against the roof of her mouth, but there were thoughts far more bitter. She wiped away traces of the juice from her lips and put a hand to her forehead. She shuddered. She curled up in a heap on the cavern floor. She began to wonder if she might be dying. Suddenly she began to understand why Aphrodite had said nothing about taking supplies for the return trip. It might be that no return journey would be needed.

Fever washed over her. She dreamed.

Xena was standing over her, her expression one of desperate concern. Xena was holding her, and she felt the cold impress of the armour against her own

skin. “You do understand, don’t you, that if you give yourself to me that there are no barriers, no reservations, and that there is no turning back? And that I will make demands of you?” Gabrielle just held on as if she would never let go. Xena took hold of Gabrielle’s wrists and forced her to step back. She looked over Gabrielle, her expression hungry, brooding. Her voice had changed, become deeper. It broke over Gabrielle like a purr, or a growl. “Kiss me,” said the warrior princess.

Gabrielle bent her head back, felt Xena’s hands round her waist, pulling her close. Xena’s breath was sweet against Gabrielle’s skin. And Xena tasted sweet: she tasted like fresh water that had honey flowing through it. Gabrielle drank her. She tasted Xena’s lips and felt Xena’s tongue press against her own. She felt Xena pull loose her clothes so that her naked skin was revealed. Xena picked Gabrielle up, laid her down on soft ground, her hands reaching all over, touching Gabrielle, pulling her close, pressing her lips to Gabrielle’s body, sliding down from the girl’s throat where the pulse beat frantically.

She parted Gabrielle’s legs with an easy, confident movement and kissed the girl between the legs so that Gabrielle shivered and reached out to pull Xena closer still. Xena sat back on her heels and grinned at Gabrielle, her smile both reassuring and fearful. She ran her fingertips lightly over Gabrielle’s lower stomach and then pressed a single finger inside Gabrielle. Gabrielle shivered and her body strove to meet Xena’s. More of Xena’s hand pushed into Gabrielle, pressed deep inside Gabrielle, and there was pain, but it was not a pain she would have relinquished. Xena pressed her teeth against Gabrielle’s throat, and growled like an animal. She caught Gabrielle up in an embrace that was so encompassing that Gabrielle began to lose her sense of where she stopped and where Xena started.

Xena kissed her again and the taste was harder, sharper, and coppery, like blood. Xena’s tongue pressed against Gabrielle’s, hot and welcoming. Xena’s hand twisted inside Gabrielle, forcing a response, ruthless, unrelenting.

And Gabrielle woke. She woke on the cold floor in the cold of night. The fever washed over her again.

“You see?” Aphrodite stood beside Xena. The two of them stood beside a pool of water in which the image of Gabrielle’s wracked body shimmered across the surface. “Can you really have any doubt about her feeling for you?” She felt ashamed of having seen so much. For Xena to see Gabrielle’s need of her was one thing, but Aphrodite felt like an interloper. The two of them were so clearly meant to be together that she couldn’t understand Xena’s hesitation, or Xena’s stupidity in not seeing Gabrielle’s feelings for her. She was about to add, with considerable irony, “Isn’t it all clear enough to you now, Warrior Princess, Destroyer of Nations? Do I have to drag you, kicking and screaming, up the mountain path?” but there was no necessity. Xena was already moving,

cutting down the miles that separated her from Gabrielle. Grey dust rose in Argo's wake.

Aphrodite watched Xena go and it must have been the dust that made her eyes water. "For the love of Zeus, Xena," she said, softly, "love her."

Gabrielle woke and slept, crawled to the black berries and ate. Slept again. The third day had come and was close to going.

The evening sky blossomed in a display of peach, apricot and gold.

Gabrielle woke, and stumbled out of the cavern. She looked a little like a figure from a nightmare, her face pale as death, the berries staining her mouth, dust and sand sticking to her clothes, and to her skin, where she had lain. She dropped to her knees on the rough grass, her head heavy, her limbs leaden.

Then she dreamed again - must have dreamed - for suddenly she was being lifted, carried, a warm voice talking to her, soft lips pressed against her forehead and then, briefly, her lips. And the voice caressed her: it told her of promises of love, it expressed affection and dismay at her bloodied, muddied state.

And when she finally opened her eyes in the dream that had ceased to be a dream, she saw that even Xena could cry. There were tear-stains on the warm skin. Xena said, "I thought you wanted to be away from me. I thought you were afraid." Gabrielle said, easily, because all reality had been stripped away,

"I was afraid that you wouldn't love me, couldn't love me. It ate away at me, a little more every day. I was afraid that if you did love me, that love would make you vulnerable. That you'd be at risk because of me." Xena bit her lip. The words wouldn't come: she wasn't good at these things. But she had to make Gabrielle understand.

"Gabrielle, you and I will always be at risk. You more than me perhaps because you're inexperienced. But you'll learn, and I'll teach you and you'll..." she was about to add, "you'll be careful," but she knew the potential for pain and danger that was bound to come if Gabrielle became her lover. "And you'll keep me safe." she finished. "We'll keep each another safe. And as to everything else, well, we'll just take it one day at a time."

They sat just outside the cavern, with the late sunlight falling on them. Gabrielle's fever was fading. "Gabrielle, what have you been doing?" Xena was seeing for the first time the myriad of cuts and bruises that Gabrielle had accumulated. "You'd better let me take a look." But Gabrielle was reluctant. "Gabrielle, I want to make sure that you're alright. You'd do the same for me.

Here, let's do this properly." Xena spread out a blanket on the short grass and carried Gabrielle to it, lowering her onto the rough cloth.

And in a gesture far closer to tender than Xena had ever demonstrated before, she used the water in her flask to wash the young woman's face and arms. "They look painful but they'll be gone before you know it," said Xena. Gabrielle said nothing; it was enough to feel Xena's touch, and to see the kindly twist to Xena's smile. She watched Xena's hands at work on her skin, sure, fine hands that moved with confidence and dexterity. For an instant she allowed herself to relax into Xena's touch. Then a stray thought struck Gabrielle and she said, "Where's Argo?" It suddenly occurred to her that Xena had arrived on foot and alone.

"Argo's fine. A little impatient, maybe. But fine and waiting for us both at the village. We'll be back down by tomorrow evening."

"But Xena, it took me a week to climb the mountain. How d'you think we're going to get back in a day, especially without Argo..."

"Gabrielle, sweet, look." And Gabrielle looked around her, at the clear space behind them where the cavern had been. The mountain, that had seemed so tall and imposing, was nothing more than a hill, and at that a hill covered with short, soft green grass. And the path was a slim, beaten line. And below them, visible but distant, the outline of a village, clearly within a day's walk.

Gabrielle began to say, "I don't understand," but she didn't get past the second syllable. Xena put up a hand to silence her.

"Gabrielle, there are things I need to say." Xena's face had the fixed, authoritative expression most often seen when she was about to enter battle. "There are things that I should have said before that I didn't say. Your being away from me has made me see things differently. When I saw you go, I was angry. I thought that you were turning your back. But when the anger started to fade, I realised how much I missed you, how much I like having you around. The world felt... it felt a little quieter without you. And not in a good way," she added, before Gabrielle started worrying about if she usually talked too much. "I need you in my life, Gabrielle: there are changes I need to make, things I need to do that I can't do on my own." She scowled, and Gabrielle realised just how much it was costing Xena to talk in such a manner. She put a hand out, and gently pressed a single finger on Xena's lips to silence her, and as she did so it was as if a jolt went through them both. Gabrielle started to speak, but Xena silenced her by kissing her.

Xena's mouth was warm and soft. Gabrielle's arms went out and snaked round Xena's neck, pulling her closer. Xena went on kissing her, now that she'd started, she didn't want to stop. And then Xena let a hand slid carelessly but

possessively over a breast and just pressing the nipple before coming to rest on Gabrielle's stomach. And Gabrielle pulled herself against Xena. And the conversation never was finished, because and all the things Xena had dreamed about their doing when Gabrielle was well, when Gabrielle and she had talked things through, they did then, on a worn blanket in the fading light, while the moon rose behind them and Aphrodite glanced at them for just an instant before she smiled, and quickly turned away.

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