



THE JOURNEY

The Gift

Chapter 1

The Journey

WRITTEN BY

Flawless

ENGLISH TRANSLATION

Giulia V.

ARTWORK

Flawless
Various Artists

“I think we can stay here, Gabrielle”

“The sunset on Corinth, what an amazing view! What a shame that we have to leave so soon...If only I was good at painting as well...”

“You would not be as good as writing...”

“Really?”

“Yes, I love your writings Gabrielle...” she said with a sweet inflection in her voice.

Xena loved what Gabrielle was used to write. She could not believe it. The surly warrior she was travelling along since a couple of years seemed to have rounded her edges a little.

“It’s the most suitable place to spend the night, so you can enjoy the view from the hill”

“Since when you’re so romantic, Xena?”

“Uhm? Since never. Was saying that for you...”



Gabrielle noticed a slight embarrassment in Xena’s tone, but decided not to go on; in a few days the warrior’s birthday was coming, and she still didn’t know what to gift her.

She, an action woman all sword, chakram and whip!

What could she offer her that would be so special?

Gabrielle's thoughts were interrupted by Xena's hand leaning on her shoulder; she turned on her right and Xena was silently smiling at her. Her eyes were bright blue, as the sea that they would have reached the next day, travelling to Thebes.

"Let's go to sleep? Tomorrow we should be up early"

"Ok, Xena" and Gab rested her head on the warrior's chest.



Gabrielle was not able to fall asleep and she didn't know why. It was as a white light ray was hitting her eyes.

She got up and saw Aphrodite in front of her, glancing and winking.

"You cannot sleep, right? But I'm here to help you sweetie!"

"Are you here to do a magic sleep spell?" Gab was joking friendly.

"No, silly! I'm here because I know what is in your heart! You don't know what to gift Xena and tomorrow you two will surely be busy!"

"Yeah, sometimes I would like a less adventurous life with Xena"

"And tell her about your feelings, right?"

"Xena believes that I am too young for anything, leaving feelings apart...she does not consider me at all..."

"And we will make her waking up!"

Aphrodite released a little touch of magic and disappeared.

Gabrielle finally fell in a deep sleep.



“Where is my chakram? Where is it?”

Dawn was rising, and Xena was shouting like a frenzied!

“Xena, what’s happening?”

“My chakram **is gone!** Yesterday evening I left it near your saddlebag and now **it is not there!**”

“There are no signs that someone could have been here, it is not possible that it was stolen Xena...”

Xena watched Gabrielle with a blaming expression.

“Don’t look at me like this, I didn’t take it, didn’t use it...”

“Of course not...you wouldn’t know what to do with it...but you move and speak, and get up...and walk at night...!”

“I’m sorry? You’re trying to say that during sleepwalking I could have taken your chakram and thrown it who knows where?!?”

“Precisely!”

“You are mad!”



Xena was much altered, and her anger made her punching one of the forest trees. Her knuckles started bleeding plentifully and Gabrielle went immediately searching for something to treat Xena's wound.

"Leave it, it is not hurting. And I'm able to take care of myself anyway. You are only causing troubles"

"Sorry?"

"I shouldn't have taken her with me..." Xena was speaking softly, but Gab could still hear her.

"You cannot think for real what you just said, Xena..."

Despite her bitter feelings, Xena did not hide her thoughts.

"This life is not for you, Gabrielle. I am not for you."

"How can you even say such horrible things? You're hurting me..." Gabrielle's eyes were wet. Those words broke her heart.

"When we will arrive to Thebes we are going to think about it. Since I haven't my chakram anymore it will be impossible to face the Greek Sphinx"

"But the legend narrates that it is needed to solve some enigma to defeat her"

“I cannot solve riddles, Gabrielle! And you have to go back to Potidaea!” Xena was determined.

“I won’t go anywhere, Xena!”

“You are going to do what I tell you, or...”

“Or what? I am not a little girl, Xena! You cannot control me!”

Gabrielle stood in front of Xena as if she was able to challenge her, not only with words but also physically.

“But I can decide who can and cannot be with me!” Xena pushed her with her shoulder, went to Argo and mounted on her back.

Gabrielle felt lost.

Xena was ahead of Gabrielle as usual on Argo’s back and already a few hours have passed in total silence. The emotional distance of the two women could have been cut with a knife.

“Let’s stop for a break. Argo is tired.”

“Of course you don’t care about me, right Xena? If you have lost your chakram is my fault and I don’t deserve that you speak to me, right?”

“I didn’t lose my chakram!” underlined Xena pronouncing words with spite.

“Neither do I, Xena!”

There was a moment of total silence.

“Listen Gabrielle, let’s take a break. We are going to eat something and then we will continue our journey...ok?”

Gabrielle nodded, but she was deeply sad.

Gabrielle cooked for both of them and served a bowl to Xena that looked at her embarrassed; she thanked her, then took her arm softly but firmly.

Gabrielle jumped.

“Forgive me Gabrielle...I didn’t want to be so harsh...”

Gabrielle didn’t reply, she sat near her but could not eat anything.

“Gabrielle, talk to me”

She took Gabrielle’s chin between her fingers, trying to turn her face towards her, but Gab lowered her eyes.

“Gabrielle, say something to me...”

When Gabrielle lifted her eyes saw Xena’s eyes, clearly sad and grieved: she could be as cruel as sweet, and Gab was not used to this side of the warrior.

Maybe Xena was right, maybe the right thing to do was to go back to Potidaea to her family, reunite to whom was her promised husband and leave that life behind.



Xena woke her up from those thoughts caressing her face, and from her movements and glance she seemed almost intended to kiss her, but Gabrielle snapped and spilled her bowl to the ground.

“For all Gods! I’m sorry Xena, I hope I did not stain you!”

“No Gabrielle...listen I...”

Gabrielle didn't let her finish speaking, she got up and went to clean the bowl with her heart beating madly.

“My promised husband... Perdicus... I don't love him and I don't want him, but I cannot stay with Xena. I am a burden for her...some kind of trouble... she was very clear...”

Was it really possible that Xena was about kissing her? After all she said?

No. It was not.

And she never showed her this kind of behavior. Only a great affection surely more similar to the love between two sisters.

Xena didn't press her; she could not understand if the girl refused her or maybe she didn't understand her intentions clearly. On the other hand, she was aware that this reaction was justified, since she has threaten many times to bring her back to Potidaea.

“Gabrielle, come!”



Xena stretched her arm to help Gab mounting on her horse and remembered when time before, when they first met, the same thing happened.

She never mounted on a steed's back before and she was afraid of heights, but Xena made her feeling safe.

She felt protected by that woman with whom she unconsciously fell in love at first sight years before.

That woman for whom she was convinced to leave everything and everyone, for living an existence maybe beyond her physical abilities.

Gabrielle mounted on Argo's back and encircled her arms around Xena's waist, which for a second made sure that the girl was embracing her tightly.

Thebes was ever closer.



RED BLOOD ROAD

The Gift

Chapter 2

Red Blood Road

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ARTWORK

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Various Artists**

Finally Xena and Gabrielle arrived at Corinth's port, from where the galley headed to Thebes would have departed shortly.

"Wait for me here Gabrielle, I am going to deal with the captain. The price will be surely increased because of Argo"

Gab was distracted by some stands not very far from the dock, in particular she was attracted by the colorful manners of a merchant, selling fabrics and jewels.

"My beautiful lady, how can I satisfy your wishes? Look at this delicious cap, wonderful for an excursion to the sea" he said showing her a horrible yellow cylindrical hat.

"Really! You want to sell me that horrible thing for real?" Gabrielle giggled.



"No, of course not beautiful lady...surely your elegant eyes could not have missed this *stròphion*" ***(cloth very similar to a bra, used in the Ancient Greece)** the merchant insisted.

"Are you crazy? It's red! Used by the *etère*" ***(prostitutes in the Ancient Greece)**

"Surely your promised husband will appreciate it, try it!"

"Well...I haven't any promised husband...or better...I had but..."

"Gabrielle!!" Xena was looking for her and she seemed rather annoyed.

"**Gabrielle!**" called again.

"I'm here Xena!" she waived.

“Nothing that even a beautiful warrior like that one could not appreciate...” the merchant winked.

“Ok fine, give it to me!”

While she was paying, her eyes settled on a small chain with a particular necklace, catching her attention and making her immediately thinking about Xena.

“Can you give that to me, please? Hurry up!”

Gabrielle, who was always negotiating over the price of everything, this time had to move at the speed of light.

“**Gabrielle! HURRY UP?!?**” Xena screamed harder.

“Have a good day, dear lady”

Gabrielle hastily greeted the merchant with her hand neurotically, surely annoyed by Xena.

“Gabrielle, I told you to wait for me and you have gone around for stands with Argo instead! What have you bought?”

“Nothing...”

“Come on! Show me!”

“But I said I didn’t buy anything!”

Xena started tickling Gabrielle and putting her arms around her waist, until she finally managed to reveal one of her purchases: opening it she was visibly embarrassed.



“And what is this?”

“It’s mine!” replied Gab taking the cloth away from Xena.

“Hot stuff... not your kind.”

“It will be when I go back to Potidaea. To Perdicus”. With these words Gab tried to make Xena jealous.

“Didn’t you think he was stupid and boring?”

“And you? Can’t you wait to get rid of me?”

“Listen, we have no time for this discussion. We should get on board”.

Xena took Argo’s bridles and started to go.

Gabrielle was thoughtful, right behind her. *“You’re so annoying Xena...annoying and lovely at the same time...”*

Finally the galley departed and they were travelling on the sea.

“Well well, Argo is settled. It was a real luck finding a galley large enough to take her on board. Are you ok Gab?...?”

“No, Xena. You should know that I am suffering for seasickness”

“One more reason to stay on the mainland...” she smiles

“Ok Xena, understood! Don’t worry!”

Once we are in Thebes I will arrange to go back to Potidaea! Now please stop whining!”

“But...” Xena couldn’t finish speaking, Gabrielle walked away without saying a word anymore, leaving the warrior speechless.



The night on the galley was very animated, since Xena could not sleep and Gabrielle was on the deck, throwing up the hell out of her; the continuous swinging of the ship didn’t help her to digest anything, not even water.

Xena, worried for her friend, decided to reach her upstairs and saw her leaning against an armrest of the deck, still, watching the moon reflected on the sea.

“How’s going?” Xena caressed Gabrielle’s back affectionately.

“Do you care?” Gab kept watching the moonlight, mirrored on the water.

It was a clear and fresh evening.

Gabrielle suddenly felt Xena on her side, resting her cloak on her, then she caressed her shoulders quickly, to make her feeling warm. Finally she hugged her lightly.

“I always care about you, Gab...”

These affectionate behaviors from Xena to Gabrielle were nothing new, but they were also very uncommon. She really needed that now, more than ever, so she relaxed. Without realizing, she hugged Xena and Xena reacted to that tender embrace.

“Let’s try to rest, Gab?”

“Ok, but first let me stay like this a little longer...”

The galley was approaching Thebes; one of the sailors went searching for the two women to warn them, finding them both still asleep: Gabrielle was comfortably hugging Xena.

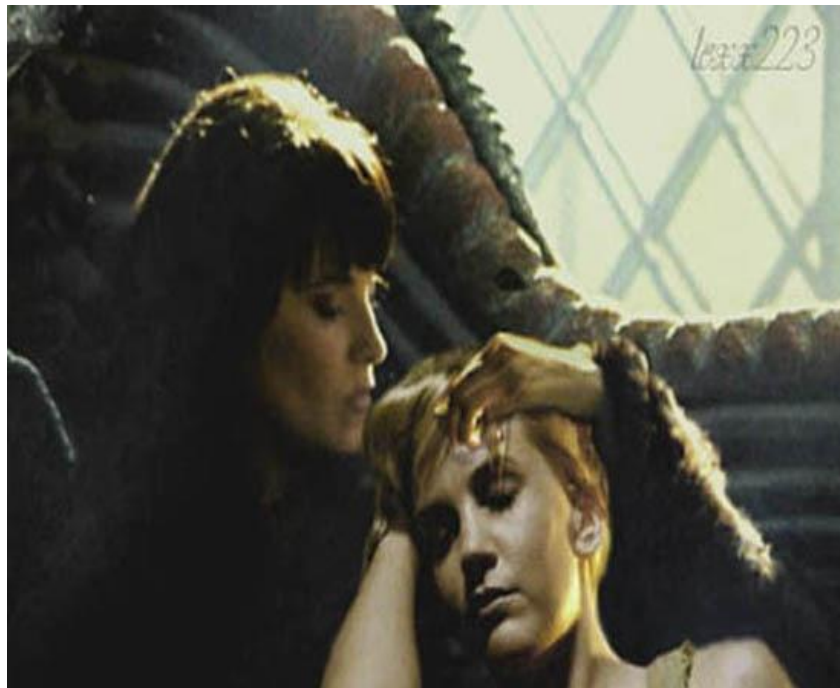
“Hey you two! Hey!” the sailor screamed.

“I’m sorry to bother you, but shortly we will dock at Thebes’s port!” reiterated the sailor ironically.

Gabrielle was sleeping heavily, the seasickness had shattered her.

Xena tried to wake her up.

“*Gabrielle...Gabrielle, wake up...*” Xena’s tone was sweet and soft but firm; however, instead of waking up, Gabrielle hugged Xena tighter, who was taken by all that sweetness and went nearer the girl, kissing her lips lightly.



“Gab...” Gabrielle opened her eyes and unbelievably saw Xena very close to her...too close!

She got up suddenly.

“So...are we...arrived?”

“Yes” Xena replied seriously

“Good...good...let’s go?”

“Gab, listen...”

“Yes, I’m ready!”

Xena was speechless.

It was clear that Gabrielle was not feeling more than friendship for her, so she decided to focus totally on the mission for which King Laius had asked her help for.

“Majesty, Xena, the Warrior Princess, is here!”

Xena was announced to King Laius.

The king was quite strange; he was wearing bright colors, his nails were long and polished and his make-up was like the one of an Egyptian Queen. Even his way of speaking was very unusual for a King.



“Oh very very perfect! Xena I’m so happy that you came! The situation is very very degenerated!” King Laius’s voice was almost girly but pleasant.

“Oh, who is the very young lady with you? She looks like a laundress!”

Gabrielle looked at him in shock.

“She is one dear friend of mine...anyway what were you saying Majesty...?”

“Oh, yes...well...you surely know that there is a very very annoying curse on Thebes after that I had...well...killed the very handsome Crisippo!”

“Since when is she here?” Xena asked doubtfully.

“Since at least two Moons...she killed many many good citizens, nobody can solve her riddles, they are too too very difficult”

“I don’t believe that the Greek Sphinx is here because of a murder, it seems strange to me.”

“There are no other reasons, Xena”

“Apparently...”

“Where is the Sphinx?” asked Gabrielle curiously

“You can find her on Mount Ficione most probably, but sometimes she stays in the middle of the city. Nobody is very very sure of where she is, with very precise precision!”

“Of course I am very glad to offer hospitality to you and your very short friend, for all the necessary time”

“Very short friend?!?”

“*Gabrielle, leave it...* fine Majesty, we accept your hospitality with pleasure. In the meantime I will try to learn more about all of this...” Xena greeted the King and left.

The two girls on Argo’s saddle were heading towards Mount Ficione. The day was pretty dark; it seemed as if a storm was about to explode.

“From where should we start?”

“I don’t know Gabrielle...if only I had my chakram...in the meantime let’s see if we are able to find signs of the Sphinx.”

“We can start asking around, King Laius did not seem to me so exhaustive!”

“He wasn’t because he has killed a man Gabrielle...a man who was his lover back then...”

“Ah, really?...”

“Yes, he was not even as handsome as he says...”

“Beauty is subjective, Xena!”

“In this case you would have something to say as well, Gab...!”

“Umpf! I don’t think so! ...for all Gods Xena! **Look!**”

Both stopped arguing, because in front of them there was a very disturbing and horrible scene: about ten dismembered corpses, some with internal organs coming out from their bodies, others with empty orbits.

The position of some bodies made them thinking that they have tried protecting themselves, others had evident signs of claws on their back and deep wounds on their flesh. Bright red blood was flowing out from the fresher bodies and was melting with the ground, on the path that was headed to the mountain.

“*All of this is horrible, Xena...*” Gabrielle’s tone was low and full of terror at the same time...

“*Shhhh...look Gabrielle...*”

The blood drops melted with the ground turned into many little black scorpions that started getting on the bodies and eating the decomposed flesh. Xena noticed that as soon as the arachnids were eating, they started growing in size, reaching the dimensions of an adult man; one of them went near Gabrielle threatening her with its sting. Xena managed to stop its progress only for a few seconds with her whip, because the insect cut it with one of its claws.



Xena was shocked and understood that she should be acting quickly.
“Hurry up Gabrielle, we should leave now!”

“But...why? Leave...?”

“Gabrielle, did you forget about my chakram? We must think of a plan to reach mount Ficione, without my most powerful weapon here we have no chance to fight and survive!”

Scorpions have become much more and bigger.
Xena took Gabrielle’s arm and they run away getting on Argo’s saddle; a moment later Gabrielle realized that her stick was lost, surely it must have fallen down when the scorpion was attacking her.

“Damn Xena! And now?”

“Now you’re without your stick and I’m without my Chakram. As soon as we get back to King Laius we are going to think about it!”

The situation have become considerably complicated.
Someone was watching them from a glade.