

# ~ A Place To Heal ~

by Carole Giorgio

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*(Takes place a few days after 'Motherhood')*

The path they took was leading them back toward the village of the Northern Amazons. Gabrielle promised Xena it would be a good place for healing, knowing in her heart that there would probably be conflict there as well as any place else the three of them were to travel in these times of change. Not many of the Amazons they knew and loved were still alive and the younger generation may have forgotten about them, or worse hated Eve and maybe even Xena for having killed Artemis. Still, Gabrielle's status as Queen and Eve's as her successor could not be denied - challenged maybe - but not denied. Gabrielle knew there would be an initial uneasiness and perhaps even resentment from her Amazon sisters. If they could amend any hard feelings the tribe harbored for them, then the Village would be an excellent place for the trio to heal, from both the physical and emotional wounds they, as yet, found themselves unable or unwilling to discuss.

The walk along the beach was one of quiet retrospection. Silence prevailed through most of the morning, with each component of the trio being bathed in her own thoughts. When they turned from the water's edge and entered the dense forest, Gabrielle continued to relive in her mind the events of the past few moons, such as the sorrowful joy at finding an aged Joxer, and the devastation at losing him again, only this time to death. The only thing about that fateful day and those that followed that had been discussed in any length was the friendship Aphrodite had

shown toward the bard. Xena felt that the golden-haired beauty deserved to know how deeply the Goddess of Love cared for her. It gave Gabrielle solace to know the Goddess who always seemed like a friend, in actuality was.

Talk of the betrayal, due to the mental meddling of the Furies, was avoided as was the mortal blow Gabrielle received at the hand of the person least likely in the entire world to hurt the fair-haired beauty. The bard realized that for them to leap these hurdles and then continue on with their lives, talk needed to be instigated and soon. *When we reach the village and Eve is safe from vigilantes, then Xena and I will also have a little peace and not have to continually look over our shoulders for someone trying to avenge a relative, friend, or village.*

"Maybe you'll get a chance to do some writing when we get settled into the village." A gentle contralto voice interrupted Gabrielle's thoughts.

She looked up into caring blue eyes that always seemed to match the blue they were nearest to; today it was the sky. "That would be nice, it's been a while and there is a lot to record. Feeling safe for a while will be a luxury for us, and being among family and friends . . . I've almost forgotten what that feels like."

"We could go to Poteidaia first if you want. You haven't seen your . . ."

". . . Baby sister who's now close to 25 years my senior? My parents who I'm sure are no longer alive? Xena we have people to grieve for, who remain in our hearts and minds just as we left them 25 years ago. Even now when I think of Joxer and Meg, my first impression is not of the couple we came back to find, but of the individuals we left behind during our timeless hibernation. Until I get my life - our life - back on track, I can't think of going to see Lila."

"You're right, Gabrielle. Even the Amazons have lived a lifetime since we last saw them and here we are having aged only moons. I'm also worried about how they will accept Eve back into the village; after all it was because of her that Artemis was killed."

"But she didn't do the actual killing Xena, you did. It was by your hand that their protector died."

"That's true." A pensive look came over the warrior's face as she looked down at her bard.

"Where do we go from here?" Gabrielle asked to no one in particular. "The Amazons will never accept the power that instigated the downfall of their Gods."

"Since some of the Gods were spared, maybe one of them will take Artemis' place within the Nation," Xena offered. "I guess we'll have to initiate a policy of 'one day at a time', it's the only practical way to handle our lives at this point."

"Xena," Gabrielle smiled hoping to lighten the grave look on her warrior's face. "I do believe that's the way we've always lived." She received the desired response as Xena smiled and proceeded to put a strong arm around her shoulder. A gentle touch grazed the area where the chakram had hit the bard week's ago and Gabrielle wondered how they were ever going to breach

that conversation. *Just ask her why! It's the simplest and most direct route. You know you're not good at direct, but maybe this time you need to try.*

Xena pulled her close and kissed the crown of soft golden hair. "We need a little time alone, Gabrielle. It's been a lifetime - I miss you."

"I've been right here all along . . ."

"I don't mean . . ." the warrior stumbled, looking for the right words to say.

As usual, her bard didn't let her falter for long. "I miss you, too, Xena." For the first time in days the warrior's touch heralded a bumpy response from Gabrielle's skin. She missed the feeling of the strong yet gentle touch of her champion and the intimate embraces they were avoiding because of Eve and perhaps for other reasons as well.

Reading her lover's mind, Xena responded, "You know Gabrielle, Eve's not stupid. I'm sure she's figured out by this time that you and I are more than just traveling companions, after all she has devoured most of your scrolls." A slight come-hither look appeared on the otherwise somber face.

"We're only within a day's trek from the village. We've waited this long, what's another day?"

"These are troubled times, and what another day may have in store for us only the Gods . . . or what's left of them would know. Remember the 'one day at a time' slogan?" Running a slender finger down the small of Gabrielle's back, the raven-haired beauty smiled as she watched her lover's skin ripple under her touch, letting her know she still possessed the power to arouse her partner's desire with but a simple movement. She leaned down and whispered into a perfectly formed ear, "I know you miss the touching as much as I do. I don't want to wait until the village, Gabrielle. I want you now." Kissing the small ear she allowed her tongue to travel the distance around the ear to nibble at the neck beneath.

Focusing her verdant eyes on sapphire orbs, the bard, as usual, gave in to her warrior. "I must admit you make it impossible to deny you, Xena. Do you think you could find something for 'our daughter' to do while we're relieving old memories?"

*That's another thing we need to discuss. I remember the first few moons of Eve's life, every time I went to do something "motherly" you questioned me. Now you have decided she is mine as well as yours. What caused the change in you, my warrior? Why are we now sharing a gift you wouldn't even let me help name?*

"You bet I can." Quickening her pace the warrior closed the gap between herself and her daughter. "Eve, wait up."

Eve stopped in her tracks and waited for her mother to reach her. "What? Is something wrong? Are we making camp already?"

"Nothing's wrong and yes, we're going to make an early camp. We should be able to reach the village by nightfall tomorrow, even if we stop now. Gabrielle's getting hungry." Xena nodded her head back in the direction of the slowly approaching bard and gave Eve a 'you know Gabrielle' look. If I remember correctly there's a lake just over that ridge there. Why don't you try your hand at fishing while we set up camp?"

"Sure." Being her mother's daughter all that was needed was a bag to carry the bounty back into camp, so she deposited the rest of her gear with her mom. Giving her mother a more knowing look than was expected, the prodigal announced, "I'll give you two a little extra time to stoke the fire and perhaps I'll rest a little before bringing dinner back. It might be nice to sit by the edge of the lake for a while. She's not too hungry is she?"

Xena swallowed hard, realizing that Eve had, indeed, caught on to the scope of the relationship between her two 'mothers'. Even so they were going to have to discuss that. They were leading Eve into a village of Amazons, which would be a totally alien environment for the young woman who grew up as a Roman aristocrat, surrounded and pursued by members of the opposite sex. Perhaps they would approach that subject later this evening or over dinner, after her own appetite had been quenched and she was better able to even think about discussing the topic. Right now all she wanted was to get back to Gabrielle.

"Okay, Eve - we'll find a nice clearing somewhere around here and see you in a bit."

"Right, Mother. See you in a bit." The younger woman flashed another knowing smile in her mother's direction then turned and headed for the lake.

"Be careful, Eve." Gabrielle called after her as she neared the spot where mother and daughter had been talking.

"So." Gabrielle turned to her dark lover. "How much time do we have."

"More than enough, I'm sure, but maybe we'd better at least pick out the site and start the fire first, that way there'll be no hurry." Grabbing the bard around the waist she pulled her close. Lips she had known for years reacquainted themselves. "I can't believe it's taken us this long to get..."

"Of course you can . . ." the bard in Gabrielle began reciting all the reasons why an emotional reunion had been impossible up to this point. "Let's see, first we were unfrozen, cold, hungry, and confused. Next came the quest to find Eve, followed by the 'save Livia from herself saga', concluding with kill the Gods, and throw . . ."

Long, slender fingers covered the bard's sensuous mouth as Xena shook her head, misty sapphire pools staring through to Gabrielle's soul. "Please, Gabrielle. Let's not go there just yet. All I want at this moment in my life is to hold my world in my arms again and let her know how much I've missed her."

Clearing her throat and breaking the gaze so as not to let Xena see just how much that confession meant, Gabrielle gently kissed the full lips of her lover, letting her tongue venture into territory

time would never steal from memory. The soft warmth, sweetness and hunger that was living and waiting for her inside her warrior's mouth caused her knees to buckle, until she felt a strong, muscular arm reaching down to pick her up, allowing her to concentrate on the feelings flowing through her. As in days long gone by, her arms encircled her lover's neck and she drank in the passion she had been denied for far too long.

A long throaty groan could be heard from the warrior as she broke contact with the lips eager to continue. "We really need to attempt a start on the camp, Gabrielle. I promise it will be worth the wait."

The small blonde shook her head in agreement. "You're absolutely right, first things first."

After the saddlebags were emptied and the extra equipment lay on the ground, the horses were set free to roam for the evening. Xena shifted into high speed and began a fire that Gabrielle fueled with branches gathered from close by.

Gabrielle padded the ground beneath the bedrolls with an abundance of needles she found in the surrounding area, positioning the beds in an obscure corner of the campsite, and totally concealed by fairly high shrubs.

With the fire kindled and cooking utensils set out, the warrior turned and walked toward her bard.

"Xena, maybe we should have been the ones going for dinner. Wouldn't you like to have a bath first?"

"Gods Gabrielle - you're actually serious aren't you? No, I don't care about a bath. We bathed in the ocean this morning and we can bathe again later. Right now all I want is . . . you know what I want . . . come here." She held out her arms and the small flaxen-haired woman practically fell into them.

"It's been so long, I just want everything to be perfect." The whine was apparent and Xena knew there would be no ignoring the situation.

"You want a ritual of water - so be it." Stepping away from Gabrielle the taller woman strode over to the pile of equipment and supplies she had taken off Argo. Retrieving one of the water bags and a sponge, she rejoined her lover, placing the supplies down on the ground before taking off her armor.

"You can keep going," Gabrielle encouraged from her sitting position on the joined bedrolls.

"Yeah, and you can start," Xena pointed to the bard and flicked her fingers in a get the damn outfit off motion.

"Okay, okay - just wanted to make sure you wanted to continue."

"Are you acting shy for my ... "

"Xena, it's been ... "

"It's been only a few moons as far as our memories and body's are concerned, but you know what?"

"What?"

"That's a few moons too many in my book." Kneeling down on the bed next to her bard she whispered, "You can put that in the scrolls."

Grabbing the water bag she opened it and soaked the sponge. "Okay - ready for your ritual by water?" Without waiting for a response, droplets of tepid liquid fell into the crevice of Gabrielle's navel, filling, pooling, and overflowing but being quickly caught up again by the swift movements of the warrior, now turned devoted attendee. Xena ran the sponge, softened by the fluid, up and down the length of Gabrielle's torso. "Rituals can be very erotic if handled properly, you know," the soft contralto voice crooned, as her lips followed the route the sponge had just taken, blowing softly in its wake. "You should dry quickly in the heat of the afternoon sun and warmth of my breath." She smiled up into lush green eyes. "Why the goose flesh on such a sunny day?"

"You know very well, why - stop teasing Xena."

"Not teasing Gabrielle - we haven't finished with the ritual yet. Can't be continuing on without finishing the ritual first." She smiled, squeezed out the sponge and again soaked it with water. This time the soft dripping object went slightly south of the bard's navel. Xena's attention was focused on the golden mound that held unforgotten treasures; it glistened in the sunlight as water danced on the soft curls and they fluttered in the delicate breeze. Slightly parting the shapely thighs that were also covered in love bumps, the warrior methodically ran the sponge down the span of each shapely leg, then drew it back up collecting most of the moisture it had deposited just seconds before. Finally the object of concentration was the area surrounded by the nether folds as long, slender fingers opened Gabrielle's passion to drench the inner passages, already moist with the liquid of love, with the cooling water.

"I'll bathe after," the warrior declared, " I'm not waiting another second."

Positioning her body on top of her bard's she whispered softly. "I've almost forgotten what you taste like, Gabrielle. I never thought I'd hear myself say that." She lowered herself between the smaller woman's legs, her arms reaching upward teasing the already erect nipples. Almost as an involuntary movement, Gabrielle's legs separated further, allowing entrance to her nether lips to be easily accessible to her warrior. With small hands running fervently through her lover's long dark tresses, forgetting all that came before and all that still needed to be addressed, the now impatient bard implored ...

"Take me Xena, please ... I need you ... yes ... yes ..."

With the expertise that comes from knowing how to best give her bard pleasure, the warrior began by applying soft wet kisses to the entire area, casually flicking her tongue over Gabrielle's seat of passion as her tongue leapt between the smaller woman's thighs.

"By the Gods Xena, Don't make me wait any longer." With an upward thrust of her hips she positioned her area of desire where it could receive the most attention. "Now Xena, take me now!" she pleaded.

Rustling of bushes prompted the warrior to raise her head like that of an animal suddenly surprised while feasting, causing her to pull away from the warmth of her lover's body.

"Gabrielle, I think Eve's coming back." The words left an ache in her throat as they poured forth from the warrior's lips.

"No, don't you dare stop!" The bard started to continue protesting, only to be stifled by a large hand covering her mouth.

"Gabrielle, I think your water ritual took too long. I'll make this up to you, I promise." She placed a large hand where her mouth had resided just seconds ago and pushed with an intensity, trying to squelch the need in herself as well as in that of her lover.

Gabrielle tried to smile as she clenched the muscles between her legs, attempting to ease the throbbing as her body cried out for the attention that had just been ripped from it.

Pulling her warrior into one last embrace she whispered softly, "You bet Argo you will! Get dressed and go talk to Your daughter!"

With a look of contrition the dark-haired champion, after being released from the deadlock, scrambled to her feet, quickly pulling on her leathers as she stood to face the happy fisherwoman coming through the bushes toward the campsite.

Humming to announce her arrival Eve entered the campsite with a full bag. "Fishing's good at the lake; how was it here?" She smiled at her mother and shook her head as a slight blush rose to grace the warrior's cheeks. "I'm surprised you waited so long, I didn't think you were the shy type, Mother."

"I'm not but not everyone realizes how quickly you catch on to situations, Eve."

"Like mother, like daughter," Gabrielle chimed in sweetly, stepping out from behind the bushes.

"I hope you two worked up a good appetite, because these fish practically jumped into my hands," Eve bragged, showing off her catch. Taking a knife from her boots she brandished it. I even took the time to scale and filet them. You'll be eating like the best patricians in Rome."

Catching the strained look on the duo standing in front of her, she corrected the faux pas - "How about the height of Greek aristocracy. Is that more to you liking?"

"Much better, Eve." Giving the younger woman a weak grin, Gabrielle held out a pan which the younger woman filled with boneless strips of fresh water fish."

"I'm starving, what are we having to go with these?" Eve asked.

"I . . . ah . . . didn't have a chance to do any foraging," Gabrielle began as she rummaged around getting spices to use on the fish, "I'm sure there are berries around here somewhere, and there's some bread in the saddlebags."

Xena looked around, doing her best to act busy doing something else.

"Okay, I get the picture. I'll go pick some berries while dinner is cooking." Eve replied, looking at one then the other of her traveling companions with a broad grin. "Guess it's difficult getting used to having a third wheel around all the time, huh?"

"No Eve, we love having you with us." Xena started.

"Yeah, it just would have been a lot easier if I had stayed a baby and you two could have gotten used to me gradually. I can understand that."

"You're right in some ways, Eve. But none of us planned for our lives to take the turn they did." Gabrielle interjected.

The younger woman gave Gabrielle a look of sympathy, "Mother never did make it easy for you, did she Auntie Gabrielle?" Not expecting an answer, she turned and walked into the dense foliage.

Gabrielle turned to the love of her life when Eve was out of hearing distance. "Xena, we have to make some kind of arrangements to deal with this situation. It's obvious Eve is not oblivious to the relationship between us and we need to address it once and for all."

"I know Gabrielle but we were supposed to have a lifetime of raising her . . ."

"But we didn't and now we have to adjust and so does she. We can't hide or send her away every time you get amorous."

"It's just that I didn't think . . ." Xena began.

"That's really quite obvious."

"Give me a break, Gabrielle. Listen, we'll go for a walk after dinner. I promise."

The bard shook her head, pretending to focus her attention on the browning fish.



Changing the subject Xena thought now might be the best time to explain to Gabrielle why she needed to leave for a short side trip. After all, the blonde was already upset with her, might as well get all the shit out in the open at once.

She cleared her throat and began, "If you were wondering why we took this short detour on the way the Village . . . I brought us this way because it takes us near to an area I need to go check out."

"Oh," Gabrielle looked up at her warrior in confusion. "I thought maybe you remembered an easier way to get to the tribe. Since that isn't the case, what is it you need to check out?" Gabrielle asked as she took the fish out of the pan and arranged them in their dinner plates.

"Oh some old stuff I need to make sure is still where I put it."

"Xena you're beating around the bush and I'm not sure I like the direction this conversation is heading."

"Gabrielle you don't seem to understand. We've been out of commission for 25 years, people either don't know we exist, think we are legends, or hate us because of this situation with Eve."

"And you point is?"

"We're broke - okay is that direct enough for you? At this point in time we have no means of support and I don't like the feeling. I'm not used to not being in charge of every aspect of our existence, and this is driving me crazy."

"So you are going to do exactly What about it?"

"I know how much you used to hate our having to rely on my stashes . . ."

"Are we going there again, Xena?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, we are! Listen Gabrielle, there's probably not a soul left on this earth who remembers these stashes but me. It's only bargaining power and we certainly could use some of that."

"Xena you know how I feel about using those treasures."

"You can't possibly still feel the same way. Think about it Gabrielle, most of the stashes left are the ones I pilfered from the other warlords. None of the victims are still alive. It would be stupid to deny us and to deny Eve a decent existence because of past mistakes. Surely you've learned that by now."

"I guess what you're saying makes sense. But I'd feel a lot better about it if we gave some of the treasure to a charity."

"What do you think we are?" Xena retorted, trying to lighten the discussion.

"We're not a charity case, Xena. We have the means of supporting ourselves, we have the Amazons . . ."

"Get off the lecture box Gabrielle . . . we need the dinars! And, I promise some of it will go to a worthy cause other than to us. Does that make you happy?"

"If the truth be told, I was wondering how we were going to survive outside the Village with people turning their backs on us or trying to eliminate Eve everywhere we go. This would give us a bit of a cushion to soften these hard times."

"That's more like it." She gave her lover an encouraging hug.

"Don't go getting too close there, Warrior Babe," Gabrielle teased, using the Goddess of Love's affectionate term for the dark-haired beauty. "Remember the predicament you left me in a short while ago?"

"Sorry."

"So . . . now that you've gotten that little boulder off your chest, I suppose we could all make the detour instead of you're going alone."

"That would be great Gabrielle. Instead of my having to wander off, leaving you and Eve alone, the three of us going together would put us that much closer to the Village. We may actually still make it by tomorrow night."

Looking around Gabrielle saw nothing but forest. "Xena call Eve before this fish gets too cold, she was only supposed to be gathering some berries."

"No need Auntie Gabrielle." The response came from the direction of the path leading back to the ocean. "I found some of these blackberries, they're not poison are they Mother?"

"No Eve, they'll do just fine." Xena took the cloth bag brimming with the succulent fruit and emptied them into a small basin then rinsed them off with the remaining liquid in the water bag. "Gabrielle and I will refill this and the one we use for dinner later tonight when we go check out that lake."

Dinner conversation, consisted of an odd concoction of topics where each of the women seemed to dance around the real concerns they possessed, generating long intervals of silence. At the conclusion of the meal, the two 'older' women volunteered to clean up. Gabrielle put the dishes and utensils into a cleaning bag and grabbed a couple of towels, while Xena picked up the empty water containers, tossing them over her shoulder.

"We might be a while Eve," Xena advised her daughter as they headed toward the lake.

"Take your time, I think I'll do a little exploring and maybe turn in early tonight."

"Be sure to feed the fire before turning in, we want to have warm embers for breakfast. If the fish are still hungry in the morning we might get a repeat of tonight's meal before heading for the Village.

"Will do Mother, you two enjoy yourselves at the lake."

"Good night, Eve." Gabrielle added as she followed Xena into the woods.

The sun was beginning to touch the horizon by the time the two reached the edge of the lake and Gabrielle stopped to take in the view.

"I'm glad you decided to take that little detour Xena, this lake is worth the extra time."

The dark warrior took the bag of dishes from her lover's hand, as well as the bathing towels and placed them and the skins she was carrying on the ground at her feet. "Beauty is always worth the extra time and the extra trouble that it sometimes causes. That's something I've only learned since being with you, my Bard."

Tilting the angelic face in front of her upward to gaze into soft emerald eyes, the warrior's heart melted as it always managed to do when staring into the face of unconditional love. "You, my love, are still the best thing that ever happened to me, do you realize that?"

"I like to believe that to be so, my love . . . I know that's how I feel about you."

"Even after all we've been through . . . after all I've . . ." Tears began to pool in the sapphire eyes staring down at the small figure in her arms.

Slender fingers reached up to rest on the warrior's lips, quieting the hurtful words, "Hush, my dark hero, you know that's how I feel. You are my world Xena, the other half of my soul." Putting her head on her lover's chest she squeezed tightly, hoping to relay with a single action all the love that dwelled within her heart.

"What do you say we take that swim we came here for?" Gabrielle asked, beginning to undress.

Xena had left her armor back at the campsite, carrying the chakram in hand and a knife in her boots. Within seconds she was stripped of her leathers and splashing ahead of her bard in the crystal clear water.

"Race you over to the waterfall Gabrielle," the warrior called as she dove deeper into the depths of the lake.

"Some race," Gabrielle shouted after her. "Looks like you've got yourself a pretty good head start! Why don't you just tread water and wait for me?"

"I can do that," replied Xena as she turned and paddled slightly closer to the shoreline.

As Gabrielle began walking into the crisp, refreshing lake, she looked out over the rippling water at her lover. She was convinced that going back to the Amazons would be the best solution to their present troubles . . . it had to be. If things didn't get better soon, there was that gut wrenching feeling that they would only get worse. Perhaps spending some quality time alone tonight would be a turning point. All they needed was a chance to start breaking down the wall standing between them, a chance to start the talking again, to make it comfortable like it used to be, so the healing could begin.

Impatience got the best of Xena and she yelled from the middle of the lake, "What do you intend to do walk all the way over here?"

"Here I come, you wait right there!" Gabrielle shouted as she dove deep into the cooling liquid and swam toward her dark hero.

Long strokes shortened to allow them to swim side-by-side as the distance between the swimmers and the raging waters lessened.

"Look Gabrielle, over there, to the right of the falls."

"What?"

"I see a ledge, come on." The warrior hastened her advance to the falls, her bard following closely in her wake.

Upon reaching the edge of the cascading water the outcropping was within arms reach of the tall warrior. Taking a leap out of the water, she hurled herself upwards and landed on the smooth damp surface. By this time Gabrielle had situated herself beneath the ledge and with curiosity was looking upward.

"Surely you don't expect me to follow you ... with that jump you just performed!"

"Of course not. Let me look around a bit and make sure it's safe up here, then I'll help you up - Shorty." She grinned broadly at her bard knowing the irritation the pet name caused.

"If you want company sitting up there on that long piece of rock . . . " Gabrielle began then ended shouting to herself as her warrior disappeared behind a curtain of water.

Coming back around with a large grin on her face Xena raised her hands, producing a long expanse of vine. "Will you look what I found back near the other side of this aperture. There's a path leading back into the woods I believe, but I tore some of this vine off the cave wall. It's huge back here Gabrielle and warm and dry. Come on up."

Finding a large branch sticking out of the rocks the dark warrior tied the vine securely and lowered it down for her lover to climb. "Hold on tightly, it'll be easier if I pull you up." With that Gabrielle found herself being drawn quickly toward the ledge.

"Okay." The blonde exclaimed standing and looking out over the lake. "Do I need to change your title from warrior to explorer?"

"No, no. I'll just add a new hat to my already growing collection." The raven-haired beauty grabbed her bard and pulled her close. "How fortuitous for us - this place is only about a day from the Village - when we get our fill of being part of a communal and I'm sure we will, we now have a special haven to escape to. Come on Gabrielle let's explore."

Smiling up at her warrior who was acting more like an excited child she agreed that this looked like an ideal place to have a mini-vacation from the rest of the world.

Looking around Gabrielle beheld a natural paradise. The spray from the water was strong in certain areas but flowed like a mist in others, which made it excellent for showering. Further into the ledge the rock became concave, forming an expansive room-like area. Over to the far left light could be seen filtering in, both from above and from the western corner where the mountain graciously created a natural archway leading back into the lush forest.

"Isn't this beautiful Gabrielle?"

"The stuff stories are made of," the bard agreed.

"But Xena we need to get back to the campsite before too long. I don't think we should leave Eve alone."

"I know your memory is better than that. Eve can take care of herself. Would you hesitate to leave me alone in the woods?"

"When you put it that way . . . but Xena we told her we'd be back, don't you think she'll worry?"

"You're right." A look of melancholy came over the angular features of the warrior's face, then the twinkle quickly returned to her sapphire eyes. "I know. You stay here Gabrielle I'll go back and tell Eve we decided to sleep away from camp tonight. I know she won't mind. I'll tell her to come sleep by the water's edge if she wants and that we will be within shouting distance."

"Do you think that's a good . . ."

"Gabrielle she's a big girl, she almost married Caesar, she had an affair with Ares . . . she can spend the night alone and the Gods know we need some time. We're going to be surrounded by your tribe come this time tomorrow night. Give me a break Gabrielle."

Knowing the ramblings of the raven-haired beauty to be truths, Gabrielle shook her head affirmatively, her heart rejoicing at the prospect of being totally alone with her lover on this perch, hidden behind a waterfall.

She watched as the graceful muscular figure dove off the ledge and into the calm water below and waved when she reached the water's edge. *I hope she remembers to bring something to strike a fire so we aren't working for candlemarks trying to get one started.*

Thinking she would walk down after Xena left to retrieve her clothing lying on the banks, she began walking over toward the light at the edge of the cave. *I truly hope this spot is as deserted as it seems. I'd hate getting caught both nude and weaponless!*

As she walked through the opening she noticed a different scent to the air, a sweet fragrance that was not foreign to her sense of smell. *Where in Tartarus have I smelled this before?*

Suddenly, there was a sparkle of gold tinged with pink and the answer appeared before her very eyes. "Aphrodite!" A shocked, Gabrielle tried to cover her bareness.

"I really did catch you unaware, didn't I Little One," the Goddess of Love giggled as she waved a hand and clothed the body before her in a flowing negligee. "There that ought to keep you decent until the Warrior Babe returns."

"Aphrodite, what are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you to find this place. Take a look around you, Gabrielle; this is no ordinary forest. You would find it very difficult to return to the lake from here."

"I don't understand." Gabrielle confessed as she gave the Goddess a bewildered look.

"Olympus is in shambles, half of my family is dead, I needed someplace quiet to go, so . . ."

"So you created this refuge to escape all that was happening."

"You got it kiddo. I knew you and Xena would be traveling somewhere close to here. I've been watching the three of you."

"Speaking of watching over us, I hear I owe you an enormous Thank You for taking care of me when . . ."

"No need for that Little Bard, you've always had a special place in my heart."

They sat and talked for a while discussing some of their times together like when Aphrodite put a spell on Gabrielle's scrolls and got a taste of mortal life or the time when Gabrielle was having a bout of writer's block and they had their own private pajama party. Finally the conversation turned more serious as they spoke of the events of the last few moons.

"You know Gabrielle, neither you nor Xena asked for the tapestry of your lives to weave the design it's been spinning the past 25 years. It would not be fair to blame the two of you for all that has come to pass. The obstacles placed in your path would have been insurmountable for less noble souls."

"That may be the truth, but our problems now are dealing with the events that have just passed." Gabrielle confessed. "I need to ask Xena why she threw the chakram when she could have done something less destructive. I don't know how to ask and I don't want to drive the wedge further between us. But, if the question isn't brought out into the open, I'm afraid it will fester."

"If I tell you what happened Gabrielle do you think you could then let it go?"

"Please Aphrodite, I would again be in your debt - Xena and I would both be grateful."

"To begin with I want you to know that I asked Athena not to involve you in her scheme, but she was terrified of Eve and the twilight that was upon us. You also need to know, because she will never tell you, that Xena is as distraught over the incident as you are Gabrielle, and if you don't let her know that it wasn't her fault and that you forgive her completely the guilt will someday destroy her."

"Anything you can tell me would be greatly appreciated but she'll be back shortly and . . ."

"Don't worry about that, my little friend, I'm still the Goddess of Love and my powers are still intact." She motioned for Gabrielle to sit down next to her on a soft stump covered with moss and the young bard did as she was bid.

"I have tried to help the three of you when I could, Little One. I've even asked Morpheus to soften your dreams so none of you would be haunted with nightmares. All three of you have issues to deal with, but none of them are unconquerable, and taking Eve to live with the Amazons is the best thing you can do for your daughter at this stage in her life. She may not have grown under your heart Gabrielle but if you'd been given the chance you deserved, the girl would have surely grown in it. With you and her mother as inspiration, she will come out of this ordeal a better person. But I can see now that you need more than pleasant dreams to turn your lives around."

The small blonde listened intently as the Goddess began to explain what happened the fateful night that Gabrielle stabbed Eve and Xena, in turn, hit Gabrielle in the head with the chakram.

"You see Gabrielle, Athena's plan was to have the Furies drive you to killing Eve by putting misleading thoughts into your head. The problem was keeping Xena away long enough to get the deed completed. Ares volunteered to lure your warrior out into the rain and keep her there until her child was no longer a threat to us, but with her almost godly intuition, she sensed that something was amiss and started to run back into the house. Two of the Furies left you and went to dance in the mind of your lover, telling her that Hope had returned to kill Eve as she had Solon so many years before. The thoughts began to drive her mad and when she opened the door, it was not you she saw standing over Eve with the sai in your hand, it was Hope with a sacrificial

knife. Her immediate response was to throw the most lethal weapon at her disposal and that of course was her chakram."

Tears flowed freely down the cheeks of the bard as she listened intently to the story the Goddess of Love unfolded for her. Gabrielle's heart lightened as she felt the weight of doubt being lifted, and the love for her warrior rushing in to heal the scar that it left behind.

"How can I tell Xena that I know and understand, Aphrodite? How can I help her to forgive herself for something she actually had no conscious involvement in?"

"Tell her I talked to you, explain everything I just told you and let her know that you know she was unable to control the forces of the Furies. She'll understand, she knew they were in your head after she hit you and you fell. She just didn't remember that it was the vision of Hope that she had seen and she can not forgive herself for wounding you with the chakram."

The Goddess smiled at the mortal before her. Gabrielle's tender heart and unconditional love for her champion were but a couple of the reasons the Goddess of Love held the young bard in such high esteem.

"Time to dry those pretty green eyes, Little One," Aphrodite grinned. "I do believe the Warrior Babe has just returned to the lake. Here, let me help you get this place ready for her return."

Upon re-entering the cave, the Goddess waved a hand and in an instant there was a large heart shaped bed in the middle of the room with burning candles hanging from the walls. There was an odor of fragrant flowers permeating the entire area. Off in one corner there appeared shelves holding towels, incense, additional candles, flint to light the candles, shifts and negligees. There was a small table to one side of the bed containing two goblets filled with the sweet nectar of Dionysis and a pitcher also filled with the same liquid.

"Aphrodite," Gabrielle gasped as she watched the cave being transformed into a lover's suite. "I don't know what to say."

"Thank you would be more than appropriate," the deity smiled at her mortal charge. "I am still the Goddess of Love you know, and the two of you could certainly use a little help in getting back into the groove of things." The Goddess beamed at the response her gift was producing.

She placed her hands on Gabrielle's shoulders. "This is a private place and only you and Xena will ever be able to find it. The archway will lead to anywhere you wish to go. It might take you a while to get here from wherever you are, but when it is time to leave you need only walk through into the forest and think about where it is you want to be; you will be transported there immediately. The two of you are always in my heart, Gabrielle, the tests your love has been challenged to endure proves beyond a doubt that true love is definitely unconditional."

Gabrielle started to open her mouth to speak when she heard the sound of Xena jumping back up onto the ledge. She spun around to greet her lover, while from the corner of her eye she witnessed the sparks of pink and gold as her friend, the Goddess of Love, disappeared.



The bard couldn't help giggling at the expression on her naked lover's face when Xena took in the transformation of the cave.

"What in the name of . . ."

"Aphrodite was here Xena. She told me this is a special sanctuary, just for us."

"If I didn't know better I would swear that the two of us consumed tainted nutbread for dinner. But I do know better. Did you say Aphrodite was here?"

"Oh yes, my love, and she told me things . . . things that it's now time for us to discuss." She grabbed a towel from a shelf and proceeded to dry the glistening body of her warrior. Then handed Xena a shift and motioned her toward the bed.

The phrase, "This is unbelievable," was repeated more than once by the raven-haired beauty as she gazed around the enchanted cave. "Why Gabrielle? Did Aphrodite tell you why she would do this for us?"

"Here Xena, drink this." Gabrielle handed her lover one of the goblets. "Sit down and I'll share with you everything Aphrodite told me while she was here."

Gabrielle sat next to her lover, gently stroking her back as she retold the story, practically word-for-word. Intermittently throughout the tale, she wiped away tears of her own and tears of her lover's as the healing process began to run its course. When she finished there was a heavy silence surrounding the two shadowy figures, who sat clinging to each other as if there were not another living being on the face of the earth.

"I love you more than life, Gabrielle." Xena finally spoke into the quiet. "This wasn't how I planned to spend this night, but I'm glad we both finally know the truth. I once told you that even in death I would not leave you and I kept that promise. I now renew that oath to you, my love, my heart, and my soulmate. Your forgiveness has lifted a guilt that's been slowing eating away at me since that night, and I'm glad we can finally begin to put it all behind us. Do you think it's too much to ask for the rest of our lives to run a little smoother?"

The bard's dark angel looked into soft verdant eyes that twinkled in the shadow of slowly extinguishing candles. An impish smile crept across Gabrielle's face. "Oh, my love, you wouldn't know what to do with yourself if your life became uncomplicated, and I wouldn't know what to do with a warrior with no battles to fight. No . . . I do believe we will constantly have obstacles placed at our feet, the only saving grace is that the two of us will tackle them together."

"Together," Xena repeated. "It seems like ages since we've been alone together." The tone was melancholy. Sapphire eyes gazed intently onto the face she loved, taking in all the nuances that allowed this visage to send chills up and down her spine. She drank in the soft girlish features, the slightly freckled nose, and most importantly the expressive green eyes that could fluctuate between opposing emotions in the span of a heartbeat.

Gabrielle's small hands cradled her champion's face, while questioning eyes scanned the solemn expression it now displayed. "What is it Xena?"

"I was just thinking of what my life would be like without you, and I know it wouldn't be worth living."

"Well, the Powers That Be willing, neither one of us will have to face that situation for a long time to come."

Xena gently lowered her bard onto the bed, slipping off the negligee that reminded her more of the Goddess who supplied it, than it did the woman who was wearing it. Knowing fingers re-explored the exposed body of the small blonde, starting at the neck and tenderly continuing down to areas that had been neglected for far too long.

"I believe I promised you the completion of a seduction started many candlemarks ago, my bard."

"I believe you are absolutely correct, my warrior." Gabrielle smiled, pulling Xena closer and running her hands through the still damp hair. "I intend to hold you to that promise." She passionately kissed her love as Xena's hands continued to caress the body now beneath her.

"You still have that shift on Xena - take it off, please."

The warrior sat up and pulled the article of clothing off, letting it drape over the bed as she quickly went back to the pleasure at hand. Her lips found their match as she gently bit Gabrielle's bottom lip before allowing her tongue access to the sweetness within her bard's mouth. "I love you," she whispered without removing her lips.

"You're talking with your mouth full," Gabrielle mumbled between breaths.

"Oh you think so, do you? I'll show you talking with my mouth full." Xena slid her body further down her lover's, positioning herself between Gabrielle's willing thighs, while placing her mouth around a firm breast and cupping the other in her hand. "I love you Gabrielle," the words were almost inaudible but they brought a smile to the petite blonde's face.

Strong, long fingers interlaced with small, slender ones as Xena took both of the bard's hands and raised them high above the golden head, bringing her own body to full length on top of the one beneath her, and then some. Blue velvet eyes looked longingly into the gentle green orbs of her lover as she captured a memory and placed it into her heart's scrapbook.

Reining in the passion that was desperately trying to burst free, she again lowered her face down, and to within a hair's breathe of the one she loved, "Marry me, Gabrielle?!" It was difficult to ascertain whether the statement was a request or a demand. "It's the only step we haven't taken in this love affair of ours. We've already pledged unending commitment. Marry me amongst the throngs of Amazons who love you as their Queen. Let me become the Queen's Consort in every meaning of the word."

A sharp intake of breath followed by a single tear brought a smile to the warrior. As she kissed away the dampness on the face of her fair Gabrielle, her bard uttered sweetly, "Oh Xena . . . yes . . . yes . . . Yes!"

Xena felt her heart swell with joy as the desired words danced in her mind. Unable to contain herself any longer, the bard's dark hero let loose the hunger that had been building throughout the day.

Groans of pleasure became music to her ears as she again lowered herself toward the golden mound of soft curls to partake in the treasures beneath. "What do you want, my love?" Xena questioned as Gabrielle opened her legs to allow her lover entrance.

"I don't think you need to ask," came the soft reply.

"Need to . . . No . . . I don't need to, but I want to hear you tell me. It's been ages since I've heard your desires voiced." The dark warrior caressed the golden locks below her lover's abdomen as she whispered into the folds beneath the curls, teasingly touching the now moist area with quick, rapid thrusts of her tongue.

"Tell me Gabrielle," she whispered, beginning to drink in the elixir of love, quenching her desire and causing her own center to become wet with anticipation.

"Tell me," she repeated.

"I want you to taste me . . ."

"Like this?" Xena sucked softly on the small erect bud centered under the folds of her lover's nether lips.

"Harder Xena . . ."

The warrior concentrated on stroking the small erection with her tongue using swift, constant movements. "Like this?" she queried.

"Yes, my love, yes." The small blonde ran her fingers through her lover's hair. "Harder Xena, please . . ."

Xena graciously obeyed, and the fair-haired woman began, digging her nails deep into the flesh of the muscular shoulders at the tips of her fingers.

"Xena . . . oh . . . Xena . . . By the Gods!"

Ever the experienced lover, Xena smiled inwardly, knowing that within seconds her bard would beg for a reprieve.

Never one to disappoint her warrior Gabrielle's next response pleaded for exactly that.

"Enough . . . Xena . . . enough!" The bard pushed on the shoulders beneath her hands, trying desperately to move her body away from the celestial torture as her passion erupted beyond tolerance.

Absolutely aware of the precise second between euphoria and exquisite agony, the raven-haired beauty lifted her mouth from the volcano of love, repositioned her body on top of Gabrielle, and allowed her eager fingers to enter the depths of her lover's hunger.

"Come for me Gabrielle," resounded as a throaty plea from deep within the warrior's soul.  
"That's the way, my love . . . come for me."

"By the Gods, Xena . . . I love you," was the only response the bard was able to expel before her dark hero straddled her thigh, the warrior's own fire rising higher with each thrust.

The two rode together on wings of desire to the realm of rapture. Echoes of passion filled the walls within the cave; magic muted the cries of love from the outside world, which heard only the roar of the waterfall.

Exhausted . . . emotionally and physically satisfied, and for the first time since awakening from their frozen hibernation, the warrior and her bard would sleep side-by-side without another soul within eyesight. Reminiscent of happier times the two intertwined their bodies, seeking solace in the fact that after all they had gone through, they were still together and even more in love if that were humanly possible. As they lay there listening to what they thought would have been the roar of the falls, the lover's realized that from this side, it was merely a soft trickling sound that easily helped to lull the duo to sleep, after the gratification of their renewed vows.

Tomorrow would be another day, but it would have the distinction of starting off with a healing breath. The sins of the past were cleansed this enchanted night and the hopes of tomorrow renewed.

***The New Beginning!***