

~ Our Village - Our Home? ~

by Carole Giorgio

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Positive feedback always welcomed and tends to keep the fingers typing. (If you don't like lesbians - I don't need to know -- Feel free to go somewhere else for entertainment.)

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Morning greeted the world with hugs and kisses - a sprinkling of sun through a rainbow and the laughter of the water as it cascaded over the mountain into the lake below. This would be an exceptional day, no doubt; after all, it was already starting out that way. Here it was just after dawn and the bard's eyes were open even before the warrior's. For a few serene minutes she lay with her head on her dark hero's chest, relishing in the memory of the last few days. Things were definitely beginning to allow the ageless duo, as some were beginning to refer to them, a few days' rest and time to act and react like 'normal' people without having to be either heroes or villains.

Gabrielle could still smell the after scent of making love and it brought back in clear detail the exquisite feelings of the evening before. "I do love you so, my warrior. You fill my heart, my mind, and my body. You're really all I need to give me peace and make my world complete."

"You took the words right out of my mouth."

Gabrielle jumped, not having been prepared to hear the soft morning growl of her lover.

"Xena I thought you were still sleeping."

"And I was until a certain someone decided to talk to my breasts."

Pushing herself up Gabrielle grinned into sleepy blue eyes as they attempted to bat their way into opening fully. "I was talking to myself."

"I'm sorry about that, but I distinctly hear words coming out of your mouth." She pulled the small-framed woman back down onto her and kissed her passionately good morning. "Last night was fantastic, my love. I'm glad we stayed the extra time here."

"Me, too. Actually with less than a twist of my arm, I could call this place home."

Catching the haunting look on her warrior's face she quickly rectified the comment. "Not that I'm considering making this our home, I was just kind of saying that it was . . . you know . . . homey." She stopped, thought a second, and then continued. "I guess I was thinking about how we've been running lately. First we were running from . . . and now . . . we're running to. I think it would be nice if we had a safe place where we weren't doing either, a place where we could just be content. Do you know what I mean, Xena?"

"I think I do, Gabrielle. I know how tough these last few years, not counting the lost frozen time, have been on you. I've watched you change from bard, to follower, to more of a warrior than I ever imagined you could be, and hopefully back to bard again, but with many more skills. It looks to me like you've come full circle. When I think about it, we've both grown, and if you stop and look at our life, it has never been an easy one. Yet every change, even though it doesn't seem so in the beginning, ends up being for the best by the time the end rolls around." She held her bard tightly. "Listen to me; I'm beginning to sound like you."

"That's part of our growing together, my love. I've had to learn to fight and protect and you've learned to soften and care. But we are still opposite sides of the same coin, no matter how much I seem to become more like you, and vice versa, we only do so in respect to one another."

"You really have been doing a lot of thinking about this, haven't you Gabrielle?"

"Yes, especially now that we're considering going back to the Amazons. What exactly do you intend to do when we get there Xena? Are we going to settle, and raise a family? Or are we running to a haven because we're tired of fighting and because Eve needs a place to hide for a while?"

"I'm still a warrior Gabrielle and always will be, but I'm tired of fighting constantly. I think it's time we get some real-life time for ourselves. We lost the opportunity to raise both our individual children, for one reason or the other, and then we lost the chance to raise Eve. Maybe destiny is finally on our side. Once things calm down about the Gods, and life continues its steady course, Eve will have to choose whether to stay with the Amazons or move on with her life; we can't tie her down to ours."

"Is my brain deciphering correctly what my ears are hearing? Xena are you saying that you want to settle and raise a family?"

"Did I ask you to marry me, Gabrielle?"

"Yes."

"Do I know you want another child?"

"Yes."

"Am I talking too much?"

"No, no, no, my love." The bard raised up and kissed her warrior, small eager kisses that covered her entire face. "Oh, Xena - you don't know how happy I am at this very minute."

"I could venture a good guess. Damn it must be this place. Do you think Aphrodite purposely put a gab spell on this place to irritate me?"

"No - I think you're just relaxing and finally being able to voice what your heart's been feeling for a long time."

"Come here, you." Xena pulled the small blonde close and held her tightly. "I almost lost you forever the last time, Gabrielle. You don't know the nightmares I've suffered for that."

"I think I can imagine them, Xena. But they're over now, and we need to think about what we're going to do today. I was trying to figure out before you woke up if we were doing the right thing with all three of us marching into the village unannounced."

"What do you mean?"

"First of all, we don't know how much the Amazons know about our quick thaw. Secondly, we can only hope that some of our friends are still alive to tell the story of Eve. I don't want her to come across as a monster like . . . like . . ." Even now, after all that had happened, there remained words that could destroy, feelings that were too deep to hide.

"Like Hope. I know Gabrielle; it's okay." Xena held her lover close, pampering, stroking, and soothing away the old hurts that still stung too sharply at times. "So what are you suggesting . . . that you go in alone?"

"I thought maybe that would be best."

"I don't think so."

"Why not? I am the Queen."

"Y-e-s, the Queen of the Amazons maybe, but that doesn't make you the only decision maker in This family. We both have an equal voice . . ."

"Equal voice? Did you say equal voice? I can remember many times when we ended up doing something solely on your decision, no questions asked . . ."

"But Gabrielle, that was when you were still so green behind the ears you couldn't even parry with your staff. Our relationship has changed; we've both grown. We are equals. Don't you know that by now?"

Green eyes began to mist over and a quiver could be heard in the bard's voice. "I don't want the Amazons to hurt you or Eve."

"Is that what all this is about?" Xena lifted Gabrielle's face, gently wiping away a tear as it threatened to dampen the slightly freckled cheek.

"Yes." Gabrielle confessed.

"No Gabrielle. We will face this as a family. We will all go in together, and the sisters will accept us, challenge us, or banish us. But we will go through it together. Not one of us will be put to the task alone. Is that understood?"

"Unless there's a challenge for the throne."

"We'll deal with that when . . . If it happens. Now we should probably get showered and down to the campsite to help Eve with breakfast. She's going to begin feeling like an unwanted slave-child." The warrior smiled at her attempt to add humor to the situation. "I think I smell the fish starting to cook already."

"You're right, and I guess you're right about us all going in together. All for one and one for all."

"That sounds like a good motto to me." The dark warrior rolled off the bed, grabbed a couple of towels, and sauntered over to the showering area. "Care to join me, early bird?"

"Sure would." Gabrielle was directly behind her as she stepped into the cooling waters. "Oooo chilly."

"Invigorating." The warrior corrected.

"Pretty close to cold." Gabrielle insisted.

"Want me to warm you up?" She turned and faced the smaller woman.

Even with the cold waterfall teasing her tactile sensations, Gabrielle could feel her insides beginning to warm at the sight of her champion standing statuesquely in front of her in all her naked glory.

"Gods Xena. Do you know how you affect me?" She stepped closer and placed two small hands on the hips of her lover.

"The chill has lessened a bit, I presume?" The raven-hair beauty smiled, nodded, and threw back her head, causing her dark tresses to whip away from, rather than freely form about her face.

This left Gabrielle staring into the stark exquisite beauty of her dark champion's features. Xena's crystal blue eyes glistened in the early morning sunlight, as the first rays filtered in, creating a rainbow prism through the falling liquid.

"Water feels almost tepid at this point, my love." Gabrielle blushed and turned away. If she stood staring much longer, she wouldn't be able to keep from touching the perfect body before her. "I thought you said we should hurry down to Eve."

"Gabrielle, I still get a glimpse of the rose from you, even now after all this time?" Xena smiled and stepped closer to her lover, wrapping long muscular arms around the smaller body, while her breasts ended up touching the all too sensitive back. Slowly she allowed her hands to run freely down past Gabrielle's neck and touch the erect nipples below, as they each sent a telltale message to the raven-haired beauty.

Doing a quick side-step Xena went from behind to in front of her bard. Smiling broadly and shaking her hair free of excess water, while without losing a step she picked Gabrielle up and placed the small woman over her shoulder, then walked over and threw her down on the bed.

"This will never do, leaving here right now. None of us know how this day will end. We don't even know for sure where we will be camping tonight. But right now . . . this minute . . . this second . . . this is ours to command, and by the Gods, I plan on devouring you this morning." Xena stretched out on top of her lover, covering every inch of Gabrielle with her own body, the bottoms of her legs touching nothing but the bed covering.

"But Xena . . . remember Eve . . ."

"As I said before," Xena whispered into Gabrielle's ear, "Eve's a big girl now, and she knows we haven't had a lot of time together since we came down from Mt. Etna."

"But she's alone down there, Xena."

"We've all been there, Gabrielle." Pulling back from the small blonde she arched an eyebrow and asked, "Do you not want to make love?"

"That's a ridiculous question."

"Then stop debating with me, before the mood gets spoiled."

With a total change in attitude, Gabrielle recaptured the feelings that had minutes ago been throbbing in her loins and tickling her skin. She closed her eyes and welcomed her warrior into open arms.

A re-enactment of the evening before had the two gasping and perspiring as they rocked back and forth on the large, soft bed. They would forever be beholden to the Goddess of Love for allowing them this special place to mend their emotions and their lives.

Candlemarks later they lay still entwined, long legs over and between shorter ones, arms wrapped around each other's body. "I could stay like this forever." Gabrielle finally broke the silence.

"Really? Does that mean you'd give up eating?" Xena smiled as she waited for a response.

"I truly think you already know the answer to that one. Of course I couldn't give up eating. I'd just learn to eat in bed, wrapped around you." The small bard giggled as she began unwrapping herself from her warrior.

"Look at that Xena; the sun is clearly visible now. We should get down to the camp. What do you think of taking some fish along to the village as a token of good will?"

"You're their Queen, Gabrielle. Do you think you need to present tokens to your own people?"

"But we're not even sure if they'll remember me. If everyone we knew is dead, no one will recognize us, Xena. We may not have a village to go back to."

"Gabrielle." She took the bard's face into her hands and looked into emerald eyes that still held the innocence of youth even after all they had been through. "I don't think we will have been forgotten, nor do I think we'll get a reception of ignorance. But you know what?"

"No what?"

"If any of your fears come to pass, we'll do as we've always done when we didn't feel comfortable, we'll move on and who knows, maybe we'll make this place home for a while." She gently kissed away the frown on her lover's face. "Come on, My Queen, let's go eat some breakfast."

"I'm in need of another shower." Gabrielle mock moaned. "On second thought, maybe we should swim over. I don't know that we'll ever get off this ledge if we try taking another shower."

"Tell you what. I'll take our clothes and a couple towels and go down via the forest and then come back up and we can swim over to the shoreline together."

"That's a great idea, Xena. I'll straighten up here and make the bed while you're gone."

Gathering the articles up in her arms, the warrior stepped out into the sun drenched woods. Within minutes she was back up in the grotto. In the time she had been gone, Gabrielle had, indeed put everything back in order and was standing naked waiting for her to arrive. Xena pulled off her nightshirt and placed it on the bed next to Gabrielle's.

"So, my bard, are you going to attempt a dive this morning?"

"I don't know, the water seems to come up and hit me in the face every time I look down at it."

"If it will make it any easier for you, we could hold hands, then run and jump through the water, putting us out over the falls. Want to try it that way? Sounds like fun to me."

"Okay, but don't let go of my hand until we hit the water, promise?"

"Promise."

Picking a sparse area of cascading water, Xena took Gabrielle's hand and started counting. Shortening her steps so the bard could keep up, they began at the back of the grotto and started running. Gabrielle almost backed out at the last minute, but the warrior held the small hand in her powerful, larger one and with a slight yank as they neared the edge of the ledge, both the women jumped through the waterfall.

A primordial scream loosed itself from the lungs of the bard and the warrior laughed, holding on to her partner, just like she had promised - for dear life.

Seconds later they were making their way up from the depths of the lake.

"Wow - that was certainly a rush." Gabrielle gurgled as she came up for air.

"Next time you get to dive."

"I think I'll pass on that for a while."

"Wanna race to shore?"

"Xena do I really look that stupid?"

"Well . . ."

"Enough! Just swim."

They looked over toward Eve's campsite and noticed the younger woman looking out toward them. Eve heard Gabrielle's outcry and looked up to see what was falling out of the sky screaming. She waved when she saw them both come up after the jump, and they waved back.

Upon reaching the soft ground around the water line, Eve handed each of them one of the towels Xena had placed on the platform earlier.

"I cooked some fish up a bit ago, thinking maybe you'd be down earlier. When you didn't come I went ahead and ate them and then caught some more. I have an entire bag full of cleaned catch." Eve stated matter of factly.

"That's wonderful, Eve. Thank you. We were just talking about taking some fish into the village with us; do you have enough?"

"If I don't, I could get more while you two are eating. These are hungry fish, Mom." She smiled over at Gabrielle.

The endearing term, although welcomed, caught the blonde off guard and she smiled at the use of her new title. She found it amusing and chuckled to herself about the looks she anticipated getting, having Eve, a woman looking near to her own age, calling her Mom.

"I guess we can worry about that After we eat what you've already cooked. I'm starving."

Warrior and bard towed dry and dressed while Eve put the partially cooked breakfast back on the fire. She made herself busy while awaiting the arrival of her Moms by gathering berries, brewing tea and working on a spear to add variety to her fishing techniques.

"Are you going to eat with us Eve?" Xena asked picking up one of the filled plates and a cup of tea.

"No, I thought I'd go try this new 'chucker' out while you two were eating. Enjoy."

Gabrielle caught the melancholy tone in the younger woman's voice and laid a hand on her shoulder when she passed by on her way to the lake. "Wait a minute, Eve."

Deep blue eyes, with the haunting look that occasionally filled Xena's, looked down at Gabrielle. "Something's troubling you, Eve. Why don't you sit down with us while we eat and talk about it?"

Seemingly relieved to be able to unburden some of her thoughts, Eve put the spear down and took a seat across from her mothers. The pain in her eyes pulled at the heartstrings of the older women.

"I feel so lost; it's hard to know where to begin. So much has happened in these past few moons. My life has been altered beyond recognition and I have no idea in what direction I am being led. I was reading one of your scrolls last night Mom, where Mother was wondering if she would ever be able to live down her reputation as being an evil warlord. That corresponds so vividly to the thoughts I'm having about myself."

"Eve you're nothing like I was . . . "

"Yes, I was mother. I murdered and pillaged. I killed innocents without a second thought."

"But Eve, you thought you were doing it in the name of Rome."

"Not in the end. I was simply trying to hurt you and Mom. I didn't care; my heart was stone to all the pain I was inflicting."

"But then you were forgiven, Eve." Gabrielle walked over and sat beside the younger woman, placing a comforting arm around her shoulder.

"It was too easy. I shouldn't be allowed to simply say, 'Hey, I'm sorry. Let's all act like it never happened.'"

"Why not? You're own guilt is torture enough. You are sorry for the harm you caused, aren't you?"

"Yes, but I'll never be able to bring back the loved ones of the people I left behind. When I think of the villages that were torched in my name or Rome's . . . " she shuddered, " . . . nightmares haunt my dreams and sometimes my daydreams aren't any better." Allowing Gabrielle to hold her she sobbed as acrid tears lined her face, her breath coming in short shallow spurts. "I feel so dirty."

"It's okay, Eve." Gabrielle tried to assure the sobbing woman. She looked over at Xena who was sitting frozen, looking toward the lake. Narrowing her green eyes, and clearing her throat, Gabrielle tried to get a response from the warrior who just kept staring in the opposite direction. She turned her attention back to Eve and tried to calm her down.

"Unfortunately you can't go back and undo your entire life Eve. We all have to go on from this point right here and right now. You have to try to be the best person you can be from now on. Believe me, you will probably never lose your warrior instinct any more than your mother has hers, but you can follow in your mother's footsteps and turn into a champion for the greater good."

She tried again to get Xena's attention but to no avail. "Look at all the honorable deeds your mother has done since her reign of . . . um . . . "

"Terror." A soft contralto voice growled the sentence to completion. Xena looked over at the two women she cared for the most in the world as they clung to each other for support. "Terror," she repeated.

"Xena, I didn't mean . . ."

"I know, Gabrielle but that's the only word that would describe the fear I wielded during those years." She walked over and sat on the other side of her daughter. Gabrielle relinquished her hold on Eve and motioned for Xena to take over.

"I'm not very good at talks like this, Eve, but I can honestly say that I know what you're going through, and the metamorphosis from warlord to crusader is not an easy one. People will hate you and hate your memory and there is nothing I can say to you that will make that reality go away. But you have me, and what is more, you have Gabrielle; she's the only reason I was able to make the transition. We can't stop all the pain, but we are great buffers." She held the woman/child close and sang the soft lullaby that she used to sing to her as a baby, before their world changed forever.

Soft emerald eyes smiled at the sight of mother comforting daughter, and a tear trickled down Gabrielle's face at the memory of a baby that was lost to them forever. She turned and began picking at the meal she had left untouched when Eve began her confession.

After a few minutes Eve gave Xena a long hug and pulled away slowly. "Thanks." She looked at one and then the other of her mothers. "I know it will just take time to heal and I really am thankful that I have the two of you to lean on." She stood up, walked over and picked up Xena's unfinished plate. "I think maybe it's time for you to finish your breakfast. I'm going to go spear some fish to take along with us." With that she picked up her new fishing gear and walked over to the lake.

"She'll be fine, Xena," Gabrielle assured her warrior as she refilled her cup with hot tea.

"She will as long as you're around to say the right things and give encouragement."

"You didn't do too bad a job yourself, warrior." Gabrielle kissed her champion on the cheek. "I'm going to start cleaning up here. We want to make sure we enter Amazon territory while the sun is still high. Don't you think it would be best if we entered a candlemark or two from the village?"

"Yes. Popping into the middle of the village unannounced might cause a bit of a ruckus," Xena agreed. She finished her meal and downed the tea before getting up and helping to dismantle the campsite and scatter the fire.

Gabrielle rolled up Eve's bedroll and piled most everything she could find onto the platform. The lovers stood side by side, Xena's arm around Gabrielle's shoulders as they watched their daughter practicing with her new tool.

"She's pretty good at that, Xena. Looks like she has a bag full already."

"Of course she's good," Xena beamed proudly, "she's my . . . "

"Excuse me?" Gabrielle smiled up at her champion.

"She's our daughter."

"That being the case, why don't you go help our daughter by scaling and filleting those critters and then we can be on our way."

"Sounds like a plan to me," she kissed Gabrielle softly on the forehead and walked closer to the lake.

"Eve," she shouted getting the young woman's attention. "Toss me the bag and I'll start cleaning the fish. Gabrielle's getting anxious to leave."

"Great, I'll keep spearing until you get caught up with me and then quit." She threw the bag in her mother's direction.

"Okay." Catching the container, she began scaling - humming as she worked. Gabrielle came and sat beside her on a large rock overlooking the peaceful lake.

"You know Xena, if things don't work out well for Eve in the village . . . "

"Now who's sounding negative. Gabrielle you always tell me to look on the bright side. I think you need to take your own advice. I'm sure everything will go fine with the Amazons. You're their Queen, remember?"

The small bard forced a smile, "Yeah," she mumbled - "I'm their Queen."

Feeling playful Xena picked up the next fish and tossed it at Gabrielle, hitting her neatly in the chest.

"What was that for?" A not too pleased Queen wanted to know. "Was it supposed to be funny?" She tossed it back at the scale-covered warrior. "I hope you intend on bathing before we leave for the village; at the rate you're going, if you don't, they'll just have to sniff to know we've arrived.

"Oh? Well, if that's the case, all of us might as well smell the same." She got up and ran toward the retreating bard.

"Come on Xena - don't."

"Oh, poor Gabrielle. Don't you want to smell like fish?" Catching up with the small blonde she waved the offending object in Gabrielle's face.

"I think you've succeeded in getting my mind off Amazons for a while. Can we stop playing with the food now?" She pushed the fish away from her face and looked around for anything she might have overlooked earlier to place onto the platform.

"Eve!" Xena yelled. "I think we have enough fish. Hurry and bring in what you've got so I can get cleaned up before we leave. Gabrielle insists I take a bath."

"Okay, be right there."

"I might as well finish up the last ones she brings in, no sense in anyone else getting messy."

"That's so sweet of you Xena."

"Yeah. That's me, Miss Sweet." Xena shook her head and continued cleaning the last of the fish in her possession.

With water dripping everywhere, Eve handed her mother the last of the fish and went to grab one of the towels Gabrielle brought down from the cave.

"So, what's the plan of action, Mom?"

"Huh?" Gabrielle looked questioningly at her daughter.

"Are we going to pop into the middle of the village unannounced?"

"No, Eve. We decided to aim for an area a few candlemarks from the village. That way the lookouts will spot us and escort us in. No sense drawing more attention than we already will be receiving."

The fish were all cleaned and boned and Xena placed them into the bag, before she stripped down and got into the cool water. Normally, Gabrielle would have joined her, but today she didn't want to delay any more than necessary. She grabbed the towel that was still on the platform and walked over to the edge of the lake. Sitting down on a warm rock she watched her lover as she soaped the smell of fish from her body. When she finished, Gabrielle was standing there, waiting to hand her the sun-warmed cloth.

"Thanks, where's Eve?"

"In the bushes," Gabrielle nodded beyond the campsite.

"Oh, then I guess we all just about ready. Are you?"

"I've been ready."

"That's a first."

Gabrielle took the towel before Xena let it drop onto the ground and started toward the platform. "Why don't I go up first with all this stuff and put away what we aren't taking?"

"Sounds like a good idea. We'll follow as soon as I know this fire is good and out. Think I'll put a little water on it; I'd like this place to still be here when we return." She walked over to the platform with Gabrielle and gave her a kiss on the cheek before turning the key. "See you in a bit."

"Okay."

In an instant Gabrielle was gone along with all the supplies. Xena finished with the fire just about the time Eve came back. The younger woman had an odd look on her face as she approached her mother.

"Nervous Eve?"

"A little, Mother. I don't know what to expect from these women."

"Just let me and Gabrielle handle the Amazons to begin with. Gabrielle did show you the acceptable greeting didn't she?"

"Yes, she wanted to make sure I knew it before we arrived in their territory, " Eve told her mother.

"Good." Xena looked around to make sure everything was picked up, then kicked the fire one more time, and stepped onto the platform beside her daughter. "Ready."

Eve nodded in the affirmative.

"Okay, here we go." Bending down Xena turned the key then took it out and put it into a small pouch. The next thing the two women saw was the inside of the grotto.

"Everything's ready to go, Xena." Gabrielle informed the warrior upon her arrival. "I've loaded the horses with all we wanted to take and put the things we wanted to leave behind over on the shelves."

"Great. Let's go."

The three women stood next to the laden horses as Xena concentrated on where she thought it would be best for them to appear in the Amazon woods. Within seconds the sound of the waterfall and the warm breeze of the magical forest were replaced with a slightly cooler atmosphere.

"We're here." Gabrielle remarked as she looked around the dense wood.

"We certainly are." Xena agreed.

"A little colder here, isn't it?" Eve asked.

"Yes, we're farther north." Taking Argo's rein she mounted, then reached her hand down to help Eve up behind her on the horse. When Gabrielle got settled onto her own horse, they began trotting in a still northerly direction. "I would think we should be prepared for meeting a few Amazon's before the sun moves too much more to the west," Xena informed her companions.

With her usual precision Xena's information was correct, and before another candlemark there was a rustling heard in the trees above them. Assuming it was Amazons and not animals the three 'visitors' took the ceremonial position and awaited the consensus from the new arrivals that they were at least not enemies.

Minutes later, they found themselves surrounded by masked warriors.

"Speak your name!" The leader commanded of the three intruders.

"I am Gabrielle, Queen of the Amazons, and this is my champion, Xena and our daughter, Eve,"
The small blonde announced.

"Yeah, and I'm Hippolyte, most famous Queen of the Amazons, daughter of Ares, and these are my followers."

Tittering could be heard coming from under the masks of the entire Amazon group, until the leader turned and stared at them with venom in her eyes.

"Why do you doubt that we are who I said we are?" Gabrielle asked.

"Because our Queen would never bring the destroyer of Artemis and her bitch child here to these sacred grounds."

Xena put a hand on her chakram, preparing for the inevitable.

"Now you hold on just a minute there!" Gabrielle dismounted. The anger in her eyes and voice caused the warrior in front of her to back up a few steps. "I am Gabrielle, and before you or the tribe go around casting judgement, you need to hear the entire story."

"So, you want to tell me a story, Bard Queen?"

"You'll regret that tone, I promise," Gabrielle continued. "I want the entire tribe to be privy to the truth," The small blonde responded in a firm voice belying her stature.

"Guess it wouldn't hurt to take you back to the village," the leader condescended. "If one of the old timers can recognize you . . . then we'll let you talk. Otherwise . . . "

Unable to hold her tongue any longer, Xena spoke up. "You will apologize to your Queen before the sun sets on this day, mark my word."

"Yeah, we'll see."

The leader instructed the rest of the Amazons to keep their masks on then told Xena and Eve to get down from the horses. Xena glanced over at Gabrielle before seemingly obeying an order; she felt it was best to keep peace for the time being.

One of the warriors started to take Argo's reins, but the blue icicles that shot at her from the eyes of the tall, dark-haired warrior, who so resembled the tales she had been told as a child of Xena Warrior Princess, deterred her from following through. Instead she motioned for her sisters to flank the three strangers on all sides as they escorted them toward the village.

Gabrielle looked over at Xena and a strong arm was casually slung over her shoulders as they continued to walk. "Don't worry, it will all work out fine," the warrior assured her bard.

"I hope you're right Xena."

The masked Amazons and the three strangers walked the rest of the way in silence back to the center of the village.

Upon entering the village the leader instructed one of the guards to go inform the Queen of the stranger's arrival and told yet another to go get at least one of the village elders and bring her to the meeting room.

She turned to another guard and instructed her to take the stranger's weapons. Gabrielle allowed her to take the sais. Eve did not resist when her sword was taken. Xena unsheathed and handed her sword to the smaller woman, but when the Amazon glanced in the direction of the chakram, Xena curtly shook her head and growled, "Over my dead body." Terrified of the ominous stranger, the woman/girl seemed satisfied with the bounty already collected and went on her way.

After giving feeding and brushing instructions, Xena agreed to allow a young member to take the horses, and yet another Amazon led the three women into the great meeting room. Gabrielle could see in the distance the porch of the hut they had used so many springs ago when they brought Eve here to initiate her into the tribe as an Amazon Princess. Her eyes misted over as she remembered that poignant time in their lives where, for a few days, they were able to almost forget their problems.

Seated together in the main hall they talked amongst themselves while awaiting the arrival of the reigning Queen and the tribe's elders. Gabrielle was hoping that the women would be old friends. If a few of the Amazons they knew from before were still alive that would make this new situation more palatable to everyone involved.

They listened to the commotion outside the hall as more and more of the villagers heard that the strangers included a woman who claimed to be Queen Gabrielle, her champion Xena and their daughter, known as the Harbinger of Death to the Gods. The drums began pounding out a steady beat as the cacophony of voices reached a crescendo.

Suddenly all went dead silent and a single unmasked guard appeared at the door.

"If you will follow me," she motioned to the three sitting alone in the large room.

Xena positioned herself between and slightly to the back of the two women she would die to protect. She placed one hand on the shoulder of each and bent forward whispering, "Remember all for one and one for all."

That brought an immediate smile to the small blonde's lips, and Eve gave her mother a questioning look, receiving only a knowing smile, explaining nothing.

The late afternoon sun was, by this time, beginning to throw shadows on the huts as it seemed as though the entire village was gathered around the already flaming bonfire. Amazons in ceremonial tunics and with war paint on their faces were dancing around the flames. The three

strangers were lead to the middle of the on-goings and told to kneel at the base of the Queen's throne.

Eve went down on one knee and her mother immediately pulled her back up. When she looked over, Xena put a finger to her lips and simply shook her head 'no'.

Gabrielle was the first to speak.

"I mean you no disrespect, but as rightful Queen of this village I refuse to bow to an equal as do my champion and my daughter."

As a guard began to approach the three strangers, the regent put out her arm halting the warrior in her tracks.

"We shall see! For now I will not take that as an indiscretion, until I am able to hear the story in full."

It was at this point that a loud, eerie cry was hear from a short distance away. Everyone turned and watched as an older woman, flanked by two young Amazons, came hurrying toward the center of the village.

"Are my eyes deceiving me?" The woman's voice rose above the clamor. "Queen Gabrielle? Xena? Is that really you? By the Gods is That Eve?"

Gabrielle looked at the woman and then at Xena as she whispered, "Xena do you recognize her?"

A small sad smile appeared on Xena's face as she remember back to their last visit and to the high-spirited young Amazon who seemed to have had such a crush on her. She remembered that the young girl had been so willing to take Gabrielle's place that she cleaned the entire Queen's hut by herself, just to be able to spend time with the great warrior, Xena. "Gabrielle," Xena whispered back, "I believe it's Eris."

"No!" The bard objected.

"Look hard, my bard." Xena insisted.

Taking a second long look at the woman now standing before them, it became quite clear that Xena was right; it was the once exuberant Eris.

With sadness in her emerald eyes that matched the same emotions she displayed the first time they saw the aged Joxer, Gabrielle softly acknowledged their old friend.

"Hello, Eris." The small blonde extended her hand, which the Amazon quickly ignored, instead falling down on her aged knees. A hush fell over the entire congregation as they watched the interaction between the two players.

"Queen Gabrielle we thought you dead and then we . . . "

"Get up Eris!" Gabrielle would have none of this. She just wanted to set everyone right as to who they were, not to have friends groveling at her feet. Putting out her hands she helped the woman to a standing position. "Hello my old friend," the blonde smiled as she looked into mature eyes, but through the eyes of memory Gabrielle only saw the sparkling eyes of the younger version of the woman now standing before her.

"Time has treated you well, Eris."

"Fairly well, my Queen," the Amazon agreed.

The reigning queen waved for a stool to be placed behind the older woman so she could sit and converse with the strangers and perhaps help the village better understand what was happening. Gabrielle, Xena, and Eve sat on the ground in front of her, and the rest of the Amazons sat where they stood. It seemed that it was story-telling time and the entire village was already enthralled.

Eris looked at the Bard Queen and started to fill her in on what the Amazons knew of present and past happenings. "We were told about you demise many moons after Eve's initiation. We mourned for the three of you, and our Shamaness, Aello, tried to contact the other side . . . first seeking counsel with Yakut and then you . . . but all to know avail." She looked over at Eve and shook her head. "It's hard to believe I baby sat you 25 springs ago and now here you are again, all grown up."

"Eris," Gabrielle interrupted, "please, back on the subject at hand."

"Oh, yeah . . . sure." She straightened up and continued with her story. "A few moons back we began hearing chatter again about you and Xena having come back from the dead. The stories persisted and we began to listen closer. We also heard of Livia, but her conquests in Rome did not interest us, so we ignored any news of her until someone came back with the story that Livia and Xena's baby Eve were the same person. It was when Artemis no longer seemed to answer our prayers that we began to investigate and listen to the story tellers about what happened down here and up on Olympus a few moons ago. They said Xena killed both Artemis and Athena and that she also mortally wounded you and that you killed Eve. The village went crazy, and there were sisters who wanted to see Xena dead and others that were celebrating the fact that you killed the bitch child who was born to fell the gods. The new warriors didn't understand that it was all a part of everyone's destiny and that the change would bring with it a period of growth."

The compassion that the gentle Bard Queen still held for her sisters was not lost on the older Amazon as she looked deep into eyes the color of a warm Spring meadow.

"I can see that at least some of the rumors were just that, Queen Gabrielle, as you and Eve are both sitting here before me." She smiled at her Queen, and Gabrielle didn't have the heart to go into the entire story and confuse everyone even more.

"So Eris, are you the only one left of our friends?"

"No. Rhea is still here, but she got sick a few moons ago and is always tired any more. She's sleeping, but will be so pleased to see the three of you."

"Did she ever have a child, Eris?"

"She birthed me." The voice came from somewhere in the middle of the assemblage. An Amazon, looking not to be too much younger than Eve stood up. "Rhea is my mother. I am Toxaris, and I am honored to be in the presence of the Bard Queen, her champion and their daughter, Eve."

"We are pleased to meet you, also, Toxaris. I would be honored to speak with you and your mother later, after we have straightened everything out here."

The young woman smiled and sat back down, gossiping quietly with her friends.

Eris cleared her throat and began to speak again. "It took a while for us to get all the facts about exactly how you two came back to life having not aged so much as a day. The stories were very difficult to believe. During all the confusion of your being reborn, Livia being Eve and gods being killed, there was chaos here in the village. Then some of us started having dreams and Aphrodite appeared to the Shamaness telling her that to survive we needed to let go of some of the old ways and move on. Leave it to the Goddess of Love to have such a forgiving heart."

"She does have that, Eris." Gabrielle agreed. "So what you are telling us then, is that even to this day some of the sisters believed that we came back and some didn't?"

"Yes."

"And of those who believed we were alive, some hated both Xena and Eve?"

"Yes."

"Well," Gabrielle stood up and faced the entire tribe. "Now that I'm fairly sure you all agree that we are definitely alive and that we are who we say we are, I think it only fair to tell you why it is we have come back to the village." She looked down at Xena and then over at Eve and smiled.

"It seems to me as though you've gotten most of the facts as they were played out. None of us have been in control of this drama that has been playing out. Eve, as you older Amazons and perhaps your children already know, was born to bring about a change in belief systems. If the gods had not viciously gone after her as a baby, things might have . . . No . . . would have turned out differently; I am absolutely sure of that. The twilight of the gods did not have to mean their total demise as you can see with the continuing existence of Aphrodite. Had they not used violence out of fear, perhaps they would have disappeared into a sort of retirement in time to come, but that was not as it was to turn out to be."

She turned and approached the reigning queen. "I know it must be hard for you to conceive, but I still am the Queen of this tribe and my family and I have come home to heal. We have seen

enough of the hate that consumes the world for a while and want just to settle down and be part of our Amazonian family. Xena and I came back to consummate our love for one another with an Amazonian wedding and we brought our daughter back to get her away from those who would do her harm. I hope we are welcome here."

The regal Amazon looked at Gabrielle then at Xena and Eve. She thought for a few minutes before answering the rightful Queen. With no trace of a smile she began her dissertation. "My name is Tecmessa, descendent from that Tecmessa who died at the hands of Hercules along with Asteria and many other great Amazons during the battle over Hippolyte's girdle. I have been Queen of this village for many seasons now. I have seen youngsters grow into fine warriors and I have weathered living under the heroic stories of an ancient queen and her champion. You, Gabrielle, have been gone from this family for 25 winters, whether of your own doing or not. What makes you think that you should be able to come back and claim your Queenhood on a whim? An entire generation has grown in the period of time you have been gone. You are but a memory, Gabrielle; a story we tell our children of the Bard Queen, her Warrior/Champion and the daughter who would bring the Gods to their knees. If you want the queen's mask back, you will have to face the ultimate challenge. I do not intend to simply hand over my throne to you."

Gabrielle smiled but her eyes betrayed a glint of sadness. "I was afraid it was going to come down to this. I can't say I'm surprised. I would probably feel the same way if I were you. At least you believe that we are who we say we are." Gabrielle looked over at Xena before finishing her conversation and the raven-haired beauty nodded discretely at her lover.

"I am prepared to accept your challenge, Queen Tecmessa "

A whooping cry rose up from the throng and the small blonde smiled, not knowing if the acknowledgement was for or against her and really not caring, at least she could see that the Amazons had not lost their appetite for competition.

"Being the challenged, Queen Gabrielle," the reigning queen addressed her with the honored title, "the choice of weapons is yours."

Xena could stand the banter no longer; she stepped forward and put an arm on Gabrielle's shoulder. "Excuse me, my Queen," she formally addressed the other half of her soul, "but don't you have a request to make?"

"I don't think so," came the unexpected reply.

Xena's troubled azure eyes focused on the determined look in her bard's face. "Gabrielle, you can't fight this woman; let me be your champion. Let me do what I do best, protect you." The pleading in her warrior's voice caused the next sentence she spoke to catch in her throat.

"Not this time, Xena," she whispered so only her dark hero could hear. "I must do this challenge by myself. I am capable, my love. I'm not the same young woman you intervened for with Melosa so many seasons ago. As much as I cherish the fact that you would do this for me, I must do it for myself.

It was at this point that Eve stepped up and joined in the family conversation. Gabrielle glanced over at the reigning queen and slightly shrugged her shoulders. "Family conference, sorry." Then turned her attention back to Xena and Eve.

"What Eve?" Xena questioned.

"Seeing how I'm next in line for the throne after Mom, I think I ought to be the one to act in the challenge as Mom's champion."

"Hold on, the two of you." Gabrielle tried to keep from raising her voice. "Just listen to yourselves. You're talking like I don't know a sais from a frying pan. This is my challenge and I intend to perform it myself."

"Gabrielle . . . " Xena objected.

"Myself!" Gabrielle insisted.

"But, Mom . . . "

"No buts!"

Gabrielle looked back up at the queen and shook her head. "It was necessary for us to have a family vote, " she tried to joke, then cleared her throat. "Where were we?"

"Choice of weapons," the irritated queen answered.

"Ah yes, weapons -- I think the staff would be a good choice."

"The staff?"

"Yes, it was the first weapon I learned to wield as an Amazon. I think it only fitting it be the weapon I use to win back my throne."

"Staff it is then, Queen Gabrielle. Do you need time to practice before the challenge?"

"I think not." Gabrielle smiled up at the confused queen. "Do you need time to practice with the staff?"

Not wanting to show weakness in front of the entire tribe the regent snorted, "Of course not! So . . . feast tonight sisters - feast and celebrate to welcome Gabrielle, Xena, and Eve home. The challenge will be tomorrow - to see who will be Queen of the Amazons."

A cry rang out from the middle of the crowd. "May the best Amazon win!"

The End

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