

# ~ Reunions ~ Amphipolis ~

by Carole Giorgio

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**Violence Warning/Disclaimer:** Nope -- This is a party story! Rest, relaxation, dancing, singing Amazons and the reinstatement of a Queen.

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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.)

Carole Giorgio aka WomynBard@aol.com

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It wasn't long before the last house in Potidaea was passed, and as they exited the town, the riders became quiet and introspective. Xena could see that the tears were continuing to flow and quickly dry on her bard's face as they galloped away from the seaside village and on toward Amphipolis.

After a candlemark of silence, the warrior breached the barrier. "That was really sweet of Lila to name her daughter after you Gabrielle. You never know how truly loved you are by family members until they do something like that in your memory."

"It was quite a surprise, but a little unnerving with her looking so much like me. If it happened in real time for us, at least I would have had the opportunity to watch her grow, and we would never have looked almost identical at the same time, as I would have aged also. Nothing like having a niece who looks like she could be my younger sister and a sister who looks like she could be my mother." The blonde looked over and smiled at her lover. "That was some surprise, but you're right, Xena, it was a pleasant one. I'm very glad we made the trip; even if Lila can't make it to the joining, stopping to see her and to meet all the new members of the family was a marvelous experience. Who knows what we'll find in Amphipolis."

"Probably nothing much different than when we left it." Xena remarked.

"I wouldn't count on it; I didn't expect Potidaea to have grown so and look what happened to it."

Eve was riding on the other side of Xena and pulled over a little closer. "Mother, did you say Uncle Toris lived in Amphipolis?"

"Well, he did when last I heard, Eve. After 25 years, I wouldn't even venture a guess. I do hope, for Mother's sake, that he stuck around and settled down. By the way, you girls seemed to make quite an impression on Gabby. So, does she want to be an Amazon now?"

"Very funny, Mother . . . does Jason want to be a warrior?"

"Touché, smarty," Xena acknowledged. "It's just that every time I heard her talking, she was asking questions about you being Amazons."

"Well, I didn't have that many answers," Eve confessed. "Most of the Amazon questions were answered by Toxaris."

"Yes," Toxaris interjected, "but she is so proud to be a relative of an Amazon Princess . . . "

"And an Amazon Queen," Eve finished, looking over at Gabrielle. "Gabby never thought she was going to get to meet her famous Aunt Gabrielle, Bard of Potidaea and Queen of the Amazons. Talk about your hero worship." Eve giggled and the blonde gave her a slightly sarcastic look, but the smile was a dead give away that it also boosted her ego tremendously to have her niece think that highly of her.

"All in all, I think it was a fantastic visit, Mom. Aunt Lila is very nice and so are Aeson and Jason, even though we couldn't seem to keep them in the house longer than the time it took for them to eat." She laughed and turned to say something to Toxaris.

"I'm sorry Lila won't be able to come to the wedding, Gabrielle." Xena consoled.

"It's really okay; she has a lot to do to get ready for Jason's nuptials and I'm sure it would be a taxing journey for her. She's about as comfortable being on a horse as I used to be." The blonde smiled over at her mate. "Besides, she might feel a little out of place with all the Amazons around. She's really a small town girl at heart. It all turned out for the best, I'm sure, especially since we promised to go visit again when this season rolls back around."

"That we will my love and that will give us a reason to stop in Amphipolis on the way home again. I think we will be making the trip yearly for a two-fold reason. Dite did say that Mother was frail, and that could mean many things."

"Well, don't you start worrying yourself about that until after we get to Amphipolis and see Cyrene. Knowing your mother, she's probably a feisty old crone." The small blonde glanced playfully at the love of her life. "And we have what, two days you think to get there?"

"If we make good time, yes. Whenever you get tired we'll stop to rest; I know you didn't get much sleep last night, and to tell you the truth, I don't think the girls did either. I recall hearing them and Gabby talking long after you started snoring."

"Xena! I don't snore."

"Yeah, right!" The warrior commented as she picked up speed, daring the other horses to keep up.

They rode hard and long and the sun was far beyond the midday position when they stopped by a creek side to water and rest the horses and have something to eat.

Lila had loaded them down with all sorts of goodies, fruits, breads, cookies, nutbread, cheese, hard boiled eggs, dried pork jerky, and salted beef. She insisted on giving them each a sack filled with food, even when Gabrielle protested that it would leave her storehouse leaner than it should be. Lila stubbornly disputed her sister's objections, stating "Consider these the gifts you would have taken with you every time you came to visit in the 25 years you were frozen and they won't seem like so much. You're merely getting them all in one visit. Now stop arguing with your 'elder' and pack the saddlebags."

Gabrielle smiled to herself as she remembered the sweetly sarcastic conversation and then the smile of satisfaction on her sister's face when each of the women had a bag packed safely on a horse. It was wonderful seeing Lila again, but her heart ached to see her younger sister so much older. She shook her head to rid her mind of the thoughts and dismounted to give Ginger some water.

Xena was absolutely right in the fact that none of them had gotten an adequate night's sleep. She even suggested that they all lie down and rest for a while after eating so no one would be tempted to sleep on horseback.

"Besides, the longer rest we give the horses now, the longer and harder we can ride them afterward. I figure even with some rest, we should have only three candlemarks left to travel before the sky gets too dark to see clearly and even then, with the land here being fairly level, we can travel as long as we have good moonlight and starlight to see by."

Arguments were nonexistent and after eating and cleaning up, they laid out the bedrolls beneath the shade of the trees near the creek. Within minutes the only sounds were those of nature and those of snoring Amazons and a warrior. Xena was the first to awaken after a short interval. She never needed more than half a candlemark to refresh. Upon lying down to rest, she would will herself to sleep quickly and deeply, creating the illusion of a full night's sleep from less than a candlemark's. It was a trick she attempted to teach Gabrielle, but so far her success in training the bard was nonexistent. The air felt cooler and it would be a good time to travel; the horses wouldn't overheat as easily. After packing everything except the bedrolls, Xena woke everyone up and shortly thereafter they were on the go again.

Gabrielle began having them all play the game she and Xena used to play when traveling from town to town, "Who Am I." It was one of the few games the warrior seemed to enjoy playing as she was very good at guessing and even better at giving hints that threw the other players off the track when she was the person who was 'it.'

Shortly after nightfall they began looking for an area suitable for stopping. Xena didn't feel that any of the spots the women suggested were appropriate and safe enough for them to sleep through the night without posting a lookout, and the only one she would have relied on to not fall asleep was herself. The warrior no longer trusted the more traveled roads between the cities, especially after 25 years of not having traveled them herself. Gabrielle was beginning to get a little short tempered about stopping when Xena recognized markings on the well-trodden road they were on.

"We're in luck, ladies," the warrior announced. "I do believe we are less than a candlemark away from Acanthus and there should be an Inn, warm baths, food, and wine without any of us having to do any fetching, cooking, or cleaning."

That news, of course, went over well with everyone concerned and the horses were given a little nudge and promised extra carrots or apples if they would not object and go the distance at a quickened pace.

True to her word within the hour they saw the outline of a town and at the center of the buildings there was, indeed, a tavern with sleeping quarters upstairs. After paying for their food and lodging, the women asked if there was a private bathing room. Again they were in luck and Xena and Toxaris flipped a dinar to see which couple got to use the facilities first. Xena won the toss and she and Gabrielle grabbed their belongings and headed for the bath while Toxaris and Eve decided to stay in the main room and mingle with the town folk.

They were told that the bath area was actually behind the main establishment, in a small adjacent building, and after retrieving the key from the Innkeeper, they followed his directions, which took them down the long hall and out the back entrance. Once Xena opened the door to the bathing chamber, it was easy to understand why the building was locked. She locked the door behind them and the two women surveyed the oversized room.

It was unusually extravagant for an inn of this size; the walls were lined with an aromatic cedar, indigenous to the surrounding area, and the tub seemed to be made out of the same wood and bound with large rings of brass. The warmth of the room was the first thing they noticed upon entering. Their guess was that the tub water was kept at an almost constant warm temperature, while the steam off of it heated the entire room. The large tub was cradled on a bed of hot stones and seated firmly into a brass holder. The two women looked at each other and smiled; this was going to be fun.

"Just look at the size of that tub; you need steps to get in, at least I need to use the steps." Gabrielle giggled as she pointed to the three steps leading up to the large reservoir of water.

Xena spied a pipe coming in through the wall and attached to the top of the hot tub. It had a spigot for fresh water and a second pipe that lead out of the tub at the bottom and also disappeared through the wall for drainage. Towels hung from hooks on the wall, and shelves containing scented soap, candles, and oils were well stocked. There were lanterns strategically placed on the perimeter of the walls and a few of them were lit. Xena walked over and extinguished all but one of the lamps, which she carried over closer to the tub. She proceeded to collect a few candles from a shelf and lit them using the lantern. After carefully placing the candles around the outer rim of the tub, she turned the lamp almost all the way down and put it back in its wall position.

Gabrielle brought over some oils and added them to the bath as well as a bottle marked 'foaming liquid soap'. "Great . . . bubbles . . . I love bubbles," she chuckled to herself, while pouring the sweet smelling concoction into the water, and turning on the spout, enticing the bubbles to form. Placing a bar of peppermint soap on a holder on the top of the tub, she went back to the shelves to get a sponge.

Xena was the first to undress and enter the now frothing liquid, but it wasn't long before a very naked and alluring bard joined her.

"Ahhh," the blonde exclaimed as she lowered herself into the water and found that there were formed seats carved into the tub. "Isn't this marvelous?" She looked over at her warrior who was scooted down with only her head above the water line.

"Fantastic," came the throaty reply.

"I'm glad we won the toss; I'll bet it takes quite a while for this to fill and heat."

"Probably not that long," the warrior countered, having remembered that there were hot springs on the outskirts of the town. People had certainly been inventive in the 25 years she and Gabrielle had been frozen. She reached over and pulled the blonde close. "Come here you."

"Y-E-S?" The blonde drawled out the word seductively.

Since actions speak louder than words, the warrior decided to use the former and kissed her lover gently on the lips, receiving an instant replay in reverse.

"Now, this is the way to relax after a long ride." Xena gently coaxed the smaller woman over onto her lap. "When we get settled, I want to build something like this behind the hut. A totally secluded retreat where no one will intrude."

"That's a great idea, then we won't have so far to travel in the cold seasons and we'll be able to bathe more often." She threw her arms around the muscular shoulders in front of her and nuzzled her face into the long, slender neck. She could feel her lover's nipples reacting to the touch of her breasts as she leaned into her. "I love you Xena. This has been a great trip so far. I can't wait until we get to Amphipolis tomorrow evening." She shivered slightly.

"I know you can't be cold, Gabrielle. Why did you just shiver?"

"I think it's just the anticipation of seeing Cyrene again and the added expectation that you might have new family to meet just as I did. Oh, Xena, wouldn't it be wonderful if Toris did stay around and you had nieces and nephews?"

"Yes, it most definitely would . . . but you know what?"

"No, what?" Emerald eyes sparkled in the flickering candlelight as she looked into the eyes of her heart.

"I don't really want to talk about anything right now. All I want to do this very minute is hold you close and feel your heart pounding against my chest." She nibbled delicately on a small ear then whispered, "I want to make love to you in this oversized bathtub, Gabrielle, until you are totally satisfied and the only desire you have left in your body is to curl up into a ball, snuggle close to me and go to sleep."

As expected the statement received a deep sigh. Xena could feel the smile forming on her lover's cheek as it was held tightly against her own.

The warrior had explored all the seats in the tub while Gabrielle was undressing and came across a most unusually formed appendage. It was long and protruded from the edge of the tub toward the center, allowing for a participant to recline on it. There was an air filled bladder attached to the outer perimeter where the patron's head could rest. As the bed-like adjunct extended out into the middle of the tub, it allowed room for someone to stand beside it and perhaps administer a therapeutic massage to the person reclining. Xena, of course, had an entirely different purpose in mind for this newly found plaything and she began maneuvering the body of the smaller woman around to lean back on the wooden couch.

Never before in water had they actually been able to lie down as if they were in a bed. Being a totally new experience, it was more than a little intoxicating. The small blonde smiled up at her champion as she stretched out on the appendage and then pulled her lover down on top of her.

"I feel like a water nymph." Gabrielle purred into her lover's ear as Xena began to slide her hands down the svelte body beneath her.

"Seems like some maneuvers are going to be a bit precarious, but others ought to be quite interesting." The warrior arched her eyebrow and grinned at the beauty in front of her.

"Can you say, *hold your breath*?" Gabrielle giggled.

"Oh, but I am an expert at that, my love." The warrior assured her bard, placing her face below the water and sucking on an inviting breast, while playfully exploring the area below the golden curls for entrance into the cave of pleasure.

When the blonde was sure that the warrior could not possibly hold her breath any longer, she reached down and pulled her lover's face up parallel to her own and kissed her passionately.

"I love you more than life, Xena." The bard whispered when she finally released her champion's roaming tongue and full lips.

The ability to move with fluidity only heightened the warrior's desire as she now sat straddling her bard. Placing a hand on either side of the smaller woman's waist, she scooted her up into a sitting position, fully exposing her voluptuous breasts.

"Eye candy as well as bodily aphrodisiacs," the warrior mumbled as she leaned closer, covering one erect nipple with her mouth.

"Mmm . . . you taste delicious." Xena continued, as she rubbed her center on the soft golden curls below Gabrielle's abdomen.

Floating quickly to one side and allowing her fingers entrance to the realms below the curls, the warrior pressed now against the bard's thigh, as she entered her lover's depths. With the ebb and flow of water, she penetrated the throbbing center.

"Gods Xena!" Gabrielle panted. "Harder . . . faster . . . please . . ."

Watery gyrations caused bubbles to re-form, surrounding the lovers in a peppermint scented ambience, heightening their emotions, as the cool smell opened their imaginations to partake in a liquid fantasy.

The answer to her bard's request was the addition of another long, slender, finger into the center of Gabrielle's core, while the warrior's thumb frantically stroked the hardened nub above the pulsing cave of yearning. "Come for me, Gabrielle. Come for me, my love - let me feel the zenith of your desire."

With one hand resting on the small of Gabrielle's back, Xena pulled them closer together until their bodies lay as one on the wooden bed. She could feel her own passion rising when she pressed hard against her lover's leg, her fingers deep within the recesses of the bard's body. There was a simultaneous scream of release, as two travelers found ecstasy in the warm scented water and passion's fulfillment, in the comfort of each other's arms, in a town so very far from home.

For minutes afterwards, they lay in intoxicated silence, breathing deeply and rhythmically, Xena's head resting on Gabrielle's shoulder, their bodies, from lack of movement, beginning to float on the warm liquid.

"I suppose we should get out and dressed?" Xena questioned after a few more minutes had passed.

"Yes." Gabrielle agreed, reluctantly. "If anyone is looking for us, we'll have to explain what took us so long." The bard smiled at her lover.

Still, neither of them made any attempt to move; instead they both felt quite content to float beside one another in the warmth.

"This is great, having water that never gets cold." The bard finally spoke again.

"Maybe." Xena grinned, lifting up her own pruning fingers and one of Gabrielle's hands. "You want to go around looking all wrinkled?"

The blonde laughed, "I imagine we'll be wrinkling soon enough, thank you very much."

"Then come on, let's get outta here." She pulled the plug from the lower end of the tub and they could hear a gurgling sound as the water began to flow through the pipe and out to who knew where. "I've got a pretty good idea how to make one of these now," the warrior informed her mate.

"Fantastic. But we have to get you home first to do it."

Reluctantly they exited the tub, dressed, and opened the door back onto the real world, their romantic rendezvous over for the time being with no hopes of another encounter for at least the next few days.

"We could just disappear into our room for the evening, after I give this key back to Patroclus," Xena commented, while she locked up the building. "I'm sure the girls haven't waited for us to eat." She paused and looked at her lover. "On the other hand, I'm positive you're famished, and I don't feel like being awakened in the middle of the night by your stomach making sounds that would keep a Cyclops from sleeping. Having to go in search of midnight vittles is not pleasurable."

"You're right." Gabrielle shook her head in agreement. "We should probably go eat before retiring for the evening."

When they walked into the main room, they found that it was filled to capacity with patrons. There were even people standing around without any hopes of finding seats.

"By the Gods." Gabrielle exclaimed. "I didn't realize this was such a popular tavern. I hope we can get something to eat."

"Me, too." Xena countered. "Let's find the girls, at least we might have a seat."

They spotted the two young women seated at a small table for two over in a corner. After greeting her mothers, Eve told them they had already eaten. Taking the bath key from Xena, the two quickly excused themselves and headed out of the main area toward their room. Xena gave her daughter a weird look for slithering away so quickly, but figured they were in a hurry to get cleaned up and refreshed. The owner of the tavern came over and handed Xena back the monies she paid for their evening's stay.



"The other two have already eaten and there is food and wine for the two of you whenever you are ready, my name is Patroclus," the Innkeeper informed the puzzled warrior and bard.

"Yes, they told me they ate, but . . . I don't understand . . . " Xena began.

"I don't want your money, Xena. We are honored to have you and your bard staying with us," the owner of the inn announced. "The two Amazons that are traveling with you told us who you were. At first no one believed them. We heard rumors of your visiting places all the time and most of those are truly that, rumors. But those two young women were very convincing." The innkeeper glanced from one to the other of the two women.

"Are you Xena Warrior Princess and Gabrielle the Bard of Potidaea?" He asked.

Delighted to see that the expression on the man's face was one of friendship and not hate, the warrior acknowledged the fact that, yes, they were Xena and Gabrielle. The answer to the admission totally took the duo by surprise.

"If Gabrielle would be so good as to grace us with a story or two tonight, I would be happy to give all four of you meals and rooms gratis."

Xena looked over at her mate who was beaming with pride at being asked to perform. She knew Gabrielle was tired, especially after making love in the bath, but the thought of people wanting to hear her stories always perked the small blonde up. The warrior figured dinner, a story or two and then bed wouldn't slow them down too much. After all, they weren't in any real hurry; it wasn't like someone was expecting them in Amphipolis.

"You want to perform, Gabrielle?" Xena asked, already knowing the answer to the question.

"Sure, I don't mind," the blonde answered gleefully. "Free food and lodging seems like a pretty fair exchange, don't you think, Xena?"

"Sounds more than fair to me," the warrior chuckled. "You, my love, are doing all the work."

The bard nodded her head and then Patroclus ushered the two women to a table and nodded his head at the serving maid, who sauntered off into the kitchen and came back almost immediately with a tray of full of bowls and dishes laden with vegetables, potatoes, and meat.

Neither of the women realized how hungry they were until the food was placed before them. Gabrielle, of course, retrieved her appetite quickly and filled her plate with the delicacies laid before her. Likewise, Xena managed to down a more than modest helping of almost everything the Innkeeper lay on the table before them.

All during the meal Xena would glance up when she felt the heat of staring eyes and give the bearer a warning look that sent a message to be patient. Finally they finished eating, and the atmosphere of the entire room changed, as if everyone in it had breathed a sigh of relief all at the same time. The intensity lightened and when the bard turned to Patroclus and asked where he

wanted her to sit for the storytelling, he ushered her to a high barstool, which had been placed at the head of the middle table, to assure that everyone could see and hear the storyteller. A round of applause spread across the room as Gabrielle looked out into the throng of friendly strangers. She noticed that the table directly in front of her was covered with goblets of wine, and the barmaid informed her that the drinks were gifts from anxious customers.

The bard smiled sweetly at the crowd and then requested, "Could I please have a glass of water, also? Sometimes I get parched while telling the story and if I drank all this wine . . . " the smile that always warmed her warrior's heart, now lit up this room filled with strangers, " . . . you'd never be able to understand the ending." Almost instantly a slew of water glasses instantaneously appeared next to the goblets; the bard smiled again and cleared her throat. "Just what story would you like told first?" she inquired.

Vociferous requests from various parts of the room made it almost impossible to hear any singular behest. Two small hands went up into the air and gently waved the crowd to silence. "Let's try this a different way. Raise you hands and I'll call on you; I'll see which stories are the most popular, and we'll pick two from there."

Xena's heart swelled with pride as she watched her lover captivate the audience of townspeople who had hastened to the tavern in an obscure little village, on the edge of nowhere, to listen to the Bard of Potidaea. Gabrielle had come a long way from the young peasant girl who begged to tag along with the infamous Warrior Princess and finally won her heart. She wasn't quite sure where her place in history would be through all this, but Bard and Amazon Queen were two very notable accomplishments for the young woman who only wanted to get away from home and make a small difference in the world. Though the eyes of her warrior, Gabrielle had definitely surpassed her initial goal.

As it turned out the two stories were on opposite ends of the story spectrum, the first being the story of Eli and how he came to be known as an Avitar. By the time the story was finished, Gabrielle had downed two glasses of water and one goblet of wine, offering most of the remaining intoxicating liquid to Xena. Glancing over at the dark warrior, the bard sensed a mood of melancholy she couldn't quite figure out. She made a mental note to ask the warrior what was on her mind when they got back up to their quarters.

The second request was about the Twilight of the Gods and the rumors that the God of War was no longer. Gabrielle told the story of how the God, in a weaker moment, he would probably never admit to, gave up his Godhood to save both her and Eve, because of his devotion to a long time acquaintance who had done many deeds in his name, specifically - Xena. She also informed the group that even though he gave up his mortality and powers, that the Goddess of Love took pity on him and reinstated his powers and immortality by procuring for him some ambrosia, the food of the Gods.

At the conclusion of the second story, the room was still filled with patrons clamoring for Gabrielle to tell another. Patroclus stood and tried to hush the audience, proclaiming that the bard had given them quite a full night's entertainment and was most likely tired from her traveling all

day from Potidaea. It seemed that the crowd did not have ears to hear that the storyteller needed her sleep, until a certain warrior stood beside her and repeated the words of the Innkeeper.

Slowly the room began to empty as customers came up to shake the bard's hand and thank her for an enjoyable evening.

Gabrielle was visibly tired and as she finished off the last of her second goblet of wine, she felt the strong hand of her lover on her shoulder. She turned her head to face her champion. "Thank you, Xena, for dispersing the audience. I don't think I could have completed another story tonight."

"Anytime, my soul, glad I could be of some service." The blue eyes again took on a hint of sadness that the blonde did not comprehend. Just as she was about to ask, the Innkeeper came over and thanked Gabrielle for her performance. She, in turn, thanked him for the rooms and food.

"Don't be silly," Patroclus insisted, "with what the crowd here tonight drank and ate, the four of you could stay for a fortnight. If only I talk you into staying a few extra days, I'd be set for the entire cold season." The man smiled at his two visitors, knowing they, especially the bard, must be exhausted after traveling all day. "Have a good rest and I will make sure your breakfast is exquisite. Thank you again." He bowed slightly and left the two women to retire to their room.

"Guess you could make us quite a living now if you decided to take your scrolls on the road, oh, phenomenal Bard of Potidaea." Xena bowed low and got smacked gently on the head on the way back up.

"No one called for a smart ass," Gabrielle whispered. "I'm exhausted. First traveling, then you, then the wine and finally story telling, don't you dare wake me up early in the morning."

"Me?" Xena pointed to herself with a questioning look. "Why, Gabrielle, I'm hurt," she continued sarcastically.

"Oh, it's gotta be the influence of the grape; you are waaay too silly." The bard grinned back at her warrior as she placed an arm around her waist and the two of them started walking back toward their room. "What do you suppose happened to Eve and Toxaris?"

"Well, it seems like they set you up for the entertainment and then took advantage of a full night's sleep." Xena opened the door to their room.

"I don't know about a full night's sleep, perhaps a little fooling around in the tub and then in the bed and then a good night's sleep. I've got to admit that bed looks terribly inviting to me."

"It has been a busy day, my love, emotionally and physically."

"And now we're one day closer to your home. Are you getting anxious Xena? I've noticed you being a little more moody than usual."

"Moody? Can't a girl get introspective around you without you thinking something's wrong? I've just been trying to imagine what Mother looks like."

With Xena in her nightshirt and Gabrielle in one of the gowns Aphrodite had given her, they lay down on the bed and in unison let out a moan of exhaustion when their heads hit the pillows. The warrior lay on her back looking up at the ceiling, trying to picture her mother's reaction when she saw the three of them. Gabrielle curled up next to her and wrapped a small arm around Xena's waist.

"I never feel safer than when I'm in your arms." She repeated a statement that wasn't new to the warrior's ears, but tonight the bard said it again, partially because it was true and partially because she felt the warrior needed some boosting of her morale. The bard couldn't quite put her finger on the cause, but she knew that something was bothering her soulmate, something other than the trip to Amphipolis.

"You're safe tonight, my soul." The warrior replied as she squeezed the smaller woman closer and kissed the crown of her head. "Get some sleep; tomorrow's another busy day. I promise to let you sleep until you wake up on your own, or at least until the sun is almost high in the sky, if you haven't gotten up by then."

"Fair enough, Xena. Sweet dreams."

"Back at ya, Gabrielle." The warrior smiled as she held the other half of her soul and closed her eyes, thanking destiny for allowing her to experience the love of the small woman whose arms were wrapped around her.

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Even the warrior overslept the next morning and by the time she dressed and walked downstairs, Eve and Toxaris were already sitting at one of the tables, conversing over a cup of tea.

"We thought we'd wait for you and Mom to have breakfast." Eve looked over at her mother with a contrite expression.

"I suppose that would be a nice gesture after causing Gabrielle to have to spend her evening telling tales to strangers," Xena answered.

"Oh, but Mom loves being the storyteller; you know that as well as I do, better even." Eve retorted. "And it got us free food and lodging to boot."

"And what are the two of you going to do for her for your *free food and lodging*?"

"Anything the Queen wants," Toxaris chimed in.

"Yeah," Eve seconded.

"Good," Xena concluded. "You can start by waiting until she wakes up for breakfast. She's exhausted because of you two, so you can stay hungry because of her."

"Mother . . ."

"No lip, Eve . . . that was not a request . . . that was an order."

The two younger women mumbled into their cups while Xena went to get a cup for herself and find out what the owner of the establishment had in mind for the morning meal.

As Xena sat chatting with the man about events that had transpired in the area over the past 25 years, she was surprised to feel a familiar touch on her shoulder.

"Thank you for letting me sleep."

The statuesque beauty turned to stare into two still slightly puffy but remarkably beautiful emerald green pools.

"Gabrielle . . ." Xena stammered, "I didn't expect to see you for a few more candlemarks, but you can be assured that everyone's stomach thanks you for getting up earlier."

The small blonde smiled as she touched the warrior on the thigh. "I think I'm just as anxious as you are to get to Amphipolis and see Cyrene. So . . ." she turned to Patroclus, ". . . I guess we're ready for that marvelous morning meal whenever you're ready to make it." Her friendly smile warmed the Innkeeper's heart as he headed back toward the kitchen to talk to his wife, the cook. It was to his good fortune that the warrior and bard happened upon his inn. He overheard the younger women talking about making a yearly trip in this direction and he wanted to assure that Acanthus was always a stopping place for them on their way back home, wherever that happened to be.

As the four women sat discussing the plans for the day, they could smell the delicious odors drifting through the air. It wasn't long before they were indeed served a meal fit for a ruler. Eggs, sausage, bacon, biscuits, potatoes, fresh juice, and newly brewed herbal tea were served the visitors. With filled plates they started eating, only to be surprised as the Innkeeper's wife came back into the room carrying a huge plate of griddle cakes, her children trailing behind her with warmed butter, honey, and blueberry syrup.

"By the Gods," Gabrielle sighed, shaking her head. "Even my appetite didn't expect this." She looked up at the wife. "Thank you, this is definitely a meal fit for royalty. Are you going to sit down and eat with us?"

The wife looked over at her husband, who shrugged his shoulders.

"We hadn't thought about it, but the children are very hungry. If you're sure you can't finish it all."

"No." The bard shook her head and looked at her companions who all agreed that there was enough food to feed an army and they were only a small group of four. "By all means . . . what is your name?"

"Lykopolis, m'lady." The woman bowed slightly as she spoke to the bard.

"Well, Lykopolis . . . Gabrielle will do just fine for me and we would love to have you and your family join us."

Without a second thought the three children ran back to the kitchen and reappeared with plates and utensils, filling their dishes in an orderly manner and then sitting at the table next to the honored guests. Gabrielle motioned for Lykopolis to sit next to her and Xena offered Patroclus a seat beside to her.

The remainder of the meal was spent getting to know all about the Innkeeper and his family and the foursome was invited back anytime they found themselves in the area with the promise of a roof over their heads and food in their bellies.

Eve and Toxaris finished first and headed to the stable to bring the horses around to the front of the Inn. While Xena and Gabrielle thanked the Innkeeper and his wife for their hospitality, the younger women loaded the saddlebags with the extra sacks and packages of foodstuffs that Lykopolis insisted on them taking. Before getting out of the Inn, Xena and Gabrielle were handed two bladders filled with wine and two filled with juices. With words of thanks all around, the women mounted their horses and resumed their journey north to Amphipolis.

Because Acanthus was almost exactly halfway between Potidaea and Amphipolis, Xena informed everyone that they would more than likely find themselves in her hometown a little after nightfall. The ride was a fairly easy one as the paths were level and well worn, making the traveling easier on the horses and riders alike. Time went by quickly, what with discussions on the positive attitudes of the people in Acanthus and Gabrielle telling another of her stories after being coaxed mercilessly by Toxaris, who, until recently only heard the stories from other people's memories of what Gabrielle had written.

There were a few scrolls the bard left behind in the Amazon Village for the storyteller, but they were mostly of the beginning years, before the bard and her warrior had professed their love for each other. The stories of their love affair were all handed down, word-of-mouth and not very accurate. It didn't take much to have the bard relate the conditions of their first romantic encounter, but she noticed with a smile that her warrior tended to ride slightly ahead of the troupe when she began to talk of more personal situations.

Having stopped for lunch along the river, they were able to refill their water skins and have a picnic lunch. They were all too excited to stop and nap as they had before and insisted on traveling directly through to their destination.

Before the setting of the sun, Gabrielle could tell from the warrior's silence and body language that she was beginning to recognize the area they were quickly approaching. When Xena finally

came out of her introspective mood, the warrior announced to everyone what her lover had already figured out - they were within a candlemark of Amphipolis and Xena knew exactly where they were.

Little by little Argo inched her way in front of the other horses and increased her speed. It seemed as though the young horse knew her master was excited and wanted to get her wherever it was she wanted to be in such a hurry. Again the pace picked up and before the end of the anticipated time, the four horsewomen were at a steady gallop. The last leg of the trip was traveled at some speed and the horses were panting and sweating by the time the village came into sight.

Xena stopped just outside the gates and took a deep breath. She waited until Ginger was reined beside her and reached over for her lover's hand. "We made excellent time, Gabrielle." It was all she could think of to say.

Knowing that her warrior's heart was probably beating almost out of her chest, the bard squeezed Xena's hand and nodded her head. "Yes, my love, we did. Are you ready to go see your mother?"

Blue gems glistened as the warrior looked at her soul mate. "As ready as I'll ever be, Gabrielle. Shall we?"

As the party of four began traveling through the streets, Gabrielle could see Xena's body reacting to all the changes that had taken place in the past 25 years. Her warrior always did react slowly to change and this seemed to be no exception. Houses extended beyond the perimeter of the old city, and there was an additional Inn, as well as many new stores. Amphipolis, like Potidaea, had definitely grown during the duo's absence.

There was a lump in the dark haired beauty's throat when she dismounted Argo in front of the house and tied her to the post. She waited for Gabrielle to get down from Ginger and come to her side.

"Would you like to go in alone, Xena? I'd understand if . . ."

"No!" came the emphatic answer. "We go in together, but I'll tell you Gabrielle I'm a little nervous."

Gabrielle looked back toward Eve and Toxaris, "Will one of you girls take care of Ginger for me? I'll come out to get you in a few minutes."

"Sure, Mom," Eve answered, grabbing the horse's reins. "Take your time; we're not going anywhere."

Slowly the lovers walked hand in hand up the path leading to the house where Xena grew up. Gabrielle could feel the warrior's palm sweating and squeezed it tenderly. "Dite said she was fine, so let's just get inside and make your mother the happiest mother in the known world." She

smiled up at her love, who smiled back down at her, then bent and kissed her tenderly on the cheek.

"You always know just what to say. That's one of the things I love about you, Gabrielle."

Xena wasn't sure how she was going to handle the initial meeting. She didn't want to startle the older woman and anything she could think of to do would probably do just that. Deciding on just opening the door and slowly entering, she put her hand on the handle and pushed. As she was opening the door she could smell the scent of freshly baked bread and lamb stew. The odor took her back much farther than the 25 years it had been since she stepped foot into this, her childhood home.

What she hadn't been expecting was the voice of a young woman, softly singing to herself. She shook her head and cocked it to one side, listening intently. "Do you hear that?" She whispered to Gabrielle.

"Yes, Xena. I do." Gabrielle smiled at her lover. "Why don't you continue on in and find out who it is."

"Yeah, right. I was just going to do that." The warrior moved farther into the room and inadvertently startled the young woman who was standing over the basin washing what seemed to be the dinner dishes.

"What . . . "

Xena put her hands up and began to speak when she heard Cyrene's voice coming from the area of the bedroom.

"Xena, is something wrong?"

Xena looked at the young woman standing dumbstruck by the basin. Thinking her mother was probably getting forgetful in her old age and calling people by other people's names, she put her fingers to her lips to shush the startled woman. "Nothing's wrong, Mother. We have company."

"Mother . . . company?" came the confused answer. "Xena . . . "

It was at this point that mother and daughter met between the two rooms. Cyrene threw her hands up to her face in disbelief, tears immediately filling her still brilliant blue eyes. "By the Gods, are my eyes deceiving me?"

"No, Mother . . . It's me . . . Xena." The warrior quickly breached the distance between them and held her mother close to her. "I've come home to visit."

"Xena is it really you . . . not just a figment of my imagination?" She looked beyond her daughter to the figure standing just inside the door. "Is that my Gabrielle?" Her arms extended beyond her daughter as she beckoned the blonde into a group hug.



While all this was happening, the tall blonde at the sink continued to stare in disbelief at the scene playing out before her. After what seemed like minutes, the three stopped hugging and crying and kissing on each other and turned to the stunned young maiden.

"Xena," Cyrene began after her daughter helped her to a chair. "This is your namesake, your niece, Xena. Toris and Lavinia were good enough to humor me and name her after you."

Xena looked over at her brother's daughter who, except for her hair, which was the color of Lyceus' she could have been a younger sister to the warrior.

A slight push from Gabrielle set the warrior in motion toward the younger woman. "Hi, I'm your Aunt Xena." She grinned as she held out her arms and embraced her niece.

"And this is Gabrielle," Cyrene promptly acknowledged. "My other daughter."

"Speaking of daughters," Gabrielle murmured.

"Right . . ." Xena turned back to her mother. "Mother, Eve is outside."

"Eve? Oh, Xena. Why did you keep her outside?" Cyrene looked from face to face finding it difficult to believe that her daughter and Gabrielle were actually standing in front of her and to top it off she was going to see Eve again. She continued to pray to the Gods, especially after Joxer came to tell her that Ares had taken the bodies of her daughter and Gabrielle somewhere unknown. Even though she mourned the loss of Xena and Gabrielle, Cyrene believed that with the God involved there was always a chance that the two of them might have somehow survived. For 25 years, she refused in her heart to believe that they were actually dead and now standing before her were the fruits of her conviction. What she hadn't expected was that Xena and Gabrielle would look as young and beautiful as they did the last time she laid eyes on them some 25 full seasons ago; that definitely was going to take some explanation.

With the mention of Eve, Cyrene's mind floated back to the day Joxer informed her that a Roman patriarch, by the name of Octavius, took her baby granddaughter to Rome to save her life. She mourned not being able to watch her daughter's baby grow and figured the child lost to her forever. So many memories began flooding in that she became unfocused, drifting in time, until she recognized her first born grandchild coming through the door.

While Eve and Cyrene were getting reacquainted, Xena and Gabrielle introduced Toxaris to the younger Xena.

"For lack of confusion you can call me Xe the young woman told her aunt; it's what my twin calls me.

"Twin!? Toris had twins?"

"Actually Lavinia had twins," the quick-witted maiden replied, laughing.

"I'm sure I know that," Xena answered, giving her niece the trademark infamous arched eyebrow and crooked grin. "So, I have two beautiful nieces . . ."

"Well, yes, you do, but if you're speaking of my twin . . . I don't think Lyceus would be at all amused to be called a beautiful young woman," Xe interrupted.

"Lyceus?" Xena and Gabrielle voiced in unison.

"My twin brother," the younger Xena proclaimed.

"So . . . Mother brought us both back at one time." Xena stated, grinning and shaking her head. "Mother never changes." But as she watched Cyrene fawning over Eve, the warrior could clearly see that Mother had, indeed, changed. The now frail and white-haired Cyrene was a mere shadow of the woman she used to be. As Cyrene gently caressed the face of her oldest grandchild, Xena took a leap back in time. In her memory, it was but a few months gone, while in the reality of the world they now lived in 25 years had passed. In her mind's eye, the warrior watched her mother with her daughter, visualizing a more youthful image of Cyrene, holding a baby Eve in her arms. Xena cursed destiny for stealing not only her daughter's childhood years but also her mother's autumn from her as well. She, Gabrielle and Eve still had a lifetime ahead of them but Cyrene . . .

"Xena . . ." Gabrielle tugged on her arm. "Xena are you still here with us?"

"I'm sorry, I was lost in thought." The dark-haired beauty turned from her mother and daughter to once again face her lover and niece.

"So . . . how is your father? And did you say I have another niece?"

"Quite well, Aunt Xena," the young woman smiled as she took in the expression on her aunt's face when being addressed as such. "You have a younger niece, Euphrosyne, who grandmother insists on calling *Sunny* and a nephew, Ganymede. Euphrosyne is 14 and Ganymede is 16."

"Well . . . an aunt four times over . . . that's . . . great." Xena muddled through the thoughts, trying to contend with the idea of being an instant aunt four times over.

"I think it will take a little getting used to being called Aunt, Xe. I think it makes this warrior feel a little old." Gabrielle grinned and stroked her lover's back. "Not that she minds," she added as an afterthought.

"Should I call you Aunt Gabrielle?" Xe wanted to know.

"That's totally up to you . . ."

"She is family Xe," her grandmother chimed in unexpectedly, causing Gabrielle to grin from ear to ear.

"Well, let me put it this way . . . my niece, Gabby, and nephew, Jason, have decided to call Xena aunt, so it's totally up to you. As your grandmother mentioned, we are all 'family.' I would, of course, be honored if you decided to do so."

"It seems a little odd calling someone aunt who looks not to be much older than myself." Xe observed. "That includes Aunt Xena." The young girls smiled at one and then the other of her aunts.

"I'm sure it does. It's like being called Mom by Eve when she looks more like a sister than a daughter." Gabrielle agreed.

"We thought the rumors of your coming back from the dead and fighting with the Gods were just that, but Grandmother insisted that they were all true. She kept telling everyone that one day you and Aunt Xena would return, but no one believed her. They all called her a crazy old woman. Guess she'll show them all who is crazy now."

"Won't be the first time," Xena acknowledged. "I suppose Gabrielle and I have given her more than enough pause to be considered odd by the rest of the villagers, but she's always possessed faith in us."

As astonishment started to die down, conversations became more normalized.

"Come here, girls," Cyrene summoned the four still standing by the door to join her and Eve at the table. "Xe would you get everyone some tea and nutbread?"

"I'd be happy to Grandmother, but I think maybe they might want some bread and stew first."

The visitors all nodded in agreement, having not eaten since midday. The aroma of the stew set their gastric juices flowing and rumbling sounds could be heard coming from the direction of all four of them at once.

"I'll help," Toxaris volunteered, feeling a tad out of place at such an emotional family reunion.

Throughout the meal and the remainder of the evening the conversation bounced between the past and the present. Xena and Gabrielle wanted to know all about what had transpired over the years, how Toris was and about the births of all the children.

Xe wanted to know about Amazons, warriors, fighting Gods, Eli, and all the exciting aspects of her aunts' lives.

Cyrene smiled a lot as she looked from one face to the other and she cried some when Gabrielle informed her that Joxer was dead. Tonight was not the time to disclose to her how, so in her bardic way she avoided the actual circumstances of their best friend's death.

She told her daughters that Xe had been living with her for a few years now, helping with the chores that she found difficult to do and working in one of the small shops in the middle of town.

She also informed Xena that Lyceus had taken old man Cadmus' place as the apothecary for the town and that he was married with a child.

"So, not only are we aunts . . . we're actually great aunts." Xena again shook her head, "Unbelievable."

Eve and Toxaris mostly listened to everyone else chatter, except when they were cleaning the dishes and talking to Xe about the Amazon village, or when Eve was filling her cousin in on how she was raised as a Roman patrician.

The sky was beginning to lighten when Xena looked over at her mother and realized that sometime during the last conversation, she had fallen asleep. Without waking her, the warrior, under the watchful eye of her bard, picked up the mere slip of a woman and carried her to bed, gently laying her down and then returning to the front room.

"Maybe we should all take a hint from Mother and get some sleep before the sun is fully up and we've not slept at all."

No one argued the point, but they needed to figure out where everyone was going to sleep.

"I think I have your old room Aunt Xena. You and Aunt Gabrielle are more than welcome to use it while you're here," the young woman offered.

"That shouldn't be necessary, but thank you for the offer, Xe." It was the first time ever that Xena would not sleep in her own bed upon a visit home, but she was grateful to her niece for living in the house and helping to take care of Cyrene. "Let's see," Xena scratched her head. "I know I should either flip for it or offer the extra room to you girls, but I'm not that generous." She smiled over at Gabrielle and then at Toxaris and Eve. "So, one of you gets the couch and the other a pallet in front of the . . ."

"Wait . . . that's ridiculous," Xe interrupted. "My . . . rather Aunt Xena's old bed is large enough for her and Aunt Gabrielle. There are two single beds in the spare room. Aunt Xena, I insist on you and Aunt Gabrielle taking the bedroom and Toxaris and Eve taking the spare room. This is my home now and if nothing else, Grandmother taught me to be a good hostess." She smiled over at her aunt who was definitely not used to having other people make the decisions. "I have no problem with sleeping on the couch; the Gods know I've done it often enough before. It's really rather comfortable, and that way no one has to sleep on a pallet."

Eve and Toxaris started to protest the young woman's wanting to give up sleeping in a bed, but Gabrielle put a stop to the bickering, stating that it really probably was the best solution and no one would be more the worse for wear for sleeping on a couch.

Within half a candlemark everyone was wherever they were supposed to be and almost before heads hit pillows Morpheus took control of their dreams. No one saw the beautiful morning sky as the sun made her first appearance of the day. In fact, it was close to midday when the first of the night owls opened her startling blue eyes. Recognition came quickly as Xena glanced around

the room and realized that she was sleeping in the bed of her youth. She pulled Gabrielle closer, kissing the soft golden crown. The warrior felt an unaccustomed need to put thoughts to words, so she whispered into the air, "I can't believe we're actually here. Except for the new people added to the family and the fact that Mother has aged so, I feel as though we're merely coming home for a normal visit, not one after a hiatus of 25 years."

Gabrielle stirred in her arms and mumbled something ending with '*Xena*' but the rest of the words were indistinguishable. The warrior smiled and was about to kiss the golden head below her chin, when she heard a rattling around in the front of the house; ever so gently, she unwrapped the smaller woman's arm from around her and got out of bed. Within minutes she was dressed and heading for the kitchen.

Sunlight streamed into the house and memories of yesteryear drifted through the Warrior Princess' head as she beheld the familiar visage of her mother preparing the morning meal. It didn't matter that she was now a grown woman, or that her mother was now an aged crone; the sight of that long ago ritual turned back the hands of time and threw the warrior tenderly into the role of being a child.

"Can I help, Mother?" Xena questioned as she approached the older woman.

"Of course, Xena." Cyrene looked at her daughter with the gleam of love only a mother could produce in blue eyes that had kept their sparkle and youth, even when the rest of her body gave way to aging. "I can always use your help." She smiled and nodded for her daughter to come closer. "No need waking anyone else until the meal is ready . . . gives us a little time alone . . . I've missed you and Gabrielle."

The warrior tried to keep the hot liquid from stinging her eyes, but to no avail. Tears welled and overflowed down her face. "We missed you too, Mother."

"Now, now, Xena, I know it must be difficult coming home and having everyone so changed. We're the lucky ones, after all these many years we get to see you again, and you still look exactly as we remembered you. It's a comfort for me to know that you and Gabrielle didn't lose all those years to yourselves as well as losing them to us. You still have the opportunity to live the years your situation stole from us." She pulled her daughter to her bosom and held the child within the warrior tightly. "I'm just happy you girls came home for a visit, Xena."

"Me, too, Mom." Xena steadied her emotions, and the two began discussing in detail the childhoods' of the nieces and nephews. Soon the conversation turned Joxer and after talking about the visit he made to Amphipolis years ago, Cyrene finally asked Xena, point blank, how their best friend died. It was with a heavy heart that Xena told the story of Livia/Eve and the transition that took place after the baptism by water. Cyrene cried for both the man and the woman who killed him and then shook the sorrow away.

"Today is a day of rejoicing; I know you won't be staying long, and I want everything to be perfect while you are all here." Cyrene commented softly.

Xena smiled, thinking that her mother's positive outlook had always been a great comfort and even in the winter of her life she kept that bit of summer.

"You're absolutely right, Mother . . . and . . . before I forget to mention it . . . Gabrielle and I . . . I asked Gabrielle to join with me in a formal Amazon ceremony when we get back to the Village."

"Xena." Her mother's face shone with excitement. "I'm so happy for you girls. You've been through so much together, a commitment ceremony seems like the appropriate decision at this point in your lives; you have many good years ahead of you." The older woman turned toward the stove and began stirring the contents a pot that was not, in any way, in need of attention. The change in body language was not lost on her daughter.

"Mother, we initially began this trip to ask you and Lila to come home with us and be part of the ceremony. I know now that it was a foolish dream. But we know you'll be there in thought and that's why I told you. I didn't do it to make you sad."

"I'm not sad, Xena." The brilliant smile returned to the older woman's lips. "No one knows better than I that such an extensive trip would not be possible for me, but I am blessed to have been able to see the three of you again." She looked at her daughter and then it seemed as though a new light came into her eyes. "But Xe could go in my place. She would love that."

"Who would help you around here if Xe went with us?"

"I could have Ganymede and Sunny take turns visiting, no problem at all."

"Do you really think Xe would want . . . "

"Want to," The voice of the young woman being talked about interrupted into the conversation, "I would be thrilled to get to see an Amazon village."

Xena turned to look at Xe, the color in her cheeks darkening as blood rushed through them. "It's just that . . ." The warrior shrugged her shoulders, almost at a loss for words. "You know . . . I didn't know if you . . ." she stopped and looked toward her mother for support " . . . Amazons are different from . . ."

Finally Cyrene chimed in, relieving her daughter of the awkward situation. "How could I tell your nieces and nephews about you and not mention the one great love in your life, Xena? Love you, love Gabrielle . . . the two go hand-in-hand as you two have done since the day you met her. I believe I knew you loved her even before you did but felt that you needed to realize it yourself, before we could talk about it openly.

"I know you knew Mother," Xena professed. "And I know how much you love Gabrielle. I just didn't know how you dealt with telling the rest of the family."

"That's the operative word, daughter . . . family . . . and we all love you for who you are and we love Gabrielle, too. After all, if it wasn't for . . . "

"Gabrielle," Xena finished her mother's sentence. "I would be a totally different person today. Enough said, I understand that you all understand and it makes me feel very special."

"You are special Aunt Xena; not many people have the honor to state that they are related to a Warrior Princess and an Amazon Queen!"

"Oh, no, not you, too." Gabrielle exclaimed as she stepped into the kitchen in the middle of the conversation.

"Huh?" The younger woman looked totally confused.

"First my niece Gabby and now you, what's with this 'Warrior Princess, Amazon Queen' fixation? You two are too much!" She was laughing as she walked across the kitchen to give Cyrene a morning hug. "I slept as soundly as I always do when under your roof, Cyrene."

"Gabrielle, don't you think it's time you referred to me as *Mom*?" There was a twinkle in the eyes that still identically matched those of her lover's.

With her eyes misting over, the bard looked first at the older woman, over to her champion and then back again. "Yes . . . Mom . . . I do believe it is time." As a tear trickled down her fair face, the blonde gave her mother-in-law another hug and a kiss on the cheek.

"So, shall we wake the two missing Amazons and get to eating?" Xena quickly lightened the atmosphere in the room.

"Sounds good to me." Gabrielle agreed with having breakfast as soon as possible and started walking out of the room on her way to awaken the sleepy heads.

During the meal the discussion led to how they were going to spend the remainder of the day and evening. Xena promised her mother that they would stay the night again and perhaps even one more day before starting back to the Village. She explained how it would have normally been a two-day excursion, but that now they had a unique mode of transportation that took one entire day off the return trip.

While everyone was helping to clean up after breakfast, Xe suggested that she walk over to her father's house and invite the family to dinner. Toxaris offered to give her a ride and the proposal was immediately accepted.

"I want you to drop me off out of sight, though. I don't want Mother to have any idea that we have company; she might forget and unintentionally let it slip to Father. Could we also stop by Lyceus' home? I'd like to give my sister-in-law a little time to get herself and Phoebe ready and make sure she doesn't start making her own supper."

"Sure, we can go anywhere you'd like," the Amazon replied.

"Don't you girls be too long," Cyrene cautioned. "Xena wants to see all the changes that have occurred in Amphipolis since her last visit."

"Last visit," the warrior chuckled. "I guess that's one way of looking at it."

"Riding won't take us very long Grandmother. Besides, I have to go into the shop for a few candlemarks this afternoon. While I'm there I'll talk to Tescalus about taking some time off. Lyceus isn't going to believe it when you pop in on him at work." The young woman was giddy with excitement.

Xe's hand was on the door when Xena called over to her.

"Do you know how to ride, Xe?"

The young woman looked startled, "Of course, I've been riding almost since I've been old enough to walk. Father made sure all of us received lessons. It's just that I don't have a horse of my own right now. Lyceus' lost his in an accident and Cassia's pregnant so he doesn't like to leave her without transportation. I lent him mine. He usually comes and gets me for work on my early mornings; when I go in late, I walk."

"In that case why don't you take Ginger." Xena suggested.

Gabrielle shot her lover a quick look of disbelief and then shook her head smiling.

"That's a good idea, Xe." The bard agreed. "Would you like to ride Ginger?"

"Yes, that would be fabulous, thanks Aunt Gabrielle."

"You're very welcome, Xe."

"Well, I guess you don't need me to tag along," Toxaris added slightly dejected.

"Hey, you're more than welcome to come along for the ride, Toxaris," Xe informed the Amazon.

"In fact, it would still be a good idea, that way you could keep Ginger with you out of sight, while I walked on up to the houses."

"Okay." Toxaris agreed. *Now the three who need to be alone together for a while will finally get a chance.* "I'm ready when you are."

After Xe and Toxaris left on horseback the four remaining women finished cleaning up and then made a pot of tea and sat out on the front porch to reminisce; there was so much to catch up on and so little time to do it. A few candlemarks later the riders arrived back at the house. Xe was still excited, as she had carefully avoided telling her mother and sister-in-law why they were being invited for dinner on such short notice and for no specific reason. Of course, the idea of not having to cook appealed to them both, until Xe asked her mom to bring a couple pies and her



sister-in-law to make her famous vegetable combo. Cyrene made bread the day before so there would be plenty of fresh rolls to go around.

It was almost midday and Xe needed to check in at work. Xena suggested that she ride with her and they would pick her up on their way back after she showed Eve and Toxaris the town. Cyrene shooed them all on their way and said she intended to start dinner early so there would be no rushing when everyone arrived.

"What did you plan on having for dinner, Mother? I know we've popped in on you rather unexpectedly."

"I thought perhaps I might be able to add to what was left of last night's stew and . . ."

"Ah, Mom," Gabrielle replied. "I think we finished the stew off last night."

"Listen, you and Gabrielle get the potatoes and carrots cleaned and peeled." Xena proposed. "Eve, Toxaris, and I will go ahead and get a few rabbits - we're going to have quite a few hungry mouths to feed tonight - damn - there're 13 of us. I think we need at least four of those little varmints to make a decent meal." She turned to Xe, "You go ahead and take Ginger to work; Gabrielle can ride behind me on Argo."

"Are you sure, Aunt Xena?"

"Positive . . . now run along and do what you have to do. Get home when you can to help you grandmother, just in case we aren't back yet."

"Sure . . . great . . ." The young woman gave her grandmother a hug and kiss and did the same for her aunts, then ran out the door as she was already close to being late. "See you in a while," she yelled back from the front yard.

"She's absolutely lovely, Mom." Gabrielle noted, while looking out the front window as the younger Xena mounted Ginger and took off in the direction of the middle of town.

"She certainly has been a blessing to me." Cyrene admitted. "I don't know what I'd do without her."

"Okay." Xena turned to Eve and Toxaris. "You two ready to do some quick hunting?"

The reply came in the form of a simultaneous affirmative and the young women laughed at their enthusiasm to get out and go 'kill' something.

"I'll get my bow and arrows from the barn," Toxaris said as she headed for the door. "Will we need the horses?"

"Yes, I think it's best to go out to the woods," Xena replied. "There's apt to be more game available there."

"At least with the three of you going, it shouldn't take you very long," Gabrielle commented. "But you'd better get going if you want to have time to show Eve and Toxaris around while the sun is still high."

Xena walked over and gave her mother a hug and a kiss and then kissed Gabrielle on the cheek. "We won't be long; you're right, with three expert hunters, this should be a piece of cake." She smiled and then turned and left two of the most important women in her life in the kitchen, while she hurried to join the third out in the barn.

"I thought they'd never leave," Gabrielle kidded as she turned back to Cyrene. "I guess you and I will get caught up on some good gossip now, without Xena shushing me, huh Mom?"

"Don't we always?" The older woman smiled at the blonde.

They decided that they would probably need more bread so Cyrene started on the dough while Gabrielle began peeling the vegetables. While they worked, they talked about the situations that were difficult to discuss with Xena and Eve in the house. The blonde went into greater depth about the battle with the Gods and Eve's transformation. She also elaborated on the lighter side about their friendship with the Goddess of Love and how, if it hadn't of been for her taking them up to Mt. Olympus in the first place, she and Eve would probably not have been around today. Ares was the one who eventually gave his mortality and Godhood for their lives but Aphrodite was the messenger, without whom they wouldn't have even been there to be saved.

Of course as the day progressed they also talked about the wedding plans and what kind of a ceremony Gabrielle wanted to have. Cyrene lived vicariously through the young woman's telling of her dreams and thanked the Gods, once again, that her Xena found the young bard all those many years ago.

The afternoon went by quickly and before the two women realized how late it was, they heard the hoof beats of horses as the three hunters returned.

Eve was the first through the door, carrying four already skinned and cleaned rabbits. Toxaris came through next and told Cyrene that Xena was hanging the skins in the barn. They cleaned up by the well and were now ready to have a guided tour of Amphipolis.

"We have everything pretty much under control here," Cyrene declared when Xena came through the door, looking around to see what the women had accomplished while the 'hunters' were out procuring tonight's dinner.

"I'll put the rabbits and vegetables into the pot and then into the oven." Cyrene informed Xena. "Then I'm going to take a little nap, while the four of you visit Amphipolis." Seeing the look of involuntary sadness cross her daughter's face, she smiled sweetly. "It's okay Xena, it's been a gradual metamorphosis for me; I'm really quite used to it."

The younger woman turned away from her mother, pretending she heard something rustling outside the window, but her actions fooled no one in the room.

The remainder of the afternoon flew by as quickly as the morning and early afternoon had. Figuring there were about three candlemarks remaining, before Toris and Lyceus would be off work, they headed first for the apothecary shop.

When the statuesque warrior made her entrance into the shop, flanked by three beautiful Amazons, heads turned to follow their movements. Xena looked around and instantly her eyes were drawn to a gorgeous young man standing behind the counter thoroughly immersed in his work as he was measuring out some powder for a customer with a sick child. Putting a hand on Gabrielle's shoulder she leaned down and whispered in the bard's ear. "By the Gods Gabrielle, he's the spitting image of my Lyceus. It's like stepping back in time." She squeezed the blonde's shoulder then released it as she traveled toward the counter with her entourage following close behind.

"Can I help you?" The young man looked up from his chore and into intense blue eyes that immediately struck a chord in his heart. He swallowed hard as he, for a second, thought he was looking into the eyes of his grandmother. Shaking off the distraction, he repeated his question. "I'm sorry, can I help you?"

"Sure . . . you want to come around here and give me a hug?" The request coming from the tall, beautiful, warrior shook the young man to his toes.

"E-x-c-u-s-e me?" He stammered. With an even more confused look, he glanced over at the blonde standing beside the warrior. He couldn't understand why she was trying so desperately to stifle a laugh.

"It's Lyceus, right?" The warrior asked in a stern voice, her penetrating eyes catching and holding those of like color.

The man's full attention was shifted back to the stunning dark-haired woman standing before him. "That's right. And you are?"

"This," Xena said, pointing to the woman standing beside her, and ignoring his question completely, "is Toxaris, an Amazon warrior."

"And you are . . . " The young man tried to repeat his question, barely looking in the direction of the aforementioned Amazon.

The tall warrior again interrupted his train of thought. "This is another Amazon, an Amazon Princess, to be exact." Xena continued to ignore his query and pointed to Eve.

"Uh, huh . . . and what does all this have to do with . . . "

"And finally . . . " Xena continued, her hand on her lover's shoulder, "Lyceus, let me introduce you to not only an Amazon Queen, but also Gabrielle, the Bard of Potidaea."

If she didn't think she had his undivided attention before, she surely was receiving it now. He took a step backward and covered his mouth with his hand as an involuntary gasp escaped his throat. Shaking his head he began to speak and this time his aunt let him finish.

"If those two ladies are Amazons and the lady beside you is Gabrielle, the Bard of Potidaea, then you could be none other than . . . **NO** . . . This is some kind of a joke . . . my sister put you up to this didn't she? She's always pulling nonsense like this on me . . . "

"Lyceus," Gabrielle interjected. "Take a really good look at the warrior before you. The stature, the features, the poise, the striking sapphire blue eyes, don't doubt your first reaction."

"Aunt Xena?" The final realization came as a whisper.

"Nice to meet you Lyceus, now come on around here and give me a hug."

Without another moment's hesitation the young man actually jumped the counter and landed directly in front of his aunt, who he promptly enveloped in his arms.

"If I was Father's age, I would imagine you would be picking me up off the floor about this time, Aunt Xena." The young man confessed.

"We'll see if that happens tonight at dinner." Xena smiled and hugged him again and then put him out at arm's length. "Do you know how much you look like your namesake, Lyceus?"

"As a matter of fact, yes, Aunt Xena. I think Grandmother spent the first five years of my life telling me and occasionally she still gets that far away look in her eyes. I think she loved your brother very much."

"We all did, Lyceus." Just saying the name and looking at his handsome face made her heart happy. "We all did."

Introductions were made again, this time informing the young man of Eve's relationship to him and reiterating about seeing him at dinner. A small crowd was beginning to form around the counter and Xena told Lyceus to go on back to work and they would see him at his grandmother's in a few candlemarks.

There was just about enough time to take a quick look around the town and have Xena point out some of the more interesting aspects of Amphipolis. Just like Potidaea, this area had grown enormously in the 25 years the duo had been frozen in the ice cave. All the same, Xena still recognized the landmarks that had been around since her youth.

Before the sun fell too low on the horizon the small group started back to the house. Ginger was already in the barn when they got there and Xe and Cyrene had begun putting out dishes and glass for the anticipated dinner. The smell of roast rabbit filled their nostrils and their salivary glands told them they were all hungrier than anticipated as they entered the door to the home.

"Okay," Gabrielle announced approaching the kitchen, "what can we do to help?"

"Well, we're certainly not going to be able to fit everyone at the table." Cyrene admitted, looking at the dining area. "The weather is really beautiful, so if you want to we could eat outside. There's a larger table out back that might fit all of us and benches instead of chairs."

"We could take two chairs out for the ends of the table - that would give us more room," Gabrielle stated, grabbing a damp cloth to clean the table and heading out the door. Xena grabbed two chairs and followed close behind her.

"This will do just fine," the bard acknowledged looking at the large, planked, wooden table. "It looks like it's been years since this has been used."

Xena smiled as she placed the chairs at the head and foot of the table. "Yes, but we had some wonderful parties sitting around this table. Holidays were always busy around here."

The warrior's ears perked up as she heard the sound of horses coming down the road. "I have a feeling we've got company." With her warrior's stance hiding the butterflies in the pit of her stomach, she put her arm around Gabrielle and gave the smaller woman a quick kiss. "I love you, my soul, let's go reacquaint ourselves with the family."

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The evening was a marvelous mixture of the old and the new with children and spouses being introduced and brother and sister reuniting. Twenty-five years is a lifetime for some people, and it was difficult to fit everything everyone wanted to know into the short span of one evening. Often when Gabrielle or Xena would glance over at Cyrene they would see the look of utter contentment on the older woman's face, as she sat with her entire family filling her house with the sound of talking, and laughter. Four generations had been brought together on this auspicious occasion and the warrior and her bard were exceedingly glad they decided to make this trip before their wedding.

Partway through the evening Gabrielle noticed that Xe had gotten extremely quiet and went over to talk to the young woman.

"Is something bothering you?" Gabrielle asked.

"A little." Tears welled up in the striking blue eyes as she turned to her newly acquired aunt. "I can't get away from the shop for at least a week, Aunt Gabrielle. Tescalus told me I could have tomorrow off, but that he had to make an emergency trip to Athens and I was the only person he trusted enough to keep the shop open. I know you aren't able to wait for me that long. . . I was so looking forward to going with you." Now the tears were flowing freely and the bard held the younger woman close, trying to console her. "Don't worry, Xe, we'll figure something out. If you want to be at the wedding, I promise - we'll find a way to get you there."

Toxaris had been wandering around the room and overhead the end of the conversation. She saw that Xe was upset and felt secure enough in her relationship with Gabrielle to ask why. When the bard explained the situation, Toxaris smiled.

"I'll be happy to come back down and escort you to the Village, Xe. Listen, Eve will be all tied up in the preparations for the joining and I'll most likely be standing around with nothing to do. I'll grab an extra friend for company on the way down and we'll come get you, no problem. I'm sure Xena will be able to make us a map."

"You'd do that for me," Xe sobbed.

"Sure . . . we're family . . . remember."

Gabrielle smiled and patted Toxaris on the shoulder. "Thanks, Toxaris that's wonderful." Then she turned back to her niece. "See . . . have you now learned that before getting yourself all upset for candelmarks, the wise thing to do is tell someone about the problem. It didn't turn out to be such a disaster after all."

With the dilemma taken care of Gabrielle went back to join the festivities, while Toxaris and Xe stood talking of the forthcoming trip they would be making. The remainder of the evening soon disappeared into early morning. Not having heard her mother's voice in a while, Xena looked around until she spotted Cyrene asleep in her rocker with Phoebe in the same condition, sitting on her lap. The warrior smiled at the touching picture of the oldest and youngest of her relatives clinging lovingly to each other while the God of Dreams, by the looks of it, supplied both of them with pleasant images.

As it was now well into the early morning hours, and knowing that work would come within the next few candelmarks, Toris gathered up his family and, after conversing with Lavinia, invited everyone over to his house for dinner tonight. Lyceus gathered his small clan and soon the noise and excitement diminished and the house was once again quiet. It was decided that there would be no cleaning up until later and all the women retired to their respective rooms to attain a few candelmarks of shut-eye before beginning the day anew.

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Knowing that this day would be the last spent in Amphipolis for a while, none of the women seemed to be in need of an overabundance of sleep. They were all up and flitting around within a few candelmarks of going to sleep. Toxaris and Eve straightened up while Gabrielle and Cyrene made something for them all to eat. Xena motioned for Xe to come outside with her and asked if there were any pressing repairs that needed to be done around the house that perhaps Lyceus or Toris might not be able to get around to fixing in the near future. She found that her niece had been named rightly, as she was almost as capable as her aunt was when it came to keeping the house in good repair. Instead of going back inside and helping with the menial tasks, the two sat on the large table in the back and got to know each other a little better. Xena was particularly interested in why a young woman as beautiful as Xe didn't talk of any suitors.

The younger woman blushed as she informed her aunt that she had no desire to be tied down to a house and children, at least not at this stage in her life. She wanted to travel and study but felt obligated to stay around, at least until Euphrosyne was old enough to take her place for a while. She refused to leave Cyrene alone and didn't think her younger sister was mature enough to stay alone with the older woman.

"That's very commendable of you Xe, but you can't live your life for Mother. Does she know your desires?"

"Not all of them, Aunt Xena. I don't want her to feel like she's holding me back; I love her very much."

"I'm sure you do, but you're not giving her the credit she's due. Mother would be fine if Ganymede and Euphrosyne could just take turns checking on her. I'm sure Toris and Lyceus could handle the house repairs, and Lavinia and Cassia seem to love her like a mother. Don't you think they would be more than happy to help with the cooking and cleaning if she needed it? You need to get on with your life, and if you were to put the question to Mother, I'm sure she would tell you the exact same thing."

The younger woman smiled at her aunt and reached over to touch her arm. "You know there are many nights when I think Grandmother forgets which Xena I am. She says some things that don't relate at all to me." There was a gleam of pride in the younger woman's sapphire eyes. "She's told me on more than one occasion that she was glad Father agreed to call me Xena, because as it turned out I am very much like she expected you would have been if Cortese never made it to our village."

"I'm glad you've been here for her all these years Xe." The warrior reached over and pulled the younger version of herself into a loving embrace. Then she started to chuckle, "I'm surprised Mother didn't try to talk you into coloring your hair."

"Aunt Xena!" The younger woman laughed.

"Come on, I'm sure Gabrielle will be looking for us soon, better to make the entrance on our own, rather than to be dragged back into the house on command."

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The remainder of the day and evening followed fairly close to that of the day before, except that the group made a side trip to Lyceus' house to visit with Cassia and play with Phoebe. Dinner at Toris' was quite enjoyable and then the house began to shrink as news had spread throughout the town that Xena and the bard from Potidaea had come to visit. Friends and friends of friends of Toris' and Lyceus' came calling, as well as old acquaintances of Xena's and new members of their families.

Once again Gabrielle was asked to perform, and as usual she was more than happy to oblige. The evening disappeared far too quickly and as the moon rose to its highest point, Cyrene mentioned

that the visiting women had a long day's journey ahead of them that would begin far earlier than expected, if they didn't manage to get at least a little sleep.

Cassia handed Gabrielle a sack of cookies to take on the trip and gave Xena a skin of homemade wine. Over the years Lavinia had heard the 'nutbread' tale more than once from Cyrene's lips and made sure her new sister-in-law had a couple loaves to take with her and share on the trip home.

It was difficult saying goodbye to everyone and leaving for the short jaunt back to Cyrene's, but it was an easy chore, compared to what they knew they would be feeling the next morning as they were saying their final good-byes and heading north.

Xena spent a small amount of quiet time talking to Cyrene after everyone else had bedded down and was still holding her mother's hand when the woman finally could keep her eyes open no longer and nodded off to sleep. The warrior sat on the edge of the bed with hot tears silently trickling down her cheeks, knowing in her heart that this might be the last time she would behold the image of the woman who had brought her into the world and who loved her so dearly. Instead of going back into her own bed, Cyrene's daughter curled up at the bottom of her mother's bed and in the silence of the old familiar room, willed herself to sleep.

There was a mixture of joy and sadness with the rising of the sun. No one needed to be nudged from sleep, as everyone seemed to awaken simultaneously when Apollo rode his chariot across the sky and chased away the darkness. The kitchen was a solemn place on this bright new morning, and small talk caught in the throats of the women who tried to find something witty and light to talk about.

Finally, Cyrene lightened the atmosphere with an unexpected exclamation. "Girls, if this is any indication of the mood surrounding my funeral, I'll simply have to refuse to die."

Looks of confusion crossed the faces of all the women present as they turned and stared in the direction of the old woman. Upon receiving their total concentration, she broke into an ear-to-ear smile.

"This has been a marvelous reunion ladies, one which I prayed for, but never in all my years, actually expected to come to fruition. Please . . . let's not ruin the past few days with a sorrowful ending. This old heart of mine has not been this filled with joy in years. To have my entire family gathered, in this house all at one time was a dream come true. Now - let's have no more pouting and finish breakfast so the four of you can get yourselves headed home; you have a wedding to prepare for."

The ice having been broken and words of joy overriding the feelings of sorrow in everyone's heart, the atmosphere lightened and the meal became a pleasant event.

Hiding the heaviness in their hearts, the inevitability of farewells finally arrived.

In an almost orderly fashion each of the women took their turn saying goodbye first to Xe and then to Cyrene. Toxaris reaffirmed that she would be back to escort Xe to the Amazon Village in



one cycle of the moon, as it would take that long to get the celebration prepared. She thanked Cyrene for her hospitality, and then turned and walked toward her horse.

While Toxaris was talking to Cyrene, Eve said goodbye to Xe. Each in turn, the women continued on until there was not a dry eye between them.

Gabrielle finished saying goodbye to Cyrene. Xena hugged her niece and said they would be expecting to see her again very soon.

It was then that the warrior turned to her mother and slowly walked into her extended arms. Gabrielle could tell from the stance of her warrior that Xena's knees were weak as she stood saying goodbye to the woman she might never have the opportunity to hold in her arms again. Wrapped in her mother's embrace and with a lump in her throat the daughter held her mother tightly to her chest and kissed the snow-capped head of the woman she loved so deeply. "We'll be back to visit again, Mother, I promise," she whispered softly.

"I know Xena. You, Gabrielle and Eve have made me a very happy woman and I'm thrilled that young Xena will be able to attend your wedding. She'll come home and tell me all about it, don't you worry. I'll be able to have the memories through her eyes. I love you, daughter, now go . . . have an uneventful journey . . . and keep Gabrielle and my granddaughter safe."

"I will mother." She let loose her hold on the older woman and looked over at her niece, mouthing the words, "*You take care of her for me.*"

Xe nodded in return and watched as her heroic aunt slowly mounted Argo and turned once more to glance at the home of her youth.

With hands waving high in the air, the foursome trotted away, and the beginning of the final leg of their journey home was begun.

***The End***