

# ~ Reunions ~ Potidaea ~

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.)

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With the horses fully rested and Gabrielle's wounds almost a memory, the short journey to the lake and the enchanted ledge would not be a burden on anyone.

The group had been surprised to see that more than half the Village was awake and ready to join them at breakfast and to make sure they got off to a good start. The communal lodge was filled to capacity, and the kitchen was going full steam when the soon-to-be-travelers entered for their morning meal.

There were all sorts of inquiries about Potidaea and Amphipolis and about the families they were going home to visit. Xena finally had to squelch the questions so they could finish eating and get started. Besides, she could tell that Gabrielle was becoming uneasy at having to think about how the reunion with her sister might go. Twenty-five years . . . there was no way to tell what had taken place in their little villages in twenty-five years. Going home before was always a surprise, but at least when they started on their trips then, they had some idea as to who would greet them when they arrived. This time there were no such guarantees.

They finished eating and Xena ushered them through the throng of well wishers and out to where the horses stood, waiting for their riders to embark on a new adventure. The crowd outside the building was also growing, and Xena suggested that they hurry things up a bit before they were delayed any longer with extended farewells.

Rhea was, of course, the last of the Amazons to turn and head back toward the center of the Village, after an affectionate farewell to her daughter. Toxaris allowed her horse follow the others, while she looked back, waving to her mother, until the older woman was no longer visible. She was far from being a child, but she had never been farther than a day's foot excursion from the Village, and now they were traveling all the way to Potidaea. She had butterflies in her stomach at the thought of meeting the Queen's sister and Xena's mother. People of legend were coming to life all around her.

When they finally lost sight of the Village, an uncanny silence surrounded the four travelers. Each was lost in a world of her own, trying to imagine what the next few moons would hold in store.

Gabrielle was trying her damndest to keep a positive outlook as her bardic imagination took hold and began running in many different directions at the same time. *Will I recognize Lila when I first see her? What if Mom and Dad are dead - I have to realize that might be a very viable situation. Am I sure this was a good idea? Of course, it was a good idea - we have to go home sometime.*

Xena noticed the strained look on the bard's face but, the fast pace they were traveling at was not conducive to conversing.

*I know she's worried about whether or not her parents are still alive. I have the same concerns myself about my Mom. Twenty-five years is a lifetime. This trip is necessary, but the stress . . . the anticipation . . . I hate the feeling of helplessness when I can't alleviate her fears!*

Eve's mind was just as busy, but with thoughts running in a totally different direction as she wondered what her Aunt Lila, her Grandmother, or her Uncle Toris for that matter, would think of her. She envisioned what it would be like to have cousins. She never had close family around while growing up and wondered if they would look like her. Thoughts such as those fostered new thoughts . . . well not actually new . . . but things she wanted to one day ask her Mother but had been reticent to talk about. She read most of Gabrielle's scrolls, but a few seemed to be missing, and she often wondered if that was on purpose. She distinctly remembered reading the story that dealt with her mother discovering that she was pregnant, but in it Xena kept insisting that her pregnancy was impossible.

Eve could just not bring herself to step across the mother/daughter barrier and ask who her father was, especially now that both her 'Moms' were embarking on this extensive trip in preparation for their joining. Her question was an important one, but not a pressing one. It would wait until after the wedding; it really wasn't paramount to her, just a bit of a nagging curiosity.

Toxaris rode along in a bit of a haze, wondering what the towns of Potidaea and Amphipolis would be like. She was trained as a warrior but in her lifetime had never really been in any other village save for a few of the smaller friendly provinces adjacent to the Amazon territory.

They had been pushing the horses fairly hard and it was getting close to the middle of the day. Xena knew Gabrielle must be getting hungry by now and she could see that the less disciplined

horses were getting harder to handle. The distance traveled so far assured that they would reach the lake before nightfall, even if they stopped and had a midday meal. Looking at her three companions she could see that everyone was lost in thought. This pilgrimage seemed to hold a special magic for everyone involved.

"Gabrielle." Xena looked over at her lover in hopes of getting her attention. Receiving no response from the bard who was still lost in thought, she spoke a little louder and slowed Argo down a bit, hoping Ginger would follow suit.

"Gabrielle!"

Jolted from her reverie, the bard almost lost her balance. "What?"

"You want to stop for food?" Xena gestured with her hand to her mouth, making a chewing motion with her jaw. "Yes. Food, do you want to eat?"

"Yes! Where?"

They were within sight of a small creek.

"Up ahead," Xena answered. "By the water."

Hearing most of the conversation the other two women also prepared to bring their animals to a halt as the creek bed came closer into view.

"It's been a very quiet morning," Eve announced, dismounting and walking her horse into the shallow water.

"Lots to think about," Gabrielle chimed in. "I have such mixed emotions about making the leap tomorrow morning. Right now it is the thing I most and least want to do in all the world."

"Least and most?" Toxaris asked as she joined Eve by the creek.

"Yes. Twenty-five years - that's practically your entire life Toxaris. I haven't seen my family in twenty-five years, as far as they're concerned. It's only been months to me. Can you even fathom that? They've aged a lifetime and I'm only a few months older. My baby sister is now my elder. It's almost more than the mind can comprehend."

Xena grabbed Ginger's reins and handed them and Argo's to Eve.

"Believe me, Gabrielle, I have the same uneasiness you do, but you were right about making this trip; it will put our minds at ease . . . one way or the other. It's something we need to do for ourselves, for Eve, and for those we love and haven't seen in far too long." By this time the dark warrior had her arms around the smaller woman and she gently kissed her lover's golden crown. "Everything will be as it's supposed to be, my love. We both know that by now. Our worrying about it before hand will not change a single situation."

Emerald eyes sparkled as they looked up into the face of love. "Why Xena that was eloquent. You know you never cease to amaze me." She smiled as strong fingers began to tickle her midriff.

"Xena, cut it out! Where's your sense of humor?" Gabrielle did her best to wiggle away from the insistent fingers, but to no avail.

"Just because I try to get you to stop worrying is no reason to insult me." The soft contralto had a definite hint of mischief in it.

"That wasn't an insult," the bard protested through fits of laughter. "It was a compliment."

With a mischievous rise of her eyebrow, the warrior bent down, picked the smaller woman up, and began quickly walking toward the stream.

"No! Xena, No!" Gabrielle screamed. "Put me down!"

"Precisely what I intend to do, my love." The warrior answered.

"Not there . . . please . . . Xena . . . don't . . . " The plea came too late as the bard found herself sitting in the cool, clear water with Ginger splashing her with her face.

"Thanks," the blonde addressed her horse. "That's just what I need, you joining in with her." The sound of laughter far above her head set the wheels a spinning in her mind. Thinking quickly, she grabbed the ankles of the booted person standing beside her and began laughing herself, as caught dangerously off guard, nearly six feet of Warrior Princess tumbled into the creek beside her.

"Refreshing, isn't it?" Gabrielle grinned over into eyes so blue they would make the heavens jealous. The bard's smile melted the frown on the warrior and she reached over and pulled her lover close.

"Who says warriors don't bathe?" Xena smiled and the sun shone through all the melancholy thoughts that had been traveling through Gabrielle's head since they left the Amazon Village.

"Well, at least they're good for comic relief," the blonde answered as she splashed water in the direction of the dark-haired beauty.

"If you two are finished acting like adolescents," Eve interrupted, standing above them with her hands on her hips.

"Oooo . . . wrong tone of voice to take with your Mother." Xena lashed one long arm out, catching the young woman around her knees and bringing her down into the cool liquid with them.

"Gods Mother . . . " Eve began but was quickly assaulted with a splash of water onto her face.

"Now, now, Eve." Gabrielle chided as she splashed the young woman again.

"Mom you're . . . "

This time the spray came from the opposite direction.

"Okay, no fair . . . two against one . . ." Eve whined.

"Didn't I tell you the Fair was in Athens, Eve?" Xena chimed in.

"Toxaris! Are you going to let them do this to me?"

"Of course not, my love. The Gods forbid I allow them all the fun." Toxaris bent over and began joining in the fun of flinging water in all directions, when she made the error of hitting the wrong target. Seconds later she found herself face first in the chilly liquid.

It was at this point that Xena stood and offered Gabrielle her hand. "Now that we've all gotten our minds off solemn subjects, what say we dry off and get something to eat?"

"Reading my mind again are you, warrior?" Gabrielle asked as she was being helped up from her seated position.

"Always, my soul." Xena answered with a clandestine grin.

Stripped down to undergarments, with their clothing spread on nearby bushes, the travelers relaxed in the midday sun, enjoying the food they brought with them from the Village.

Candlemarks later they were traveling again, contented, relaxed, and in slightly brighter moods. Because of the rest, they were able to continue at a quickened pace and found themselves reaching the lake in record time.

Camp was set up in a similar fashion to the way they handled it the last time around. Gabrielle gathered firewood, while Eve did some fishing. Toxaris decided she would help Eve, and Xena began unloading the horses of everything that was needed for the evening.

They had decided to take the animals on up to the enchanted forest for the night, where they could roam without being put in harm's way. Since there was little to unload, the warrior decided to take Argo up, while everyone was still gone; she would be back before being missed.

Seconds later the warrior and her steed arrived at the now familiar *home away from home*. She relieved the mare of her saddlebags and then took her saddle off, allowing her to wander through the forest unencumbered. "Go on girl, find some dinner. Aphrodite promised there was a water supply easily accessible for you, also.

At the sound of the Goddess' name there appeared the characteristic pink and gold shimmering lights along with the crackle of static electricity.

"Good day to you Warrior Babe. How's it going?"

"Hi Aphrodite. Everything is just fine and this little oasis of yours has definitely come in handy for us."

"So, have you thought about the wish I promised you?"

"A little, but I want to make sure it's something special and something I can't do for myself before asking. Right now my mind is focused on this trip home."

"So, the Little Bard wants her sister in the wedding; is that right?"

"Not only her sister, she wants my mother there, too. We're not even sure who is still alive, Aphrodite." The warrior looked at the Goddess, knowing she would know but did not want her question to become her wish.

"Would you like me to relieve your minds a little Before you take the journey home?"

"At what cost?"

"Ever the cynic aren't you, my warrior friend? No cost, just a freebee from your favorite Goddess."

"That being the case, it would certainly relieve a lot of mental anguish, Aphrodite. Gabrielle is worried sick wondering what she will find when she arrives home . . ."

"And you, of course, have no such trepidations, right my fearless friend?"

"Of course I do, I am human, you know." The warrior's voice was sarcastic and slightly acid.

"You're not just any human, Xena; you're smarter than that. You've been favored and protected by the Gods . . . Everyone's Gods . . . for most of your life."

"Favored, protected and Used," the warrior spit the words a little more vehemently than she had intended. "I'm sorry, Aphrodite, I didn't . . ."

"Never mind." The Goddess waved her hand and shook her head. "Listen I didn't come here to bicker with you. I know my little friend is in for some solemn news and I thought it might be easier if she was prepared ahead of time."

Xena stared at the Goddess, her mouth going dry at the thought of her having to relate to Gabrielle news of her parent's demise.

"Herodotus died almost ten years ago in an accident. It seems one of his mules kicked him in the head and he never recovered. Hecuba died a few years later from a sudden illness. She didn't suffer Xena. But they were both around long enough to enjoy their grandchildren for a while . . ."

"So Lila . . . "

"I'm getting there, Warrior Babe, give me time. Lila is fine and there are children, but you know, some things you should find out for yourselves. I just thought since this trip was for a happy reason, my little friend should be given a softening of the blow."

With a pensive look upon her face, Xena pondered before beginning to ask the question that was now most prominent in her mind. "Aphrodite . . . um . . . "

"She's fine, Xena. Much older than you will anticipate and very frail, but she is fine." The Goddess put a hand upon her friend's shoulder. "She will be so happy to see the three of you. She still prays for all of you and has no idea that you have returned. She thinks the rumors of you coming back, fighting, and killing Gods is merely that, rumors. She's an old woman and faith dies hard, my friend."

Xena could feel her heart pounding and her knees felt like they were going to give way. It was a double blessing that the Goddess of Love had just bestowed upon her. The good news interspersed with the bad. Now it was her job to relay the information to Gabrielle.

"Thank you Aphrodite." There were tears in the warrior's eyes. "I don't know what . . . "

"Take good care of my Little Bard. I didn't want her surprised with the news of her parent's passing. Lila thinks of her often and will be thrilled to see all of you, I'm sure. I'm anticipating that wedding of yours." The Goddess smiled broadly. "The Warrior Princess, Champion of the Amazons, Consort to the Bard Queen, settled and domesticated, tied to . . . "

"Now wait just a damn minute there . . . "

"TTFN Warrior Babe, gotta run." The Goddess disappeared in the wink of an eye leaving behind only a scattering of gold and pink dust and the sweet smell of honeysuckle.

Xena turned around to see that candles had been lit in the grotto and there was a small parcel in the middle of the heart-shaped bed. Walking over and picking it up, she carefully read the inscription written in gold letters *To My Favorite Two Mortals*. Deciding that since it was addressed to the two of them Gabrielle should be here when it was opened. Xena placed it back onto the bed and walked into the forest. With the speed of the Goddess she found herself back down at the campsite.

An intensely aggravated Gabrielle greeted her near the fire pit.

"There you are! Why didn't you leave a message? When I saw that Argo was gone, also, I thought perhaps there was trouble."

"What were you thinking, Gabrielle? You know I'd never leave all of you here and go off on my own." Xena was still coming to grips with the news she had just been given and Gabrielle's being upset was not helping the situation in the least.

"I know no such thing. Think of all the times you went off leaving me at one campsite or another while you went off fighting for the greater good."

"Gabrielle that was a lifetime ago, when you were still wet behind the ears. I haven't left you anywhere in ages." Defending her actions, she continued. "I thought I'd start taking the animals and supplies we didn't need for the night on up to the forest like we had planned. That way we wouldn't have so much to do in the morning, and the animals would be free to roam without wandering away from the campsite." *What is Tartarus am I doing, accounting for every damn thought I have. Maybe I am henpecked - Damn!*

The bard had stopped her rampage and was standing, staring at her warrior as she listened to Xena making excuses for why she was not exactly where Gabrielle had left her. This was very unlike the champion she knew and loved.

"Whoa!" The blonde threw up her arms and walked closer to her mate. "Okay, give."

"Huh?"

"Something . . . something isn't right here. You're giving me reasons as to why you were gone. You don't give Reasons; you just go and Do and that's that."

Fumbling for words, Xena tried to compose herself. "Well . . . I was just . . . trying to be thoughtful."

"Thoughtful, huh?"

"Yes . . . that's it . . . thoughtful. I thought I would be back before you missed me, that's why I didn't leave a note."

"Okay," Gabrielle shook her head. "Okay. I can live with that. So . . ." she began to change the subject. ". . . do you think the girls are about finished fishing?"

"Should be . . . want me to go down and check?"

"No . . . Xena you okay?"

"I'm fine, I'll just start the fire." She turned away from Gabrielle as she began readying the wood to burn. *What am I going to do to get through this meal? Calm down and act naturally, that's what. I know Gabrielle knows me better than anyone else, but I've got to remain cool until I have a chance to think. She took a few calming breaths. I have to figure out how I'm going to break it to her that her parents are both gone. Damn Aphrodite, why did you have to leave this up to me? It's not Fair -- yeah, yeah, I know - the Fair's in Athens.*

Xena didn't turn around to face her mate until she heard the sounds of Eve and Toxaris coming up from the lake area.



"I think I hear the girls coming this way," the warrior stated over her shoulder. "This fire should be nice and hot by the time we're ready to put the fish on."

The warrior had definitely decided that Gabrielle would be the first to know of the news the Goddess had personally delivered. Tomorrow morning, when the bard was still sleeping she would come back down and tell Eve. After all, Eve didn't even know Gabrielle's family and when she thought about it, as awful as it seemed, Herodotus probably wouldn't have given Eve the time of day and would only have broken Gabrielle's heart with his terrible prejudice. She didn't mean to think badly of the dead but her lover's father was definitely not one of her favorite people.

The girls had brought back more than enough of the creatures of the lake for the evening meal but even Toxaris noticed that the warrior seemed unusually quiet throughout the dinner and the cleanup. When questioned as to why the silent treatment Xena simply stated that she wasn't feeling very well and that perhaps a good night's sleep was all she needed. Gabrielle gave her mate questioning looks throughout the meal but never ventured a verbal question. She figured they would be alone soon enough and then she would definitely begin her interrogation.

While Eve and Gabrielle were cleaning up the dinner mess, Toxaris got out the bedrolls and Xena went ahead and took Ginger up to the forest. By the time she got back down, Gabrielle was ready to make the trip up with Eve's horse.

"We'll leave the key here with you two," Xena announced, handing the small golden object to her daughter. "If there are any signs of trouble, hop on the platform and get to the ledge as soon as possible. Don't wait around to fool with anyone - understand?"

"I'm not a child, mother." Eve responded a slightly indignant attitude.

"You don't have to remind me, Eve. I just don't want anyone getting hurt on this little adventure and the ledge is an easy escape."

"Don't worry, Xena. We'll use the platform." Toxaris assured the warrior. "I want us all around and in good condition for visiting. I can't wait to see Potidaea and Amphipolis." Realizing that she had forgotten the reason they were visiting the towns, she quickly added, "And of course I'm anxious to meet your families."

Goodnights were said by all and Gabrielle was the first one up to the ledge, taking Eve's horse with her. Xena waited until she saw the light flickering through the waterfall at its thinnest area then she knew the coast was clear for her and Toxaris' horse to make their way up.

As soon as all the horses were unbridled and set to roam, the bard turned to her warrior with a solemn look in her emerald eyes.

"All right Xena, no more excuses . . . no more avoidance . . . what in Tartarus is bothering you?"

The irritation in the bard's eyes softened when she looked into the face of her lover and saw a look of quiet despair. "Xena what happened between the time we arrived here and . . ."

"Come here Gabrielle." The warrior motioned her soul mate over to the bed. She picked up the small package and placed it on the small table. Then patting the bed she spoke again. "Sit here, next to me."

"Xena you're scaring me . . . "

The dark warrior took her soul mate's hands in her own and breathed a sigh of resignation; there was no way to soften the words that needed to be spoken.

"Sweetheart, our favorite Goddess came to visit me while I was up here alone. She wanted me to tell you something before we made the journey home." Tears welled in the velvet blue eyes of the warrior, as she searched her heart for a way to make the painful statement less so.

"Xena?"

"Gabrielle it's about your parents . . . "

A gasp and already the bard was formulating the rest of the sentence; sea-green eyes misted over immediately as the small blonde knew there would be only one situation that would have affected her warrior so.

"They're dead aren't they Xena?" The question was whispered as if the near silence would change the answer.

"Yes, my soul, they are." The warrior reached out her arms to enfold the other half of her heart, as she knew it was breaking in Gabrielle's chest.

"Aphrodite thought it might be easier for you to be forewarned by me, my love, rather than to go expecting something that wasn't to be." Xena held her close, rubbing her back and kissing the top of her head.

"Oh Xena," Gabrielle sobbed, "I had the feeling they would not be there to greet me. Did . . . did Aphrodite say . . . how . . ."

"Yes, my love she did. The dark warrior tilted the fair face in her direction, their eyes meeting. "Your father has been gone about ten years; he was wounded in the head by a mule and never recovered."

"And my mother? Xena what happened to my mother?"

The look on her lover's face was devastating. *Why do I have to be the bearer of such terrible tidings?* But she already knew the answer. *Because you love her more than life and only you can comfort her.*

"Gabrielle, Aphrodite said she contracted an illness and went quickly and without pain. You know they're together again."

"I know," the blonde sobbed, trying to keep her composure as the tears flowed freely. "I was just being selfish. I wanted to see them again." She looked up into her champion's eyes and noticed that the misty sapphire orbs were on the brink of spilling over. "Don't Xena . . . they led good full lives . . . Xena?"

"What my love?"

"Did Dite say anything about Lila?"

A small smile formed on the warrior's face, knowing that she could answer that question happily. "As a matter of fact she did."

"From the look on your face, I take it that my news this time is good?"

"Absolutely. Lila is married with children And your parents . . . Gabrielle they loved their grandchildren. But that's all the Goddess would say; she figured the good tidings we could find out for ourselves."

A look of despair came across the bard's face causing her slight smile to disappear. "Xena, I was so involved in my own grief over what you said about my parents I forgot to ask . . . did Aphrodite say anything about Cyrene?"

"Yes, my soul, she did. She said Mother was fine, aged and frail, but fine. She may not be up to making the trip, my love, but at least we will get a chance to visit with her."

"That's marvelous, Xena. If I can't visit with my own mother, yours is a definite second for me; I love her almost as much as my own."

"I know you do, Gabrielle, and she feels the same way toward you. At least some of each of our families has remained intact." She held her bard close and rocked her.

Remembering the package left on the bed, the warrior reached over and picked it up.

"It seems the Goddess of Love left us a little something. It was addressed to both of us so I thought it best to wait until you were around to open it." She handed the package to Gabrielle.

The blonde wiped away a tear as she read the inscription and then began to carefully unwrap what turned out to be a small vial. There was a note attached to it, also written in beautiful gold calligraphy:

**I know the news has brought you tears and thoughts that make you cry.**

**This potion brings sweet memories, which causes tears to dry.**

**Release your hold on sorrow, you both know that souls survive,**

**Those you love are happy now and in memory alive.**

**~~ Your Friend, Dite**

"What a lovely thing for her to do for us Xena. Take away the pain of losing love ones; a gift of healing." Gabrielle reached over and put the vial back on the table.

"Gabrielle . . . "

"Not tonight, Xena . . . I don't want to lose the pain tonight . . . I need to mourn them; it's only right."

"You know, Gabrielle, we don't have to leave tomorrow. Maybe we should take a day or two and let you get over your grief so when you see your sister there is only joy in your heart."

"I would really appreciate that, Xena. Thanks." The bard sat quietly next to her warrior who wanted desperately to be able to take the pain of loss away, but knew that Gabrielle had to deal with it on her own terms.

"Do you want something to drink?" Xena asked when she could think of nothing else to say.

"That would be nice, thanks."

The warrior left the bed and walked over to where she had placed the wineskins. Before pouring a goblet for each of them, she extinguished all but the candle on the nightstand and then turned back toward where she had left Gabrielle, only to find that her precious bard had draped herself across the bed and was again, softly sobbing into a pillow.

"Here Gabrielle."

As the blonde sat up, Xena handed her the soothing elixir. "This will merely take the edge off, not numb your feelings."

"Oh Xena, I feel so empty inside. I knew there was a strong chance of this happening, but I guess I was hoping that I would get one more chance to see them."

"You know, you could always ask Morpheus to allow you a dreamscape in which you get to say goodbye. It would at least ease your mind."

The small blonde shook her head in acknowledgement. "That's a good idea, my love, thank you. I may just do that." She picked up and drained the goblet in one continual drink, something Gabrielle seldom ever did.

Xena followed suit and drained her goblet as well, knowing that the bard would probably want to go to sleep and wanting to be there for her. After putting the goblets on the table and snuffing out the one remaining candle, the two reclined back onto the bed in their usual position. There was nothing more to be said that would make what was learned this evening any easier.

Xena lay with her eyes fixed on the pinpoints of stars as they began finding their way into the now darkened grotto. She could feel Gabrielle's heart pounding and knew that the bard was trying not to cry, but she was not exceedingly successful. The warrior could feel her shift becoming increasingly damper and found her own eyes filling with hot stinging liquid, more because of her bard's pain than for any other reason. With each stifled sob, the dark-haired beauty would apply a slight amount of pressure to Gabrielle's arm, merely to let her know she was there for her.

Within what seemed like less than a candlemark, the bard's breathing became less labored and more rhythmic. Xena thanked the God of Dreams for taking Gabrielle quickly to his realm and entreated him to make her lover's sleep as pleasant as possible on this night of sadness.

Gabrielle had taken her consort's advice and silently asked Morpheus to allow her to finalize a meeting with her parents. It seemed the God was listening for just such a request, as it was expediently acknowledged and fulfilled. In actuality, he had been forewarned that such a petition might be heading his way on this dark night and was awaiting the simple plea.

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Xena had expected to be awakened throughout the night with nightmares and cries of anguish from her lover, but as it seemed the two had slept not only through the night but well into the morning. Xena kissed her soul mate tenderly and started to unwind the smaller woman's arm from around her body.

"Not yet, Xena, please . . . I'm not asleep."

"Whatever you want, Gabrielle. Did you sleep alright?"

"Surprisingly so," came the immediate response. "I took your advice and asked Morpheus to allow me to say goodbye. Even though I know it was only in a dream, it has somehow set my mind and heart at ease, and I don't feel so guilty about not spending more time with them."

"That's as it should be, my love; it was through no fault of your own that you were encased in that tomb for 25 years."

"That's a good excuse, Xena, but we both know that Potidaea was not our most favorite place to visit. My father was always rude to you and never did anything but make you feel uncomfortable. The last time we were there I promised myself that I wouldn't put you through that again."

"But we would have been there for Lila's wedding and the birth of her children . . . at least we would have tried to be there," the warrior objected.

"It doesn't really matter, Xena; in my dream I told them how much I loved them and I came away feeling like a good daughter."

"You are a good daughter, Gabrielle . . . a good daughter, a good friend, a good lover, and a good person."

"And you, my champion, are very prejudiced." She sat up and looked her warrior in the face. "I'm glad Aphrodite made the decision to tell us what to expect. I think I would like to take today to just rest, though, and maybe do a little writing."

"No problem," the warrior agreed, as she got out of bed and started dressing. "I do need to go down and talk to Eve and Toxaris about the stay over, though. I will also tell them why. We still have plenty of bread and fruit from the Village and the girls can go fishing again. We can stay as long as you want to, Gabrielle. I don't want you to feel rushed."

"Today will be quite enough time. I'm still anxious to see Lila, her children, and her husband. Also, each day we put off heading for Potidaea, puts us further away from getting to Amphipolis, and further away from one of the main reasons for this trip to begin with . . . "

"That being?" There was a gleam in the warrior's sparkling cerulean eyes.

"I know you're kidding, Xena . . . right?" A smile appeared on the bard's lips that brightened the warrior's heart.

"Most definitely, my soul, most definitely." Xena gave her lover a tender hug and kiss, whispering, "How could I forget the anticipation of the day that will, in front of the world, bind you to me for the rest of this lifetime?"

"As if we really need a ceremony to do that, huh?" Gabrielle whispered back.

"Oh, but it will make a lovely memory." Xena released her lover and walked toward the forest. "I'll be right back with some tea and any breakfast the girls have fixed."

"You don't have to do that Xena, I'm really not hungry."

"Don't be ridiculous, you've got to eat . . . and since when are you not hungry?"

The blonde nodded in agreement, a small, unnoticed tear trickling from her eye as she conceded to the warrior bringing nourishment back up to her. "I'm going to shower . . . I'll be here waiting. Take your time Xena, no hurry."

The warrior stepped into the sunlight of the magical forest and disappeared in the blink of an eye. Getting out of bed, Gabrielle shed the shift she had worn for sleep and grabbed one of the soft

drying cloths from a shelf. When she reached the bathing area, she peeked out through the water to spy her lover, daughter and Toxaris sitting by the campfire. The vision elicited an outpouring of love to the strength in her life and she silently thanked Aphrodite for allowing Xena to be the one to break the news of her parents' passing to her.

Cool, cleansing, invigorating water splashed on her head and sent chills through her body. The sweet smelling peppermint soap they had bought on the way to the Amazon Village enhanced the bard's senses and for a few minutes she forgot why they were not traveling to Potidaea today. She did not notice the radiating flecks of gold and pink as they covered her body, creating the atmosphere for a gentle healing to begin.

She stepped out of the refreshing waters to be greeted by a Greek bearing food.

"That looks fantastic -- what did the girls cook?"

"Looks like fish . . . surprise, surprise . . . biscuits, fruit, and Toxaris made some sort of topping for the biscuits by smashing berries and adding some honey she brought from home. I also brought up a large pot of tea. I figured if you got any thirstier you could always drink the water from the falls." She smiled over at her bard.

"You are going to sit and eat with me before running off again, aren't you?"

"Yes, Gabrielle, I brought up enough for the two of us; I just wanted to make sure you wanted company."

"I do . . . I do. So, how did Eve react when you told her?"

"They were both very concerned about you, my love. Eve had been excited about meeting your parents, but she didn't know them personally, so there was no real emotional response, except for her worry over how you were taking the news."

She sat the makeshift tray down on the table Aphrodite had supplied, while Gabrielle finished drying off and slipped into a clean shift. The two of them then sat down to an improvised feast.

Gabrielle's appetite seemed to have returned and Xena noticed that the blonde's mood was lighter than when she had left close to a candlemark ago. *Must be magical waters as well as a magical forest.*

"What are you going to do with the afternoon, Xena?"

"I don't know, probably sharpen our knives, polish and sharpen my sword, maybe patch my leathers a little. Busy stuff. Would you like rabbit stew for dinner?"

The bard smiled sweetly and nodded her head affirmatively. "That would be lovely." It warmed her when she thought about how considerate Xena was when she was physically or emotionally

in pain. The hard exterior that clung to her dark champion's reputation for so many years was like ancient history compared to the loving personality standing in front of her today.

All the good Lao Ma had seen in Xena those many years ago had finally surfaced, as the evil warlord little by little was buried in the sands of history. The Dark Warrior Princess was a figment of the past, and before the bard sat the Warrior Princess of Light, ready to do battle against evil at every turn. Her temper had mellowed; her rage was quenched in the true love she found in her soul mate. All the positive aspects of Xena survived the many trials they had been put through, and though she was still able to use her many skills, and still possessed an arsenal of weapons at her fingertips, the Warrior Princess no longer felt the need to strike out against the world in anger.

Emerald eyes misted over as she focused on the metamorphosis her lover had undergone during the time they shared. She again thanked the Gods for giving her the courage to leave home and to follow the Warrior Princess and her heart, until she had attained permission to slowly creep into the warrior's soul.

Misunderstanding the tear that fell from her lover's face, Xena reached across the table and wiped the moist liquid from the fair cheeks. "It will be okay, my love, the hurt will pass with time."

"I know," Gabrielle nodded, knowing in her mind that it was a tear of joy and not sorrow that had just found its way to her warrior's fingertips. "I love you, Xena."

Even though she was confused the dark-haired beauty responded automatically. "I love you, too, Gabrielle. What prompted you to say that?"

The blonde shrugged her shoulders and smiled weakly. "It's just that you are always here for me when I need you. People wouldn't believe me, if I explained to them the Warrior Princess I know and love."

"And . . . we'll keep it that way . . . won't we Gabrielle?" An arched eyebrow and crooked smile convinced the bard to answer in the manner she knew her warrior was expecting.

"Most definitely, Xena. We wouldn't want the word to get out that you're an old softie."

Happy to see that Gabrielle was able to lighten the conversation and joke a bit, the warrior shook her head and smiled as she finished what was left of her mid-morning meal.

When they were both finished eating, Xena gathered up the dishes and her cup, leaving Gabrielle's and the teapot on the table. "I'll go ahead and take these on down to get washed . . . "

"I could take care of them up here, Xena," Gabrielle started to protest.

"No, no. You go ahead and do your writing. We all need something to do down by the lake anyway." She stood staring at her bard, not knowing what to say next. Then she cleared her



throat. "Do you think you might want to come down for dinner, or would you rather I brought it up here to you?"

The sweet smile that always warmed the warrior's heart was her answer as Gabrielle got up and took the dishes, from her lover's hands. She put her arms around Xena's waist and her head on her champion's breast. "I'm not ill, my love. Why don't you come on up after you're done doing whatever you want to do today. I'll return with you for the evening meal. I should probably make an appearance and talk with the girls."

"Only if you're ready."

Gabrielle looked up into eyes that never ceased to create a quiver of expectation in her being. "Come here you," she beckoned as her lips parted in anticipation of a kiss.

Dark tresses covered the pale shoulders of the bard as Xena leaned down to kiss her lover tenderly. "If I don't stop now, I'm afraid I'll take advantage of you," she murmured through lips not willing to move from the soft feel of her lover's mouth.

"And I would have half a mind to allow you to do just that," the small blonde mumbled back.

Xena put her hands on Gabrielle's waist and put the length of her outstretched arms between them. "No . . . you need to do some writing, and I have those chores I described earlier . . . besides, I need to catch and skin that rabbit for dinner." The taller woman smiled at the blonde as she again gathered up the eating utensils. "I will be back in a few candlemarks. Let your writing weave its healing spell, my soul."

"Thank you, Xena. I'll see you in a bit."

Gabrielle watched her leave, as the warrior turned and walked back toward the forest. After pouring herself another cup of tea, the bard walked over to the saddlebags to retrieve her writing tools. Instead of getting out a scroll, she searched in the bag for a small journal she had purchased on their way out of Rome. She had yet to make an entry as the writings she did in the Village had all gone onto scrolls. The sunlight filtered through the grotto and Gabrielle found an especially cozy corner where the streams of light dusted down gently, making it an excellent cove for reflection. She grabbed a pillow from the bed, and sitting with her back to the wall, allowed her mind to travel back in time to the days before she met the beautiful woman she had just shared a meal with. She opened the journal and picking up her quill began writing on the first page, starting with the date and followed by . . .

'Gabrielle, Bard of Potidaea, Soul mate of Xena the Warrior Princess, Daughter of Herodotus and Hecuba.'

She sat pensively for a few minutes, chewing on the tip of her quill, until the first phrase formed in her mind . . .

My Dear Parents:

Instead of internalizing on the news I was given last night, I thought I'd reminisce a bit today and put into words the dream of last evening, so I can always look back and remember.

## ROOTS OF LOVE

Mere words alone cannot express the feelings stored deep within.

I now make a journey back in time -- but where should I begin?

Two loving faces looking down, a babe within a trundle,

Your very first, you loved her so, your precious little bundle.

The years I spent within your care were as priceless as could be,

But then for my soul to learn to grow my warrior found me.

I'm left with priceless memories of my youth within your home,

And the lessons that you taught me 'ore I found the need to roam.

Father, you taught me tolerance, by your lack of just the same.

Dear Mother, you gave me patience, by your deeds and lack of blame.

My darling sister Lila, you forced a selfish me to share.

The love that was lavished on me I have taken everywhere.

I used to feel quite guilty for not visiting at home more,

And would feel a pang of sadness when upon some foreign shore.

But now I know I take you with me, where 'ere I choose to go.

You're never more than a thought away -- my heart has told me so.

The love within is ageless, as the ebbing and flowing tide.

Where 'ere I go ~ what 'ere I see ~ you'll be always at my side.

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Now here I sit awkwardly older than my younger sibling, and trembling with the anticipation of our reunion. Even though losing you, my loving parents, I have been given another chance in this

lifetime. I have a daughter you will never know, and perhaps someday I will be blessed with another that I will be allowed to raise, with the help of the other half of my soul.

As you look down from whatever 'Heaven' you have chosen for yourselves, I hope you see that having had you as parents has helped to make me the person I am today and for that I am thankful. I hope you are proud of yourselves for the guidance you gave the young soul in your care. I know you can both now understand why I had to leave home when I did and how intricately intertwined my soul is with Xena's.

I love you both and will miss you.

Until we meet again, your loving daughter ~~ Gabrielle

The bard reread her heartfelt outpouring, and before closing the book a singular tear fell upon the page, creating a mark that would forever remind the bard of her emotional state when she wrote the letter to her parents. Carefully she encased the spotted area within a heart, so as to capture the moment of combined joy and sorrow in perpetuity. *It's time for me to once again move on, but this time I truly believe that both of you know and understand why. I will love you always and remember you until the end of time.*

With a sigh she closed the book and got up to put it away. The act of writing had finalized the feelings she had been carrying around with her since awakening, and she was now able to breathe freely. The knot that had been tied to the inside of her chest was finally dissolved, and the ache was replaced by a feeling of contentment. Her parents would always be a part of her just as they had been all these years when she was away from them. In her mind's eye they would eternally remain middle aged and healthy, and in a way she was the lucky one to be able to remember them so.

Exhausted from the mental and emotional unwinding she placed her empty teacup and the writing tools on the bedside table and crawled onto the bed for a short nap. There was a feeling of peace enveloping her and she fell asleep as soon as her head touched the pillow.

*"Sleep well, my Little Friend, your gift has healed you even more than mine could. I'll see you when you return from your voyage. If you are ever in dire straits, remember to call my name."* Without ever fully materializing the Goddess of Love blew a kiss in the direction of her mortal friend before disappearing from the grotto.

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The sun was beginning to set when Xena made her way back up to the ledge. Instead of rabbit stew the three warriors had decided early on in the afternoon to have roast rabbit with biscuits and vegetables. Eve hadn't realized it before, but Toxaris was a bit of a gourmet cook. The young warrior knew how to scavenge and find some of the more delectable roots from the ground in the area. Near the roots of the old oaks she managed to find a few white truffles which she cleaned and stuffed into the rabbit before sewing it up to cook. She also dug up some root vegetables, which had the consistency of potatoes when they were cooked. Consequently, the evening meal

would prove to be quite an on-the-road experience for the warrior and her bard who used to simpler meals when away from towns.

Xena made a quiet entrance into the grotto, hoping that the stillness merely meant that the bard was sleeping peacefully. She was right, as she could hear Gabrielle's soft metrical breathing. For a few minutes she stood and looked down at the sleeping beauty before gently leaning over and kissing her on the lips.

Two small arms reached up and drew the warrior down onto the bed.

"I love you Xena."

"I love you, too, Gabrielle, and as much as I would love to stay here with you, I've got to tell you that the evening meal is ready to be served."

"Right now?" The blonde wanted to know.

"As soon as we get back down lakeside." Xena informed her. "How are you feeling?"

"I feel fine. I know that occasionally I will be reminded of the loss, but I intend to carry them with me as I always have." Gabrielle smiled and scooted off the bed. "Let's go eat. I'm famished."

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Dinner was fabulous and Gabrielle could not stop complimenting Toxaris on her additions to the meal. Afterward they sat for a while and discussed the phenomena of Aphrodite and her friendship with the Warrior and Bard as well as Gabrielle's feelings on the loss of her parents. Gabrielle told a few stories about her mom and dad and finished off by explaining how she had written everything that was in her heart down in her journal this afternoon, giving her emotions a sacred place to remain forever.

A few candlemarks slipped by between the clean up and the discussions and it was decided that they would wait and have a hot breakfast in Potidaea in the morning instead of taking the time to make a fire and cook.

Spirits were high when Xena and Gabrielle finally said goodnight and headed toward the ledge.

They had left one candle burning, so the grotto was dimly lit when they arrived.

"I'm excited about seeing Lila tomorrow, Xena."

"I can imagine, my love; it should be quite an interesting day. I'm sure she will be thrilled to see you, also. I forgot to ask Aphrodite if Lila knew we were alive. If not, it should be a doubly welcomed surprise for your sister."

"Just think, Xena, I may have nieces almost my age!" She giggled like a child and the warrior smiled, realizing that the healing process had indeed begun and her Gabrielle was going to pull through this heartbreak with flying colors.

Moments later they were in bed, wrapped securely in each other's arms.

"Sometimes I just want to stay like this forever." Gabrielle thought out loud.

"We'd end up with bed sores," Xena added teasing her lover.

"Honestly, Xena, I feel as though nothing can harm me when I have your arms around me."

"I wish that were true, Gabrielle. As much as I would love it to be so, I cannot promise you that. But I can promise that I would give my life to protect you."

"I know that, Xena." The smaller woman acknowledged.

"We need to get some sleep tonight, my soul; tomorrow is going to be a very busy day. Twenty-five years . . . unbelievable."

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Gabrielle hardly waited for the first rays of dawn to come creeping through the waterfall before she gently rocked her warrior to awaken her.

"How in Tartarus did you wake up before I did?" Xena wanted to know.

"It's Potidaea we're arriving at this morning. My body refuses to sleep and my mind is running overtime." The bard hopped out of bed and began getting ready to shower. "Come on, lazy bones, the waterfall will clear the cobwebs out of your mind." She shook two towels in the direction of the bed.

"Okay, I'm coming." The warrior had no aversion to early morning arousal, it was just shocking to see her bard up and exuberant before her own eyes were even thinking about opening.

They took a quick shower and Xena glanced through the waterfall before drying. Eve and Toxaris were up and swimming in the lake, so it looked like everyone would smell fresh upon their arrival in Potidaea. Xena volunteered to round up the horses, while Gabrielle took a trip down to the lake to see if the girls needed help with anything before leaving.

One candlemark after dawn and the four travelers were positioned to travel via the use of the mystical forest to the home of Gabrielle's birth.

The bard was almost beside herself as she reached for her lover's hand and began thinking of the meadow a half a candlemark from the small village. Within seconds they found themselves far from the magical forest and within eyesight of the first dwellings of the little province.

"By the Gods, they've expanded beyond what I imagined. A few Goliath steps more and we would have been spotted by the houses on the outskirts."

Xena beamed as she watched the expression on Gabrielle's face take on the look of an excited child.

"Where to first Mom?" Eve was also feeling the anticipation of meeting family, although she wasn't sure how Gabrielle's family would view her. Her mother had informed her that Herodotus had been a very prejudiced man.

With her eyes set on nothing in particular the bard spoke almost to herself. "I wonder if Lila is still living in our home? It's up and to the right."

"Mom, why don't we stable the horses first and then we won't have to worry about them."

"No, if Lila is still in the old place, there's plenty of room for the horses." Gabrielle turned and smiled at her daughter.

They continued slowly walking the horses through the little village that had grown into a larger town in Gabrielle's absence. Still having small-town ways, the villagers gave the foursome looks of distrust as they made their way through the center of the community and then turned north. They were on the property and almost to the front yard, when they saw a young woman exiting the barn.

Gabrielle's breath caught in her throat when she captured a glimpse of the young woman. The word, "Hope!" escaped her lips and she drew her horse to a quick stop, looking desperately in the direction of her champion.

Xena smiled and shook her head, "No, my love . . . not Hope. Your mind is in the past not the present."

The anguish in the emerald eyes lightened immediately and the frown disappeared, as she continued to look at first her lover and then the woman walking toward her family's home.

"By the Gods, Xena . . . she must be my niece."

"Spitting image of her Aunt Gabrielle I would say." Xena commented.

"She could be your twin with long hair, Mom." Eve chimed in.

"Who is Hope?" Toxaris queried.

Three voices spoke as one as the rest of the travelers answered in unison, "That's a long story." Giggles all the way around and Eve promised to fill Toxaris in on who Hope was when they had more time. Now it was definitely time to meet Gabrielle's sister.

The four horses stopped in front of a house that had obviously been enlarged. Newer thatch roofing covered the area of expansion. Gabrielle was the first down off her horse, and she handed the reins up to Toxaris. The young woman coming from the barn, carrying a basket filled with eggs, stopped in mid-step to stare at an almost mirror image of herself with short hair.

From within the house the bard heard a familiar voice, calling an even more familiar name. The question came ringing clearly through the morning air. "Gabby are you almost finished? Your father wants to be on the road before noon."

Still looking at her twin image the younger woman began to answer and then, seeing the stranger put her fingers up to her lips she stopped.

Gabrielle had motioned to the younger girl not to speak and as she continued to do so, answered her sister. "If you are in such a hurry why don't you come on out and gather them yourself?"

"What in Tartarus!" Seconds later a much older than remembered Lila came storming out of the house, wiping her hands on her dress, dark brown hair tinged with grey flying in the breeze behind her.

Coming out of the house, Lila's attention had all been focused in the direction of the barn. Now she stopped, staring at her daughter who was stopped, staring in the direction of the front of the house.

"Gabby . . ." the older woman turned to see what her daughter was gawking at and nearly went down on her knees.

"By the Gods . . . Gabrie . . ."

"Yes . . . yes . . . Lila, it's me."

"Gabrielle!"

The two sisters ran into each other's arms, tears of joy streaming down their faces. They practically lost their balance in the ensuing hugs and kisses.

"I thought you were . . ." Lila exclaimed.

"I know . . . I wasn't." Gabrielle acknowledged.

"There were the rumors . . ."

"They were all true . . ." Gabrielle avowed.

Lila stretched out her arms and took in the appearance of her sibling who now looked only a few years older than her child. "By the Gods, Gabrielle, you haven't aged a day."

"Positive consequences of being frozen in ice for 25 years." She smiled at her 'younger' sister, noticing the definite signs of aging on the face she remembered as young and exuberant.

"This is so hard to believe . . . Gabrielle there is so much I need to tell you . . . " Her eyes misted over again, this time the tears were not of joy and the expression was clearly one of sadness.

"I already know about Mother and Father, Lila." Gabrielle tried to ease her sister's need to disclose the somber information.

"You know? How?"

"I'll explain it later, but now . . ." She turned to the rest of her little group who had all gotten off their horses and stood waiting for the sisters to come up for air.

"Hello, Xena." Lila smiled over at the warrior.

Xena nodded her head and smiled back; she still felt like an outsider in her soul mate's family dwelling.

By this time Lila's daughter had joined the group. She placed the basket inside the fence and walked to stand beside her mother.

"Amazons, Mother . . . are they Amazons?"

"Yes," Gabrielle answered, "We're Amazons and . . . "

"And this is my sister - your Aunt Gabrielle." Lila turned from one to the other of the blondes standing before her. "This, Gabrielle, is your namesake - my daughter, Gabrielle."

"Did she call your friend Xena, Aunt Gabrielle?"

"She most certainly did," Gabrielle smiled at her niece.

"Xena the Warrior Princess that Mom always told us about in her stories?"

"The same," Gabrielle confessed and placed her arm around her niece. "Gabrielle . . . did I hear Lila call you Gabby?"

"Yes."

"Okay, Gabby . . . this is Xena."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance . . . "

"Same here," Xena held out her hand and shook the younger woman's firmly.



"Lila, Gabby . . . this is our daughter Eve and her friend Toxaris." Gabrielle watched the expression on her sister's face at the acknowledgement of Eve and figured she could fill her in on the details later. No longer was she going to fool around with hiding truths or dancing around explanations. From now on people were either going to accept her and her family or she would be on her way. She had been through too much to put up with prejudice from anyone . . . no more hurt feelings, and no more trying to live her life the way someone else wanted it lived. She saw the look of surprise on her lover's face and simply offered her a smile, as she continued with the introductions.

Lila invited them all into the house to meet her husband, Aeson, and her son, Jason. Introductions were made all around and Lila couldn't seem to keep her eyes off Gabrielle. Gabrielle couldn't keep her eyes off Gabby. Xena watched the interaction between family members and spoke with Jason who was impressed that the Warrior Princess of legend was sitting in his home. Eve and Toxaris offered to help Gabby finish breakfast and the small kitchen was buzzing with excitement everywhere one turned. Aeson made himself scarce after the meal, as he was not used to being bombarded by a roomful of Amazons and not quite comfortable with the fact that his older sister-in-law looked more the age of his daughter.

Still broken into small groups, the visitors and visitees sat around the rest of the afternoon talking. Jason asked Xena to teach him some complicated sword exercises so the two of them moved their 'discussion' outdoors. After finishing up the dishes, Eve, Toxaris, and Gabby, went into Gabby's room where she could ask them all about being Amazons. When she found out that Eve was an Amazon Princess she could hardly contain herself, telling Eve that she couldn't wait to tell her friends that her family really did have Amazon royalty in it.

Gabrielle and Lila finally had the kitchen entirely to themselves and they sat, drinking tea and reminiscing. Gabrielle tried her best to bring her sister up-to-date on what had happened after their crucifixion. Lila's eyes teared time and again as her sister described the atrocities she and Xena had endured and smiled through her heart when she finally accepted what her sister and the warrior were to each other. There had been many times in her life when she cursed the day her sister took off in search of her soul's desire. Xena had often been the brunt of many vicious talks in the family home and the younger sister had come to resent the raven-haired warrior. After the situation with Hope, when Xena saved Lila from dying in a fall, she began to think better of her sister's champion, especially since she, at that time, was old enough to begin to understand the bond that was between the two women.

When it was Lila's turn to talk, she filled Gabrielle in on what had happened after she left home the last time. Herodotus had still blamed Xena for the incident, even though Hope was Gabrielle's child. He insisted that if Xena hadn't lured Gabrielle away in the first place that Perdicus would have still been alive and that he would have had grandchildren that were human and not part Demonic God. She explained to her sister that their father died a bitter old man and that the only thing in his life that continued to bring him joy was fishing with Jason. She assured her sister that she loved their father but his passing was more of a blessing in disguise. He had become even more caustic with Hecuba and did nothing but argue with her, while she continued to smooth his ruffled feathers, even when he had no grounds to be ruffling them.

"I do miss Mother, though, Gabrielle." Lila's eyes filled again with hot salty liquid. "I know she's been gone many seasons, but sometimes I think about the last few years and . . . oh Gabrielle . . . she was a changed woman after Father passed. It was almost like a stone had been lifted from her heart. She smiled constantly, after her period of mourning, of course, and she adored the children, especially Gabby. She was the one who asked me to name my daughter after you. She missed you so much, Gabby."

Gabrielle took her sister in her arms and comforted her as the two of them cried and again mourned their mother. "I'm so sorry, Lila . . . I don't know what else to say."

"It wasn't as though you had any choice in the situations Gabrielle, other than leaving Xena and living a life someone else wanted you to live. I envy you the traveling and knowledge, but not the lack of roots and home."

"We're trying to make up for that now . . . we've been given another chance and we're still young enough to enjoy it." Gabrielle swallowed hard after having said the final sentence. She was looking into the face of her younger sister who was now more a mother's age to her. "Xena and I are going to be married in a ceremony in the Amazon Village, that will officially make her an Amazon and my consort. Lila we would love for you to come and share in the wedding festivities."

"Gabrielle, I would like nothing more, but to tell you the truth I've forgotten to mention that Jason will be getting married within the next moon and I couldn't possibly leave. We've been planning . . . "

"No need to explain," the bard shook her head and held her sister's hands. "I totally understand. I'm so happy for you and for Jason. I'm sure his bride-to-be is lovely."

"Oh, Gabrielle, I wish you could stay around for the wedding."

"I don't think that would be possible. I have responsibilities to my tribe and they are in the throes of a possible skirmish with some outlying territories that are trying to infiltrate into Amazon territory. We took off to come here because things were settled down some, but we promised to be back between the waxing and waning of the moon . . ."

"You don't need to explain anymore than I did, Gabrielle. We have different lives now and what is happening in each of our lives is important to us. That does not make us any less important to each other."

"What I can promise, Lila, is to come back within the amount of time that should make you a grandmother." There was a huge smile on the blonde's face, which transposed itself onto her sister's.

"This is so unbelievable, Gabrielle. Here I am thinking of becoming a grandmother and you're still hoping to have another child."

"Yes, one that Xena and I can finally raise together; we haven't had much luck up to now in that department."

Time seemed to fly by and the chatting continued until people started filtering back into the kitchen stating that they were getting hungry. The evening meal was started and the little house held more excitement that night than it had in ages. Aeson and Jason offered to take a couple of bedrolls and sleep in the barn to give the women more room. Arguments for them to do otherwise were quickly squelched when they confessed that they would be more comfortable out there and would probably get a better night's sleep.

Early on in the evening Xena went out to the saddlebags and brought back two wineskins full of Amazon wine. The ladies were even gracious enough to give the men a goblet before sending them off to the barn.

Lila insisted on giving her bed up to Xena and Gabrielle and sleeping with Gabby while Eve and Toxaris brought their bedrolls inside and bunked down in the living room. Of course with all the discussions flying around the room, no one was in the mood for sleep. Conversations jumped around the room as everyone joined in all at once and then went back into groups of two and three. Gabrielle spent some time with Gabby. Xena even spent time with Lila and the now older woman confessed all her feelings of yesteryear to the warrior, but ended up on a positive note, as she officially welcomed Xena into the family and apologized for taking a lifetime to do so. Toxaris and Eve talked to Jason before he went out to join his father in the barn.

Anyone listening in would have found it impossible to keep up with all the subjects that were being tossed around in conversations: Gods, Goddesses, Heaven, Hell, India, Rome, Caesar, soul mates, weddings, births, aging, and not aging. A few candlemarks before dawn the suggestion was made that everyone try to get some sleep. Xena promised they would stay another entire day and evening, so Gabrielle could show the girls around Potidaea and so that Lila and Gabby could show Gabrielle all the changes that had taken place in the past 25 years.

When she finally got her bard bedded down it seemed like only seconds before she could feel the cadence of her mate's breathing. She smiled as she drew her lover closer. "It's been a good day, my soul, sleep well. I'm sure tomorrow will be another filled with excitement."

To the warrior's surprise, the bard gave her a tender squeeze. "I love you Xena, thank you for bringing me home."

"I love you, too, Gabrielle . . . get some sleep."

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The cock crowed and the sun came up at dawn, not caring that the women inside the house had experienced very little sleep. Miraculously, no one seemed to mind, as they all were up and flitting about as if they all had good sense. Everyone pitched in to get the morning meal out of the way so they could go explore the town. Directly after eating, Aeson begged off, stating that

he had some important work that needed to be addressed in town. Jason, likewise, had chores that needed attending. With the men gone, the women began organizing the day.

Throughout the afternoon the group again split into smaller groups, and the communication never ceased. People on the street would turn as they passed by, shaking their heads at the small group of women who were jabbering incessantly as they passed by houses and stores. Midday meal was taken in the tavern along with a glass or two of ale. Lila was not used to drinking and became quite giddy, reminding Gabrielle of the younger woman she had known.

The day passed by too quickly and the evening sped along, but more gaps were filled and hearts were overflowing by the time they said good night. The warrior insisted that they try to get a decent night's sleep; getting to Amphipolis was not going to be as quick a trip as their arrival in Potidaea. Even though she got them all in bed a little after the moon hit its high point in the sky, getting her bard to actually sleep was another story. She resigned herself to the fact that it was definitely going to take longer to get to Amphipolis than anticipated. They would have to stop early in the day to make up for the sleep everyone was not getting tonight.

The warrior was not looking forward to watching the scene of departure between the sisters, but she promised Gabrielle that they would make a trip back when this same season rolled around again.

Once more everyone was up with the rising of the sun, even the bard who loved morning sleep almost as much as she loved her warrior. The hustle and bustle in the kitchen was of a different tenor as everyone was anticipating saying goodbye to family members and new friends.

Aeson and Jason said goodbye to everyone directly after breakfast and then took off with excuses and sheepish looks on their faces, as if they were ashamed to feel sorrow at the departure of their guests.

Xena took Toxaris and Eve with her out to the barn to ready the horses and to give Gabrielle an extra candlemark with her family. When she could no longer drag out the chore, she walked back into the quiet house.

"I'm sorry to have to be the one to say this Gabrielle, but . . ."

"I know, Xena, you don't have to. I think we were just sitting here, waiting for you to come back in." As tears began to glisten in Gabrielle's eyes, she placed her hand on her sister's face, "It's been a wonderful couple of days, Lila, and I think we did a lot of making up for lost time. I promise we will visit once every full season. I will try to send word to you by a messenger before we come, and I promise to write to you."

Lila, looking frail and spent, did not even attempt to stop the tears from flowing. "You don't know how much I've missed you, Gabby. I'm going to make you keep your promises." She stood and hugged her sister.

It was at this point that Xena walked the two sisters out to the front of the house where Gabby, Eve, and Toxaris were waiting. Gabrielle walked over to her niece and looked into eyes almost identical to her own. "I'm so glad I got to meet you Gabby. I know you're a comfort to your mother."

"I try to be Aunt Gabrielle. It was great to meet you and Xena and the girls. This has been such an exciting time for me. I never thought I'd get to meet you." The younger woman gave her aunt a huge hug and then went on to say goodbye to Xena and her new friends, once again, leaving the two sisters to stare into each other's eyes.

"I won't say goodbye to you Lila," Gabrielle finally announced. "I will only say 'until we meet again.' Goodbye is much too final." She hugged her sister a final time and then walked over and mounted Ginger.

"You certainly have changed, Sis," Lila smiled through her tears. "I never thought I'd see the day when you not only were riding a horse, but had one of your very own."

"We've both done a lot of growing over the years, Lila. I love you."

"I love you too, Gabby."

Gabrielle gave a quick wave in her niece's direction and then waved at her sister. She turned Ginger to follow Argo and didn't look back again. With mixed emotions the small troupe continued their journey, this time heading back toward home. Next stop - Amphipolis.

***The End***