

# ~ To Challenge the Queen ~

by Carole Giorgio

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"May the best Amazon win!"

Within seconds, after the cry of the lone Amazon, giving tribal voice to the challenge, Gabrielle, Xena, and Eve found themselves flanked on all sides by inquisitive young Amazons wanting first hand details of events they had been privy to only through stories handed down from their mothers.

The three new arrivals continued to become further and further separated from each other as groups of women surrounded each of them individually. Some of the sisters wanted to talk to the Bard Queen, others found themselves interested in the Warrior, and a third group of Amazons were curious to hear about Rome or how it felt to be the daughter of the two very famous women.

Looking out over the crowd surrounding her, Xena tried to keep an eye on Gabrielle, as she wasn't sure whether the small blonde would be in danger from someone who might want to give the reigning Queen an advantage over the challenger. The warrior smiled when she recognized the golden head bobbing up and down rhythmically and knew that her bard was probably enthusiastically in the middle of an exciting story.

Xena continued searching until her eyes met Eve's. The two women simultaneously gave each other 'the look' - with raised eyebrows and crooked grins, denoting that they were not enjoying their popularity quite as much as the returning Queen seemed to be taking delight in hers.

Tolerating the question and answer period for more than a candlemark, Xena finally excused herself by asking where the tribe intended for the former Queen and her family to spend their first night back in the village.

Rhea's daughter, Toxaris, came forward explaining that she had sent a group of young women and children over to the hut the three of them had called home so many years before. She explained that although it now stood on the outskirts of the village, the older Amazons had insisted that it be kept in perfect condition as a monument to the Bard Queen.

"We lost many of our elder sisters in the border skirmishes some eight full seasons ago and then more of them when the sickness hit following contamination from our enemies. At the time Cyane was still Queen and she, Eris, my mother, and a few others were adamant that the hut remain intact and that the younger children be given their storytime there by the bards.

"Queen Gabrielle was a favorite of the elders and those of us who grew up listening to the stories from mothers who remembered, are thrilled to be able to get to know the Bard Queen personally. Cyane passed over a while back from the sickness and Tecmessa took control. Since then there has been much unrest between those of us trying to follow a more peaceful existence and those wanting to return to the violence of the past."

Toxaris offered to walk with the warrior over to the hut to see how the cleanup was coming along, and Xena accepted her invitation.

It was like stepping back in time - not the too distant past for Xena - but 25 years for any of the villagers old enough to remember. All the decorations Gabrielle had painstakingly collected or made during their short stay in the village were still hanging in the same places where the bard had hung them. Their separate beds were still tied together. She smiled when the memory of that little accomplishment flashed across her mind, and she made a mental note to find the tribe's wood craftswoman as soon as possible. Even with an abundance of furs and feathers, the separation between the beds was still quite uncomfortable, especially during intimate moments. The bed Aphrodite had supplied them at the grotto had now become her measure of decadent comfort and she wanted the same for them here, if this was to be their home for a while.

"Look Xena," the young Amazon broke the warrior's concentration on the sleeping arrangements. "Queen Gabrielle's mask - the feathers have been refreshed whenever they seemed to be drooping, so it should look just as it did the last time she wore it. It's beautiful isn't it?"

"Yes Toxaris, it is. I'm sure Gabrielle will be thrilled that everything has remained in such excellent condition. This hut is an honor to her and I know she will appreciate the effort the entire village has made." She walked over to the young Amazon and put a strong arm around her shoulders. "We'll have to make arrangements to thank your mother and Eris for continuing this tradition, even after Tecmessa began her reign."

The desired effect was received when Toxaris looked up into the famous warrior's face. Pride was overflowing in the younger woman's dark brown eyes. "Thank you, Xena. I know Mother would be thrilled at the thought of the Queen appreciating her small gesture."

"When we were here last, Eve was just a baby." Xena murmured as she stared at the small crib. "Is there a spare bed we can put in here until she gets a hut of her own?"

"All of us who share one of the long huts have already talked about that, and we would like to invite the Princess . . ."

"Wait a minute, I wouldn't go addressing Eve as Princess," Xena interrupted.

"But we have been taught that she is next in line for the throne if something were to happen to Queen Gabrielle," Toxaris debated with the warrior.

"I know, but I think you will find that both Gabrielle and Eve prefer to be addressed informally unless it is a tribal occasion. So . . . Eve will do just fine, okay?"

"Okay, Xena." Toxaris agreed as she continued. "We would like . . . Eve . . . to stay with us for a while, until things are settled. That way you and the Queen will have your privacy. Then if . . . Eve . . . wants a private hut, there are those of us who would be happy to help her build it."

"That's very generous of you and your friends. I'm sure Eve will be honored." In her own mind Xena breathed a sigh of relief. It was one thing being up in the grotto with Eve below knowing what was happening at night and quite another to be in the same room with her. She hadn't been looking forward to too many nights of being a happy trio, and Toxaris had just alleviated that concern.

"It looks like everything is just about ready for occupancy. What do you say we go find Gabrielle and Eve?"

They turned to walk out the door when one of the younger sisters accidentally dropped one of Gabrielle's old scrolls. Toxaris turned suddenly and darted across the room toward the young girl. "Don't be so clumsy! Don't you realize how precious these scrolls are?"

"Whoa, Toxaris," Xena exclaimed, putting herself between the angry Amazon and the now frightened child. "I understand you wanting her to show respect, but Toxaris, these are just . . ."

It took an act of fearlessness to speak back to the infamous Xena, but when it came to the Bard Queen's scrolls - they were considered sacred artifacts. The children were not supposed to touch them under any circumstances and only the older Amazons were given the privilege of gently cleaning the dust from the irreplaceable stories.

"You don't understand, warrior. These scrolls are precious to the village - they cannot be replaced and must be revered."

A small smile graced the face of the older woman as she thought about how important Gabrielle was to this small village. They were desperately trying to hold on to old customs, while the world around them was changing at an ever-increasing pace.

"I'm sorry. I do understand Toxaris, but Gabrielle is not a Goddess, her scrolls are stories, elaborations of truths . . ."

"Maybe to you, Xena, after all, you live with the Queen. But to us they are more than that. These scrolls have brought smiles and tears to the eyes of children and adults alike for 25 years. The life lessons written in the lines of these scrolls, as well as the adventures, have kept many in this tribe from leaving and finding a different way."

The more the young Amazon talked the more Xena realized how much Gabrielle had influenced the young women of the tribe when they brought Eve here to be christened 25 years ago. Her message of uniting the Amazons and teaching them to live peacefully had touched the hearts of many of the women at that time and still carried through to their daughters. But they had put her onto a pedestal that Xena hoped she would be able to live up to.

Realizing that she was not going to dissuade the young Amazon even an centimeter, she closed the discussion by patting the younger child on the head and telling her she was finished helping and could go outside and play. The girl, who stood there watching with eager eyes as the two women discussed the Bard Queen, had touched a tender area in the warrior's heart.

This hut brought back loving memories and hopes of what could have been, along with the stark reality of what actually came to pass. She shook off the unsettling feeling and turned back to Toxaris. "Come on young Amazon, let's go find your Queen."

Dusk was beginning to cover the village in a mist of light fog and the warrior's stomach was starting to complain about a lack of food when they spotted the Queen and her entourage headed toward the hut.

"Xena, the festivities are going to start any time now," Gabrielle informed her mate. "What are you doing?"

"Checking on tonight's lodging, my Queen," Xena threw a sarcastic look in the direction of the Queen's quarters. "I'm sure you'll need to rest sometime tonight, after all, you do have a Challenge in the morning."

"I know Xena," Gabrielle acknowledged, breaking away from the crowd and joining her lover on the porch. As she stepped through the doorway and glanced around the hut, tears formed in the sea-green eyes. When she turned, her warrior received a melancholy smile, she knew only too well.

"By the Gods, Xena, look at this place! It's exactly the way we left it 25 years ago! I would have never expected . . ." The bard choked and was temporarily at a loss for words as pictures of the

past danced before her eyes. Memories of talks, walks, rituals, and of Xena reading her scrolls for the first time, filled the bard's mind and her soul wept for the loss of what could have been.

Xena waved the crowd away as she turned to walk back into the hut and take her world into her arms.

"I know, Gabrielle. I feel the same way. We have to put that behind us and go on from here. Those memories will always remain and as bittersweet as they are, we should be content that we were able to enjoy Eve, if only for a little while."

Gabrielle turned and threw her arms around her warrior's waist, burying her face in the bosom of her heart. "I don't know what I would do if I ever lost you, Xena. Where could I go where my heart would not break?"

"You won't lose me, Gabrielle. I'll be here for a very long time." The warrior ran her fingers through soft golden hair as she comforted her lover. "Look at this." She picked up one of the scrolls. "You are remembered as Goddess here, my love. The children are not even allowed to touch your sacred scrolls."

"Sacred?" A look of astonishment crossed the fair face. "Did you say sacred?"

"This hut has been kept like a shrine for 25 years. You must have said something of great importance while we were here." The warrior smiled broadly, appreciative that the tears in her lover's eyes were drying. "Do you remember what it was?"

"Probably never marry a warrior!" Gabrielle grinned.

"Oh? Is that what you would have told these women?" She pulled Gabrielle close and kissed her head. "You didn't forget one of the reasons we're here - now did you?"

"Of course not. How could I forget that one of my most longed for wishes was finally being granted?"

Xena placed a strong hand under the smaller woman's chin and tilted the gentle face toward her own. "I love you more than life; you know that don't you?" It was a question that needed no answer. The verbal thought was accented with a passionate kiss, and the moment would have continued to linger save for the entrance of their daughter and a small band of her followers.

"Eve," Xena growled. "Next time announce your arrival . . . stomp on the steps or something."

"Okay, Mother." Eve nonchalantly walked over to the baby bed in the corner of the hut. "Was this mine?"

"Yes." Gabrielle answered. "It was a gift from the Queen Regent, Cyane. You were a very popular little girl."

"So, this is how an Amazon Queen . . . and her consort," Eve smiled over at her mother, "live?"

"Most definitely." Gabrielle looked in the direction of their daughter and then up on the wall. "That was . . . is . . . my ceremonial mask and my staff . . ." She continued to look around the room. Addressing the congregation on the porch Gabrielle asked, "Do any of you know what was done with the staff I used the last time I was here in the village? The one I used to give lessons?"

One of the braver of the young women ventured forward. She stuttered slightly, trying to explain the missing article. "Queen Gabrielle . . ."

"Just Gabrielle will do . . . what's your name?"

"Marpesia," the Amazon informed her Queen before continuing. "Okay . . . ah . . . Gabrielle . . ." It was obvious the woman was having a difficult time addressing her Queen by her first name. " . . . The staff has been used as a token of esteem. There is a competition among the young adult warriors once each season, such as Winter Solstice, Summer Solstice, etc. Whoever is the overall winner that day is allowed to take the staff home and care for it for the rest of the season."

"I see," Gabrielle lied.

Another of the young women stepped forward and spoke up. "We also have contests for the young bards of the village, Que . . . um . . . Gabrielle. They get to keep your quill. It's a great inspiration." She blushed and bowed back into the crowd.

"Well, those are interesting facts." Gabrielle shook her head up and down with a still somewhat puzzled look on her face. "I guess I have some new traditions to get used to."

Xena saw that Gabrielle was at an unusual loss for words and intervened. "Are any of you supposed to be helping with the dinner, dance, or music preparations?"

A knowing look and smile graced the warrior's face as more than half of the young women turned and raced toward the center of the village. Another brave soul stuck her head in and invited Eve to join them in the preparations.

"I don't think I'm needed around here. That might be fun." She told her parents she would meet them at dinner and left to join the remainder of the crowd as they exited the porch.

"So Xena, do you think we walked into a Bacchae's nest here?"

"No, no . . . nothing we won't be able to handle. Give them one full moon and you'll be just one of the girls."

"Don't know if I want to go that far, my love. Simply not having to correct them for calling me Queen all the time will be good enough. A little special attention never hurts." She winked up at her lover. "Hey, when we get to communal hut, will you remind me to ask one of the girls exactly who is in possession of my staff?"

"Why? There's an entire weapons room full of them." Xena arched an eyebrow as she watched her mate searching the room with her eyes, hoping for the staff to miraculously appear. The warrior knew full well the sentimental value that Gabrielle put on her staffs, especially since her very first weapon was no longer available to her.

"I want to feel it in my hands again." She smiled at the warrior. "It had the same balance as the one Ephiny gave me. Now, memories are all I have of her, aside from . . ." She walked over and opened one of the saddlebags that had been taken off the horses. A look of sorrow crossed the fair face and her voice became almost a whisper. " . . . aside from this." She caressed the small bird's head ornament that had decorated the top of her initiation staff. Xena." Gabrielle looked into her lover's eyes. "Do you think we could find out where Xenan is? When we start looking up family, I want to find him and see what he's done with his life."

"Sure, Gabrielle. I wouldn't mind seeing the little prince . . . I need to stop thinking like that though; he's certainly not a 'little prince' any longer now is he?"

"No, I'm sure not!"

"Gabrielle, you are going to get some practice in before morning, right?"

"Right! I was going to ask you if you would spar with me? You would be more of a challenge than most of the warriors here and I definitely feel in need of a strong sparring partner."

"You think Queenie is going to give you a problem?"

"Not really, but I want to look my best and it has been a while since I wielded a staff."

"Ah, but it's like riding a horse. Once you learn, you never forget. From the look on Tecmessa's face the staff is not her weapon of choice."

"Oh well! Queen Tecmessa is quite the feisty one isn't she?" Gabrielle stood tall, throwing her shoulders back in imitation of the reigning Queen. Clearing her throat loudly she continued, 'Descendent from that Tecmessa who died at the hands of Hercules.' The sarcasm was quite apparent.

"A little catty today are we, my bard, my Queen?" Xena answered with a slight snicker in her tone.

"By the Gods, Xena, didn't you hear her snide remarks, 'claim your Queenhood on a whim?' On a whim indeed! Just because she has royal Amazon blood coursing through her veins she thinks she's so . . ."

"Calm down, Gabrielle, she offered you a challenge."

"She almost blatantly called me a fairytale!"

"Perhaps she meant legend."

"Why are you taking up for Her?"

"I'm not, Gabrielle. It's just that getting yourself all worked up like this before the challenge can do nothing but interfere with your concentration," Xena replied trying to reason with her bard.

"I disagree," Gabrielle continued. "It only makes me more determined to win."

With a deep sigh the warrior placed two strong hands on her bard's shoulders. "Tonight we practice, and tomorrow you'll again take your rightful place as Queen. But now . . ." a gurgling sound was audible from the region of the warrior's stomach. "Now we need to eat! If I'm sounding like this," she pointed to the offending area of her anatomy, "I know sure as Tartarus you must be starving."

"It's been such a busy afternoon and I almost could say I forgot about being hungry." She smiled into her warrior's sparkling blue eyes. "You'll notice I said, Almost! Come on, let's go see what these Amazons are cooking up."

Arm in arm the warrior and bard left the Bard Queen's Residence and headed for the communal lodge where most of the village feasts were held. Gabrielle and Xena had been given a seat of honor at one end of the table and Queen Tecmessa was seated at the other end. There were various other tables scattered around the room and the younger Amazons, who had a kind of catch-as-catch-can meal, were in charge of making sure the tables remained full of food and beverages.

Xena filled her goblet with wine, but when Gabrielle held hers out for the same, Xena instructed the young maid to get the pitcher of berry juice for the Queen.

"Why did you do that?" Narrowed verdant eyes glared at her warrior. "I'm thirsty."

"Of course you are, but wine is not on your agenda this evening."

"One goblet of wine would not hurt me."

"I beg to differ with you. You haven't had the fruit of the vine in quite a while, and you have a challenge in the morning. The last thing you need is to be hung over."

"Xena," Gabrielle whined as the young woman returned with a pitcher of berry juice and filled her goblet. "Thank you," the bard tersely dismissed the server with a nod.

"This is so unfair!" The bard continued to complain.

"The fair is in Amphipolis, Gabrielle." Xena tried to make light of the situation. Getting no response she shook her head and offered her goblet to the pouting bard. "That's very Queenly of you, my love. Here, one sip won't hurt you."



Grabbing the goblet without so much as a by your leave, the fair-haired woman took several gulps before her warrior realized what she was doing.

"Are you satisfied?"

"Quite!" Gabrielle replied, as she tore into the leg of rabbit on her plate, ignoring the stare she was receiving from her mate. "Looks like Eve's fish are a big success." She pointed to the end of the table; a large platter of fillets was quickly emptying as the hungry Amazons filled their plates.

Ignoring the fish statement, Xena started in on her own plate.

"What's the matter with you?" Gabrielle took the warrior's elbow when she didn't turn to face her.

"I'm only looking out for your welfare Gabrielle. Sometimes, I still do know what's best. I know I said we're equals, but . . . I want you at your very best in the morning."

Gabrielle's tone softened when she spoke again. "I'm sorry. It seemed like you were treating me like a child. Listen, those few mouthfuls will be out of my system in a couple candlemarks. No more tonight, even though this is supposed to be a welcome home celebration. Okay? Truce?" The green in her eyes had softened and the smile was irresistible to her warrior.

"You know I can't stay angry with you when you look at me like that." She bent and kissed Gabrielle tenderly on the cheek. "I just don't want you to get hurt tomorrow. Are you sure you won't reconsider and let me be your champion?"

Doing her best to keep the irritation out of her voice, Gabrielle slowly shook her head. "Listen, my love, I thought we had been all through this? If I am to be Queen the warriors need to know that I will be an asset to the ranks. I don't want to be a Queen in name only, Xena. I'm no longer a child."

"I know that Gabrielle." There was a pleading quality to the warrior's tone. "It's only . . ."

The blonde placed two small fingers on her lover's lips, a shushing sound emanating from her own. "Tecmessa's not a Goddess, not an Immortal, and probably not even a good staff-woman. But she is the Queen, and I am the one who needs to put her in her place." She reached up and whispered softly. "I love that you want to protect me and I need to know that you feel that way, but trust me, my love - I'll be fine." She kissed her warrior and motioned that they continue eating.

Following the meal, the reigning Queen led the crowd out to the bonfire where dancers and musicians awaited their audience. After a brief period of entertainment everyone was invited to join in the dancing and singing.

At first Eve sat in awe of the liquid movements of the dancers, but soon she was coaxed into joining in the festivities.

A fierce looking young warrior approached the duo as they sat enjoying the entertainment. Xena was taken back at first by the somber look on the young woman's face.

"Excuse me Queen Gabrielle . . ."

Gabrielle did not flinch this time as it was at least a semi-formal occasion and use of the royal title was well within propriety. She acknowledged the woman standing before her and was quite surprised and pleased when her old staff was placed respectfully into her hands.

"I won the honor of sheltering the staff for the remainder of this season, my Queen. Now that you are back, I do believe it belongs to you." The young sister bowed slightly and began to back away.

"Wait."

"My Queen?"

"Your name?"

"Phillippis, my Queen."

"And Phillippis, do you live up to your name?"

"That I do my Queen. I have a great love of horses." The solemn look had been replaced with a beautiful smile from the tall blonde standing before Gabrielle.

"I'm glad to hear that Phillippis. Since you must have competed strongly to have won this trophy for the season, it's only right that after the challenge in the morning, it should return to your hut until the next competition."

"But, my Queen."

Gabrielle looked sternly into the young woman's face for attempting to argue with her, but her expression changed as she glanced quizzically at the staff she now held in her hands. Stepping closer to the fire she examined the staff more closely. There was a desperate tone to her next question, and it came out harsher than Gabrielle had expected.

"Phillippis, where exactly did this staff come from?!"

"My Queen, I already told you, I . . ."

"No!" There was a panic in Gabrielle's voice that caused Xena to get closer to her bard and the young Amazon.

"Is there a problem, Gabrielle?" Xena asked.

"Xena, look at this staff she handed me!"

"Okay, what could be wrong with . . . " Xena took the staff into her hands and ran her fingers along the well-defined symbols. Her eyes got big and her mouth dropped open as she looked up at Gabrielle. "No, Gabrielle. This is simply not possible."

"Yes, Xena, I believe it is. Remember our discussion in India about how all rivers lead to the sea? It seems that this small object, this piece of my past, has made its way full circle! By the God's Xena, it is my old staff! It's my lost treasure!" Tears of joy flowed freely from unashamed eyes as she took the staff back and held it to her chest. "Never again, will I part with this, never again."

Suddenly remembering there was a third party in on the entire conversation, Gabrielle turned to the amazed young warrior. Clearing her throat, she continued her conversation with the woman.

She was now unsure that she wanted to trust her prized possession to the Amazon standing in front of her but realized that they had kept the staff safe all these years. It would, most likely, survive a few moons in the young warrior's hut.

"I expect to be able to visit the staff if I so chose or have it brought to me if I so desire, but it is to remain with you until the end of this season. After that, we might find another more suitable object to be awarded as a prize, one perhaps that need not be returned with the changing of the seasons.

Quite perplexed with the casual and then dramatic conversation from the Queen, the woman bowed and backed away, then turned to join her friends. Gabrielle could see her chattering gaily to the women who came running up to find out what the Queen had to say to a mere warrior.

Gabrielle looked around, searching for Eris. She had to know how they had come into possession of the staff she was holding tightly to her. "Xena do you see Eris? We need to talk to her."

The advantage of height allowed the warrior to better distinguish one Amazon from another, and she soon spotted the older woman chatting with a group of dancers.

"There she is, Gabrielle. Come on."

Excusing themselves and Eris from the conversation they took the woman aside.

"Eris," Gabrielle showed her the staff. "This is not the staff I used when we were in the village last. Where did this one come from and why was it passed off as my old one?"

Eris bowed her head and began to apologize, "I'm sorry my Queen . . ."

"Gabrielle," Gabrielle corrected.

"I'm sorry Gabrielle the staff you had used was destroyed when the hut of a champion caught on fire, while she was in possession of it. We didn't know what we were going to do about keeping up the tradition. But, the day after the fire one of the women was fishing in the river when this staff floated onto the shore. She picked it up and noticed that it had similar markings to the one you had used. It was definitely an Amazonian staff and we claimed it as a sign from the Artemis. I'm sorry . . . "

Gabrielle began to chuckle as she interrupted the unnecessary apology. "No, Eris. You have no need to be sorry. None whatsoever. Whereas the staff you had been using had been one of my lessons staffs. This staff . . ." She held up the cherished object. "This was actually the very first weapon I ever used. I don't know how and I don't know why but fate was kind enough to allow it to be joined with me again after all these years." She leaned over and gave the astonished woman a kiss on the cheek. "Thank you, my old friend, thank you more than I can say for keeping my treasure safe all these years."

"My pleasure, Gabrielle." The woman was smiling from ear-to-ear as she excused herself to join her friends and tell them the news.

Gabrielle turned to Xena and nodded. "Ah, this is turning out to be quite a day, Xena."

"That it has Gabrielle."

"Shall we go get a couple practice staffs for our workout to see if I still have the touch?"

"I could stay here and watch the dancers, while you went and picked a couple out."

Gabrielle stood and grabbed Xena by the ear, "I definitely think Not. Come with me warrior, we have sparring to do."

They nodded good evening to Tecmessa, the dancers, and the musicians; Xena caught Eve's eye and mouthed goodnight. Leaving the gaiety of the festivities behind them the duo walked over to the weapons hut. On the way there Xena suggested that Gabrielle use her original staff for both the practice and the challenge.

"I don't know if I should do that Xena. I would be devastated if the staff were broken after all these years."

"Gabrielle perhaps the reason it was found to begin with was for this very challenge. The staff has a history with you and with Ephiny. It was special to her, and it was special to you. This is a great combat for you, and the destiny of all Amazons will be affected by the outcome of this confrontation."

"So . . . you think I should use it tomorrow?"

"Definitely."

The small blonde pondered the situation and agreed with her warrior. She would be a fool not to consider the staff showing up in Greece as a sign from The Fates. All rivers may flow to the sea but this staff . . . ending up back here . . . at this very village . . . all the way from India . . . was nothing short of a miracle. It had to be destiny. Yes, she decided, she would use the staff as an instrument to help her regain her throne.

With her decision made, they found a staff for Xena and proceeded on to the sparring grounds.

Torches surrounded the practice area, and the women sparred for close to a candlemark. Her bangs were soaked with sweat and Xena had to admit that Gabrielle gave her a good workout. "What do you say we call it an evening, Gabrielle? Tomorrow is going to come much faster than you can imagine."

"Ah, had enough, have you Xena?" The bard smiled, moonlight glistening on the sweat pouring from her brow, also.

"No, I haven't 'had enough'! I just think you ought to stop and conserve your energy for tomorrow.

"What do you say to a quick dip in the lake before retiring, I don't feel like getting into a clean bed with stinky skin."

"As long as we don't have company. I don't feel like communal bathing tonight." Xena put her arm around Gabrielle's shoulders and they walked up to the hut to put the staffs away and get a couple of soft cloths for drying.

It was only a short walk from the hut to the lake; the moon was fairly full and the path was well lit. Aside from the occasional musical note as it floated on the breeze, the forest was still. A lone owl hooted as they passed her tree and flew off in search of food.

"Normally I would have thought of Athena when we spotted that owl," Gabrielle admitted. "Our world has changed yet once again." Putting her arm around her warrior's waist they continued walking toward the cooling water.

"It certainly has, Gabrielle. It will take me some time to erase from my memory the look of surprise on the Goddess' face, when the sword pierced her skin and she actually bled. I always admired Athena; it was a bitter victory that's for sure."

"Wouldn't it be wonderful, Xena if Aphrodite put another ledge behind the waterfall on this lake? Just think we could go from here to anywhere we wanted and . . . "

"Gabrielle! Be thankful for small favors. The grotto is only a day away. A lot of energy will be conserved with the help of that one small forest." She smiled down at her love, held her a little closer and kissed her gently on the head.

"Last one in has to rub the other person's back until they go to sleep," Xena yelled as she quickly undressed, threw down her cloth and rushed toward the water.

"No fair, Xena. You always win foot races," Gabrielle retorted as she followed suit.

Long muscular legs slowed their speed and the warrior to whom they belonged turned around to watch her soon-to-be bride speed up.

"Ah, ha!" Gabrielle exclaimed as her feet hit the water seconds before her warrior's. "Guess I get the back rub tonight!"

"Gabrielle you know I stopped and let you beat me."

"Doesn't matter I got to the water first." She giggled and dove under swimming out just far enough to be totally covered when she stood. "This feels good."

Before swimming up to stand beside her bard the dark-haired champion stood near the edge of the lake watching as the moon and stars performed their magic on the surrounding region. The small area of lake where her golden headed charmer stood became center stage. Glistening bubbles danced around her body, while stars played hide-and-seek in the ripples of the cool water.

The warrior's heart was filled with the picture before her; yet a deep nagging pain distorted the view. She worried about the contest her heart would be enduring tomorrow morning when Gabrielle took up the staff against Tecmesssa. All reasoning aside, she still did not like the idea of Gabrielle being voluntarily put in harm's way. By the code of warriors she knew Gabrielle was right, but on the other hand She was the Champion and should be allowed to fight for her. Of what use was she in this village if she couldn't even protect the person she loved most in the entire world?

"You going to stand there in all your naked glory until the Amazons get drunk enough to come join us?" Gabrielle yelled.

Breaking her train of thought the warrior shook her head and dove into the cool liquid, swimming out to meet her mate. While Gabrielle was covered with water up to her breasts, her raven-haired companion definitely was not.

"Here, let me wash you," Gabrielle offered, starting to lather her lover's chest.

"If you want to get some sleep tonight and be rested in the morning, I would suggest that you wash yourself and I wash myself," Xena lightly reprimanded as she removed a small hand from an already responding nipple.

"Do you realize that you are absolutely no fun tonight?" The bard questioned.

"Do you realize that you have a challenge in the morning?" Xena answered the question with one of her own.

Pouting enough to receive a small kiss, the bard agreed that it would probably not be a good idea to pursue her heart's intentions this evening.

"I promise to make tonight up to you when you are reinstated as Queen, Gabrielle." Xena closed the distance between them and took her bard into her arms. "It's not from lack of desire that I think we should abstain tonight; you do realize that, don't you?"

"Yes, my love." The answer softly drifted up from the area of the taller woman's chest. "It's just that you're so beautiful in the moonlight with the stars dancing in your eyes."

"Let's finish here and get to bed before we let our bodies rule our minds. I don't want to jeopardize your abilities, my destiny. Your defenses must be at peak performance in the morning."

Bathing returned to mundane as warrior and bard did their best to ignore the magnetism charging between them. "Not much fun, bathing like this," Gabrielle mumbled turning her back on Xena.

Keen ears, of course, picked up the comment and their owner's mouth could not keep quiet. "You'll thank me for this in the morning."

"Will not."

"Will too."

"Will not."

"You are totally out of control; do you realize that?" The warrior was finished bathing, as was the bard. Strong arms reached out and spun the small blonde around then picked her up pulling her close. Gabrielle's arms flew around Xena's neck as she kissed her warrior without restraint.

"I need to have you so close I can't tell where your body leaves off and mine begins," the bard whimpered. "I need to touch you to keep myself grounded in the present." Sea-green eyes began to mist over and tears began to add themselves to the waters of the lake.

A soft whisper escaped the bard's lips. So hushed was it that it would have gone unheard by any other ears, save those of the warrior, but Xena caught the timid confession of doubt.

"I must admit I don't relish the fight tomorrow," Gabrielle barely breathed.

"I know, my love," Xena whispered back, letting her life-mate know she had been heard. "I know."

"I didn't think I would ever have to fight one of my own. It seems so . . . so . . ."

"Uncivilized?"

"Yes."

Xena had walked with her lover in her arms to the edge of the lake and now gently put her precious bundle down on the soft dirt. "But it's custom, Gabrielle. They have to be able to cling to something in these times of change. Unfortunately you, as their Queen, must allow them to retain some of their traditions to keep the tribe intact."

"I know. I think I just needed to verbalize the thought."

Wrapped in the soft drying cloths, they picked up their clothes and walked back to the hut in silence.

As soon as they entered the hut Gabrielle went to the table and picked up the bird's head. With loving hands she placed it back on the staff, which had for so long been without its adornment. Her eyes filled with tears as she looked upon the exquisite weapon. It was as if it had been naked for too many seasons and now was once again fully clothed in all its splendor. Memories of Ephiny and her first meeting with the Amazons flowed freely through her mind and suddenly she was sobbing uncontrollably.

Two strong arms encased her like a protective shell. "There, there, my sweet, everything is going to be fine."

"I know, Xena," the bard whimpered. "But look at this." She held out the staff. "It makes me miss Ephiny so."

Xena turned her beloved around and wiped a trail of tears from the fair face. "Listen to me, Gabrielle. Tomorrow when you go to the challenge, dedicate it to Ephiny and the Amazons of the past. Dedicate your victory to your friends without whom you would not be the person you are today. They can live on in you, Gabrielle, and in me, and in the rest of the Amazon Nation." She kissed her reason to live and walked her over to the bed.

Silence ensued as they crawled into bed next to one another. Xena lay on her back staring at the ceiling when she felt her bard cuddle close, placing an arm around her warrior's waist as she laid, her still moist golden tresses on her champion's chest.

"Whatever happens tomorrow, know that I love you Xena." Gabrielle murmured into the darkness.

"Everything's going to be just fine, my world; I have faith in you."

"Just in case something goes wr . . ."

"Nothing will, Gabrielle." The champion's heart pounded at the thought of anything going wrong. She could keep the burning question in her heart no longer. She needed to ask just one



more time and hoped that it would not start an argument. "Gabrielle are you sure you don't want me to take up the challenge? It's not too late you know."

The dark-haired beauty relaxed ever so slightly as she felt a smile form on her lover's face. "No, my love, thank you for offering again, but I really must do this for myself." She squeezed tighter and planted a small kiss on her warrior's breast.

*Okay here it goes . . . if I don't ask now, I'll never have the strength to breach the subject, and our living here will never be viable.* "If I can't be your champion, Gabrielle, what exactly will be my position here in the village, in the tribe?" *There! Your ego is out on the table warrior, here's hoping the answer is one we can both live with.*

Gabrielle repositioned herself on one elbow, her soft green eyes staring tenderly down into the sapphire orbs that could melt her heart with a single glance. *How could I have been so selfish, so full of myself not to think of how she must feel?* As quickly as possible she gathered her thoughts, now was the time when her bardly instinct needed to be as sharply honed as possible. *One slip of the tongue and you could devastate her, Gabrielle. If you do that then living here will never be viable.*

"Xena, that is such an important question but one I had hoped you would have already known the answer to. For any other challenge, I would not have hesitated to use you as my champion. For any challenge in the future I will do the same. You're my source of strength; I would be lost without your support. Yet, this one instance is so different, my love. I would think you would realize that fact, and if you were thinking logically, I am sure you would have. But you are using your heart here and not your mind, which is so unlike you, my warrior. I need to gain back the respect of those who have followed Tecmessa for so long - I know you realize that. If I used you now, you would win, and I would be Queen. But, I would only have the respect of those who already respect me. If I do this myself, I show that I am a worthy adversary and that I deserve to be Queen of the Amazons." Her furrowed brow showed deep concern for her warrior's state of mind and heart.

Xena looked deep within and smiled. *All the answers, you gave all the right answers as I knew you would, my life.* The warrior smiled back up at the other half of her soul. "You're right, Gabrielle. I was being selfish and a bit egotistical. I know I belong here as your Consort and your Champion. I think not being able to show my love and loyalty for this challenge I . . . well I . . . I "

"You needed to be reassured, my strong silent warrior," Gabrielle smiled and kissed the stuttering lips. "Be assured, my love, you are always needed by me."

Xena pulled her bard close and kissed her sweetly, pouring all the love in her heart into a singular display of affection. Forgetting her own strength she held Gabrielle so tight that a gasp escaped from her lover's lips.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I was just trying to fulfil the wish you voiced at the lake."

Gabrielle giggled. "Silly warrior, I want us to be close, but I also need to breathe. I love you Xena, I'll see you in my dreams."

"I love you, too, Gabrielle, may they be all you desire."

Sleep came quickly to the contented duo as they continued in dreams what they had barely avoided consummating in reality on this eve of the challenge.

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The crowing of the cock jolted the warrior from her sleep. It took her a second to realize where she was, but after she did she kissed the crown of her sleeping beauty before gently rocking the bard awake.

"Rise and shine, Gabrielle," Xena insisted.

"I'll rise, but shine - I don't think so." The reply was not an uncommon one.

The reality of the moment hit within seconds and the small blonde jumped up from her reclining position. "By the Gods, Xena, it's today already."

"That it is, my love, that it is." Xena smiled as she rolled from the bed and began dressing. "So, how are you feeling?"

"Fine . . . fine . . . considering."

"Good - then it's a good day to take back your tribe." *Think nothing but positive affirmations this morning, Xena* - she reminded herself.

Stepping out of the doorway to greet the sun, she almost tripped over a large bowl of fruit and a pitcher of juice. "Looks like we had visitors already this morning, Gabrielle." Reaching down to retrieve the offerings she also noticed a bowl of blue war paint and what looked to be articles of clothing.

"Looks like they have a Ceremonial Challenge outfit," Xena chuckled as she walked back into the room with the bounty in her arms. She put the food and drink down on the table and turned to her mate. "I think this is what you are supposed to wear."

Gabrielle stopped dressing and looked up at what her warrior was swinging in the air. "By the Gods, Xena - there's nothing to it." She grabbed the two pieces of dark blue cloth out of her lover's hands and examined them closely. "It's just a pair of panties and a breast covering." The look on her face was priceless and Xena couldn't help but laugh.

"What in Tartarus do you find so damn amusing?"

"Well, ever since we've been together your clothing has become more and more revealing, and this, my darling, is the epitome of divulgence. I do believe it is only one step from being stark naked." By this time the warrior was beside herself with laughter.

Sternly glaring into sparking sapphire eyes, Gabrielle shook the offending clothing in her lover's face. "Well, will you still be laughing, when the entire village is gaping at me wearing these two small pieces of nothingness?"

The laughter subsided abruptly and a scowl took the place of the ear-to-ear grin. "No, as a matter of fact. Maybe you should start a new tradition and wear your own clothes."

Seeing now that the tables had been consciously turned, a smile of satisfaction appeared on the bard's face. "No, that wouldn't be prudent. I need to 'allow them to retain some of their traditions to keep the tribe intact', remember Xena?"

With a deep sigh of resignation the warrior agreed, "Yes, Gabrielle, I remember."

Gabrielle exchanged her own clothes for the skimpy attire that had been left for her and grabbed a small piece of fruit. "I'm starving, but I know I shouldn't eat."

"There will be plenty of time for feasting after the challenge." Xena's eyes narrowed as a look of deep concern came over her face. "Are you feeling okay, Gabrielle?"

"I feel fine, Xena," Gabrielle assured her. "A few flutterbyes in the stomach, if you know what I mean, but other than that - I'm ready to go."

As they were about to leave the hut, the sound of heavy, stomping footsteps gave them pause. "What in Tartarus . . . "

"Hey! You two up?" Eve's voice rang through the door, well before her face made an appearance.

Xena shrugged her shoulders. "Well, I did tell her to make her presence known before barging in," she admitted.

"At least she listens to you," the bard countered, smiling also. To the woman just entering, she answered, "Yes, Eve. Not only are we up but we were just getting ready to leave."

Eve took one look at Gabrielle and was taken back, "Mom . . . that's . . . " she pointed at the outfit, " . . . you're almost . . . "

"Naked," Xena finished her daughter's sentence. "It what the well-dressed defender of titles seems to be wearing today." That remark got a nasty look from the green-eyed monster standing next to her as well as a punch on the arm.

"What?"

"You know very well What?" Gabrielle reprimanded. "Let's go get this over with." As she walked past Eve, her daughter grabbed her arm.

"Mom."

"What Eve?"

"You have to put the paint on your face. I heard the women talking in the hut last night and it's some kind of superstition. They believe that the paint gives you the power to concentrate and do your best. It's got some special herbs or something in it."

"What kind of herbs?"

"I don't know, they're supposed to make you stronger and more adept."

"Sounds like cheating to me, Eve."

"No, Mom - it isn't. Tecmessa has the exact same potion in her paint."

"That doesn't make any sense at all. If we both have the same potion then we'll be equal again; it would be the same as if neither of us put it on."

"But, I know for a fact that Tecmessa Is putting it on, so you must, also."

Gabrielle looked over at Xena and the warrior seemed to agree with Eve.

"Great I have to drug myself up now. I was doing fine on my own adrenaline."

"It's probably more psychological than anything, Gabrielle. If your mind thinks it gives you more power than it probably will. My guess would be that you should believe it will work; you know Tecmessa believes in the magic." Xena turned to Eve. "Did the sisters say if the Shamaness mixed up the potions?"

"Yes, they did and they said there was one sister present from each side of the challenge, one who wants Mom to remain Queen and one who wants Tecmessa, so the potions are equal in strength."

Gabrielle grabbed the bowl and stood in front of the looking glass. "Here goes nothing." She adorned her face with the blue paint that matched her clothing. One long streak across her forehead, one down each cheek and one from her bottom lip down to the tip of her chin. With some remaining in the bowl she dipped her fingers in again and this time painted two lines from her elbows to her wrists. "These two lines," she stated as she pointed to the ones on her left hand, "will stand for you and me fighting side by side, Xena." Then turning to Eve she pointed to the two on her right arm. "These stand for you and me, Eve. I'm taking you both into the arena with me. Now let's get this over with before I change my mind." She picked up the staff she had chosen the evening before and walked toward the exit.

As the three women began to leave the hut, they were met by a fairly large contingent of Amazons who had come to walk with them to the ceremonial grounds. A cheer went up as they started down the path to the Challenge of the Queens.

"Queen Gabrielle - May the best Amazon win!" The chant followed them all the way to the grassy knoll. When they reached their destination, the opposing group of sisters surrounding their own champion, Tecmessa, met them.

"Queen Gabrielle," Tecmessa nodded.

"Queen Tecmessa," Gabrielle returned the nod.

An arbitrator stepped between the two women, with Gabrielle dressed in dark royal blue and Tecmessa in bright red. "Would the Queens be so kind as to step into the arena?"

Following the instructions, they did as they were asked. They stood - each holding her staff in an upright position with one end firmly on the ground and the other head level. Looking into each other's eyes, there was not a trace of fear between them.

The arbitrator raised her hands above her head and turned to address the crowd. "On this day will be decided who of the two Queens will rule this tribe. To my right, the Bard Queen, Gabrielle of legend." A mighty roar went up from the crowd. The speaker continued, "To my left the Reigning Queen, Tecmessa." The statement was answered by yet another thunderous cheer. "This challenge is a fight to the death."

Eve gasped, not having known the way of the Amazons and turned to her mother. Xena looked at her daughter with haunted blue eyes - there was no sign of a smile upon the warrior's face. She leaned over and whispered into her daughter's ear, "Gabrielle will not die on this field, I promise you that." With that she turned back to listen to the final announcement, proclaiming the commencement of the battle.

"May the best Amazon win."

The arbitrator stepped out of the circle the women were standing in and the challenge was begun.

Gabrielle stood still, her staff with the bird's head held shoulder high and parallel to the ground waiting for Tecmessa to make the first move. Normally she would have removed the ornament before fighting, but this was a special challenge and the future of the Amazons deserved to be won with a ceremonial flare. *For Ephiny! For all who came before her and all who come after!* The arrogant Amazon fell right into Gabrielle's plan. The small blonde could see that the larger woman was not as agile as she was, nor did she seem to have the same degree of dexterity with Gabrielle's weapon of choice. She came at Gabrielle full kilter, sweeping the staff in the air. As she came closer to the smaller woman, Gabrielle undercut the weapons thrust, throwing the charging woman off balance. The blonde then kicked her opponent in the side.

Tecmessa regained her footing and struck back with a full swing. Staffs caught in mid-air, one parallel to the ground, the other nearly perpendicular. The two were at a stand off as Gabrielle pushed forward, causing Tecmessa to back up slightly.

The reigning Queen was quick on her feet, but Gabrielle was quicker as she twirled her staff like a baton and swung first to the left, with her staff being met by her opponents and then to the right where she struck the taller woman's shoulder with a jolting blow. The crowd heard a loud crack and Tecmessa cringed in pain.

While she still had the advantage, Gabrielle swept her weapon low, catching Tecmessa at the back of her knees and toppling her onto the ground.

A shout went up from one section of the crowd. "Queen Gabrielle, Queen Gabrielle!"

The felled Queen scrambled to her feet, grabbing her staff from the ground and began swinging at the Bard Queen, a swing to the head and a miss . . . another swing to the abdomen . . . hitting it's target and knocking the wind from the smaller woman and causing her to stumble backward.

As Tecmessa came closer, Gabrielle swung high and hit her on the right side of her face, causing blood to spurt from a gash in her cheek, made by the weapon. She shook off the intensity of the attack and regained her composure, spinning full circle and coming back at the small blonde with a vengeance. The larger Amazon levied her weapon at the Bard's mid-section but instead made contact with the quick woman's staff.

A roar of exaltation went up from the crowd with the block, making the reigning Queen even more determined. She jumped up and forward, landing a powerful foot in Gabrielle's side, causing the blonde to stagger. Tecmessa then swung again at the Bard, a diagonal overhead swing to the right, blocked by Gabrielle, then another diagonal overhead swing to the left. When Gabrielle attempted to block the second strike, her hand caught the full impact of the blow. Small knuckles were caught for an instant between the clashing staffs. The impact caused them to crack open, and blood began oozing slowly from the fissures.

Standing on the sidelines, Xena's breath caught in her throat as she watched the red liquid flow from her lover's fingers. Barley able to keep her composure, she steeled herself and continued to watch.

A cheer from the other side of the audience egged Tecmessa on, and she increased her attack, running toward the small blonde, who ducked a head swipe and caught the taller woman in the back of her knees, throwing her off balance and onto the ground. Undaunted, Tecmessa regained her balance as she staggered to a standing position and came up swinging.

The groans of the two women became louder as the challenge continued. Again, Gabrielle swept Tecmessa's feet from under her, and watched as the woman scrambled to stand up. Screaming angrily, Tecmessa charged at the blonde, hitting her squarely in the abdomen with her outstretched staff and knocking the wind out of Gabrielle.

Grabbing her stomach, Gabrielle glared at her competitor; furious green daggers shot from her eyes. "This is getting ridiculous!" She screamed. She faced her enemy and as she approached close proximity to the woman she landed a damaging strike by jumping up and kicking high, again jarring the already damaged shoulder.

Another cheer for Queen Gabrielle filled the arena as the taller woman attempted to shake off the assault. Gabrielle quickly countered with her staff, hitting the now injured woman in the side and again in the back when she turned to get her balance.

The crowd went wild and then hushed as the two Amazons continued their fight.

At one point when they were particularly close, the taller woman caught the Bard off guard, when she landed a fist to Gabrielle's face, causing the blonde's lip to split.

At the sight of the swelling mouth, Xena again had to pull in her temper to keep from interfering.

Gabrielle licked the warm red fluid from her mouth and with determination, increased her assault on her opponent.

It was obvious that the women were fairly evenly matched and each was receiving her share of bruises and cuts. It was also apparent that they were both beginning to tire.

Gabrielle delivered an incredible blow, which landed the taller woman on her knees, and then she jammed the staff into Tecmessa's chest, causing her to gasp for air.

Suddenly, Gabrielle was distracted as a sharp cry arose from somewhere in the crowd. She was taken off guard for but a split second, but that was enough to let Tecmessa gather her composure and right herself. With the Bard's head turning back toward her, the Amazon made good use of the opportunity and used her staff as a club, hitting Gabrielle with a forceful blow to her low back.

Silence from the throng, as the blonde went down on her face in the dirt. Xena stood, readying her chakram. A young sister, standing to the right of Xena, partially covered the more experienced woman's large hand with her own. "This must be a fair fight to the finish Xena," the brave young woman announced, daring to look the warrior in the eyes. "No one can interfere. Not even you."

Returning her attention to the other half of her soul, Xena sat back down. She knew full well that should her Gabrielle be put into a position where mortal harm was inevitable, not all the fire in Tartarus would be able to stay the toss of her chakram toward the now reigning queen.

But, for now she merely watched as the vicious Tecmessa stood over her Gabrielle.

Tecmessa raised her staff and just as she was about to deliver a mighty blow to golden tresses, Gabrielle flipped onto her back, grabbed the dropped staff with her right hand and stabbed her

opponent sharply in the stomach, catching her totally off guard. Jumping up, she again brought her weapon around and hit the already bleeding shoulder with a fierce blow.

Tecmessa let out a cry of anguish as she dropped her staff doubling over in pain. Another amazing swing and Gabrielle landed the weapon in the Amazon's side. The reigning Queen went down on her knees, at which point Gabrielle positioned herself in front of the weaponless woman and fixed her staff into a lethal position. One quick move and Tecmessa's neck would be broken.

Uncontrolled tears of agony streamed down the now beaten woman's face. Tecmessa looked up into the eyes of the defending Queen. Even with all the fight drained from her, the Amazon's pride would not be squelched. "Go ahead, Bard Queen, finish the task," she dared.

"Tecmessa," Gabrielle began, "us fighting amongst ourselves and killing off our best warriors is a waste of precious Amazon blood. I am going to give you a choice, but being killed is not among the options."

Still holding the staff on the defeated woman's neck Gabrielle looked out at her subjects.

"I will not kill your former Queen; that would be a dereliction of my duty as your reinstated leader and a grave loss for the Amazon Nation. I will, however, give her a choice, and I hope she is Amazon enough to see the greater good behind the pride of this challenge and make an honorable Amazon decision - one that is good for the entire tribe, not just for her and her small following."

Again Gabrielle turned to Tecmessa, but this time spoke loud enough for the entire tribe to hear. "Tecmessa I will not destroy what is important to the Amazons as a nation. You and yours are part of our history. Your relatives fought hard for the privilege to be called Amazons, as did you just now. I beseech you not to give up that birthright and to join me as a leader in my royal guards. Stand by my side with your followers and make this tribe stronger. Your only other choice is to take yourself and all who would leave with you away from here immediately and never set foot into this village again. I hope you decide on the former choice; you are an asset to this tribe, Tecmessa."

With that Gabrielle removed the staff from its lethal position and stood back, awaiting the former Queen's decision.

At first Tecmessa remained on her knees, slowly looking around drinking in the entirety of the village with her eyes. She cautiously reached over and picked up her staff where it lay, and leaning on it she rose to her feet. The now defeated Queen stood towering over Gabrielle a look in her eyes of respect that the smaller woman had not seen the royal Amazon bestow on any of her sisters.

"To be honest with you, Queen Gabrielle, I thought it would be an easy victory. I had heard of you assigning your Champion to your first challenge as Queen and expected you to do the same today. As it turns out you are not only an adept warrior but a charitable Queen as well. I would



be foolish to become your enemy. You are also correct in realizing that this village needs me as well as it needs you. Therefore, I accept your terms."

Extending her hand, the former Queen clasped the reinstated Queen's arm in a gesture of sisterhood and alliance. She then stepped back. With one knee on the ground and the other in a bent position, Queen Tecmessa gave up her throne and bowed to the Bard Queen Gabrielle.

The entire village went wild.

Gabrielle turned to her subjects and held up both her hands demanding silence. The assemblage hushed and Gabrielle began speaking.

"As first order of business I want to inform all of you that my name is Gabrielle and unless it is a formal or ceremonial occasion that is how I prefer to be addressed. I will accept the respectful head nod before addressing me and any other honors that are afforded me as your Queen, but I do not want to be beyond the reach of any individual in the tribe. We are all here for the good of all. And now I think we may have cause for another celebration." She smiled as wide as her injured lips would allow at her subjects.

It was at that point all Tartarus broke loose. Amazons scattered and re-converged into small groups, discussing how to make the evenings festivities even more spectacular than they had been the night before.

Gabrielle didn't need to search to find Xena and Eve; they were running toward her. She walked slowly in their direction, her body aching all over. When the two women reached her, she handed her staff to Eve and placed her arms around her warrior's waist, her body shaking from relief. Xena held her close and kissed the top of her head gently.

"I'm very proud of you, Gabrielle."

"Gods, Xena - I thought I'd lost it there for a minute."

The warrior did not admit to her own doubts or the incident that almost caused the chakram to be thrown. "I never doubted you, my love. You've brought your village back together and everyone will profit from that." She tilted the fair face up until sea-green eyes were looking into the loving sapphire orbs that lit up her soul. Xena bent down and tenderly kissed the split lip, then reached for the hand with the injured knuckles and softly kissed them as well. "We'll have you as good as new in no time, my love."

"They're just minor bruises and cuts, they'll heal easily. We've been through worse." She started to smile but it hurt, so she simply placed her head back down on her lover's chest and held her tightly.

Eve threw her arms around her mothers and addressed Gabrielle. "Well, Mom, looks like that reinstates the two of us." Nodding her head toward her mother she continued, "Now what are we going to do about getting her into the Royal Family?"

Xena swatted her gently on the top of the head and Gabrielle chuckled to herself. "Actually, that's the next order of business. It looks like this tribe really gets into parties; I wonder what they'll do when they're told to prepare for a Royal Wedding?"

She turned back to her warrior and gave her a hug. "As much as I want to start on the preparations for that, my love, today is not the time. Right now all I want to do is sit down and have someone serve me something to eat and drink!"

*End of To Challenge the Queen*

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