

~ What a Difference a Day Makes ~

by Carole Giorgio

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The morning sun filtered through the falling water as sapphire eyes blinked open. The comforting feeling of waking up with Gabrielle in her arms put an immediate smile on the strong face, tending to soften the otherwise angular features. It had been far too long since she remembered feeling this contented upon rising. Gently kissing the soft crown of golden silk she whispered, "I love you Gabrielle; last night was beautiful."

"Hmmm," came the reply from the small woman nestled in her warrior's arms. Shifting her body slightly and squeezing a little tighter, she repeated the utterance, "Hmmm."

"We have a busy day ahead of us, my love, please wake up." The warrior pleaded, as only her bard would ever hear her do.

"Oh, but Xena," Gabrielle whined, "It's sooooo cozy. Do I really have to leave this comfort so soon?"

"I'm afraid so. We need to get started if we're to make it to the village before nightfall."

"You know we could just walk through that portal," Gabrielle pointed in the direction of the enchanted forest Aphrodite made for them to use, "and be at the village in a heartbeat."

"Any other time perhaps, but today we have a side trip to make or did you forget that we're dinarless?"

"Yeah, that did kind of slip my mind. Okay, you win - I'm getting up. But I want it noted that it's only under duress."

"Duly noted, my love, duly noted." The warrior smiled again, giving her bard a tender squeeze before relinquishing her hold and rolling off the soft bed. *It's nice to have friends in High places.*

While Gabrielle fought with herself to disengage from the warmth of the skins, Xena peaked out around the falls to see if Eve was anywhere in sight.

It seemed that, once again, the young woman proved to be her mother's daughter. She was indeed sitting near the water's edge. In fact, she had brought the entire camp down with her and there was already a fire burning strong. Xena detected the faint odor of herbs mixed with the pungent odor of fish cooking and her stomach made an involuntary grumble.

"Hurry up, Gabrielle, Eve has breakfast started," she yelled back into the cave.

"Breakfast. Now there's a reason to rush." The small blonde came up behind Xena and placed her arms around the warrior's waist. The taller woman felt the warmth of her lover's skin against hers and goose bumps involuntarily covered her entire body.

"Gabrielle, the idea is to get ready and be down at the lake before midday." She gently pried her lover's eager arms from around her waist and turned the blonde around to face her, gazing down into still sleepy sea-green eyes. Her heart melted, as was the case every time she looked at her lover's face. Gabrielle smiled sweetly, while inwardly she gloated, knowing the effect she had on the tall dark beauty and relishing in the knowledge.

"Good morning, my Warrior. You felt marvelous last night." She smiled seductively, "Could I talk you into a morning replay?"

"You are incorrigible! What Am I going to do with you?" There was no holding back a smile as Gabrielle pressed closer. Xena could feel the texture of her bard's erect nipples as they made contact with the skin beneath her own breasts. Small hands reached up to entreat her warrior's to follow suit.

"For starters you could kiss me." Gabrielle whispered as she placed her mouth over her lover's breast, allowing a free hand to roam southward to her warrior's mound.

Xena could feel Gabrielle smile as her fingers reached the area that was already moist beneath the dark curls.

The raven-haired beauty leaned down and gracefully picked her love up into her arms, kissing her passionately. "You know I will run your lovely ass off the rest of the day trying to make up for the time we're going to lose traveling this morning?"

"It will be well worth the consequences to spend the few extra minutes with you here this morning, my love. But, we're not really on a time schedule. What difference could one more day make? "

"Always up for bartering, aren't you?" Xena laughingly chided the bard.

She knew Gabrielle was right though, there really was no hurry. It wouldn't hurt any of them to relax another day by the lake, act like a real family, and just enjoy nature and all she had to offer. None of them knew the reception they would receive when they did finally enter Amazon territory.

"Okay, you convinced me. Should I yell down to Eve and let her know we're all right?"

"No Xena, I'm sure she realizes that we might 'sleep' a little later today." Again the warrior received a knowing smile, as she deposited her precious cargo back onto the still warm bed.

At first the lovers just lay next to one another, each drinking in the beauty of the vision before them. Slowly, fingers began to simultaneously dance on skin. Xena's hand roamed the outline of her lover's form, while Gabrielle's played on the inner sphere of the body before her, delicately tracing circles around her lover's navel then slowly letting her fingers drift down to the dark curly mound below Xena's abdomen.

Gabrielle smiled when she thought about the woman she loved, the one so different from the person known to the rest of the world as the warrior princess. Her fingers caressed the soft skin between her lover's thighs, stroking the strong muscles that could crush with a vengeance the neck of a foe, or melt into liquid under the love spell of a small bard.

Each of the women drank in the elegance of the other, each trying desperately to recapture precious time that had been stolen from them. When they could stand it no longer, they allowed the passion to unfold as it had the evening before and let the lullaby of the dancing falls intensify their desire for each other.

A few candlemarks later, sexually satisfied yet famished in other ways, they unwrapped from each other's bodies and sat on the bed.

"So do you think we could manage to show some facsimile of a normal existence for the next few hours," Xena joked over at the fair-haired maid sharing her bed.

"I think that might be accomplished now that at least one of my hungers has been appeased. You know I think every once in a while we deserve to take a day or two just for ourselves and seeing how we haven't done so in longer than I care to state - yesterday and today rightfully belong to us." She snuggled over next to the warm body that had been surrounding her as the sun went from low on the horizon to where it stood now at it's noonday mark. "I do think Eve might just be getting a little perturbed about having to spend the morning with the horses." Gabrielle smiled as she gave Xena a gentle push to the end of the bed.

"Oh, I get the picture. You've had your fill and now I'm getting thrown out like an old used bedroll."

"No, no, no . . . let's not get nasty," the smaller woman chortled. "You want to stay in the good graces of Your Queen now don't you?"

"My Queen, did you say, My Queen?"

"I do believe I did." Gabrielle attempted to look majestic, which was a little difficult seeing how her only covering was a sheet.

"You may be my Queen soon, but today you are merely my bard."

"Merely? Since when is a bard ever a 'merely'? Dramatically, emphatically, poetically, but never, never, merely a bard!"

As was her gift, Gabrielle succeeded in getting the staunch warrior to succumb to laughter. It was certainly a melodious sound, and one, which in recent years infrequently fell on ears other than those of her bard. In the time she'd spent traveling with the freckle-faced woman-child, Xena reclaimed much of the love and laughter that her damaged soul had previously lost. This mere slip of a woman replenished the empty recesses of the warrior's heart and filled it with a thirst for life without the turmoil of war.

It seemed that each time the dark warrior gained a foothold on her humanity, some forgotten foe would rise, and attempt to drag the champion back down into the dark pit she was slowly climbing out of. Her last such encounter, only moons ago, was when they were in the midst of saving Eve. Now, the warrior and her bard were being given a short time of respite, allowing time for nurturing that part of herself she always distanced in order to achieve victory over her enemies.

Only when she was with Gabrielle could she feel truly whole, allow herself to laugh, love and weep when the spirit moved her. Today she was feeling whole again, after spending an entire night and then the morning with her beloved bard. But if the chalice were to be raised, at least last night gave her the strength to again prepare to take on the world.

Coming out of her thoughts she turned to gaze into emerald depths of love. She smiled inwardly, knowing if she didn't leave soon, a repeat performance of last night and this morning's love making would soon ensue. She cleared her throat, stood up, and walked toward the edge of the ledge. "I'll go down and see if I can find some way to bring our clothes up without getting them soaked. It would be a lot easier if we could travel through the forest and then only have the one way trip to make back."

"Let me look around and see if Aphrodite left us any clothes other than these night garments," Gabrielle responded, dealing with her own thoughts of forgetting the entire excursion for the moment and spending the remainder of the day in bed, wrapped around her warrior.

She started opening drawers in the dressers that stood next to the shelves. Tons of towels, nightshirts, and negligees filled the drawers, but no leather, or armor. As she opened the last drawer in one of the dressers she spotted a note written in the Goddess' own hand.

Hey, Little Bard, I know I gave you no way to get up here other than a watery swim but . . .

Can't have a warrior running around, sans armor and boots and leather.

Can't have her bard in a birthday suit, running naked in all kinds of weather.

There's a platform on the shore below, all shiny and gold and gleaming.

Place garments there you'll want to wear, after swimming and climbing and 'dreaming'.

"Look here's a small key, a few actually, does she think we misplace things that easily," the bard grinned as she picked up one of the gold keys. "Well, that solves the wet clothes situation." She handed Xena one of the keys. Guess you have to swim with this in your mouth, or wear a shift and tie it onto that.

"The mouth will do fine, thank you." Xena took the tiny key and started toward the ledge. "I'll help Eve catch some lunch if she hasn't already."

"Great, I'll be down in just a bit, I want to tidy up here first." She kissed the warrior and watched as she dove off the ledge into the clear water below.

After watching Xena come up for air, Gabrielle ran over to the archway between the cave and the forest. Standing beyond the cave with the sunlight shining around her she called for her friend.

"Aphrodite, if you can hear me please appear."

Gabrielle waited for a few minutes then repeated her request. When she received no answer she sulked back into the cave and began making up the bed. Just as she was about to dive off into the water to join Xena and Eve she heard a crackling sound behind her.

"Aren't we the impatient mortal today?" The familiar voice echoed through the grotto. "I came as soon as I could, Little One. Is there a problem in paradise?"

"Not really," Gabrielle smiled over at the Goddess of Love. "Actually I wanted to thank you for the lovely atmosphere you created for us to reacquaint with each other after the horrific time we've just been through."

"You called me back here to thank me?" The Goddess gave the mortal an unbelieving look.

"Not exactly."

"I thought not. What is it Gabrielle?"

"I really do appreciate this special place and the ability to leave here and go anywhere we want. And I totally realize that it would be impossible for us to get here without traveling but . . ."

"Could you hurry it up, Little Bard? Cupid asked me to baby-sit and I'm already running a little behind."

"Sure, I'll just blurt it out. I was wondering if there was any way that we could put the horses . . . one at a time mind you . . . on that platform down by the lake and whether the grotto up here would hold their weight? You see that way we could take the horses and anything we carried here with us back to wherever it was we were going. Otherwise we would always have to be traveling by foot to get here. There . . . that's the question."

"Well that wasn't so difficult now was it, Gabrielle? I guess I wasn't thinking about how you mortals travel when I invented this love nest. Of course you can use the platform for the horses; I'll make it so that it will enlarge to encompass whatever it is you've placed on it. Just remember to have only one horse at a time on this ledge and take the first one into the woods before bringing the second one up." She made a fluid motion with her hand and blinked her eyes.

"There, all done and I moved it a little to accommodate the larger loads. It's over by the tallest tree closest to the lake. It will recede into the ground after you leave so you must remember the exact spot to find the lock."

"Thanks again, Aphrodite."

"No problem, my pleasure. Speaking of pleasure . . . how did it go last night?"

"It was marvelous. We got to know each other all over again and in such comfort." The small blonde began blushing.

"That's what love is all about." As she started to leave, Gabrielle stopped her once again.

"Aphrodite, before you go."

"Quickly, Gabrielle, remember I'm in a bit of a hurry."

"It's about Ares."

A frown of confusion crept over the usually smiling face of the Goddess, "What about Ares? He hasn't bothered any of you has he?"

"No." Now it was Gabrielle's turn to look confused. "How could he have bothered us? I was just wondering how he was getting along, being a mortal and all? I feel somewhat responsible for his lot in life these days."

"Oh, is that all." A smile returned to the Goddess' face as she giggled. "Ares is quite fine and he's been restored to both immortal and God. I made him promise that if I went and got him some ambrosia that he would never bother any of you again, unless you specifically asked for him."

"That's wonderful Aphrodite," the small bard remarked. "I feel so much better after hearing that. He spent a difficult time down here when his sword was stolen a while back and he lost his Godhood, remember?"

"Yes, that's why I took pity on him. That and the fact that Eros kept whining that his father couldn't be left on earth as a mortal. He is family, after all." She smiled at her mortal friend as she disappeared in a puff of gold and pink. "Chow, Gabrielle . . . don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Gabrielle shook her head laughing at the Goddess' final comment. Her heart felt immeasurably lighter knowing that the God of War had been given back his birthright. No matter how much they disagreed over the years, if it hadn't been for Aphrodite, who took them up to Olympus, and Ares, who gave up his Godhood, she and Eve would both be dead.

As much as she hated to think about it, Ares had taken Xena under his wing long before she ever met the woman. No matter how much she may have resented that, his involvement in her warrior's life may have been the only reason Xena was still alive for her to meet on that fateful day. If it hadn't been for his intervention, she may not have possessed the fortitude to make it through the years following Cortese's siege on Amphipolis.

Thinking about Ares always made her nervous. Somewhere deep in her unconscious thoughts she held the fear that he might someday win her lover back, but not as long as she was still around.

Shaking off the thoughts of the past, it was time to join the rest of her little family on the shore of the lake. Her stomach was beginning to think she was never going to feed it and she wanted to tell Xena the good news about not having to travel by foot back from wherever it was the stash was hidden. She took off the nightshirt she had donned before calling on Aphrodite and laid it on the bed.

Going to the edge of the ledge she looked over the calm water to spot Xena and Eve standing on the shoreline talking. After looking straight down into the lake from the ledge, she felt her stomach begin to churn; if she had eaten breakfast it would have been on its way to the water. *By the Gods! I didn't think we were this far up. I'm not That good a diver. I guess I could jump off.*

The dive had been like second nature to Xena. Sometimes Gabrielle swore the warrior was part fish and was hiding gills somewhere, although she of all people knew better. Gabrielle was more of a landlubber and even looking directly down at the lake was making her nauseous. She continued to look back over to the shoreline and back down into the water, three - many four times - trying to get the nerve to jump . . . all of a sudden an idea came to her. She walked over to the bed and grabbed the nightshirt, throwing it over her head she ran in the direction of the forest.

No time like the present to initiate the forest. Walking into the sunlight she closed her eyes and imagined herself standing next to Xena on the edge of the lake below.

"Hey!" Xena jumped back startled. "The least you could do is herald your arrival the next time, you know, you could have yelled over that you were going to pop in instead of swim over.

Gabrielle grabbed her dark hero around the waist. "That was fantastic! All I did was close my eyes and imagine myself here, and here I am!"

"Yeah we can see. Why didn't you swim over?"

Hanging her head slightly and mumbling she responded, "I was afraid to dive."

"What did you say, Gabrielle?" Xena prompted, having heard the confession she thought it amusing to have the small blonde repeat it.

"I said, I was afraid to dive - it looked too far down. There! Happy?" Emerald green eyes squinted, throwing a stern look in the direction of the raven-haired beauty. "Besides I wanted to try out the new toy. Come to think of it, my warrior, for teasing me . . . maybe I won't tell you the good news."

"What good news?" Xena asked.

"I said I shouldn't tell you." Gabrielle insisted.

"Then tell me," Eve spoke up. "I'm an innocent bystander. You can tell me the good news." She glanced back and forth between the two women standing in front of her. "If it's really good news, someone ought to know."

"I already do know." Gabrielle smiled and began to walk over toward the fire. "Are we going to eat soon?"

"Most definitely, Gabrielle." Xena walked over and stood next to her, casually draping one strong arm over the smaller woman's shoulders. "We're going to eat as soon as you tell me the good news."

"Since you put it that way," the fair-haired woman gave in. "I guess I'd better tell you. Remember how we were discussing how the forest was fantastic but that we would have to come here on foot because if we didn't we'd have to leave the horses behind?"

"Yes?"

"I just finished talking to our favorite Goddess and between the two of us we worked out a better arrangement." Gabrielle beamed from ear to ear.

"Ah . . . between the two of you, huh?" Sapphire eyes looked questioningly over at the imaginative bard.

"More like . . . I asked and . . . she complied."

"Gabrielle you are stretching this out into a boring conversation and the longer you take the longer it will be before you eat." Xena shook her head and pointed to the pan full of uncooked fish. "I, for one, am getting extremely hungry."

"Okay . . . okay . . . Aphrodite agreed to make the platform work for just about anything we put on it. But, if we use it for the horses, it has to be one at a time because when they get to the ledge, it may not be sturdy enough for both horses and all of us. There - isn't that great? That means we can eat a leisurely lunch, pack up everything and everybody, go get the stash, and come back here tonight. Tomorrow we can leave after a good night's sleep and be at the village in an instant. By the Gods I'm almost too excited to eat."

"Now that's going a little far, Auntie Gabrielle, even I don't believe that last statement." Eve laughed, while picking up the fish pan and handing it to the bard. "What to you say we cook these little critters?"

Gabrielle took the pan and placed it over the fire. Xena sat by the edge of the lake cleaning her sword and Eve went and picked some more of the berries she found the day before.

"Did you fill the water bags, Xena?"

"Yes." She continued her polishing.

"I see Eve tied the horses back up; have they been fed and watered?"

"Yes, Gabrielle."

"Did you find the platform, so we know where to put the key?"

"Gabrielle you really hate it when I'm sitting around just cleaning my sword, don't you?"

Stumbling for words the bard flipped the fish over in the pan. "No. I was just wondering if everything was taken care of."

"Uh, huh. You just wondered why I get to sit over here doing nothing while you get to stand over there and cook the fish."

"That's not it at all." Gabrielle remarked becoming slightly irritated. "I wanted to make sure we would be ready to leave after brunch is finished."

"What in Tartarus is a b-r-u-n-c-h?" Xena asked standing and walking over to the fireside.

"Well, we kind of missed breakfast because . . . um . . . you know why we missed breakfast. And now it's actually time for lunch but it's kind of a combination of the two meals so brunch sounded like a good thing to call it."

Smiling down at her lover, Xena stuck two fingers into the pan and pulled out a piece of the fillet. "Brunch it is then . . . yum . . . good brunch." Leaning over she kissed Gabrielle gently on the cheek. "And yes, I most certainly remember why we missed breakfast, and would do it again in a heartbeat."

Gabrielle stretched and kissed her lover on the cheek. "Ditto," she replied smiling, then placed the pan on a nearby rock and walked over in the direction of the saddlebags. "I think I still have some bread left from the other day." Pulling a half loaf out of the bag, she started back toward the fire. "This ought to go nicely with the fish and berries. I can't wait to get to the village; it'll be good to have a complete meal again, with bread we don't have to dunk to soften enough to eat."

Xena seemed a little distant. Gabrielle's eyes took on a pensive look, "Are you looking forward to staying with the Amazons, Xena?"

"It seems the best thing to do right now, Gabrielle."

"But are you looking forward to it? Any time we are in either this village or the other one where we have permanent huts, you begin to get agitated after a few days. Are you going to be comfortable living with the sisters for a while?"

"As long as I'm not made to feel useless. Sometimes it's a difficult to deal with all the attention showered upon you when we hit the villages." There she said it out loud. Gabrielle wasn't stupid and they were planning an extensive stay. It was best she got her trepidations out in the open before they arrived.

Gabrielle put the fish down one of the warm rocks sitting beside the fire and put her arms around her champion.

"You could never be useless, Xena. I know our relationship takes on a different tone when we're surrounded by the Amazons but once you're my Consort you will have a rightful place in the village, second only to mine." She watched the sapphire eyes as emotions danced across them; emotions not belied by the stone look on her lover's face.

"Xena, if there are problems we need to settle them now, before we enter Amazon territory. If you don't want to go then we'll change plans and do something else. Are you having second thoughts . . . " she almost feared to ask the question " . . . about getting married."

Xena looked around to see if Eve was within hearing distance before answering. "Of course not, I meant every word I said last night. But I do think we need to explain things to Eve first. She seems to be fine with our relationship but I would feel better if we had a . . . well . . . a family discussion."

"That sounds like a wonderful idea. Why don't we talk about it on the way back from wherever it is we are going this afternoon? By the way, where are we going?"

"There are some ruins between Mystatrada and Armoupolis. Around the ruins is a forest and some caves. That's where we're heading. It should only take us about five candlemarks to get back from there, so if we're lucky we'll be back by a little after dusk."

"Why don't we leave most of the campsite set so Eve doesn't have much to do. I don't think there will be any travelers coming this way, do you?"

"No, probably not. Keeping the campsite up would be a good idea and give us less to pack around with us."

"Anything you don't want to leave out in the open we can hide or take up to the ledge." Gabrielle volunteered.

When Eve came back to the fireside she was carrying a pouch full of berries and some fruit she found on a tree a little farther to the west.

Taking the fruit from her daughter Xena examined them. "These are similar to figs in texture and taste, I forgot they grew up here. You're a good gatherer for a city girl," she smiled.

"I practiced some when I took the army out." Eve admitted and then quickly changed the subject. "I see the main course is ready?"

"Yeah," Gabrielle answered, "we've been waiting for you. Sit down; I'm starving."

During lunch they discussed the plan for the afternoon and evening. Xena had already told Eve about the ledge and the enchanted woods. Eve started picking at her food and was sitting across from Gabrielle with a melancholy look on her face.

"What's the matter, Eve?"

"I don't know why but I was wondering how Ares was doing. I can't imagine being a God without powers or immortality . . . I mean it's hard to conceive of Ares as a mortal. He was a bastard but he must really love Mother or he wouldn't have given up his Godhood to save us."

"I was thinking those exact things this morning, Eve, minus the part about loving your mother. When I spoke to Aphrodite, I asked her how he was doing. You might be happy to know that she gave him some ambrosia and restored both his immortality and his Godhood." She took the plate from the younger woman's hand and piled it with the others.

"That makes me feel better. Now I can go back to hating all the shit he pulled on me again. I was feeling guilty after he sacrificed like that." She smiled over at Gabrielle. "I'll bet you know what I mean, don't you? He was always getting in the way between you and Mother. Now that he's a God again, you might start having those same old problems."

"I don't think so," Gabrielle replied picking up all the utensils and walking over to the lake.

Up to this point Xena had been silently listening to the banter being carried on between her two favorite women. Her heart lightened at the words Gabrielle repeated about Ares having been given back all that was his to begin with. As much of a problem as he had occasionally been, it was an enormous sacrifice he made, one which more than proved his love for her. In the dark part of her heart she knew beyond a doubt that had it not been for the God of War she might never have lived long enough to have found Gabrielle and for that, he would always hold a special place in her heart. She thought back to when they imbibed Celesta's tears - had Ares not taken them both to the high country, Gabrielle would have aged the same as Joxer did. As much of a bastard as he could be, he knew how much she loved Gabrielle and in return he showed his love by placing her lover's body beside her in the icy tomb. It was hard to harbor ill feelings about him any longer. When she thought deeper about it she wondered how he, or Aphrodite for that matter, could have even thought about helping Gabrielle, Eve, or her. Especially after she killed Deimos. She got up and went to stand beside Gabrielle.

"What do you mean you don't think so?"

Without looking up from her chore Gabrielle answered. "Aphrodite told me she made Ares promise before she gave him the ambrosia that he would not interfere with our lives ever again . . . unless we called for him." She looked up into the deep blue eyes of her lover. The expression on her warrior's face was difficult to read. Emotions were playing gently across the eyes of the dark-haired beauty, the depth of which Gabrielle was having a hard time reading. Her stomach started to tighten as she realized that perhaps the faraway look in the cerulean eyes could only be one of sorrow.

"What are you thinking, Xena?"

"Nothing." The warrior turned back toward the fire.

Gabrielle grabbed her hand, stopping her from leaving. "Nothing is not what's on your mind. What is it?"

"I guess I was just thinking about the last time we saw him. He looked so . . . so vulnerable."

Now she got right up into her warrior's face, her own flushing slightly. It was okay for Her to think kindly of Ares, but for Xena, well that put a different feeling into her heart, a different twist into the situation. "Listen Xena, I know none of us could ever thank him enough for the sacrifice he made. But all the crap he put us through - you've got to remember that."

"I do." The tall warrior almost whispered.

"For the God's sake, Xena . . . He killed Eli . . . "

"That was Eli's destiny, Gabrielle."

"He enabled your dark side to grow . . ."

"It may very well have saved my life."

For every counter Gabrielle came up with, Xena returned a viable response. There was a hard lump growing in the small bard's throat.

Eve quietly watched and listened from the area of the campsite, trying to busy herself with small chores.

"Are you trying to tell me that you Want him back in our lives?" Her emerald eyes showed mixed signs of anger, fear, and sorrow as unbidden tears began to well up and spill over.

Xena drew her close and held her tightly. "No, my love . . ." She looked over at Eve and the younger woman got up and walked back into the woods. "Gabrielle . . . look at me . . ." Placing a hand gently under her bard's face she tenderly lifted it up, kissing away the moist droplets as she tried to explain the mass of mixed emotions that were playing in her mind while Gabrielle was talking to Eve.

"It's just that he's been a part of my life since before I met you Gabrielle and I suppose a small fraction of my being misses the challenge he always provided. I know he was nothing but a thorn in your side and I'm sorry for that. But, you must realize that part of me will miss the danger he always provided."

Now the anger overtook all other emotions as Gabrielle pulled away from Xena and started back toward the lake.

Without thinking, the warrior grabbed the smaller woman roughly and spun her around. "What in Tartarus is wrong with you?"

Green daggers shot up at her as venomous words spewed from Gabrielle mouth. "If you want your damned God of War back Xena all you have to do is talk to him. I'm sure he'll come running, and we can start our little ménage á trois all over again."

"For the love of Zeus." The reference to the demised god flew out of the warrior's mouth before she had a chance to think. Gabrielle's statement hit her as comical. "A ménage á trois? You can't be serious Gabrielle!" Xena didn't know whether to laugh or be angry.

"Damn it Xena he tried to seduce you every chance he got and it came damn close to happening back in Amphipolis not too very long ago . . . uh . . . by our recollections that is . . . not by everyone else's."

"Let's get this little problem settled once and for all so we don't Ever have to have this discussion again. Do you think I would have asked you to marry me if I had any feelings, whatsoever for Ares?"

"I don't know. Remember when you said *'I felt something,'* when we were in Amphipolis . . . Remember?"

"Listen to yourself! Gabrielle, I was kidding! He kept me on my toes, kept my skills honed and my mind agile. I had to think on my feet whenever he was around. But I have no desire for him . . . not in the way you are thinking. None whatsoever, believe me Gabrielle. The only person I want in that respect is you." She pulled her lover close, running a strong hand down the skin of Gabrielle's back. An almost wicked smile graced her face as she felt the small bumps involuntarily appear on her lover's skin. Bending over she whispered softly into a small ear, before trailing her touch all the way around the outside of it. "I love you more than life; just looking at you starts me . . ." Taking one small hand in her own she positioned her lover's fingers beneath her undergarments, entreating the blonde to feel the already abundant moistness.

As a moan escaped Gabrielle's lips, Xena covered the smaller woman's mouth with her own, her tongue unashamedly begging entrance into the sweet dark cave.

"No one, no one in the world but you for this my love," she pressed her hand hard against her lover's, and Gabrielle felt her tense and release. "You have my solemn oath, Gabrielle, you are my Destiny."

"Xena!" Gabrielle broke away abruptly. "We'll be taking a week's vacation if you keep that up. What if Eve came back into camp?"

"She's a smart girl, Gabrielle, she'd turn around and leave." The warrior smiled, almost sheepishly. "Guess we should wait until this evening to finish, huh?"

"I guess," the small blonde smiled back. "You surely know how to make me want a cold dip in the lake," Gabrielle countered as she walked over to the shoreline and placed her feet into the cool water. "That should take me down a degree or two." Smiling back at the love of her life she picked up the dishes she left scattered on the fine dirt by the water's edge.

"So, is the conversation ended? Is the matter settled?" Xena arched an eyebrow as she watched her mate clean up.

"Consider the topic closed," *At least for the time being, never can tell with you, my champion.* She continued washing and began humming to herself.

By the time Eve returned the campsite had been put into order and there was a small mound of things that needed to be left in the safer ledge area. It was decided that Gabrielle would go first followed by the supplies. Next they would send Argo, then Eve, the other horse, and finally Xena bringing up the rear. The entire procedure proceeded smoothly and within a candlemark they were all standing in the warm sunlight of the enchanted woods.

"Aphrodite must think highly of you Gabrielle to have given you such a unique retreat and the ability to travel like a Goddess," Eve stated after having thoroughly examined the cave and the adjacent forest.

"Don't go giving her a bigger head than she already has now, Eve." Xena warned and quickly received a swift swat on the butt.

Observing the swat, Eve gave Xena a raised eyebrow - a look Xena herself had honed to perfection in the mirror when she was just a teenager. Xena returned the look with one of her own, followed by a whispered, "Only from Gabrielle, Eve. Remember that . . . only Gabrielle."

The younger woman chuckled to herself and stepped closer to Argo in anticipation of the trip they would soon all be taking.

"All right now, is everyone ready to go?" Gabrielle asked. After receiving an affirmative she explained for Eve's sake what was going to happen next. "You see, we all stand in close proximity of each other, here in this clearing. Then either Xena or I think of where we want to be and zap," she snapped her fingers, "and presto, we're there. It's that simple."

"I'm ready when you two are," the younger woman stated.

"Okay." Gabrielle faced Xena. "Since you know where this place is, I would assume we should go on your thoughts," she smiled warmly into her lover's face.

The next thing they knew they were in a much darker woods with a canopy of leafless tree branches obscuring the sun and a residue of mist almost knee deep.

"Does this look like the place, Xena?" Gabrielle questioned as a chill ran the length of her body.

"Sure does . . ." Xena replied looking around cautiously. "It hasn't changed a bit. You cold?"

"A little." Gabrielle answered, shivering at the inclement weather.

"Here let me get you something for your shoulders, I figured it might be like this. Are you okay, Eve?"

"Sure, I'm fine, thanks anyway." The younger woman looked around the dreary clearing.

"By the Gods it's gloomy here, Xena." Gabrielle commented.

"That's one of the reasons I chose this place, it never gets any better. I guess it used to match my attitude toward life." Meandering toward the north she cut down brush as it got in her way. "If I remember correctly there should be a cave over here." Pointing ahead, she moved forward with Eve and Gabrielle following.

She stopped and turned to face her companions. "Let's tie the horses up here. They can't go any further and if they're left to their own devices they might not be around when we get back."

"That sounds promising," Gabrielle replied sarcastically.

Even the ground beneath their feet was infested with a dreadful, uneasy feeling; the earth lacked its natural bounce and life. Every footfall left a lasting impression, and even the grass refused to spring back once the traveler's moved on. Silence screamed out to the trio; not a single woodland animal could be heard. It was as though the entire area was dead.

"I hope we don't have to be here very long Xena, this place gives me the creeps." Gabrielle edged closer to her hero.

"No, no. We won't be long, it's right around the . . . there it is." She pointed to a cave in the mountain that resembled a gaping wound. The sides were covered with a brownish/green moss, dripping from the top of the opening was more of the same, combined with vines that intertwined so intricately that the entrance was barely large enough for them to walk through.

"I hope you brought something to torch, Mother. I don't know about Auntie Gabrielle, but I don't want to go into that hole without some sort of light."

"Oh, yes, we've something to light." With that she began to cut away at some of the overhanging vegetation. The vines wriggled in her hands almost as if they were the only living stuff in all of the forest. Inside the mouth and slightly to the left she picked up the remnants of a torch. Rolling it on the floor some dark, sticky substance stuck to the ancient utensil. Xena turned around to spot Eve and Gabrielle standing by the portal, neither of them attempting to enter.

"Come on, nothing's going to get you."

"That's what you say." Gabrielle mumbled.

"Yes. That's what I say." With that she struck the torch on the cave wall; it sparked then burst into flame. "Here, there are enough of these for all of us." The warrior handed the first torch over to Eve as she prepared another for Gabrielle and then one for herself.

"Nice places you used to frequent, Xena." Gabrielle tried to make light of the uneasy feeling surrounding the area.

"This was one of the best," the dark champion grinned, raising an arched eyebrow. "It gets better."

"Oh, gee, I can't wait!" When Gabrielle saw Xena reaching back to the hilt of her sword she readied herself by reaching for one of the sais, the other hand holding tightly onto the glowing torch. Glancing back she noticed that Eve wasn't waiting for something to jump out at her; her sword was already unsheathed. "Aren't we a jittery little group who've come to play among the dead? Xena what is this place?"

Without looking back and without a word, Xena followed the path to the right, then the left, then left again. They came to a circular section where it looked like there might have been an ancient altar. Stopping she turned and faced her companions.

"I can't seem to recall the historic name for this place but we used to call it the Cave of Living Death. Half of my men, brave as they were in battle, paled whenever I spoke of coming here. The legend states that it is a forsaken parcel of earth, where evil souls unable to find their way to Tartarus reside for eternity."

"I knew it had something to do with the dead - I could feel it." Gabrielle said trembling.

"Gods, Mother. Why did you ever come here?"

"What better place to hid a treasure than an area where no one alive dares come?"

"No one but you! Why are we stopping here?" Gabrielle shuttered at the density of the air in the middle of the cave. Even with the three torches, it seemed as though the darkness continued to swallow every inch of light it could.

"Do you see these altars?" Xena pointed to the six podiums surrounding a large black obelisk in the middle of the room. I have to remember in what order to . . ." She walked over to the one situated west of the obelisk and turned it totally around to the right once, then walked to the one diagonal to that one and turned it completely around to the left. Lastly she approached the obelisk, bent down and turned the base of it two and a-half-times to the right. She stepped back and turned facing the north wall.

"Come on we only have a few minutes to get inside."

"By the Gods, Xena, inside what?"

"Be very quiet Gabrielle - don't talk until I tell you to, just follow in my footsteps and hurry. Unless the two of you would rather wait for me out here."

"In a Cyclops' eye," Gabrielle announced as she grabbed Eve's arm. "No one stays out here alone."

An eerie sound akin to the opening of an archaic sarcophagus cut through the air. Gabrielle inched close enough to touch Xena with Eve, in turn, touching her. An opening appeared where no trace of one had been before and Xena stepped through, reaching a hand behind to grab on to her bard, who in turn, grabbed on to Eve.

If it was at all possible the air became even stiller, staler, and colder. Emerald eyes widened as the bard took in the display of figures and symbols artistically written on the walls. Xena was traveling almost too fast for the shorter woman's strides to keep up her, but with a little extra push from fear, Gabrielle did her damndest.

Not a sound was uttered, as Xena advised, and within the length of 15 horses there appeared another blocked archway.

Xena turned to her companions and put her fingers up to her lips, reminding them not to speak. Approaching the archway she put her hands flat on either side of it and simultaneously turned them away from her body. The blockage disappeared and she ushered the two women into a room. The room was brilliantly lit from some unknown source. When everyone was inside she turned back from whence they came and did the same thing on this side of the archway, immediately closing them in.

"That was very good, ladies. I'm glad you didn't make any sounds while we were in the corridor."

"Would you like to explain to me why?" the bard inquired.

"Sit down, it's quite a story. The corridor we just came through is the Hall of the Searching Dead. They made it through the forest and into the cave. They even made it past the altars, but there they got stuck. You see these are the dead, who even Hades doesn't want; they would make Tartarus look like the Elysian Fields if they all arrived to spend eternity. Greed called them to this once thriving region. Greek fire, precious gems, natural springs with healing waters, and sacred oil for burning were all in abundance. But after the reign of terror these subhumans wrecked upon the land and its inhabitants, nothing was left but the stench of decay.

"Hercules had gone some time before and spoke to some of the Druids about this place, just about the time the rot from this area was beginning to infiltrate and sicken the land surrounding it. The entire countryside was being taken over by warlords, thieves, and all other forms of low-life human monsters. The forest was already dead and parcel by parcel the surrounding land was beginning to die as well. Because of their high regard for nature, one of the high Druidesses agreed to come and help the people of this region, but even more, she wanted to help Mother Earth to reclaim that which was stolen from Her, and to punish the violators.

"She sent a rumor before her that she would be carrying with her the cauldron of Dagda which possessed the power to not only give sustenance to anyone who drank from it, but also the power of rejuvenation. This was done in the hope that the marauders would hear of the cauldron and be on the lookout for it. This forest and cave were selected as the Druid's new home. She knew that neither the forest nor the cave would ever recover, but if her plan worked, the rest of the area would.

"As it so happened she was right and it wasn't but a few days after she set up the altars that the human vermin started arriving, wanting to drink from the cauldron. Under the guise of being afraid, she gave them their wish. But instead of getting rejuvenation, they received a potion, which, similar to Celesta's tears, gave the illusion of death.

"Now, the Druids believe that the head is the seat of the soul and so when the despoilers fell victim to the potion, an apprentice would lop off their head and make a niche for it along the bottom of the corridor. The symbols upon the walls are runes and they compel the dead to stay forever - trapped between the two archways flanked with skulls."

Eve looked puzzled, "Why didn't we see the skulls? I didn't see them on the archway or in the corridor?"

"Because your attention was not drawn to them. The ones on the archways are deeply embedded and time has made them almost invisible. The ones in the hallway are on the very bottom and I didn't think it was necessary for you to know about them before we traveled through."

"But Xena, that doesn't explain why we needed to be silent?" Gabrielle interjected.

"It's just a superstition, but one that I am loath to put to the test. It is said that if so much as a word is uttered, the spells will break and the souls will be set free. If one of the archways is open at that time . . . well, I don't even want to think about that."

She looked at the somber faces of the two women she loved and wondered why in Tartarus she ever agreed to bring them along with her on this trek. Then shrugging her shoulders she opened the door leading into the treasure trove.

Gabrielle gasped when her eyes caught sight of the small mountain of spoils, which covered over half of the room.

Eve looked at her mother with a new admiration and Xena frowned at the emotion that the expression evoked.

"By the Gods Xena." Gabrielle stood with her mouth hanging open.

"No . . ." Xena corrected. "By the Warlords, Gabrielle."

They stepped into the room and over to the treasure. Gabrielle and Eve each took out a small sack and began filling them with dinars, gold and silver coins, precious gems, and jewelry. Xena brought a large bag to hold the goblets she intended to take back as well as some of the gold and silver trays. The amount that fit into the bags was minimal compared to what was left.

"We could live on this one stash for the rest of our lives and never have to lift a finger to make a living - do you realize that?" Gabrielle looked over at her lover who was staring at her with a broad smile across her face. Her sapphire eyes were twinkling, putting the many faceted jewels lying all around the room to shame.

"But Gabrielle this is loot from war, remember?"

"A war whose victims have long since been sent to peace. And as you so informed me earlier, these are treasures taken from Warlords who have also seen the face of Hades . . . or the cold depths of the corridor outside these walls." Gabrielle chilled to think about walking back through that hallway knowing what she now knew.

"You're awfully quiet, Eve." Xena looked over at her daughter who was standing with her bag, looking at the hoard at her feet.

"Rummaging through this I recognized a lot of royal emblems on trays and goblets. I guess it took me back. Sometimes it's hard when I remember; a lot of the memories still hurt. There is a ... feeling when I think of Rome. I was treated honorably and I can't fault Caesar for that, Mother. I think he honestly did what he thought was best for me, to keep me safe."

"I think you're right Eve. Caesar loved you and kept you out of harm's way and for that I will always be grateful to him. You're an unusually quiet young woman, Eve."

"She takes after her mother," Gabrielle added.

"I guess she does." Xena smiled at her lover and then at her daughter. Putting the sack over her shoulder she re-instructed the two women not to utter a word as they passed through the Hall of the Searching Dead.

Doing everything in reverse that she had done to get to the treasure room, Xena led them back into the corridor.

They were almost through the dreaded hallway, when suddenly Gabrielle tripped on something. She later swore that something grabbed at her. She caught herself with her hands as she fell towards the floor. Her torch illuminated the rows of heads, mortared tightly into the wall. Caught off guard, she involuntarily she began to let out a scream. Just as the sound began issuing forth from her mouth a large, strong hand covered her lips. Shaking her head and saying not a word, Xena proceeded to pick Gabrielle up. Handing the extra torch to Eve, she motioned to the young woman to precede her through the now opened archway.

Standing outside the gloomy cave, the three women just looked at each other. Xena carefully put Gabrielle down and asked if she'd hurt anything in the near fall.

"No, and I'm so sorry Xena."

"Don't worry about it, it didn't happen - so there's nothing to be sorry for."

"But it was very close to happening."

"Gabrielle close only counts in horse shoes and Chinese black powder." She grinned at her bard and kissed her tenderly on the top of her head.

"Can we get out of this place, you two? I really don't need depressing and this certainly is." Eve untied the horses and handed one set of reins to Gabrielle, the other to her mother.

As anticipated, traveling back to the lake took about five candelmarks. Along the way Gabrielle brought out a quick dinner of dried rabbit jerky, the last of the bread, and some berries they found along the path. It was filling enough, and they didn't have to stop to consume it. Because they weren't pushing the horses very hard, Eve rode part of the time behind Gabrielle and part behind Xena. They talked about getting her a horse of her own when they reached the Amazon Village.

Discussions also centered about relationships and the difference between what Eve might have grown up with and the reality of living in an Amazon village. Eve smiled knowingly when the conversation was first breached. Gabrielle didn't let Xena cough and sputter for too long before taking over the reins of the sensitive chat. After letting her two "mothers" choose and pick their words carefully, she finally let them off the proverbial hook.

"By Caesar, *damn I need to stop letting that one slip*, I was raised in Rome! Don't you think we all know what goes on in the bath houses?" She squeezed Xena tightly as she rode behind her on Argo. Looking at the back of her mother's head, she noticed that the tips of Xena's ears had just turned pink.

"Pink is your color." She giggled and received an elbow in the gut for the untoward statement.

"Listen, all I'm saying is that you two don't need to tiptoe around me with anything that's going on, or in the environment that I'll run up against in the Amazon village. To tell you the truth I've about had my fill of conniving, sniveling bastards that only want their way with you to bolster their own egos or to better their position in life, Caesar and Ares included. Even though I can forgive Ares because of his final sacrifice, if I stop and really think about it . . . it wasn't done for my sake . . . it was done for yours, Mother." Again she squeezed Xena's waist.

"Eve we don't want you to feel threatened or coerced into anything, you do understand that don't you?"

"Yes, Auntie Gabrielle."

"The main reason for going to the Village is to heal and to be at a place where we don't have to keep looking over our shoulders for a while for the trouble that is following us. The sisters will take that load from our shoulders." Gabrielle looked over at Eve with the loving eyes of a mother who wants nothing but to protect. "Eve once you've figured out what you want and where you want to go, at least you'll have made bonds with your sister Amazons. At that point you'll be able to leave the village or make it your home."

"And you and Mother? What are your plans?"

"I . . . we . . . we're really not sure at this juncture," Gabrielle stammered, looking to her champion to jump in and help her out. "Most of the Amazons we knew have probably crossed over by now, but I'm still the reigning Queen according to Amazon law."

"Mother, in what capacity are you part of the tribe?"

Xena shot a glance over at Gabrielle who merely snickered. Xena raised an eyebrow in search of help, but the blonde simply shook her head and put the question back on the dark warrior.

"Well, Eve . . . I've actually been a part of the tribe since even before I met Gabrielle but that is another story. Even though I've never been through any of the Amazonian rituals to become a member, they've always treated me as family. I have simply never committed myself before."

"Before?"

Again the knowing smile from Gabrielle and a tilt of her head that let her lover know that she would finish the conversation that Xena just fumbled.

"Eve," Gabrielle began, "one of the major events this trip to the village will be our joining. Your mother will finally become an Amazon in every sense of the word and she will be part of the tribe. Xena asked me to marry her the other night and we plan on having the ceremony in the village. She will then be known as the Queen's Consort, making all three of us tribal members."

"Slow learner, huh, Mother? I would say it's about time." The younger woman cleared her throat as her voice took on a more serious tone. "I've been doing a lot of soul searching since we started this quest back to the tribe. I tried to think of the kind of person I would be today, if I had been raised by both of you. I think I would have still received the warrior spirit and training from you, Mother. But I would have also been tempered with Auntie Gabrielle's tenderness and love of the written and spoken word. It would have been a charmed childhood, and I'm still angry that I was denied it. But I'm also realistic and know that the only place I have to go is forward and that's what I'm trying to do." She looked over at Gabrielle with the same look on her face that the bard recently received from Xena, the look that help was needed to for her to continue with the right words.

"We're sorry, too, Eve." Gabrielle assured the young woman. "We had a plan to get you out of harm's way. If Ares hadn't entombed us, we would have taken you to a remote village where you would have grown, sheltered by our love. You're absolutely correct, you would have been given the best of both our worlds, and I honestly believe we love you equally. As Aphrodite told me you didn't grow under my heart but you most assuredly would have grown in it. I have loved you since before you were born, as much as I would have loved any child of my own."

Eve shook her head and Gabrielle could see the tears trickling down the face that had, in the near past, been so full of rage and hatred. It now took on the aspect of that of a small child who lost her way and was trying desperately to make it home, where she knew she would be loved and cared for. "I guess what I was trying to get at is that I know everything you just said to me to be the truth and if I had been allowed to grow up with you both as parents, I don't think I would be calling you Auntie Gabrielle."

Gabrielle looked away from her lover's daughter, the only daughter she herself might ever know. Her fair face blushed with the anticipation of the direction in which the conversation was leading. "Probably not, Eve," were the only words that strangled from the bard's mouth.

"I guess what I'm asking is if it would be alright with you if I called you Mom? It seems as though it would be a more fitting title."

"I'd be honored, Eve." Gabrielle looked at Eve and then at Xena who was smiling as proudly as the day she gave birth to the young woman who now rode behind her.

"Guess you'll have to start a new scroll Gabrielle, Eve Has Two Mothers." Xena chuckled uncharacteristically.

"It might be uncommon in the known world, but in Amazon villages she would have just been one of the kids." Gabrielle countered with a smile.

The sun was beginning to set as the horses started down the path that led to the lake. There would be enough light to set up camp and perhaps have some tea and the last of the nutbread. Because they didn't have to travel by conventional means to the village in the morning there was no need to fret over breakfast.

When the two more experienced women were ready to go up to the ledge Xena started to speak.

"We'll come down . . ." Xena started.

"You'll come down . . ." Gabrielle interrupted.

"We'll come down to get you in the morning, Eve." Xena finished with a large hand over her bard's mouth and a smile on her face. She turned to her lover. "The morning swim will be invigorating."

"I can just as easily take a shower." Gabrielle argued.

Ignoring the last statement, Xena said good night to her daughter and motioned Gabrielle onto the platform. Gabrielle said good night and did as she was bid, mumbling something about having to jump off the ledge, as she stepped onto the golden square.

"I'll send the loot bags up next and then the horses, Argo first. They can graze in the forest up there tonight, at least we know they won't stray."

"Okay, but wait until you see me at the edge of the ledge before sending my horse up. Good night again, Eve."

"Good night, Mom," the young woman smiled trying out the new name on the woman who had always thought of herself as Eve's second mother. The younger woman watched as a smile spread across Gabrielle's face. Xena pushed the button and Gabrielle was gone.

"Damn, that's handy." Eve looked over at her mother.

"Yes it is, isn't it? You know, you made Gabrielle a very proud woman today, Eve."

"I felt she deserved the title after all she's been through for me. And I feel as close to her as I do to you."

"I'm glad you feel that way, she loves you very much."

"I know Mother." Eve had a hard time doing the sensitive chats just like her mother and decided to turn away and get the horses.

For the second time that day the horses made the unusual journey, ending up on the ledge high above the lake. Xena said good night to her daughter and joined her lover in the cave.

"I could get used to traveling like this." Xena stated upon arriving up on the ledge.

"Yeah, and there was a time when the ability was offered to you." Gabrielle countered as she walked back into the cave from the forest.

"Don't go there, Gabrielle. I have plans for the rest of this evening and your becoming agitated does not fit into them."

Gabrielle grabbed a couple towels from the shelves. "Want to start off with a shower?"

"I can't think of a better way." Xena watched as her bard slowly undressed, folding each garment and carefully placing it on a shelf before turning and catching her warrior in the act of staring.

"Hey, it's not like it's anything you haven't seen before," the small blonde chided.

"No, but it is definitely something I could spend eternity gazing at. Come here you." She walked over and began to embrace the woman of her dreams.

"No you don't, warrior - those things . . ." she pointed to the breastplate armor. " . . . are dangerous. I suggest you strip before trying that maneuver again, I don't do pain very well."

"Oh, I don't know about that . . . I've seen you do pain . . . you're almost an expert at it." The raven-haired beauty grinned as she began to undress.

"Let me restate then . . . I don't like doing pain. Is that better?"

"Much." Xena laughed. "Want me to light these candles before we bathe?"

"Please, I'll go get some soap out of the saddlebags."

While she was getting the soap, Gabrielle remembered a bottled of scented oil they had purchased at the last town they went through; she grabbed that, also, and placed in on the stand beside the bed. Xena was still lighting candles, so Gabrielle walked over to the edge of the outcropping and looked down to see if she could spot Eve. She was feeling a little guilty about leaving the younger woman down at the campsite alone. When she had voiced the dilemma earlier, Eve laughed at her and commented that if she could keep a few of Gabrielle's scrolls to read, she would have plenty to keep her occupied before going to sleep. Of course, the bard was delighted that the younger woman was interested in the writings and told her to help herself. It had been an arduous day, and they were all tired, but a little relaxation before sleep would make dreaming that much sweeter.

When Gabrielle glanced down at the campsite, she saw Eve sitting by the fire with a cup of tea beside her and a partially unraveled scroll between her hands. Gabrielle smiled as she watched Eve read; the bard was happy someone was enjoying the elaboration of deeds she took such pleasure in substantiating for posterity.

The warmth of a tall muscular body pressing close to hers turned her attention away from their daughter, and she found herself leaning back for a closer touch. Xena's soft contralto voice added to the growing atmosphere. "Everything as it should be down there?"

"Looks to be."

"Ready for some water sports?"

Gabrielle was gently turned to face the love of her life. Their bodies were already responding to one another, sending out silent messages of desire. Taking her warrior's hand in her own they walked over to the area of the grotto where the water dipped inward, splashing lavishly on the ground before gently swirling and joining the fluid at the bottom of the falls.

"Look Xena." Gabrielle pointed to the inside of the falls. "I hadn't noticed that last night. Guess I was otherwise occupied," she grinned sheepishly.

Xena's eyes followed the direction of her lover's pointing finger, first glimpsing one of the few areas of the grotto where the dark blanket of night could be seen through the gushing water, then she saw what Gabrielle was talking about. In the middle of the falls the effect became that of an aurora borealis with the moonlight shining in prisms through the cascading water giving the illusion of multi-colored stars tumbling against a background of rainbow mist.

"Isn't it breathtaking?" Gabrielle asked.

The dark warrior again glanced at the display and then down at the shoulders of her lover, allowing her fingers to tenderly touch the soft skin of her fair maid. She bent down and placed a moist kiss behind Gabrielle's ear. "Absolutely breathtaking."

The bard turned slowly and took her champion's face in her hands. Pulling the taller woman down to receive a kiss she whispered, "You are, too."

With total lack of effort Xena grabbed Gabrielle up into her arms and stepped fully into the falls with her heart's desire in her arms.

"Put me down and I'll lather you." Gabrielle promised.

The ritual of lathering and rinsing, lathering and rinsing continued until the game became more and more intense. Soon the soap was lost to rocks, as hands trailed up and down bodies, flowing like the water as it surged over, around and between their bodies. They dance in the cool liquid like nymphs around a sacred fountain taking in the beauty of everything around them, including each other.

Grabbing Gabrielle's hand Xena drew her from the clutches of the falls back into the flickering candlelit room. The ceremony of drying also became a lesson in temperance as they touched and released one another, teasing erotic areas with the soft, billowy towels and enhancing the torment with fingers peeking playfully through the material to touch the skin beneath.

Dried of any traces of water, but moist with the fluids of love the two lay on the bed, holding one another and whispering vows of love that stretched from their new beginning in the here and now to the lives they had yet to live.

The fair-haired beauty reached over and opened the bottle of scented oil, a sweet musk that smelled even sweeter when applied to the body of her warrior.

"Relax Xena."

"Re what?"

"Relax my love." Warming the oil in the palms of her hands she straddled the waist of her champion. Beginning at the broad, muscular shoulders the small hands of the bard wove their magic as she sensuously massaged the area. Feather like touches lingered on the firm breasts as nipples stood erect - their desire for attention obvious. Not being one to neglect even the obscure, the bard leaned into her warrior's body, sliding her own smaller frame down Xena's legs and positioning herself between the sinewy thighs.

Moans of delight ushered forth from the warrior's throat. Gabrielle's mouth found the waiting nipples, and an adventurous tongue played hide-and-seek as it flicked between the impatiently awaiting breasts.

The small figure began to once again journey further southward when suddenly two strong hands were placed, one under each of her armpits. She was hurled upward, over to the right and down again onto her back.

"I can't take it any longer." The inflection was even deeper than usual. "I need you Gabrielle."

"Xena," was the only word that escaped the confused bard's lips.

"Now . . . I want you, now. You don't realize what you're doing to me."

"But Xena," lack of understanding was apparent.

Lying beside and partially on top of her bard, the hero whispered. "I want you so badly, it's as though . . ." without finishing the sentence the dark warrior grabbed her lover's hand and placed it between her own nether folds. "Feel that? The heat is so intense." She pushed the fingers of the small hand to where they entered her center; the warrior would not let loose of the hand and pushed harder to keep it in the same position. It was only then that her bard understood.

"By the Gods Xena you're pulsating as though you've already . . ."

"I did Gabrielle! The water, the oil the touch of your tongue . . . my mind and body wouldn't allow me to wait. The intensity was unbelievable. I love you more than life Gabrielle."

"I love you, too, Xena."

With that the raven-haired beauty began to deliciously torture her bard with tantalizing kisses, and caresses. She began re-exploring every crevice and curve on the small body beneath her. The warrior continued until Gabrielle was physically exhausted. Cries of passion sang through the cavern, dancing on the walls and bouncing off the candles, as they flickered with a rhythm that matched the mood of the lovers. When the small blonde reached her final climax her lover joined her simultaneously, then collapsed next to her, still entwined in the body that was half beneath her, half beside her, and having no desire to move.

Xena breathed softly into the ear that was at mouth level. "Are you totally satisfied or would you like another round."

"You've got to be kidding me, Xena. I don't think I could respond again if I tried."

Long fingers trailed down the bard's leg, coming to rest on the swollen bud hidden within the soft lips.

"Are you sure?"

"Xena . . . off! *She's* had enough." Gabrielle giggled.

The fair-haired beauty lifted her warrior's hand and placed it to her lips, showing each finger special attention as she put them, one by one, into her mouth and softly sucked, tasting the sweetness her lover had experienced all night. "The things you do to me, my hero. No one has ever made me feel the way you do."

"And no one else had better even attempt to . . . not as long as I'm alive." Lightening the conversation she added, "Guess I'm not too bad for the mother of a 25-year-old daughter."

"Oh, you are very, very bad my warrior . . . but bad in the very best sense of the word! So . . . that's the way a Mother makes love, is it?"

"That's the way this Mother does." Xena smiled holding in a laugh, then changing the subject again. "By the way, how do you feel about Eve's calling you Mom?"

"Terrific, but I think you already knew the answer to that one, Xena."

"Yeah." She snuggled up closer to her soulmate and kissed her gently on the cheek.

"But you know," Gabrielle continued, "I've been thinking . . ."

"Oh my, that could cause problems. "

Gabrielle tickled the dark beauty and then told her to stop being sarcastic and listen. "With the situation that has arisen in our little family, we give the statement '*growing up with your children*' a whole different prospective." She laughed and cuddled closer to her lover.

The candles had extinguished themselves and the cavern was now pitch black, save for the slivers of moonlight drifting in through the shimmering falls. Gabrielle looked over at the water and at the reflection of an almost full moon. Already Xena's breathing had turned heavy and steady. The bard smiled at the turn their relationship was taking. She was glad they had allowed themselves this extra day before traveling on to the village. Her last waking thoughts before drifting off to sleep were those of spending the rest of eternity with the soul sleeping peacefully beside her.

I'm getting married to the warrior of my dreams! By this time, one-or-two moons from now, I'll be taking vows in front of my entire tribe, vows to commit myself to love and stand by Xena for the rest of my life. Little do they know that I have loved her before, and that I shall continue to love her until the end of time.

The End

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