

# ~ Xantheia ~

by Carole Giorgio

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

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

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Xena was the first out of bed and dressed. Looking down at Gabrielle, she felt a slight twinge of guilt for not bandaging the bruised ribs before falling off to sleep. But they were both exhausted after making love. Leaving Gabrielle's hands unwrapped at night was okay, but her ribcage should have been bound to keep her from hurting herself more by tossing. Luckily, the wine she had imbibed kept her from doing too much tossing and the aphrodisiac she had before sleep cast her deep into the world of dreams where she hardly moved all night long. A final glance over at the sleeping bard and Xena walked through the front door, only to be greeted by a swarm of young Amazons with nothing better to do than stand around the Queen's hut gossiping.

"If you want to do something constructive . . ." The warrior began addressing the group, until her boot struck something hard, just outside the door. Looking down she found fruit, juice, sweet breads, clean water, and towels. *Hades, now I'll have to find something nice to say.* " . . . Any of you who are in need of some instruction, I intend to hold a practice session on sword wielding in the field this afternoon." The stern glare she set on the gathering belied the warmth and affection she was feeling for these young women who seemed to care so readily for their new Queen. Most everything that any of the Amazons standing before her knew of Gabrielle had been from older members of the tribe, and yet they all supported their new Queen whole-heartedly. Besides, if she was going to become a fixture here in the village then it would be best to make a place for herself in the village, other than the place history already supplied her with.

One of the sisters stepped forward to ask Xena when she wanted to hold the practice.

"Give me time to help your Queen get settled for the morning. I'll meet with you half way between now and when the sun is full in the sky. Pick teams among yourselves and a leader for each team; warm up before I get there." With a slight wave of her hand she dismissed the crowd and turned to retrieve the offerings.

The gentle breathing of her bard was the only sound in the quiet hut, as the warrior reentered with gift-laden arms. Xena didn't want to disturb her lover's sleep, but she needed to redress the wounds. She decided to give the blonde a few more candlemarks, while she went and checked on Argo. Perhaps she would even be able to find Eve and ask her about making the trip to Potidaea and Amphipolis with them before the next full moon.

Again outside the hut, she whistled for Argo and the young carbon copy of her beloved mare came galloping from the wooded area behind the hut. "There you are girl; did you and your friend have as interesting an evening as we did?" She jumped onto the palomino and rode toward the communal lodge that had been just candlemarks before the site of the banquet welcoming Gabrielle back to her throne. The village was abnormally quiet and the warrior attributed that to the fact that she imagined quite a few Amazons had only just recently found their way to bed.

Of course those who had to tend to the children were up and about, and definitely someone was preparing the morning meal, as the pungent aroma of freshly brewed herbs mingled with the enticing odor of cooking boar tantalized her nostrils. "Argo, we must remember to take something back to Gabrielle; she will be disappointed to know that she has missed a morning meal such as this." Dismounting the horse, she entered the large room. Glancing down at the young girls who smiled up at her with the innocence of youth as they went about the chore of cleaning up the mess made by their elders the evening before, the warrior headed toward the kitchen area.

Minutes later, she was walking with a full plate in hand over to the Royal Table. While eating, she played over in her mind the anticipated length of time it was going to take Gabrielle to totally recover from her cuts, bruises and sore ribs. Xena counted on the fact that the bard had always been a quick healer. She imagined they would be able to leave in a week if the bard followed her instructions and spent that time taking care of her Queenly duties from a throne chair and letting others do all the running and fetching. It really would be a good time for Gabrielle to reacquaint herself with the writing of her scrolls and maybe even work with some of the bards in the village.

On her list of things to do, one of the top priorities was to get to know the resident healer, Thraso. They had been introduced when she offered to help with Gabrielle's wounds, after the competition with Tecmessa, but Xena quickly sent her over to take care of displaced Regent instead. With knowing eyes, the healer had given the warrior no argument and in doing so had won the respect of the Queen's Champion.

The solitary warrior ate her breakfast and was preparing to leave when Eve and Toxaris walked in. Toxaris' hand, which was resting comfortably on Eve's arm, was promptly removed when she saw the warrior staring up at her from her seat at the Royal Table. Xena did her best to keep from

laughing at the uncomfortable look on the woman's face. It was obvious that she was smitten with Eve but afraid that Xena would disapprove.

"Good morning ladies. How are your heads feeling today, a little fuzzy perhaps."

"More than just a little fuzzy, Mother. But I did have an excellent time." Eve smiled in the direction of Toxaris and then walked up and gave Xena a peck on the cheek. "How's Mom feeling?"

"She's still sleeping. I intend to take her back a plate of this fried boar. She'd have my head if I didn't." She whispered the last sentence so that only her daughter could hear it. No sense in letting the entire community in on the secret that Gabrielle had her wrapped around her little finger.

"I need to talk to you for a few minutes Eve." Xena motioned for the young woman to sit beside her.

"Hey, let me go get us something to eat, while you sit here with your Mom," Toxaris offered.

"Thanks, Toxi," Eve smiled up at her friend before turning back to her mother. "What's up?"

"Gabrielle and I are going to take a trip to Potidaea and Amphipolis before the wedding. She would like both Lila and your grandmother Cyrene to be here for the event, if at all possible. We were wondering if you would like to go along with us. It would be good for you to meet your grandmother and for her to meet you, especially if it turns out that she can't make the trip back here with us."

"I'd love to go along. When do you think Mom will be well enough to travel? Those ribs of hers took quite a bruising, didn't they?"

"I figure if we keep her ribs wrapped tightly and she sits still and lets her body heal, we might be able to leave here in a week, two if she doesn't cooperate. I don't want her joggling around on a horse until she can do it without wincing."

"No problem for me. I'll just make myself useful around here until then."

"Who knows, Eve, you might want to settle in one of the two little towns."

"I think not, Mother." The twinkle in her daughter's eye was inescapable and Xena read the meaning behind it quite easily.

"I see . . . maybe not . . . but visiting would give you a chance to perhaps even meet some cousins if your Uncle Toris is still in Amphipolis."

"That sounds like fun. Listen, I don't know if she'd want to or not, but could Toxaris come with us? I don't think she's ever been as far as Amphipolis."

Xena smiled at her daughter whose eyes sparkled with the hopes of new love. "Sure, why not? Might as well descend upon the family full force."

Toxaris came back with two fully loaded plates of food and placed one down in front of Eve before sitting next to her. "So, Xena what do you plan on doing with yourself today?"

"I don't want to venture too far from the village while Gabrielle is healing. I told some of the younger warriors I would give them some sword lessons in the field a little after breakfast."

"I hope you're prepared for the onslaught that's sure to cause," Toxaris smiled over at the warrior who looked at her questioningly. "By the Gods Xena, you're a legend; they'll flock to that field to get a chance to spar with you or even to just watch you practice."

"I don't think . . ." the warrior began but was interrupted by a tap on her shoulder.

"Excuse me Warrior Princess . . ."

"Xena will do," the warrior corrected as she looked directly into the face of a very young Amazon.

"Xena . . . the Queen is asking if anyone saw where you went when you left the hut."

"She's up already?" *The wine must have worn off and she's feeling the ribs again.*

"Eve, Toxaris . . . talk to you later." Reaching down she picked up Eve's as yet untouched plate. "You don't mind if I take this do you? She's sure to be famished."

Eve shook her head and smiled at her mother's concern for her mate. "Tell her I send my love and will check in on her later today."

"Thanks Eve." Xena nodded at the two women and proceeded out of the building. Within seconds the warrior was up on Argo and headed back to the Queen's hut, doing a balancing act with a full plate of food.

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"Hut service." The verbal announcement made it through the door before Xena actually made her appearance. When she did open the door and walk through, an unexpected sight greeted her. Gabrielle was hunched over on her knees in the middle of the bed sobbing.

"Gabrielle," the warrior's heart ached at the picture. She put the plate of food down on the table and walked over to the bed. Gently sitting on the edge, the warrior placed a hand on the crying bard's back. "What's the matter, Honey?"

Between sobs, the blonde looked up into the caring eyes of her mate, her own green pools overflowing. "I hurt twice as much this morning as I did last night, (sigh) the effect of the wine

has worn off, (another sigh) and to top it all off I've started my cycle." Her head went back down onto the bed as a new barrage of tears began to flow.

"Well," the warrior began trying to make a little light of the situation, "that's probably one of the reasons you were so ferocious in battle yesterday. I should have realized you were so close."

"Xena, don't make me laugh, it hurts!" The bard scolded.

"I'm sorry, Gabrielle." The raven-haired beauty tenderly took the smaller woman into her arms. "Come here my little warrior/bard." Small arms wound around the taller woman's waist as she allowed herself to be crooned to by her lover.

"I feel miserable, Xena."

"I know, I know," the warrior soothed. "But the good news is that today will be the worst day and then things will start getting better. As soon as you eat something, and I'll wrap your ribs and your hands, and then I'm going to Thraso's hut and see if she has something to ease the pain. I need to replenish my supply of herbs. Hey." Placing a hand under Gabrielle's chin she lifted the face she adored until she could again look into her lover's eyes. "At least you won't have any complications while we're traveling. You know how you hate that."

"Yeah." She managed to smile up at her dark warrior. "We'll probably just have you to deal with in that respect." Changing the subject without saying a word, the bard sniffed into the air and smiled.

"I know that look," Xena chuckled. "Your stomach finally acknowledged that there's food in the room. Do you think I should share my morning meal with you?"

"Very funny, but I'll bet it's not your stomach that's rumbling. Knowing you, Xena, you've already eaten . . . that plate's for me, right?" Gabrielle glanced over at the plate laden with goodies.

"You think so?"

"Pretty sure." Soft verdant eyes looked up and the bard batted long blonde eyelashes in her warrior's direction. "That's my plate, right?"

"Even the fried boar?"

"Fried boar! Gaia, Xena we haven't had that in seasons - you best believe that's mine." Stopping to realize how selfish that sounded, she shyly glanced up at the dark-haired woman. "You have already eaten, haven't you?"

"Yes, Gabrielle, I have. The plate is all yours. Do you want to come sit at the table or eat here on the bed?"

"I think in the long run, I'll be more comfortable at the table." She started to get off the bed and began to wince.

Xena reached over and without any problem at all carefully lifted her broken bard off the bed and carried her to the chair. "We'll get you cleaned up, salved, and wrapped as soon as you eat.

"Thanks Xena, I hate feeling like a big baby."

"I'll bet you're not the only one in the village today with aches and pains." The warrior grinned down at her charge. "You and Tecmessa might lead the pack but there are others with heads that will be throbbing for candlemarks. That was quite some celebration, my Queen." A small grin adorned the well-chiseled features of the champion. "I talked to Eve this morning; actually, that's her plate you're eating from . . ."

"What?" Gabrielle almost choked on her mouthful.

"Not to worry - She had just gotten it when your little messenger arrived telling me you were awake. Eve gave of it freely and went for another." Xena assured the aching blonde. "Anyhow she said she wants to come with us on the trip." The warrior's eyes softened as she looked at her bard, "Gabrielle, I think she might be falling for Toxaris; she asked if it was okay if she came with us."

"That's marvelous Xena. Toxaris would be company for Eve when she starts getting tired of listening to us. It's difficult trying to treat Eve like a daughter sometimes when she's been through almost as much as we have."

"Almost is the operative word, my soul." Xena acknowledged.

"I do hope she knows what she's doing though; I would hate for Toxaris to be hurt because Eve is experimenting with a new lifestyle."

"No matter, Gabrielle, we couldn't keep either one of them from getting burned. They have to live their own lives."

"I guess you're right," the bard agreed as she continued to chow down on the food before her. "Are you still hungry?"

"No." Xena assured her as she poured the blonde a glass of juice. "You need a lot of liquids and a lot of rest Gabrielle, especially if you want to leave in a week."

When Gabrielle was finished eating, Xena helped her with all the chores of everyday living that needed to be taken care of before insisting it was time for medicinals and wrapping. Even after having a decent amount of sleep, the energy expended with moving around tired the small blonde, and Xena insisted that she either sit quietly and write or lay back down and rest.

Opting for the former, Gabrielle hurried Xena off to do whatever it was she had promised the young Amazons as she took pen to scroll and began immortalizing their adventures, going back to the fateful day they both drank the tears of Celesta.

Walking out of the hut, into a sun that was halfway to mid-day, the warrior realized that she would not have time to visit the healer until after the practice.

"Hey, you," she called to a young sister.

"Me?" The young girl pointed to herself, as she looked around to see if anyone else was in sight.

"Yeah, you." Xena motioned the youngster to come closer. "Here," she practically whispered as she handed the girl the plates and cups from her hands. "Your Queen would greatly appreciate it if you would clean these and take them back to the communal dining room, she is feeling a little out of sorts today."

"Oh," the young girl's face brightened into a beaming smile. "I would be honored to do that for the Bard Queen . . . "

". . . Gabrielle." Xena corrected the girl. "She prefers to be called Gabrielle when it's not a formal ceremony."

"Right." The girl agreed as she took the unclean dishes, cups and utensils and skipped onward toward the lodge.

Xena brushed her hands in front of her and smiled. *Well that's one way to get the dishes done. Warriors await me. I can't be bogged down with household chores. Rest well, my soul, I'll be back before you miss me.*

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When nearing the practice green, the warrior began to wish that she hadn't opened her big mouth and volunteered. From the sound of the voices, over half the Village had showed up to spar with the Warrior Princess. Coming into visual range she seconded her thoughts. *What in Tartarus have I gotten myself into now? I only wanted to make a place . . . not start a Royal Academy of Swording.* Taking a deep breath, she unsheathed her sword, started running and voicing her famous battle cry, Ay yiyiyiyi. She ran around the stragglers, dodged some of the startled ones as they turned to see what was happening, and jumped over the closest head to the center of the group, landing smack in the middle of them all.

"Okay kiddies." Holding her sword out at an angle in front of her and spinning slowly, with a look on her face that sent the faint hearted among them back toward the perimeter of the field, she announced in an intimating voice, "School's open, who wants to play with the teacher."

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Having spent much more time on the practice field than anticipated, the warrior decided to check on Gabrielle before stopping off at Thraso's. She found the bard in basically the same position she had left her . . . well . . . she was still seated in the chair. But her head was down on the table, one arm under it and the other hand still holding onto the quill. The small woman was sleeping soundly.

"Gabrielle," the warrior whispered. No response from the sleeping bard.

She tiptoed over and gently placed a hand on the sloping shoulders. Gabrielle jumped and then winced as the pain to her ribs increased with the quick movement.

"Oh, Gabrielle, I'm sorry . . ."

"It's okay Xena, you just scared me."

"I tried being . . ."

"I know . . ." the blonde smiled up at her warrior who wore a concerned frown. "It's just that I haven't moved from this chair since you left, but I finished one complete scroll."

"That's an accomplishment."

"How did your practice go?"

"Let's say that I wasn't expecting to be quite as popular as I turned out to be."

Gabrielle laughed as she watched her warrior unhook her armor and lay it over a chair. "What did you expect, Xena? You are the famous Warrior Princess and you offered the warriors a first hand practice with you. I bet you had some who were frightened to death to spar with you and others who wanted to show how good they were." She smiled broadly when she saw a crooked grin cross her lover's face. "So you are one popular warrior, huh, my love?"

"So it seems," the dark champion admitted as she came back and put her arms gently around her bard. "But it does feel good to be back in the quiet of this room with you." She placed a kiss on the flaxen crown then lifted her lover's face to meet her own. There was still a trace of pain in the sea-green eyes that looked up at her but the Shamaness inside the warrior could tell that the healing was already beginning and that it wouldn't be long before Gabrielle would be her old self again.

"After I get cleaned up and we get something to eat, I still need to pay a visit to Thraso. The sparring ran far longer than expected. I also talked a bit with Tecmessa and she would like to visit with you tomorrow to go over some of the duties with you and to catch you up on general Village information."

"Xena do you think it would be wise to ask her to act as Regent again, while we are gone?"



"I think she would be an excellent choice, and by doing that you would even further her commitment to you and her loyalty."

"Those were my thoughts exactly, but I wanted to run them by you first. So . . . were you saying something about food?"

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Rather than take Gabrielle down to the lodge again, Xena suggested they take their meal to the lake where the bard could take in some fresh air and relax in the sunlight for a while. They first rode to the kitchen area where Xena had one of the cooks fill a basket with roast boar, goat cheese, bread, and fruit. While that was being prepared, she filled a wineskin with some Amazon wine. Gabrielle had nothing better to do but rest and heal. A little elixir of the vine would help act as an ideal sedative and painkiller and that way the warrior wouldn't have to argue with the headstrong woman about overdoing.

The afternoon sun was warm and the lake water only slightly cool. They decided to wash up first, eat and then rest on the warm rocks that dotted the small sandy-loam area surrounding the lake. It was a secluded portion of the lake, slightly set in from the rest of the swimming areas and surrounded by bushes that offered a great deal of privacy for the Queen and her company.

Adept fingers unrolled the cloth binding the bard's ribs and then the strip covering the split knuckles on Gabrielle's hands. When they entered the water Xena took the bandages in also to clean them before drying them on a rock. They smelled of the strong salve she had placed on earlier this morning to help heal the bruised muscles and open wounds.

The process of bathing was always a pleasant prospect between the two women and Gabrielle insisted that today be no different than any other. Gabrielle usually did the soaping up of her lover's long dark tresses, but Xena was afraid that the vigorous gyrations of hair washing would jar the bard's bruised ribs; Gabrielle would not hear of not performing the ritual for her lover.

"I love washing your hair Xena, and I know how much you enjoy having your head scratched." Gabrielle smiled when the taller woman finally got down on her knees in the water and allowed the bard to soap the raven hair fully.

"Yeah, like the village puppy," Xena playfully answered as she grabbed the smaller woman's hands and held them in her own. "I am so thankful to Aphrodite for allowing us to heal from the catastrophic battle with the Gods."

"Ditto, my love. And coming here has been good for us too, and good for Eve."

"It hasn't done you that much good. Gabrielle, you can barely walk without hurting." She turned the small hands over in her own. "Or write, for that matter."

"Yes, but we both know that the aches and pains will heal in days and then we have the rest of our lives to look forward to. This was simply a necessary evil that needed to be endured before I could claim the throne again. Okay - rinse."

The blonde watched as the love of her life went under the water, causing ripples to form on the lake surface, as she rinsed her long tresses and scattered the suds. Coming back up she threw her head back, but not before thoroughly wetting Gabrielle. The sunlight shone on the wet ebony locks and Gabrielle could have sworn she saw a prism of rainbow lights dancing around her lover's head as she shook off the clear liquid. There was nothing more beautiful than the sight of her warrior totally naked and glistening with droplets of water.

"I think we're about finished here, aren't we, Xena?"

Hearing the exasperation in the bard's voice, the warrior cocked her head to one side. "Is there something wrong?"

"Only the fact that I think it's time I eat something, other than what is racing around in my mind to eat." A mischievous grin greeted the warrior as fingers touched her gingerly beneath the water.

"You know we have to take it easy for a few days . . . "

"No . . . I know You have to take it easy . . . I like easy," the blonde chortled as her fingers found the curly spot between her warrior's thighs.

"Gabrielle - look at your knuckles." Xena insisted, bringing the straying hands up and surveying the cuts that had already begun to scab over thanks to the salve.

"You know it doesn't hurt as much underwater, maybe we can stay in the lake until I'm completely healed."

"Good try," the warrior chuckled as she scooped the blonde up in her arms and carried her toward the shoreline.

Putting the soaking wet woman down on a warm flat rock, the warrior went and retrieved the food filled basket.

"You know, Xena, I could get used to being waited on," Gabrielle teased. "You do a good imitation of Delilah Domestic," she giggled.

"Just for that I should relegate you to berries and stale bread," the warrior replied, turning away to hide the grin on her face.

Although it was not something she would like to spend the rest of her existence doing, it felt good to be able to pamper the woman who usually handled the sensitive areas of their lives. It was a change of pace for her to be getting the meal ready as Gabrielle was always the one to make sure she had a good meal in her stomach before going off on any adventure. It was even

kind of nice not to have to be going off saving the good guys and dealing with the bad for a while. Her only hope was that Gabrielle realized that occasionally the warrior side of her nature would need something to defend.

From listening to the Amazons at the practice this morning, she assumed they would have their hands full in a few moons if the negotiations with the Dramarians didn't begin shaping up. On the other hand, arbitration was one of Gabrielle's strong suits. Xena put the thoughts of war and retribution out of mind and turned back to her bard, wine goblets in hand.

She handed the bard a glass of the red elixir, put the basket between them and then went and got two clean shifts from Argo's saddlebag.

"We should probably put these on; I don't need you getting a sunburn on top of all your other ailments."

"Is that the only reason you want me covered up, warrior?"

"No!" Xena admitted. "But we don't need to discuss that right now," she smiled over at the blonde and handed her a piece of cheese and bread.

Another glass of wine and a full stomach later, the smaller woman was napping peacefully under the declining sun, while her warrior was deciding whether to leave her or wake her up. The rock Gabrielle was laying on was slowly being absorbed into the shadows. Xena grabbed a blanket from Argo's back and a scrap of scroll to write a short note on to let Gabrielle know she wouldn't be gone long. With that done the warrior tenderly bent down and kissed her bard softly on the forehead.

"Sweet dreams, my soul, I'll be back before the stars are visible in the sky." With that said, she mounted Argo and headed in the direction of the healer's hut.

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On the opposite side of the village from the Queen's hut sat the hut of the Shamaness Thraso. The dwelling was situated slightly into the woods and flanked on one side by a creek fed pond. Had the pond been there 25 years ago, the warrior would have chosen this very spot for their hut, as it had all the necessities close at hand. She liked the idea of having fresh water so near and had seriously thought about changing the location of the Queen's hut if they did, indeed, decide to put down roots here. She would have been just as pleased if Gabrielle had wanted to stay by the private lake with the grotto, but her bard was too much of a people person to hide her alone out in the woods away from civilization for too long a period of time. Who would she tell her stories to?

The sound of children's voices brought her back to the chore at hand. She needed some replacement herbs, a bit more salve and perhaps something to help with the bruising on Gabrielle's chest. Three young girls came running out of the hut just as Xena was about to knock.

"Bye SoSo, see you tomorrow," the older of the three yelled, grabbing the middle child's hand.

"Bye SoSo," the middle girl echoed.

"Bye-bye," came the soft remark of the third little girl who couldn't have been more than three.

Xena watched as they filed out and began running down the path, back toward the Village. She smiled at the exuberance of youth and turned back around to be greeted by a woman equal in stature to herself. Soft gray eyes stared into vivid blue as the healer extended her hand to her visitor.

"The little ones call me SoSo," she explained. "Good to see you again, Xena; I've been anxiously awaiting our meeting. It's been a busy few days for you."

"Yes it has. I need to ask a favor of you."

"Yes?"

"I'm running low on salve and some of the medicines I need to speed up Gabrielle's recovery."

"I'm sure I have something around here that will be of service to you. Would you like me to come take a look at the Queen's wounds?"

"I don't think that will be necessary, thank you for offering, but they are truly superficial. I just need something to help ease the pain, other than Amazon wine, salve to help heal the cuts and perhaps something for the bruising."

"I'd be honored to give what I have, Xena." The healer began rummaging through her shelves and came up with everything that had been requested. "I think you will find it all here. Let me get you a bag to carry it in. Do you have enough wrapping cloth to stabilize the Queen's ribs?"

"Yes, and Thraso . . . Gabrielle will do. She prefers to be called Gabrielle unless it is official business."

"Gabrielle it is then. I look forward to meeting her informally when she is feeling better."

"I'm sure she feels the same. I know she plans on having a meeting of all the elders and decision making members of the Village within the next day or so. I am certain that you are on that list."

The other woman merely smiled and nodded as she went about finding something to put the medicines in. "I hear you are quite a healer Xena; are the tales true? I was only 12 seasons when you were here last but you reigned in my imagination for many years after. I remembered the way you carried yourself and the respect afforded you by the entire village. I prayed to Artemis often to bring you back so I could get to know you and after all these years, my requests have been answered."

"Unfortunately, not by Artemis." Xena admitted softly.

"Unfortunately," the healer agreed. "I would like for us to compare notes sometime, Xena. I have all of Yakut's recipes, and spells, some of which I know were provided her by you."

Xena was unsure how to take the praise being lavished on her by the woman standing in front of her. This tall Shamaness had a sense of power surrounding her, a power that blocked anyone from reading the healer too easily. It would be an interesting friendship to foster.

"Perhaps when we return from Amphipolis and Potidaea we could meet and get to know each other a little better," Xena offered.

"When are you leaving? You say 'we', is the Queen leaving the Village so soon after her reinstatement?"

"We won't be gone very long, but we haven't seen any of our relatives since before we were put into the deep freeze. Gabrielle would like . . . I mean we would like her sister, Lila and my mother, Cyrene, here for the wedding if we find that it is at all feasible. Eve will be going with us also, just in case my mother is unable to make it back, she hasn't seen Eve since she was only moons old."

"In that case, Xena, I wish you the best of luck on your trip and anything I can do to help prepare the Que . . . Gabrielle for the journey, please feel free to ask."

"Thanks Thraso," Xena offered the woman her hand. "And thank you for the supplies, I'll be sure to pay you back as soon as I get the time to . . ."

"No need, Xena. I know you are the Queen's companion, but I am her healer and anything I have that she needs is hers for the asking." The gray eyes sparkled as they watched the play of emotions cross the warrior's face. *She doesn't know whether to be thankful or jealous. Oh, warrior, you and I will be good friends; I promise.*

"As you wish, but now I need to get back to Gabrielle. I left her sleeping by the lake and promised to be back before it got too very late."

"By all means, then you must go." She handed the warrior the satchel with the medicines and bid her farewell.

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Upon approaching the lake, Xena could hear the lilt of Gabrielle's laughter and a few other voices she wasn't quite sure of. At least it sounded like the bard was in good spirits and that was a plus. The closer she got the more she realized that one of the visitors was Eve. She was glad the young woman had been true to her word and sought Gabrielle out before the end of the day.

"So," Xena walked over and sat down next to Gabrielle, acknowledging Eve and Toxaris before giving her lover a peck on the cheek. "I'm gone a few candlemarks and you throw a party without me.

"I wouldn't exactly call it a party, Xena." Gabrielle held up the empty wineskin. You and I drained this before you left. She smiled up into her lover's eyes and whispered, "Thanks for letting me sleep; it was sweet of you to leave a note."

"You're welcome," the warrior mouthed back. "So how long has your company been here?"

"We didn't wake her up, if that's what you're fishing for, Mother." Eve volunteered. "She was sitting here watching the fish jump when we arrived."

"Then you've been visiting for only a little while?"

"Long enough to talk about the trip and tell Mom that Toxaris has agreed to go with us. From all Mom has told me about Lila, I'm anxious to meet her, and of course Grandmother." Eve reached over and kissed Gabrielle on the cheek. "I think we'll take off now, I think Mother wants to torture you with something she has in that bag she's carrying." Scooting off the large rock she motioned for Toxaris to follow. "We'll try to check in on you again tomorrow Mom."

"That's great, I really appreciated the company this afternoon." Gabrielle waved, as they started walking away from the area.

"Are you having another practice tomorrow, Mother?" There was a bit of a wicked glint in Eve's eyes as she smiled over at her mother. "You seem to have quite a following."

"Well, it does seem as though I started something and should at least give it a little time before squelching it. Maybe I'll pick some leaders to help. Will you be there tomorrow, Eve?" Now it was Xena's turn to grin.

"I'm not sure . . ."

"Now Eve, why don't you go and help your mother tomorrow. From what I understand there was quite a large turnout. You could use the practice to keep in shape, I'm sure." Gabrielle looked over at her daughter's companion. "You, too, Toxaris. Xena needs some good swordswomen to help."

"Is that a Royal order, Mom?" Eve wanted to know.

"Do I have to make it one?"

"No, ma'am." Toxaris chimed in.

"Now see what you've done to her Mom." Eve looked over at her mother for help and of course received absolutely none.

"Don't know what you're looking at me for." Xena smiled at Eve, knowing she had just gotten the better of the young woman without uttering a word.

"Oh, all right . . . I have nothing better to do anyway . . . and the exercise would be good for me. See you at the same time tomorrow, Mother."

"Good night Eve. Good night Toxaris."

Toxaris bid her farewells and the two women took off back toward the Village. Xena opened up the bag and began taking out the medicines Thraso has so graciously shared with her.

"So, my love, how are you feeling this evening?"

"A little sore, but very lifted in spirit. It was good to sit and talk to Eve and Toxaris is really smitten with her. I think the journey home should be an interesting one. I hope we are not disappointed or saddened when we arrive at our destinations."

"You know, Gabrielle, we're going to have to trust Toxaris with the secret of the ledge?"

"I think it'll be okay, don't you, Xena? I think she'll be able to keep a secret."

"You may have to make it a Royal order."

"So be it, if I do. Now, what it is you have there?"

"Well." The warrior opened the jar of salve. "This is a little bit stronger salve than the one I had in the saddlebags, and it is much fresher." She took her lover's hand in her own and carefully covered the scabbing over cuts with the gel. "This should have these healed in a matter of days."

"I certainly hope it does, I hate feeling so helpless."

"Gabrielle just try to enjoy this time of healing." The warrior proceeded to wrap the hands with clean bandages and then added a dab of the salve to her lover's lip before replacing the lid and going for the herbs to help with the muscles surrounding the bard's ribcage. "This should numb the area a little and then penetrate and help with your muscular pains." That finished she re-wrapped Gabrielle's ribs and asked her if she was ready to go home.

"What's in the bottle?" The bard asked.

"This? Oh, this is to help you sleep if you still have pains that keep you awake."

"I thought that's what the wine was for?"

"We don't need to have you relying on that everyday, do we?"

"I guess not, but I'm sure it probably tastes better than what you have there." She smiled at Xena and started sliding carefully off the large boulder. "It's been a lovely day, but I do think home sounds appealing. Do we have any fruit and perhaps some of that nutbread left from this morning?"

Xena raised an eyebrow in the direction of the small blonde. "Yes, Gabrielle, we have some food at the hut. In fact, I think there still might be something left in the basket from this afternoon."

"No, nothing left in the basket." A sheepish look crossed Gabrielle's face as she slowly walked toward Argo.

"Why does that not surprise me," the warrior said to herself, shaking her head, as she joined her partner and helped her onto the palomino.

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Five days had passed and Gabrielle was beginning to go stir crazy being cooped up in the hut most of the day. She had finished a few more scrolls. History would be advised of the situation they had found upon awakening, the battle with the Gods and the transformation of Livia back to Eve. She also held daily meetings with the elders of the Village and/or Tecmessa who was gracious enough to fill her in on the politics that were plaguing the area. During one of her conversations with the new leader of her Royal Guard, she asked the woman if she would reclaim the temporary station of Regent in her own absence, and Tecmessa gratefully accepted. The two were becoming fast friends, which seemed to be in the best interests of everyone in the Village.

Xena, when she wasn't administering to Gabrielle's wounds, found herself busy with the activity that had become more popular than she ever expected it to. At least now she had help, she had delegated the duty of assistant instructor to several of the more adept students, with Eve and Toxaris being two of the chosen. The warrior figured by the time they were ready to leave, which in her estimations would be about the middle of the following week, she would be able to only make a weekly visit to the training field to supervise and encourage. She had also set in on a couple of the warring councils when the elders, Tecmessa, and Gabrielle were discussing the possibility of having a confrontation with the Dramanians.

She was happy to hear that the Amazons still experienced a peaceful co-existence with the Centaurs and was anxious to see Xenan. Even though these were not Melosa's Amazons, it seemed as though the Centaur alliance had extended to the Northern Amazons and the Northern Centaurs as well. There was rumor that the King of the Centaurs would be in Xantheia, one of the larger cities in the region and only a two-day trip from the Amazon village, within the next few days. Xena figured that traveling to visit with Xenan would be just the trial she could use to see how travel-worthy Gabrielle really was.

It seemed that as the days passed the four of women were becoming more and more anxious to get the pilgrimage underway, even Toxaris was getting excited to travel beyond her realm of



comfort. But, Xena wanted to make sure Gabrielle was in no danger of re-injuring her ribs before having her undertake a long ride on horseback.

Xena had taken a group of Amazons out a few afternoons scouting for mavericks in the high country and they came back with a horse for both Eve and Toxaris. The consequences of that little excursion was that Xena also had to now give lessons on how to break a wild horse and turn them into an animal that could be ridden, as well as give Toxaris riding lessons. The Amazons were not used to venturing so far from the Village that they needed an alternative means of transportation, hence skills in catching and training horses were near nonexistent in the tribe. This new skill, along with the others Xena demonstrated, secured her place in the Village with the younger Amazons, who had only heard tales of the Warrior Princess before actually meeting her.

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After nearly a week of riding lessons, both Toxaris and her horse were ready for a short journey. Eve had her horse trained, as well as could be expected in the short amount of time, and Gabrielle's hands were totally healed except for the slight scars across the knuckles. Thraso had come by to visit one day and brought some cream to help diminish the scarring. Xena no longer wrapped her ribs at night and she was riding on Ginger a little more each day to acclimate herself with riding again.

They finally decided that the time was right and knowing that Xenan would be in Xantheia the following day, they prepared for leaving the Amazon Village for a four-day journey. Since they were approximately the same distance from their destination on this trip, as they were from Amphipolis, Xena and Gabrielle decided that it would be worth the extra day to go south toward their magical forest, thus cutting a day off the actual two-day trip. They could spend the night by the lake and in the morning when they were rested and refreshed arrive within a half a candlemark of the city, so as not to cause suspicion.

Traveling this way would afford them the entire day and evening to spend with their nephew, before having to start back to the Village. Of course that would only be possible if his entire visit was not already filled with meetings and responsibilities. The duo was planning on the rumors being correct about the anticipated arrival of the King of the Centaurs.

Xena and Eve saw to the loading of the saddlebags with camping necessities, while Toxaris and Gabrielle took care of the food supplies they would need for the trip. There was no real necessity to take much food or drink at this point in time for they would be at the lake by nightfall. Most of the packing had to do with what would be needed for camping and traveling back from the town.

Before dawn on the following day, Xena woke Gabrielle up and while the smaller woman was dressing Xena loaded Argo and Ginger. Across the Village Eve and Toxaris were busy with identical chores. They had planned on meeting in the communal lodge, knowing full well that someone would have already started tea and breakfast. Communal cooking could be an absolute blessing on mornings such as this. Something warm and substantial in all their bellies would

make the traveling more of a pleasure, especially if they didn't have to stay around and clean up afterward - one of the perks of living with the Queen.

Within the hour the small troupe was ready to start. They mounted the horses and left the Village before most of the sisters were up. Neither Eve nor Toxaris had ever seen a Centaur up close before, and both of the women were anxious to hear the stories Gabrielle had to tell of Xenan's birth. Eve had already read the story of when Ephiny first met Phantes, the Centaur, who was to become Xenan's father, yet never live to see him born. It was a long tale and took them through most of the morning, but the ending was bitter sweet and misted eyes reigned supreme, including those of emerald green by the finish of the tale. Even Xena had to fight the moistness gathering in her eyes, as Gabrielle verbally re-enacted the circumstances surrounding the birth of the little prince. The remembrance was a difficult one for the warrior as it brought back a day when she almost lost the other half of her soul. Except for the fact that Xenan was born it was a day she did not particularly like to dwell on.

About the time Gabrielle finished the tale it was time to give the horses a rest and the riders as well. Xena didn't want the bard pushing herself without a break. She was certain when she mentioned food there would be no problem with getting everyone to stop for a while. They had just come upon a creek, so not only was the timing excellent, but the choice of rest areas was also exemplary.

As seemed to be her lot in life these days, Eve observed that the creek was laden with fish. "No sense using rations if we can have fresh meat," she announced and received not one word of rebuttal from any of the other three travelers. By the time Xena had the fire going and Gabrielle and Toxaris had the horses watered and tied, Eve came marching back up the embankment with more than enough fish to feed the small troupe.

"I do believe you missed your calling, Eve." Xena smiled at the bounty her daughter was carrying, as she offered to help her scale them. Within minutes three large fish with sticks poking through their bodies, were ceremoniously draped over a semi-blazing fire.

After the mid-day meal, fresh water and nutbread, everyone felt rested enough to continue on to the secluded lake.

Toxaris begged Gabrielle until she launched into another tale. Xena beamed with pride to see the bard back into telling her stories again. Occasionally she would blush when Gabrielle would reveal something that could have been better left unsaid, but most of the stories the bard was reliving were the lighter ones. Toxaris especially enjoyed the story of the town that had Xena trapped in a circle of repetition until she figured out why she kept waking up to the same morning.

After a while the bard asked if either Eve or Toxaris knew anything about Xantheia. When they said no she insisted that Xena fill them in on the history of the area.

"That's your job, you're the Bard."

"Yes, but you're the only one who has been here before. I only know of stories told from storyteller to storyteller. So come on, Xena. Besides . . ." The bard thought of a quick excuse, "My throat is getting dry."

"Come on, Mother." Eve joined in, "Give Mom a chance to rest and tell us something interesting about where we are headed."

"Okay." Xena frowned over at Gabrielle and then back at Eve before starting her dialogue. "Actually this is a true story about the Bistones, a group of people not far from the area we are traveling to. Hercules was given a mission by Eurystheas, King of Argos, sometime ago to travel to the area around Lake Vistonida and bring him back one of the fabled horses of Diomedes. They are a wild herd of mares that feed on human flesh. Hercules arrived in Porto Lagos and took some of the horses from Diomedes' stable, but before he could get the horses on a boat back to Argos, the Bistones arrived and there was a battle. During the battle, Hercules told one of his men, Abderus to watch the horses, but the guy was definitely not playing with a full deck. While he was guarding them, one of the carnivorous horses ate him. Totally destroyed by the situation Herc set the horses free and stayed around the seacoast for a while. He was so despondent he helped some of the inhabitants along the shoreline found a small town with the stipulation that they name it after his friend. That's how Abdera got its name. But I hear tell that the small village is cursed with a little of the personality of the person it is named after. It seems stupidity is the norm there." The warrior smiled a crooked grin and glanced over at her bard to see if her story was a success.

"So I guess that means we steer clear of Abdera." Gabrielle joked. "It might be something in the air and we all need to keep our wits about us."

The sun was beginning to set when Toxaris asked how much further they had to travel.

"As a matter of fact," Xena informed the young woman. "Just where that path starts to bend is the beginning of the path to the lake. We should have plenty of time to set you girls up a camp and for all of us to eat something before we retire for the evening." She glanced over at Eve, a grin dancing around the corners of the warrior's mouth.

"What?" Eve queried.

"I was just thinking . . . since you are soooo good at fishing . . ."

"I get the hint." Eve smiled at her mother. "Actually, I'd rather be out catching dinner than gathering wood and helping set up the campsite so, I really don't mind at all."

Xena and Toxaris unsaddled the horses and put what gear was not necessary to keep down at the campsite onto the platform to be transported to the ledge. Eve went down to the lake to fish and Gabrielle foraged around for firewood.

The meal was fairly uneventful. Talk skirted around Centaurs and how they were once the sworn enemy of the Amazons. Xena had been both enemy and ally to the breed of half-men, half-horse

and was fairly knowledgeable in their history and culture. She told of battles she had fought both with and against the brave Centaurs.

Getting tired of battle stories, Gabrielle suggested they play the game she and Tara played when the young troublemaker was hanging around Xena and her. It made Gabrielle think of the small woman she had had such a difficult time endearing herself to. So much had happened to them since then that the experience now seemed like a lifetime ago.

Eve and Toxaris were all for playing the game until Xena stepped in and told everyone that they needed to have a good night's rest so they could make the leap early in the morning. They wouldn't even have to fix breakfast if they could get started early enough. That got everyone's attention and evening 'good nights' were given all around. Toxaris was curious about the ledge, but Xena, as a way of deterring the visitation tonight, told her that if she went up tonight she would have to dive off and swim back across the lake.

"Morning will be fine," Toxaris agreed. "Goodnight Gabrielle. Goodnight Xena."

Minutes later the warrior and her bard were alone in their lake-top chamber of love. Gabrielle insisted that they shower to rid themselves of the dust and smell of traveling, as well as for her to cleanse the medicinal odor off her ribs and hands.

"I think my hands are healed enough that I don't need any salve on them tonight, Xena."

"Oh, you think so do you. Have you become a healer now, also?"

"No. But I can tell when my body is healed." The small blonde was on her way to the cascading water, two towels and a bar of soap in tow. "Come on, my love, let's get to a point where we can actually feel our skin without a thin layer of path dust."

Xena did not require a second invitation. Joining her mate in the cooling liquid she noticed with a smile that Gabrielle's nipples were standing at attention, due to the constant trickling of water on them and the fact that the air was cooling slightly.

Two strong hands covered the shriveling nubs, as sapphire orbs stared intently into the eyes of love. "I love the way your skin feels between my fingertips." Xena whispered.

"I think I can second that statement, my love. I love the way my skin feels when your fingertips are touching it." Gabrielle purred.

Xena ventured a glance out over the lake at the campsite on the shoreline. Two indistinct shadows were merging on the bedrolls near the fire. The angular features on the warrior's face were frozen, except for an eyebrow that kept arching, dropping, and arching again.

"Xena." Gabrielle's voice broke the silence, her small hands turning her companion's face to look into her own. "You're staring."

The warrior cleared her throat. "I was just . . ." She pointed out toward the lake.

"I know what you were . . . just! You were spying on the girls."

"No!" I simply looked out and there they were . . . "

"Yes, I know. Come on, Mother, leave the duckling alone. She's all grown up you know?"

"Yes, but Gabrielle . . . "

"No buts. You wouldn't want her watching us, now would you?"

"That's different!"

"No, my warrior mom, it isn't! Now come here." Pulling the tall shadow into an embrace, the bard forced Xena to replace her former thoughts with the tangible body touching her own. The maneuver was totally successful.

"You feel marvelous, do you know that?" Xena nuzzled Gabrielle's throat.

"And we need to wash before things get out of hand." Gabrielle mumbled, swallowing hard.

"Oh, I have everything in hand." The raven-haired beauty cupped two firm breasts with her hands. "Doubly so." She smirked and looked down into her lover's face.

"Soap first, play after." Gabrielle handed Xena the bar of soap after having lathered up a sponge.

The dark blanket of night was beginning to fall when the lovers finally finished bathing and were snuggled comfortably in the soft bed the Goddess of Love had provided for them.

"I'm anxious to see what kind of person Xenan turned out to be, Xena. With parents like Phantes and Ephiny he received all the attributes of a born leader.

"And with Dephantos raising him after Ephiny died, I'm sure he was taught the skills of a warrior and diplomat. These next few weeks will certainly be one of rediscovery for us."

"Do you think he will remember me? I know he'll remember the Warrior Princess." Gabrielle gave her lover a squeeze.

"How could he forget the person who used to tell him stories made especially for him. Stories where he was already the hero." She kissed the top of her bard's head.

Gabrielle shifted her weight and scooted up, her face even with that of her warrior's. "Thank you for making these trips, Xena, I . . . "

The remainder of the statement was lost as full lips surrounded the opening mouth of the bard, drowning the words into moans of delight.

"Between now and the next full moon we are going to be covering a lot land." The warrior whispered into her bard's ear. "There will not be much time for being alone."

She watched as a smile tilted the edges of her lover's mouth upward. Looking tenderly into the emerald pools that reflected back unending love she again carefully drew the smaller woman into an embrace. Gabrielle had refused to allow her to wrap her torso, saying she didn't need that at night anymore, just when she was riding on Ginger, and Xena had conceded to giving the blonde her way. Now they were lying side-by-side, skin-to-skin and Xena had no intention of letting the moment slip through her fingers. For the next candlemark, her fingers would be doing the slipping as they traced their way down Gabrielle's back across the firm buttock and around to the silky mound that hid Xena's heart's desire.

"I want you tonight, my soul." Xena whispered passionately into her lover's ear as her fingers inched their way between the already damp nether lips of the bard.

"You'll find no resistance here, warrior. I'm yours for the taking." The smaller woman shifted to allow her lover better access to the region of excitement.

Still not wanting to put full pressure on Gabrielle's bruised body, Xena remained in the side lying position as her fingers worked their magic and received their reward. Her tongue curled around the small perfect ear, then she whispered sweet words of affection into the same as long digits caressed the swelling nub of passion before penetrating the beckoning domain of buried delight. Slowly at first, with a marked cadence Xena entered and exited her lover's body as Gabrielle rocked with her in perfect unison. As the bard's excitement became intensified the rhythm increased, and Xena shifted her position. Still remaining side-by-side she placed one thigh between Gabrielle's legs, intensifying each thrust of her fingers and in turn giving her own ignited passion a release as their bodies moved in concert to an orchestration only the two of them could hear. With a final plunge, the bard let out a scream of exultation, followed by the breathy sound of half-words . . . "Xena . . . ah . . . Xen . . . by the Gods . . . ahhhh."

As Xena held her close and rocked her gently, feeling the pulsating deep within the recesses of her bard's body, the warrior also reached an orgasm and a quiver of fulfillment encompassed her. With exaltation defeating self-control, the warrior left an unconscious sign of passion on the bard's neck for all to see that she had indeed, conquered the object of her affection.

Damp with physical exertion as well as sexual release, each of them drinking in the scent of the other, and with their desires quelled for the moment, the warrior and her bard fell into a satisfied and peaceful sleep.

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Morning came at its usual pace and within a candlemark after arising, four horses, three Amazons and a Warrior Princess stood in the post-dawn light of the mystical forest, ready for an journey to a distant city.

"Xena, I guess you should do the honors," Gabrielle suggested. "After all you're the World traveler here." She smiled in the direction of her warrior and received a small grin in return, as the warrior looked at the mark on her lover's neck. They had gone to great pains to camouflage that this morning, before joining up with the girls.

"Okay if everyone is ready, let's get started. We've never taken this many before do you suppose we should all be connected in some way to make sure we get there all together?" Xena questioned.

"You know, I don't think it would hurt, Aphrodite didn't really give us any rules to follow." Gabrielle agreed.

As weird as it looked, they maneuvered the horses so that Argo and Ginger were side-by-side with Xena and Gabrielle touching legs. Eve and Toxaris' horses were in the same positioning opposite the palomino and her rusty colored friend with Argo's head touching Eve's horse and Ginger's touching Toxaris' horse.

"If everyone is ready, here we go."

Toxaris watched in wide-eyed wonder as Xena closed her eyes and imagined the outskirts of Xantheia in her mind's eye. When the scenery started spinning, she also closed her eyes and when she felt like she was on solid ground again, reopened them to an entirely new landscape.

"Sweet Artemis," the Amazon voiced. "That was astounding!"

"Yes, it is a pleasant way to travel isn't it Toxaris?" Gabrielle agreed.

"The town is this direction." Xena motioned for everyone to follow and they went at a trot and then a gallop through the fertile valley into the bustling town.

True to her approximation, the wall surrounding the town came into view in less than a candlemark.

"We'll stop at the inn for a meal and ask if King Xenan and his party have arrived yet." Xena informed the group as they neared the opening. She was surprised to find that the gates were closed and that there were guards set on the catwalk as sentries.

"Who goes there?" A strong male voice yelled down.

"Xena of Amphipolis and party." The warrior yelled back up.

"I think not. She is but a legend . . . " The young guard was knocked in the ribs by the older sentry standing beside him.

"If you are Xena the Warrior Princess," the mature guard began, "Tell me, something to make me believe it is so, we have heard rumors that you have returned from the dead, but not many here would recognize you."

"Not dead." Xena protested. "Just encased in snow by the God of War until an avalanche melted a hole for the sun to shine through and thaw us."

"That's the story we've been hearing, but how does that make you Xena?" The guard wanted confirmation.

With a snide smile on her face and her eyebrow arched she looked over at Gabrielle who shook her head in affirmation as her champion reached for the one weapon that would prove to anyone who knew of the legend that it was, indeed, the Warrior Princess before them. In the blink of an eye the chakram went sailing up toward the guard, expertly separating the tip of the sentry's spear from its shaft.

"By Zeus, it is Xena," the small company heard the guard exclaim. "Open the gates and let them in."

In the short amount of time it took for the gates to be pushed aside, and as early as the morning was, a crowd had gathered to view the legend in the flesh.

"Are you really Xena the Warrior Princess?" A young girl asked in awe. Then looking over at Gabrielle she continued, "And is that the Bard Gabrielle?"

"Yes . . . and the one and only," Xena answered the maiden. "Now you could answer a question or two for me. Has King Xenan and his company arrived yet and is the Inn serving the morning meal?"

"King Xenan arrived last evening and is staying at the Inn, and yes, the Inn is open for breakfast."

"Thank you." Xena smiled at the child as she motioned the others to follow her toward the stables and Inn.

After settling the horses into stalls with water and hay, and with saddlebags on their shoulders, they walked over to the Inn to procure a place for when the evening arrived and to get something to eat. If the town was hosting a conference with the Centaurs, there was sure to be a lack of lodging by the time they really needed it. The inside of the establishment was clean and the smell of sausage and biscuits was unmistakable. Gabrielle's stomach growled seconds after the first whiff of the aromas were inhaled. Eve's was the second to make an audible sound and Toxaris and Xena grinned at them as they all sat down at a table and waited for the serving maid to take their order.



While waiting for the order to arrive, Xena stepped over to the bar and spoke to a couple of the men, asking why there were sentries posted at the main gates. Gabrielle asked the server when they expected King Xenan to make an appearance and what the town had planned to do to entertain the King after all the necessary business was out of the way.

"We're having a huge banquet beginning at dusk, if all goes well with the discussions." The server informed the travelers. "As for this morning - the leaders were up almost until sunrise; I don't know how soon they will be coming down to eat."

"Well," Gabrielle sighed, turning to Eve. "I've waited this long to see the little Centaur, another candlemark or two is certainly not going to hurt anything."

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Toxaris and Eve had taken the saddlebags up and put them in the rooms. Xena and Gabrielle were sitting making small talk with one of the locals who was trying to get the Innkeeper to talk Gabrielle into telling all about how they had been frozen for 25 complete seasons. Xena beamed at the attention her bard was getting and made use of the time to find out more about the invasion the Xantheians were afraid of.

While trying to think of an excuse not to do a reading tonight, the bard looked up to see a small girl walking behind Eve. She was coming from the rooms down the corridor to the right of the stairs. Gabrielle almost dropped her tea; her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open as she noisily banged the mug onto the table. Hearing the commotion coming from the direction of her bard, Xena looked over at her mate, and was astonished at the look on Gabrielle's face. She followed the direction in which the blonde was staring and immediately understood the reaction her bard was having.

"By the Gods, Xena." Gabrielle turned to her champion and then back around to stare at the young girl.

Xena was at her lover's side in a heartbeat. "I see Gabrielle, there could be no doubt."

"It must be Xenan's child; she's a miniature duplicate of Ephiny. Those dark eyes . . . that curly hair. Look at the expression on her face. Oh, Xena, she's beautiful."

"Yes, she is, my sweet, but don't you think we had better be sure before making fools of ourselves?"

"Whatever!" Gabrielle got up and walked toward the child. "What's your name little one?" The bard asked.

"Ephiny," the child answered.

A gasp of air escaped from the bard's lips as she found herself almost speechless. She leaned down to take in the little girl's features. "Do you know that I knew your Amazon grandmother?"

"How could you?" The girl questioned. "She died many, many years ago and everyone who knew her is either dead or very old."

"That is a very long story, Ephiny, but I guarantee that I was one of your grandmother's closest friends. Xena and I," Gabrielle grabbed for her lover's hand and pulled her over, "were with your grandmother the night your daddy was born."

"Xena! My Daddy's name is Xenan and he told me all about Xena the Warrior Princess and Gabrielle the Amazon Queen." Ephiny looked from one to the other of the women before her. "But you can't be those to people, they would be very old by now." A look of confusion crossed the young girl's face. Before Gabrielle could say another word the child darted away. "I'm going to get my daddy," were the last words they heard her exclaim as she ran down the hall.

"Gabrielle, I think you scared her." Xena chided playfully.

"I didn't mean to." Gabrielle whined.

"I know, but she's just a child."

"I can see that Xena. It's just that she looks so much like Ephiny, I couldn't wait to talk to her."

"I can imagine that you will be talking with Xenan before very long." The warrior smiled as she gave Gabrielle a slight hug. "You might as well sit down; it looks like the food has arrived."

When they were almost finished eating, the four travelers heard a commotion coming from the direction in which young Ephiny had fled. The high pitched tone of an excited child was echoing down the hall and soon hoof beats were mingled with it. But it was not a full-grown Xenan who appeared with the child but a version that struck the memory of the bard and warrior simultaneously.

An adolescent centaur was walking beside the young girl, seemingly trying to calm her down. He strolled up to where the warrior and company were sitting and regally addressed the astounded party.

"My name is Prince Xenan II and my sister said that you knew my grandmother; can this be true?"

Just as Gabrielle was about to open her mouth to speak, there was an announcement from the direction of the hallway.

"Make way for his highness King Xenan."

There was a bit of an irritated discussion coming from the same area, and Xena could hear a deep bass voice telling the announcer that the proclamation was unnecessary here, as this was not a formal gathering.

With that, a full-grown centaur stepped into the room, but the face of a handsome young nephew was the only thing the warrior and bard could see. Xenan may have grown into full adulthood but his face still held the youthful exuberance that the two proud aunts remembered from years gone by. He, as well, looked with unbelieving eyes at the visions before him. Misty green and blue eyes stared back at him, as his own involuntarily filled with hot tears, which he tried desperately to bat back and keep from brimming over and trickling down his face.

"Aunt Xena, Aunt Gabrielle is that Really you?" There was an unmistakable catch of emotion in the deep voice.

"Yes Xenan," Gabrielle was the first to answer, "It most assuredly is." She ran over and hugged him, tears of joy flowing unashamedly down her face.

With a little more reserve that her partner, Xena also joined in the 'group hug' as they greeted someone they had thought they might never see again.

Introductions were initiated all around before reminiscing and filling in of lost years began to occupy the extraordinary hours preceding Xenan's scheduled counsel meeting. During the course of the conversations, the reigning Centaur asked that Xena sit in as one of his advisors, a request that no proud aunt would have refused, and Xena was no exception.

When one of Xenan's lieutenants came to the table to inform him it was time to leave, he glanced over at Xena and then at Gabrielle. "If all goes well, we should be finished about time for the evening meal. This has been such a bittersweet occasion. I was solicited here to help stop a conflict with one the more barbarous tribes from Aemos who think they should be able to expand into this territory, ignoring the fact that it is already inhabited, and now . . ."

"Hey, you two go have fun with your military strategies. Eve, Toxaris and I will go do some sightseeing while you're deciding the fate of the known world." Gabrielle smiled over at Xena then turned back to Xenan. "If she wants to go, is it okay if we take Ephiny with us?"

The little girl began jumping up and down and pleading with her father to let her go with Aunt Gabrielle. There would have been no way in Tartarus he would have been able to refuse the invitation, even if he wanted to.

Everything was settled; they would all meet at the banquet hall at dusk, and if the discussions took the turn Xenan expected they would, the remainder of the evening would be free for more memories, both old and new.

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Four straggling, tired shoppers met with two fatigued warriors, at a place of honor at the head table in the banquet room. It seemed that Xenan, his arbitrators, and Xena had come up with a workable solution that was amiable to all parties involved and a full-scale war had been squelched.

Xenan made sure he gave Xena's expertise in strategy a large portion of the credit and she, in turn, praised his diplomacy when dealing with hot tempers. The mutual admiration society came to a close when the food was brought out and drinks were poured.

Gabrielle sat down beside Xena, after getting Ephiny a plate and sending her off to her room to eat and play with the new toys they had purchased on their shopping expedition. She promised the child she would come in to say goodnight a little later on. The bard looked exhausted and Xena thought about scolding her for overdoing, but didn't want to ruin the only evening they would be spending with their nephew, so she held her tongue.

The remainder of the evening was more than any of them could have hoped for. There was good food, good drink, and the company of people they honestly enjoyed being with. Eve and Toxaris thought Xenan was the best thing since bakery bread. He seemed to be enjoying the attention, as he taught them Centaur songs and told tales that his Aunts knew for a fact were made up, one of them was actually a story Gabrielle had written for him when he was very young.

Before she let the wine get the best of her, Gabrielle excused herself and pulled Xena along with her to go and tuck Ephiny into bed.

As they were coming out of the child's room, the blonde pulled the warrior over to the side of the hallway. "She's the essence of her grandmother, isn't she Xena?"

"Yes, Gabrielle." The warrior agreed. "Ephiny was absolutely the right name for that little sweetheart, and she has the heart of a warrior. Even Xenan knows that. As much as he tries to stifle it, he knows he's got an interesting road ahead with that little one."

"Doesn't she make you want to have a child around Xena?" Soft green eyes pleaded with the sapphire eyes they were staring into.

"I don't know if I'd want to go That far, Gabrielle. We haven't had much luck in the past raising our children."

"Maybe it's time for all of that to change," the bard argued.

"It's been a very emotional day, can't we talk about this when we get home?"

"Sure, Xena." A glimmer of sorrow appeared in the verdant eyes as they looked down the hallway. "We had better get back to the celebration."

"Yes, we should, but we won't stay much longer. You must be exhausted after all that walking around you did this afternoon." She put her arm around the smaller woman's shoulders as they walked down the hall.

"I am . . . it has been a marvelous day, though. Not only did we get to see Xenan but his children as well. If his wife hadn't been away caring for an ailing parent we might have gotten to meet her as well."

"Actually, Gabrielle, if she hadn't been away, he probably would have left her and the children at home, so it was rather fortuitous for us that she wasn't here this time. But, Xenan and I talked about trying to visit at least once a year, and to keep in touch. We could always arrange a meeting place somewhere between our villages. Maybe even at the same time we visit our families. Now come on, one more glass of wine and it's off to bed.

When they arrived back in the room the party was still going strong. Some of the attendees had slipped away to their rooms but Xenan was still over in the corner talking away with Eve and Toxaris as well as a few stragglers who were enjoying the tales the King of the Centaurs seemed so good at spinning.

The warrior and her bard agreed to have one more drink before calling it an evening and when they left there were only a handful of people still partying.

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Morning came too early, even for Xena, but she got up and dressed before disturbing anyone else. She decided to let Eve and Toxaris sleep a little later, but she woke Gabrielle up.

"If you want to spend a little time with Ephiny, Xenan II, and Xenan before we leave, you need to get up now. After breakfast, I'm going to go get the supplies we'll need for camping and traveling and you make a list for the girls of what food items we'll need. While you're visiting they can go purchase the supplies. I want to be on the road before the sun is too high in the sky."

As anticipated, for once, the bard didn't argue with getting up early.

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The morning seemed to fly by and soon it was time for everyone to say farewells. Ephiny didn't want to let Gabrielle go and cried the entire time the bard was saying goodbye to Xenan and Xenan II. Her father put her on his back and promised they would walk out to the edge of town with Aunt Gabrielle and Aunt Xena, which seemed to pacify her emotions for the time being.

It was a heartwarming good bye as they all promised to meet again in the not too distant future. Gabrielle even suggested that Xenan and his family come to the wedding, but Xenan informed her he needed to meet up with his wife in Trachis, where she was taking care of an ailing father. He wasn't sure how long they would end up staying there and could not make any promises. But he did promise that they would make it a point to visit. There was not a dry eye among the group as they finally parted ways outside the town gate and Ephiny made her father wait until her new family members were completely out of sight before she would allow him to turn and reenter Xantheia.

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So far the trip afforded nothing but relaxation, the uniting of family, and the making of new friends. Toxaris and Eve talked incessantly of how interesting the Centaur had been to talk to and

how lucky he was to have traveled all over the Known World. From their lengthy discussion, Xena and Gabrielle assumed that Xenan had explained in detail to them the enormous responsibility of being King of the Centaurs.

When the two young women finally tired of talking between themselves, they asked Gabrielle to tell them some stories about Ephiny, Queen Melosa, and the evil woman named Callisto that Xenan had talked about. Eve had already read some of the scrolls containing encounters with Callisto and Toxaris had heard the storyteller's version of the thorn in Xena's side, but both wanted to hear about her from Gabrielle's own mouth.

The bard was more than happy to comply, and Xena was happy to just ride along and listen. With Gabrielle weaving her magic, the small band of women hardly realized how quickly the sun was moving in the sky. The only time the bard stopped was when they were going too fast for anyone to hear her over the wind or the horses hoof beats. A little past midday they stopped to water the horses and give them some down time before starting up again. They would be resting for the night around dusk, giving the horses ample time to rest up for the final day of the trek home tomorrow.

It was close to dusk, the time when the shadows of the forest played tricks on the mind. The breeze had picked up, and the rustling of the low shrubs surrounding the pine trees gave off an eerie music for all to listen to.

Suddenly, Xena sat upright on Argo; her ears perked to some disturbance that only she could hear. "We have company and they're fairly near."

"I guess it was too much to ask that we make it all the way home without running into some sort of scum." Gabrielle looked over into the direction her lover was concentrating on.

Xena immediately recognized the men as they came out of the woods toward the four women, wielding their swords. They had been hanging around the conference in Xantheia, trying to cause trouble between the townspeople and the visiting Aemosians.

Xena pulled Argo out in front of the other horses. There were only four of the bandits, more than an even fight considering the expertise the warrior had on her own and that of her companions. The man on the lead horse was coming at a gallop until he recognized the statuesque woman astride the palomino. With a paling look on his face, he brought his own horse up short.

Xena simply sat there in her most stoic of postures, waiting for them to make the next move. Just as one of the men from the back started to go around the leader, in her most intimidating of voices she spoke. "You don't want to make me mad, boys." She was hoping they were cowards and a warning would suffice; she didn't want Gabrielle to have to get down off her horse and into the middle of this mess. But the renegade didn't seem to care; he came directly at her, his sword cutting the wind as he charged. With one fell swoop, she knocked him from his horse and put her sword away. As he was groveling in the dirt trying to get his composure, she reached down for her chakram. *No sense getting everyone involved in this little scuffle.*

One of the more observant and perhaps more intelligent of the highwaymen kept his eyes peeled on her every move. "Be careful, look what she's doing!" He screamed at his buddies as he turned his horse around. "It's that round thing that she throws. I've heard tell of it in legends. And someone in the town said she almost took off the head of the sentry when she arrived in Xantheia by tossing it at him from below the gates. Tartarus, I don't want to lose my head to that!" With that he turned and galloped away. One of the other men was gracious enough to give his grounded companion a hand up and within minutes they were all out of sight.

"I suppose some of these idiots aren't as stupid as they look." Xena glanced back around at her own comrades, who were all sitting with smirks on their faces.

"And here I thought we were going to have a little excitement," Eve grumbled.

"Yeah, I was hoping to put into action a few of the moves you showed us the other day, Xena." Toxaris agreed.

"I'm just as glad it didn't come down to that. Gabrielle doesn't need to be in the middle of a fight with her wounds this close to being completely healed." Xena admitted.

Since there was very little chance that they would be disturbed the rest of the evening the group decided to make camp right where they were. They had enough water and supplies to see them through the night, and at the traveling pace they had set, the Amazon village would be reached by dusk tomorrow.

"I would have been fine, Xena. My hands are totally closed and you still have my ribs wrapped for extra support. Remember?"

"Yes, but no sense in disturbing the healing process if we don't have to. Cowards like that don't take much in the way of scaring." She smiled over at her lifemate.

"Well your imitation of a Warrior Princess certainly did the trick, so you can stop worrying about me and we can get this campsite set up. I don't know about anyone else, but I'm getting hungry."

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Campfire in embers, bedrolls unfurled, horses fed and watered, people fed and watered - with all that completed it was finally time for the four travelers to get a good night's sleep. After the late hour of getting to bed the night before, and the early rising this morning, no one had a problem quickly finding their way to the world of dreams. The campsite was quiet, save for the sounds of the forest and the deep breathing of sleeping warriors.

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The first light of dawn shimmering through the pines woke the Warrior Princess. She decided she would let everyone sleep while she stoked the fire back into a blaze. Eve was the second up

and by the time the tea was brewed, Toxaris had joined them. It was time to wake the final sleeper, and for a change it was not a difficult task.

After a filling breakfast, consisting of the sausage they had purchased in town, fruit, and bread, they were once again on the journey home. To help pass the time when they were going slowly and giving the horses a rest, Gabrielle suggested they play the 'Who Am I' game that she and Xena invented to pass time while traveling from one city to another. With everyone's imagination in full gear, the remainder of the trek home didn't seem quite as long.

Calculations turned out to be fairly accurate and they arrived in the Amazon Village shortly after dusk. There was still the aroma of dinner in the air as the four travelers walked the horses in front of the communal lodge.

"I don't know about any of you, but I'm taking advantage of my position as Queen," Gabrielle began as she dropped down from Ginger and started walking into the lodge. "Whoever wants to cash in, come on." She teased the remainder of the little group as they all dismounted and followed Gabrielle into the building. "I don't know about anyone else, but I'm starving!"

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It was good to be back in their own bed, with their arms wrapped securely about each other.

"You know, Xena, it's nice to go traveling and I loved seeing Xenan and his children, but it's also good to have a place to call home." The smaller woman snuggled up closer. She started to talk quietly of the trip and the interaction between Eve and Toxaris and how the two enjoyed meeting Xenan. Then she began rambling on about how beautiful Ephiny was and wouldn't it be great if she could come visit sometime. Her conversation was turning to babies when she realized that she had not received an 'uh, huh,' from her warrior in quite some time. With her head on Xena's chest she felt the constant rhythm of her lover's breathing, and finally realized that the dark-haired beauty was fast asleep.

Gabrielle smiled to herself as she closed her own eyes to join her lover in dreams. "Good night my warrior, you got us there an back, and we are none the less for wear. I thank whatever Gods are still watching out for us that I have you in my life. It would be a dull and lonely place without you." Minutes later bard and warrior were both breathing in unison, each lost in her own dreamscape, safe and sound until the rising of the sun.

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They had decided on the way back to the village that two days of rest between trips seemed quite adequate. Xena wanted to make sure that the horses were fully rested. Once they got started there would be a lot of land to cover and she didn't want to start off with the animals being tired.

Gabrielle needed to check in with Tecmessa and make sure everything was going as it should be and to catch up on the news, if any, from the problems they were having with the Dramanians. She was hoping that the troubles could be stayed until after the wedding, and it seemed as though



the attacks on their nearest neighbors had been slowing slightly according to the reports of the Amazon scouts who had been sent out to observe and return with news.

The morning of the third day soon rolled around and everything was set and ready to go. The caravan of four decided to leave the Village when the sun's first rays trickled through the forest. Now that time had come and riders and horses stood ready and willing to embark on another adventure. First stop - Potidaea.

*The End*

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