

The Chakram and the Dragon

By
Pysta

This story is the sequel to [The Judging of the Queen](#).

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Violence: There is violence in this story, and readers should be prepared for it. The Amazons did not live in a time of peace, and their way was the hard road. But Xena and Gabrielle manage to hold true to the premise I posited in [The Judging of the Queen](#).

Main text (not Subtext!): The only other disclaimer is, of course, the one about it being about two women who love, honor and cherish each other above all others, through all of their many lifetimes together, and who wouldn't dream of being inhibited or embarrassed about expressing that love as they choose. If you are enslaved by a peculiarly twisted and regressive form of homophobic prejudice, I don't know how the heck you ended up here - but read at your own risk! (Who knows, you might just learn something about tolerance!) And if not, I hope you enjoy their love as much as I have loved writing about it.

I want to thank those fans who have responded to my first bardic endeavor. I pray that they willingly follow me down this road, to see where I have gone: and that in the end, they enjoy the journey.

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... If all we love and all we wish to change

Survives long enough for us to grow old,
I will forget mornings I woke alone
From blind, urgent journeys over your skin
And will ask only for your calm nearness
And that the world we live in continue . . .*



Chapter 1

As the fire smoldered to ash in the fireplace, Xena got up and pulled the shutters open, letting in the cool air of the dawn and the sound of the birds beginning their morning chorus. She slipped back into the bed, needing to wrap the warmth of her partner around her once again. Gabrielle's arms immediately pulled her in, and their bodies again entwined; both unwilling to withstand separation for even that brief act.

How would it be, when the person you most love is miraculously restored to you, after years of separation? When you have given up all hope, and have gone long beyond grief, to a place of solitary pain. When you have become so used to the inner voice that she had become, you are shocked at the living sound of her: whispering in your ear, crooning sweet words that run on, mixed with singing, and joyful laughter, in an endless stream of happiness. When you marvel, over and over again, simply to be physical; and the eye and touch that makes things alive between you - and you begin to let yourself realize that now it will happen again, every single day.

How would it be, when you are restored, after long years of patient, quiet mental murmurs to the one you dwell within, giving succor to her sorrow, gentle hints of recovery, insistent support for the daily ordeal of climbing out of the pit of despair? When you have gotten so used to being bodiless, a restless spirit keeping company in the long hours of the days and nights, trying to find some tangible way to deliver relief, and comfort. When all you could hope for was that she should die to this life, and come home to you once again. When all the millions of tactile sensations are so exquisitely sensitive to your newly-restored skin, you never want to stop the touching.

Such a huge need for both of them: to take their time, to reconnect, in the old, familiar ways. Time needed to grow together, again. Time needed to reweave the web of their friendship, and love; their hopes and dreams; their aspirations for the future - a future that once more seemed almost possible.

And yet, the daylight was quickening. The world outside their bed was coming alive with sound and light; with motion and music; with activity and all the business of ordinary life. They could not shut it out, for all the need they were feeling to do so. They could not say “Stop!” and have it all come to a halt, while they danced their pathway of love, back into one other’s living, breathing life.

Xena hugged her close. “Time enough, later,” she whispered.

Gabrielle sighed.

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The sound of footsteps on the porch brought them to quick attention. A pause, then the clear note of the small bell hung outside the entryway.

“Gabrielle? Are you awake?”

Gabrielle got up, found her tunic where it lay on the floor and shrugged it over her head, then pulled on her leggings. She turned her head, gave Xena a brilliant smile, and crossed to the doorway. She lifted the woven curtain up and ducked outside, letting it fall quickly behind her. Eponin, leaning against the porch rail, gave her a huge grin, and a hug. “How are you, this fine morning? Just getting up?”

“Barely – I woke up several times, but I wasn’t anywhere near ready to get out of the bed!” She paused, trying to decide how to proceed.

Eponin looked at her quizzically. “What?”

Gabrielle looked at her friend thoughtfully. “Poni, how are your nerves, this morning?”

“How are my nerves?” “Poni looked puzzled. “My nerves are fine. Why?”

Gabrielle took her by the arm, “Well . . . last night something . . . ah . . . happened . . . after you left me at the Grove.”

Eponin, startled, looked at her friend with concern. “Are you all right? It wasn’t anything bad, was it?”

Gabrielle grinned. “Oh no – no, on the contrary. . .”

Eponin relaxed. “All right – I give up. What was it?”

Keeping hold of Eponin’s arm, Gabrielle turned, lifted the curtain, and pulled her friend inside.

Eponin stopped, while her eyes adjusted to the dim interior of the lodge. Gabrielle had gone over and now sat on the end of the bed, which stuck out from behind the Egyptian screen. Gradually, ‘Poni noticed that there was a form in the bed – she could see someone’s legs, under the furs. Her mind was suddenly racing, and she blushed.

“*Oh, – I’m sorry . . . I . . . I’ll come back later – I didn’t know you were . . . that you – uh, had company . . .*” Her voice slowed; then skidded to a complete halt, as the long legs moved, coming out from under the covers, a long arm pushed back the screen, and the person in the bed . . .

The . . . person . . . in the bed

Eponin, thunderstruck, took one step toward them; then swayed, as her eyes rolled up and she crumpled into a heap on the floor.

Gabrielle leaped off the end of the bed, and kneeling swiftly, pulled Eponin up to clasp her in her arms. Xena crossed to the table, calmly poured a cup of water from the jug, and handed it to Gabrielle. Then she pulled on her own clothes and sat back down on the end of the bed.

Gabrielle murmured, “It’s all right, ‘Poni, wake up, now!” She quickly clapped a hand to her friend’s cheek. ‘Poni came to, dizzily.

“Wha . . . ?”

“Here, drink this. You fainted - can you sit up?”

“Of course I can!” Eponin took a drink. “*That* was the strangest thing! I don’t know what is wrong with me. I don’t faint . . .! She shook her head gingerly. “I must have had too much wine, last night! You’re not going to believe this - but I thought I saw . . .” she stopped again, and looked at

Gabrielle. “I . . . did I . . . did I . . . see . . .?” Gabrielle nodded.

Eponin gulped, shakily. She twisted around and stared at the figure quietly waiting on the end of the bed.

“Are . . . are you . . . real?” she whispered.

Xena nodded solemnly. “Yes, ‘Poni – I would *never* try to fool you about *that*!” Then she flashed ‘Poni the most brilliant Xena smile she’d seen in ages.

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Eponin passed her hand over her eyes. She shook her head and gaped at Gabrielle and Xena, who sat side by side on the bed. Gabrielle spoke, her voice gentle.

“‘Poni, I’m really sorry – I didn’t mean for you to get such a shock – truly! But there wasn’t any way to avoid it. It’s just going to be like this, for a while, until we go through all the explanations – and I’m not even sure if that will help!” She looked sidelong at Xena. “Maybe we should just line everybody up and have them all faint at once!”

Xena grinned. “It might save time, at that!”

Eponin finally seemed to find her voice. “Whoa, there – do you all mind if I just gather my poor wits?” She held up her hand. “O . . . My . . . Goddess! HOW DID YOU GET HERE?”

They looked at one another. Then they both looked at ‘Poni.

“Hey, don’t both talk at once!” ‘Poni muttered, holding up her hands in mock protest.

Xena put her arm around Gabrielle. “Well, ‘Poni, the short answer is that I tried to take on the entire army of Jappa, got stuck full of arrows, got my head chopped off, and got very dead for a while – during which I thought I had to stay gone forever. Gabrielle thought I was gone forever, too, so she went off and wandered around for ten seasons, or so, trying to put her poor self back together without me. Meanwhile, I found out that I could kind of help her out with that process, so she got to carry on with me sort of inside her, and we worked on her for a while. Then she came

back here, and you know what happened next. Then I got to come back, because we did all the right things, and got ourselves both straightened out, and so now here we are!”

Gabrielle pulled Xena’s arm closer around her. “Isn’t she just too eloquent, ‘Poni? That’s my Warrior of the Pithy Descriptions!”

Eponin stared at them a long moment. “When are you going to tell the others?”

Oh, I don’t think I’m ready for that, yet,” Gabrielle said, shaking her head vehemently.

Xena looked quizzically at her. “Tonight? . . .” she murmured.

“What?” Gabrielle said. “Oh . . . oh, yes!”

Xena shrugged. “It would be fitting . . . don’t you think?”

Eponin watched, fascinated and mystified, at the exchange that seemed to be punctuated with their words.

Gabrielle smiled, her tanned face showing the laugh lines. “O, yes - that’s perfect!”

Eponin got up off of the floor, and gave herself a shake. “Well, as long as you have it all settled . . .!” she muttered.

Gabrielle turned to her friend. “Eponin, I am asking you to agree to become my Regent – to take up the post that has been empty since Ephiny.” Her face was a mixture of sadness, apprehension, and humor - as she waited for Eponin’s response.

‘Poni swallowed convulsively, her mouth suddenly very dry and her hands very sweaty. “Gabrielle – are you sure about this? I’m not anything near as tactful as Ephiny was. I don’t know if I am capable of being what you need me to be.” Her voice petered out, as a new thought came to her, and a deep sadness welled up in her eyes. “Does . . . that mean that you’ll be . . . leaving us?”

Gabrielle smiled - her face resolute. “Oh, my dear: no! No - my friend - there’s not a chance of that! It’s just that you are long overdue for this honor – and I think I will have need of the best help I can get - besides my Champion, here. I can’t imagine anyone else *but* you as Regent.” She

added, gently, "You may be different than Ephiny, but you are every bit as good as she was."

'Poni sat silent, a long moment. Then she stood up, and clasped her fist to her chest, "My Queen, I will serve you to my last breath. I am for you."

Gabrielle nodded. "Thank you with all my heart, 'Poni.

And she proceeded to fill 'Poni in on the details of her plan.

Later, Eponin left to start organizing the evening's funeral rites for the fallen Kypris; she would make everything ready for the ceremony, which would start as the sun sank into the West.

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Gabrielle looked at Xena, who nodded. "Read my mind, perfectly, my Bard."

Gabrielle smiled, and watched as Xena went into the bathing room. She got a satisfied look on her face as she listened to the sounds of water being poured. "O, my love," she whispered to herself. "Ten thousands of kisses, to make up for! I don't care if our lips get blisters - I've been too long in the desert; and O, how I thirst!"

She walked through the doorway and removed her clothes. Xena was standing next to the large tub, naked - and bent over, as she lit a large candle that sat on the bench next to the tub. As the light flared, Gabrielle caught her breath at the sight of Xena's body, softly highlighted by the candle's glow. She walked up to Xena, and rested her hand on Xena's curved back. Xena looked up, startled at Gabrielle's pensive look; then straightened, and took mate by the shoulders.

"What is it, sweetheart?"

Gabrielle looked down, her tongue stumbling for the words.

"I . . . still feel so . . . awkward. You haven't really taken a good hard look at me, have you? I mean, dispassionately. I . . . have changed a lot, Xena."

Xena looked down at the glum countenance of her Soulmate. "Well, that

goes both ways, doesn't it? I'm no young vestal maiden, myself. What, exactly, are you ashamed of? From where I'm standing, all I see is a strong, well-made and well-used body, a dazzling pair of eyes, and a face I could gaze into for the rest of my life, and never tire of. Does anything else matter?"

Gabrielle shook her head, "No, I guess not."

Xena nodded. "Good; because I wouldn't want to miss any part of the rest of our lives together, my Bard. Every inch of you is going to be explored, until I have memorized all of who you are now. Every line, every curve, and every sweet surface!"

Gabrielle's arms encircled her lover, and she sank into that embrace with every fiber of her being.

* * * * *

Gabrielle reached over and put her hand on Xena's cheek, as they sat together at the table. "What are you doing back here, my love?" she asked, simply. Xena looked down at the table a long moment, then raised her head and gazed earnestly into her partner's eyes. "What else, but to do whatever Queen Gabrielle wants me to do, for the Last Tribe of the Amazon Nation?"

Gabrielle took Xena's hand between both of hers. She looked pensive. "Isn't that for you to decide, Xe? You haven't really said anything yet about what you would like to do. But I seem to get a real clear impression that you aren't eager to get back into the leathers . . . "

Xena shook her head. "Ah well – I expect those skills aren't going to be retired, just yet. I gather the Greek countryside isn't exactly peaceable, and I won't be satisfied until this village is really thriving, and the road between here and Amphipolis is safe enough to travel without fear. And that means I have to see what's really going on – out there - and reestablish the ties between the town and the Tribe – so we need to make a little trip back to Amphipolis." She looked sad. "I don't even know if Toris is still . . . with us. And I'd like to visit Lyceus' & Mother's tomb . . . "

"I know – we'll go there, as soon as we can." Gabrielle brought Xena's

hand to her lips.

Xena smiled. “Well, we’ll see. As for the real question – I haven’t answered you. All the time we were traveling together, we were all about righting the wrongs, trying to fight the badness with some goodness, trying to change the world. Trying to restore the balance. Now, I’m just back for you, Gabrielle. I know how much you want to help the Amazons get some kind of a good life again; and I trust that you have a good chance to do that because of who you have turned out to be. I think we belong here, Gabrielle. We have a community of friends that really are the world, to us. We can only work with them, now. We are focusing down on the quiet, everyday doing that puts the pieces back together, one at a time, person by person, bit by bit.”

Gabrielle nodded. “I know – I feel it, too. Sometimes I think that everything we’ve gone through was a preparation for this – to lead them, and make a home. Because you know, Xena – we’re not just fighting for their safety and their lives. We’re trying to keep the whole of what they are – the Amazon Nation – from being destroyed. So much of it has already passed into oblivion! I feel such an urgency, to make sure it isn’t lost forever! It sometimes frightens me, Xe – how quickly so much of what we know and love has been swept away – even in our lifetime.” She shook her head, close to tears. “It breaks my heart.”

“Well, then, we will do whatever we can, sweetheart. And we’ll do it together.”

* * * * *

The sweet chime of the bell sounded, and then Eponin entered. She carried a basket covered with a cloth, and a flagon.

“Well, that’s done. And here’s food for you, Xena.” She sat down at the table, “Everything is set in motion. I’ve got our young warriors working to build the pyre. They’re full of what went on last night! Chattering like a bunch of magpies, and re-playing the whole thing over and over. It was really sweet! Oh, and they were *very* respectful not to disturb the Queen – allowed that since you’ve really been through so much, you deserved a Royal Rest!” She snickered. “Isn’t getting old just grand?”

Gabrielle smiled volumes at Xena. “I’m just beginning to find that out, ‘Poni!

* * * * *

Gabrielle and Eponin walked slowly across the open courtyard that separated the Queen's lodge and the communal eating area. There, long tables and benches were set up under the hide-covered roof; the sidewalls rolled up and tied in the warm summer air. They could see some of the Tribe already gathered there, while others made their way in from various parts of the village. Gabrielle seemed to be in some discomfort - hugging her midriff as she walked. Eponin put her hand on Gabrielle's shoulder.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

Gabrielle took a deep breath. "Yeah, thanks for asking. I don't know how to explain this, 'Poni, but right now I physically hurt when we're apart. It's a dull ache - but bearable." She shook her head, wonderingly. "I don't know how long that will last."

Eponin mused. "Hmm, it's like you're tethered." she murmured, as they came up on the other Amazons, sitting at and moving around the tables.

Gabrielle nodded, mutely.

They sat down at the head table, where the rest of the Council of Elders was gathered. Gabrielle greeted them all. The women were in such high humor, and were affectionate in their greeting to Gabrielle, and she realized all over again how profoundly the judging had cemented her fragile ties to them, closer than she had dreamed possible. Artemis's Charge seemed to be working, in their hearts. As they continued eating, and talking amongst themselves, her eyes scanned the faces of the young Amazons, seated at the other tables. She picked out and nodded to her four young fosterlings; Io, Paphos, Dika, and Kythereia. They were seated together, their eyes often straying to stare at the Queen. As she acknowledged each of them with her affectionate smile, they blushed bashfully and ducked their heads.

'Poni spoke up. "They worship the ground under your feet." She continued, "You are going to make a world of difference, here. Do you know that, yet?"

Gabrielle shrugged. "I hope so, 'Poni. I hope so."

She turned and spoke to Talia and Alysia who were seated across from them. "How are our young apprentices doing?" she asked. "I want to thank you for taking them under your care. I hope I made the right choices."

Alysia, her tall, spare frame dressed in the dark robes of the Law-Giver, pushed a wisp of her grey hair back, where it was continually escaping the untidy twist at the back of her head. "Well, my Queen, Kythereia is probably going to be a good Law-Giver, one day. She is surprisingly astute for one so young. All it will take is time, and lots of tempering!"

Gabrielle looked pleased. "Good., Give her as many opportunities as you can devise for her to practice making rulings, She needs to learn the Amazon Laws, and settling disputes is such a practical way to find out what works and what doesn't, and what compassion feels like - *that* I know." Alysia grinned, and nodded her agreement.

Talia, who was seated next to Eponin, leaned over and poured Gabrielle and Eponin some cider from the jug. She was the same height as 'Poni, but there the similarity ended. She had a mass of wavy light brown hair with gold and red highlights - some of it with locks braided - and freckles liberally salted across her face. She wore a practical tunic, and leggings, and a belt that had many pouches and pockets for the healing materials she was never without. She had a ready smile, and a bantering sense of humor, and she was utterly devoted to 'Poni. She answered Gabrielle's inquiring look, as the Queen drank from her cup of cider.

"I have to say, Dika is also doing just fine. She had a pretty tough job helping me prepare Kypris' body. She was a little green, but she got over it. And it was a good chance to teach her the reverence with which we handle the process. I think she grew up some, yesterday."

Gabrielle nodded. "Excellent. And I must remember to make time for Paphos, later today. I want to get her started with me. Did 'Poni tell you all? She's going to learn her letters, and help me record the history of the Amazons." They all nodded.

Gabrielle then turned to Ephegnia, the Eldest among them. "Venerable Mother, I hope you are well, after all the excitement and the long proceedings last night?"

Ephegnia smiled - her brown eyes warm under the halo of white hair that framed her deep brown skin and the fine network of wrinkles that covered it. Tribal legend had it that she had come from the land of Kush

as a captured slave, and had been freed during an Amazon raid against the Romans, long ago. She was a little woman - and usually wore a deep purple robe and sandals. Her intricately carved walking staff was never far from touch. She patted Gabrielle's hand. "Oh, yes, my Queen. It was truly a night I shall remember all my days. I haven't seen the like in a *long* while! My, but didn't it bring back some memories! Why, I remember when Artemis and her sister Aphrodite were here for the Summer Solstice . . . or was it the Autumn Festival? . . . Was it fifty – no, or was it sixty – seasons ago. ." Gabrielle patiently listened, as the old woman regaled her with the story. As she listened, she tried hard not to attend to the dull ache that went on in her gut, seemingly without surcease.

When they were finished with their meal, Gabrielle called their attention. "Sisters, I must ask you to attend me in the Council chamber. I have some matters that are pressing. Will you accompany me?" Gabrielle and the group proceeded out from under the tent and crossed the open area to the building that housed the chamber.

When they had all assembled there, Gabrielle sat in the Queen's Chair. Pondering how to best approach them on the Matter of Xena, she waited for them to settle. When the silence was complete, Gabrielle spoke.

"My Sisters, I have three issues that I must put before you. One of these, you already know, is the matter of the funeral of Kypris. The other two are more . . . sensitive."

She took a deep breath, then continued, "In the first matter, I have thought deeply this past night, and I have decided to follow my Heart's lead in this, and revive an honored position that has gone too long unfilled. Therefore, I am formally presenting to you my choice for the new Regent of the Last Tribe of the Amazon Nation: the Weapons Master Eponin." She got up, walked over to where Eponin was sitting and raised her up out of her chair, and brought her to the center of the circle of seated women. She put her arm around Eponin, and spoke again. "My Sisters, please give your blessings to our new Regent. In all these long years while I was astray, this woman has embodied all the greatest attributes of the Warrior Amazon, and has worked and fought tirelessly to keep this Tribe together. She deserves your thanks as well as mine. She has humbly accepted this burden I have laid upon her, and has pledged to fulfill it, to the death."

The women exchanged smiles and murmurs of acceptance, without exception. Eponin grinned, her face a mixture of pride and apprehension.

Then Gabrielle led Eponin to the vacant Regent's Chair to the right of the Queen's Chair, and sat her down. Gabrielle resumed her own seat. She signaled to the guard who stood at the entrance. The young Amazon came to her side, and Gabrielle whispered to her. The woman nodded, and then left the chambers.

Gabrielle continued. "Thank you, all for supporting our new Regent. I have instructed the honor guard to bring us some mead, in her honor."

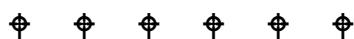
The Amazon returned, bringing a tray with goblets and a flask of mead. She set it down on the sideboard, poured the cups full, and then served each of the Council members their cup. She then went and stood by Gabrielle's chair. Gabrielle smiled up at her, whispered again, and the young woman made her salute and exited the chamber.

Gabrielle let the relaxed atmosphere continue, as the council enjoyed their refreshment. She also figured that a little fermented beverage would probably get them in a mellow mood for what would come next. She smiled at Eponin, who nodded at her with a slightly bemused expression. She drank deeply from her own cup, draining it. She was going to need mellowing herself. The ache in her gut backed off and she felt a sudden release of the dull, throbbing pain.

After all had consumed their celebratory libation, she spoke once more. "Now I have a much more difficult thing to discuss with you. And I honestly, truly don't know how to begin."

Eusta, seated across from her, spoke up. "Gabrielle – you are a Bard. You are *never* at a loss for words! Just tell us. We'll hear you!" The others nodded their agreement.

Gabrielle stared pensively at each woman. As she settled her gaze on Ephegnia, she silently thought, "*Oh, please, Ephegnia, you are so much wiser than all of us - surely you will understand!*" And as the thought went out, Ephegnia's face changed – a startled look, then a keen and searching one – and Gabrielle's head nodded, in spite of herself. Ephegnia nodded back once, sharply, and smiled a gentle encouragement to the Queen.



Chapter 2

“My Sisters, I must report to you a thing that happened after the Judging Ceremony last night. It is, in truth, something that I never would have thought possible, but which has nevertheless occurred, and for which I can only thank the Goddess and whoever else had a hand in the doing of it.” She stood up suddenly from her chair, strode into the center of the circle, and sank to her knees before them. Her face was transformed as she knelt there. They were startled at her action, and at the radiant look on her face - so intense that they were speechless before it; and as she spoke, her words stunned them into shocked silence.

“My Own - My Heart’s Love - My Champion - My Soulmate - has been returned to me. Xena lives!”

She bowed her head, the tears again threatening to overcome her.

It was as if all the air had suddenly been sucked out of the chamber. They all sat immobile. In that long breathless moment Ephegnia arose. Stepping over to the silent, bowed figure of the Queen, she gently took her in her arms, and held her close. Her quavering, ancient voice spoke loud enough for the rest to hear. “There, there, my dear. This is not a time for tears. It is a time for rejoicing!”

Alysia was the next to regain her vocal faculties, “Gabrielle – this is incredible! Where is she? How did it happen?” The others echoed her astonishment.

Gabrielle looked up. ‘Ah, well,’ she said shakily, “That’s a tale I still haven’t figured out how to tell! We’re still sorting it out. But it’s true! She’s in my lodge. She’s waiting to see what your ruling will be, and whether she will be permitted to stay with me.” She looked at them, and spoke passionately once more. “My Sisters, I beg you, please take her into your arms, as you have done for me! I truly could not live to be parted from her again!”

Alysia looked at Eponin. “Did you know about this?”

Eponin grinned. “Oh, I had my surprise already, this morning! I was so

shocked, I passed out!” They laughed, nervously.

Ephegnia escorted Gabrielle back to her chair, sat her down, and patted her on both shoulders. Then she kissed Gabrielle’s forehead, and returned to her own seat. When she was settled, she spoke again to the council.

“In my day, none of this would have startled any Amazons,” she reminisced. “People came and went in the most astonishing and bewildering ways . . . before the Twilight of the Gods, *anything* was possible,” she waved her hand airily. “Now you need to reassure our Queen that she has nothing to fear from us in regard to the return of Xena. We should all be thankful to have her back again! We’re a far sight better off with her, than without her!” She thumped her fist on the arm of her chair, and looked around, her gentle, wizened face belying her stern voice. “Well, what’s the matter? Cat got your tongues?” She asked, tartly. “Can’t you see she’s suffering?”

They all quailed at her chastisement. In a rush of voices, they all started to speak at once, reassuring Gabrielle that it was all right, that Xena was welcome and that they were relieved that she had returned.

Gabrielle waited for them to quiet down. She sighed, and spoke. “Well, I am thankful to all of you for this – it would have been impossible if it had been any other way. But I am still concerned about how the rest of the Tribe is going to take this. I know how *you* all feel – you are my contemporaries, and you have all been witnesses to my previous life with Xena. But the Tribe is still in a very precarious position, and Eponin has taken pains to describe for me the disarray and distrust that has crept in to plague you all, in the years that have passed. I’m not stupid – I know that it is quite possible that some of the Tribe may look upon this a giant hoax. For we have no way, really, to prove that Xena has been dead – truly beyond any known possibility of revival – for all these years. For all they know, I am a charlatan, conjuring myself back, and conniving to resume my place as the Queen by means of trickery.” She looked long at all of them. “What makes you think otherwise?”

There was a pause, and then Eponin spoke.

“Gabrielle. We are your closest friends and companions. We have loved you for most of our lives. We know your goodness, and your absolute honesty. You have been tried in the fires of Tartarus, for Goddess sake, and passed through the Elysian Fields, and survived the test of Dahok, and of Illusia. What else *must* occur, to prove that you have told us the

truth, and will always tell us the truth? How many more times must you and Xena die, in this lifetime, to prove yourselves to us? I, for one, have had *enough* of it! You are both back, and must both be allowed some small measure of peace, here, in the heart of your Tribe, for the rest of your lives. And I will fight to the death for your right to do so! I am the Regent of this Tribe, and I say - ENOUGH!" She thumped both arms of her chair, and scowled around the circle at the others. "Is there any Amazon in this room or in the village who will gainsay me?"

They were all silent.

Gabrielle smiled. 'Ah, my friends – you can see why I had no choice but to make 'Poni our Regent!" She laughed, and they all visibly relaxed.

Alysia spoke. "My Queen – we are eager to know how you want to proceed with breaking this momentous news to the rest of the Tribe. And when will we be able to see and speak with her ourselves?"

"Well, that rather depends on how you think the Tribe will handle it. I have an idea of how it may be done, but I wanted your assurance, first. And frankly, I had hoped that you would see her *now* . . ." she stopped abruptly, and got an odd look on her face. "Ah . . . well – I should have expected it!" She gazed over at a dark corner of the room, "It seems as though you are all going to get your wish."

They looked at Gabrielle; then turned, as a tall dark figure emerged from the shadows, and strode into the circle of women. They were mesmerized, as Xena stood silent in their midst. She was dressed as Gabrielle had left her, in the soft grey deerskin tunic over dark brown leggings and soft boots. A wide leather belt cinched her waist. Her necklace, Gabrielle's twin, was her only adornment. Her blue eyes flashed, and her expression was solemn. A small smile played around her mouth and her eyes, as she looked at her Beloved. She stood at ease and waited.

Gabrielle's face lit up, and she arose and came to Xena. The Queen hugged her fiercely to her chest, then took her by the hand and led her back to the Queen's Chair. She sat and indicated that Xena should sit down by her. Xena did so, sinking down cross-legged next to Gabrielle's legs. Gabrielle's hand crept to Xena's shoulder, where it stayed.

Xena lifted her chin, and spoke. "Well, it's been a long time . . . I'm sure you have much to ask me."

Alysia leaned forward in her chair. “Xena,” she said, huskily, “I have to say we are all stunned and somewhat at a loss for words. We had thought for so long that there was no hope . . . Toris was so certain . . .”

Xena’s eyes flared, “And he was right to be so! Make no mistake about it, Alysia! I don’t want my Bard to have to recount for you that most terrible day in Jappa! She has not told you the worst of it!” Her voice softened. “She will never have to tell of that as long as she lives, if that is her choice. And if I have anything to do with it, she won’t have to keep reliving the memories, either.” She placed her hand over Gabrielle’s.

Alysia stuttered, “I’m sorry, Xena - and my Queen – I didn’t mean to question the truth of your return! We are just perplexed! How does it happen, that you are back among us? Will you tell us?” The others on the Council nodded - eager to hear the details.

Xena relaxed, leaning slightly into Gabrielle’s leg. She sighed, and resumed her tale. “Well, I’ve given ‘Poni the somewhat shortened version, and Gabrielle knows the most private – but here’s my best explanation for you.” And she proceeded to tell them what had happened. And while she spoke, she gripped Gabrielle’s hand tightly, and never let her go.

When she finished, there was a long silence, as the women absorbed her words. Xena tilted her head, resting it on Gabrielle’s knee. Gabrielle’s hand gently stroked the dark head. Then Gabrielle spoke up.

“Well, you have heard the story. Now you know. The question is - what are you going to do? And then there is the larger question of what you think should be done about informing the rest of the Tribe. I am waiting for your council.”

There was an uncomfortable silence, an uneasy rustling as they moved about in their obvious distress. Eponin fidgeted, and moved as if to speak, but Gabrielle put out her hand, motioning her to wait, and be silent. She sank back in her chair, her face suffering at the enforced restraint.

Alysia hesitatingly spoke once more. “My Queen, this is very difficult for us. I think we all know how you feel, and we know what you want to have happen here. We probably are all unanimous in agreement with it. But . . . you must try to understand that we aren’t . . .the Council isn’t . . . as much respected as it once was, and it has become increasingly difficult for us to . . . have the kind of influence on the Tribe that we once had . . .

“ she trailed off miserably.

Eusta nodded and spoke. “My Queen, Kypris was only the most vocal of those who question the Council and our leadership – but she was not alone. There are still others who feel the way she did, even if they are not so aggressive about it. Kypris’ death has shocked them, I am sure, but probably has not turned them from their beliefs. We don’t pretend to know what they will think or say, or what they will do, at the moment when Xena appears before the Tribe, solid of flesh and blood, and her miraculous revival is shared with all of them.” She shook her head dejectedly. “I really don’t know – *what* to council you.”

There was more silence, as they reflected on Eusta’s words.

Gabrielle and Xena waited, patiently. Eponin fumed. Gabrielle looked pensively at them. Then she sighed, and spoke. “Very well, what is the very worst thing that could happen? Let us look it squarely in the face.” She raised up her forefinger “First, they could just revolt and try to kill us.” She looked around as they sharply voiced their objections to her words. “Second,” she held up another finger, “they could refuse to let me or Xena continue to stay here in the Tribe. They could refute the commitment they made to me last night, and reverse their judgment.” The women nodded, uneasily – this seemed a possibility, Gabrielle could see it in their faces. She held up a third finger. “Third, they could maintain their allegiance to me, but refuse to accept Xena’s return, and disallow her adoption into the Tribe.” More silence, as they considered this scenario. They looked increasingly glum.

“Fourth” Xena spoke up, her voice dangerously quiet, “the Warrior Princess could put her leathers back on, and kick their cantankerous butts into the Aegean Sea!” Then she grinned, “However, it would be way too easy a solution, and involve way too much violence, for my taste!” They gaped at her, unable to conceive of her having such a strangely passive attitude.

Gabrielle grinned, “Fifth,” she lifted her hand, all fingers flexed, “they could agree with you, and we could all settle down to live a good life!” She closed her fingers into a fist, and gave them the Amazon Salute. Then she continued, “You know, I think maybe it’s time that your Queen began to lead her Tribe. It is time to see if the emotional support of Queen Gabrielle that they so generously gave me last night is ready to prove itself as a real and solid support of Queen Gabrielle and her Consort Xena. That means we shall try the fifth option. And here’s how it shall be.” She leaned forward, and began to fill in the details for them.

* * * * *

The Council seemed much more at ease, after Gabrielle and Xena had gone over the plans for the revelation of Xena's return, and for what would follow.

"Well," Xena smiled, draping her arm over Gabrielle's knee, as she sat lounging next to the Queen's chair. "They certainly seem relieved to turn it all over to you!"

Gabrielle looked pensively at the gathering. 'O, yes . . . but surely they've done their job. They kept it all going, albeit raggedly, for ten seasons . . . I can't fault them for wanting to hand over to me!" She sighed. "Well, I still have to go inspect the pyre; and don my Queen outfit, for the ceremony. Are you going to fade back into the shadows until then?" She looked wistfully at her mate, a definite pout forming around the edges of her mouth.

Xena laughed throatily. "Oh, my – such a grumpy, thwarted Queen they've got!" She rubbed her own midriff, and looked up inquiringly at Gabrielle. "Got a pain?"

Gabrielle nodded. 'Uh-huh – you, too?"

Xena sighed. "Hmmm. Some things are a given – and I'm finding this one is, for sure. D'you think it's always going to be like this, as long as we're not touching? This could be a problem!"

Gabrielle shrugged. "Well, we'll just have to make like Castor and Pollux, then!"

Xena laughed again. "O, my! What a strange sight *that* would be! They'd have to carve us a wider chair!"

Gabrielle grinned. "Two for the price of one."

* * * * *

The Council had adjourned, as all of them retired to prepare for the Farewell Ceremony for Kypris. No food would be consumed, this night,

until after the ceremony. Xena got up and walked behind Gabrielle's chair. Gabrielle felt the long arms encircle her, and hug her tight – and then she was gone. The dull ache started up immediately.

Gabrielle sighed, and got up from the chair. “Come on, ‘Poni – let’s inspect the work.”

Poni looked up. “I swear, my friend – I’d love to see how she does that!” She shook her head. “I’ll probably go to my Just Reward and never know!”

“That would make two of us,” Gabrielle responded. “There are still some Official Warrior Secrets!”

Gabrielle and ‘Poni walked together across the courtyard to inspect the pyre. Gabrielle shaded her eyes with her hand, as they came up on the large wooden structure. The smell of the freshly cut cedar wood was pungent. The four young Amazons were seated at the base, their backs leaning up against the side of the pyre, sharing a water skin among them.

“Thirsty work,” Gabrielle commented, “but you’ve done a good job, all of you. It looks fine. I am sure it will carry Kypris home to the Amazon Fields with majesty. Thank you, all - from my heart – for doing this. It is fitting.” She turned to Dika. “And thank you, Dika, for your tender ministrations to prepare Kypris for her voyage home. I know that was hard for you.” She took the young woman by the shoulders and kissed her forehead. The four flushed faces smiled shyly at their Queen. Gabrielle continued, “Why don’t you all go get yourselves a nice bath at the hot springs? You’ll need to relax a bit before the ceremonies begin, after such hard labor. Paphos, if you could wait a moment, I’d like to talk with you a bit. And ‘Poni, you don’t have to wait - I’ll see you at the ceremony.”

‘Poni grinned, clapped Gabrielle on the shoulder, and headed off to her lodge.

Gabrielle looked searchingly at Paphos. “Let’s stand here, in the shade.” They moved into the shadow. Gabrielle smiled - the young woman didn’t seem to know what to do with her hands. She was a shy young thing; with curly reddish-brown hair, cut close to her head, and a tough, wiry body. She would be a strong warrior, when she had grown into her prime.

“Paphos,” she continued, “I promised you that I would have more to

discuss with you about your apprenticeship with me. Now I'm here to make good on that promise."

The young woman nodded shyly, as she twisted her hands together.

"I think that first we're going to work on having you learn your letters. So I want you to come to my lodge every mid-morning, for the candle-mark before the mid-day meal. Wait for me on the porch. I will meet you there, and we will start your lessons. Bring a water skin with you - for it will be another kind of thirsty work! I also want you to bring something that you want to share with me - it can be any object that you like. Will you do this?"

Paphos nodded, "Oh, yes, my Queen! When - when shall I begin this?"

Gabrielle thought, then nodded to her, "Let's begin in four suns' time."

Paphos agreed, and Gabrielle sent her on her way to the hot springs, to join her friends. She thought that Paphos would turn out to be someone she could nurture, and even cherish, in the days to come. And she thought, fleetingly, of Hope, and Solon, and of Eve. And was surprised to feel that the guilt was gone, and a strong intuition that the old pain was going, too. And then she turned, and made a beeline for her lodge.

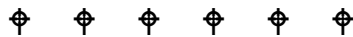
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The curtain fell behind her, as she entered the room. There was a soft sound from the bed, and she padded silently over to the Egyptian screen. Xena was lying on her side, under the furs, asleep. Gabrielle looked down on the sight - so precious to her - of her Beloved. She sat gently on the edge of the mattress, quiet so as not to wake her. She gazed upon the dear face, her eyes traveling the whole of it - the arch of the eyebrows, the movement of the eyes under their lids, the long dark lashes, the fine bridge of the nose; the delicate curve of the lips, the wide cheekbones and strong jaw, and the soft point of the chin. She lovingly memorized all the fine age lines - at the corners of the eyes, on either side of the mouth, the slight creases at the very corners that would move into laugh-lines at every smile. She listened to the soft inhalation and exhalation of Xena's breath, and watched as her breast rose and fell, rose and fell. The arm tucked under, the palm of the hand cupped under the cheek, and the other hand resting lightly on the surface of the fur.

The dark, tousled hair showed more than a few grey strands, betrayed in

the light from the window. She ran her finger lightly along one of them – entranced at the sight. A stray ray of light found a crack where the screen hinged, and it suddenly lit Xena’s cheek. Gabrielle caught her breath, wanting the image before her to be burned into her memory, to hold there, inviolate, forever.

She suddenly sighed, and felt very tired. “*Not like I don’t know why,*” she thought ruefully, “*an entire night – well, maybe except for a couple of cat-naps – of love-making and talking! I haven’t stayed awake all night for that in I can’t remember how many seasons! Ah, for the stamina of youth!*” She grinned ruefully; and pulling off her boots and leggings, she crawled in behind her mate, wrapped her arms around the sleeping form, and followed her down into the sweet realm of Morpheus.



Chapter 3

They awoke at dusk - as the deep, clear note of the ram’s horn sounded. The long, plaintive solitary tone started low, gradually rising in pitch, and then descended again as it died out. Three long times it sounded. Then there was silence. Gabrielle got up, washed her face in the water from the bath, and began changing into her Amazon leathers. Xena silently helped her tie, fasten and drape the various parts of her costume; then went to the wall pegs, and took down the katana. She waited, while Gabrielle fastened the strap across her chest. Then Xena attached the scabbard to the strap where it crossed Gabrielle’s back. As she did so, she put the flat of her hand on the vivid raised indigo ridges of the lines of the writhing dragon. Gabrielle stilled, and then leaned back into Xena’s hand. Then she turned, and put her hands on either side of Xena’s face. She brought her mouth to Xena’s – hard – a fierce, deep kiss that ached with the pain of what was to come. Xena handed her the Queen’s headdress. Gabrielle tucked it under her arm; then she ducked through the curtain, and was gone. Xena sighed, and then began her own preparations.



The Tribe was assembling, silently, in lines on the two sides of the courtyard that flanked the funeral pyre. There were only forty women, besides the Council of Elders, and Gabrielle. There were ten on each side, and a double row of twenty stretched off, facing one another, from the courtyard to the Healer's Lodge. Kypris would begin her journey home down that row of Honor Guards. Gabrielle stood - her headdress hiding her face and head - before the pyre, facing the courtyard. At the end of each line of women, drummers - their large drums strapped before them - waited for the signal. Gabrielle waited silently for all to take their places. When that was done, they all stood motionless, as an Amazon warrior in full battle dress stepped forward from the middle of one rank, and put the ram's horn to her lips, and blew the long, wailing note again, and then again; and the drums started, a slow, measured cadence. Then the horn moved into a counterpoint to the drums, and the pace picked up.

At the end of the line of the Honor Guard, figures emerged from the Healer's Lodge. The Council of Elders came, bearing the litter that held the body of the fallen Amazon. She was wrapped in long strips of fine white linen, her arms bound across her chest. Her headdress covered her head and face. Her necklaces and badges of honor were draped around her neck, her weapons at her sides, and a fine woven tapestry blanket covered her, down to her feet. The solemn procession moved, slowly and in step, down past the solitary, widely spaced Guards, who held up their unsheathed weapons before them. In past times they would have been shoulder to shoulder on each side. Ephegnia paced behind the litter, her staff in her hand.

The sun was setting, as the pallbearers arrived at the pyre, and two of them ascended the ladders that had been placed at either end, while the others continued to hold the litter steady. They stood ready, as the pallbearers, in concert, lifted the litter up above their heads, and it was captured and shifted to its resting place on top of the pyre. The two then descended the ladders, and rejoined the others at its base. They then stepped back ten paces, and formed a fourth line, facing the pyre. The Honor Guards stayed in the double line, but turned to face the courtyard and the scene. The drums continued their solemn tattoo, but the ram's horn was now silent.

With one smooth motion, Gabrielle reached over her shoulder and pulled the katana from its scabbard. She raised her arm straight up in the air, holding the sword. As the sword reached its highest point, the drums stopped. There was another silence. Gabrielle lowered the sword,

touching the naked tip to the ground; then brought it back up vertically in front of her. She began a slow, circling series of movements – the Amazons’ warm-up sword routine. She executed each move with precision and a fluid grace that spoke of long years of practice. Then she changed seamlessly into the movements that mimed the Hunt, and then those of the Warrior’s Attack; then finally, the closing movements of the sword routine. At the conclusion, she once more brought the blade to the vertical, in front of her; then she smoothly re-seated the sword in her scabbard. She clapped her hands twice, sharply. Another long silence. The sun, now reaching height of its intensity as it sank lower in the sky, cast deep red-gold light over the entire scene. And as the colors slowly faded, Gabrielle spoke.

“Farewell, we say to thee, Kypris of the Amazons. Farewell and run fleet to the fields of our ancestors. May you find all the many warriors who have gone before, and may they welcome you home. Terries and Ephiny, and all the gloried Regents and Queens of times past will be there to greet you. They will shepherd you to your rest. Sleep well, Kypris, and be at peace. You have fought long, and lived hard, and cared much for your Amazon sisters, and in the end, you chose the Hardest Road. Your sisters left here acknowledge your pain, and honor the courage of your spirit! We will sing you to your rest, and will remember your passing. Your story will be added to the rolls of the history of the great Amazon Nation, and as its chief Bard, I pledge to you that it will be told, again and again, as the seasons pass. Your name will be carried in the hearts of your sisters! We honor your passing, and now give succor to your soul. Fare you well, Kypris!”

She turned, and waked over to Eponin, who stepped forward from the rank of the Elders. Gabrielle pulled off her headdress and handed it to her. Then she walked over to the single torch, stuck in the ground at one corner of the pyre, and yanked it loose. She turned and then hesitated - and her head came up and she gazed back over the heads of the Elders, and down the long double row of the guards. Then she turned, and holding the torch before her, she began to light the heaped mounds of cedar shavings that were interspersed between the pilings of the bier. The dry wood caught, and flared, and the heat began to build, as the flames licked their rapid hungry way up the sides of the pyre. She tossed the torch in between the vertical poles, and stepped back next to Eponin. All eyes were riveted as the flames drew evermore swiftly closer to the figure lying on top. Now only the sound of the roaring flames was heard.

And as the flames began their purifying work on the body of the fallen

Amazon, there suddenly arose the pure, sweet, aching beautiful sounds of the Lament for the Dead, as the singer moved slowly down the pathway between the Honor Guards, The tall figure was clothed in a long, simple white peplos, her long hair hanging down her back, and her feet bare in the dust. She had dust on her face, and on her head – the traditional sign of lamentation. From her clenched hands, dust trickled in streams as she walked and sang. And as she came closer to the flaming pyre, the rows of Amazons wavered, and rippled, and gasps of astonishment sounded all down the lines, as the Tribe began to recognize the identity of the singer. But they held themselves steady, and kept their decorum, as the song went on. As it came to an end, Xena stopped next to Gabrielle, and bowed her head. And they all stood, mute, as the roaring flames finished their work, and Kypris departed from her sisters, and was seen no more.

* * * * *

There was absolute silence, as the Amazons continued to stare at the three figures silhouetted in the fiery glow. Xena still stood facing the flames, her head bowed. Then Xena turned and faced the Tribe. And as she turned all could clearly see, etched deeply in the skin of her neck, the wide, vivid white scar that completely encircling her throat. Gabrielle had half-turned and was looking at her Soulmate with a shocked expression that was clearly visible to everyone. Eponin was also gazing with a look of astonishment on her face, at the figure of the legend - come to life. Gabrielle cast one wild look at the woman standing in stricken silence before her. She raised her head, her eyes shut. And then a painful cry tore from her throat, and she wailed.

“Aaaiaaah, Xena! How can this be?” She raised her fists to her head, in obvious distress, a look of sheer agony on her face.

Xena, at that moment, sank to her knees before the Queen, her face clearly showing the pain of Gabrielle’s suffering. The sight of that scar, and the humility of her action – her head bowed and her face and hair coated with the dust of mourning - was a powerful vision. Some of the younger Amazons could be heard sobbing. The air was electric with the charged emotions of the entire Tribe. There was a stirring sigh that ran through the ranks of the women. Some looked askance at one another, but all seemed powerfully moved.

Gabrielle raised her hand, her anguish palpable. “My Amazons! I have

received my heart's desire, for my dearest love has been restored to me! And my worst nightmare - that she should bear the mark of her ultimate ordeal - is somehow the price! I beseech you to let her live in peace with me, and be given sanctuary in this Tribe!"

Then, slowly, Ephegnia made her way up to the three figures: the distraught Queen, the kneeling figure of Xena, and the Regent Eponin. The woman saluted Gabrielle, then turned, and stood before the bowed figure of Xena. She reached out her hand and then placed it on Xena's head and spoke to her, saying: "I will be your Sister, Xena of the Amazons." Then she turned, and spoke to the Tribe. "My sisters, I have decided to take this woman into my arms, as I did my Queen. You must do what you will." Then she silently made her way back to the ranks and stood quietly waiting. Slowly, she was followed by others in the Tribe, who repeated her actions, and took their stand for Gabrielle, and for Xena. A few of them did not follow, but they still stood silently, and acknowledged Gabrielle with the salute.

Gabrielle spoke once again, her voice still tight with pain, and her face still white with shock. "My Sisters, You have done once again for me this night, what few in this life have ever done – to show me again what great hearts the Amazon Nation have, and what proud and stalwart ties you still have, one to another, and to your Queen! And for that I shall be eternally thankful to you all. Some of you may still doubt Xena, and now you may doubt me, once again; but you still show me the best in you, by your fierce determined defense of one another! And I salute you!"

"Now, you have earned a just release from all of your sorrows, this night. Let the Drummers lead you in a dance of remembrance, and let our singers raise their voices, in honor of Kypris!" And she swept her hand in a signal to the drummers, who began a wild throbbing beat. The women broke up into groups of dancing figures, weaving in and out in time to the drums. Singers raised their voices in ululation; sounds of pain and exaltation.

Gabrielle turned, and placed a hand on Xena's shoulder, and bent over the still kneeling form, murmuring, "Xena – please!" And she took Xena under the arm and raised her up, and throwing a quickly eloquent, pleading glance at Eponin, she led Xena off toward their lodge. Eponin nodded, and took oversight of the ceremony.

The two figures stumbled up onto the porch, then into the darkened lodge. Once inside, Gabrielle turned, and pulled Xena roughly to her. She was shaking, violently. A crescendo of gasping sobs erupted, as they

embraced.

“Oh, Xe – what has happened?” Gabrielle wept into Xena’s shoulder.

Xena took the Bard’s head between her hands, and tenderly hugged her close. “It’s all right, Gabrielle. Hush now . . .” she whispered.

Gabrielle pulled away, and looked at her, such tumult and sorrow in her face. “But Xe – you *told* me you didn’t have to keep that one. You *said* it could be left behind! What has happened? Who has done this to you?” Xena led Gabrielle over to the bed, and they sat down together. Xena wiped her own face with her arm, managing to remove some of the sweat and dirt from her forehead and cheek. She sighed, and answered.

“After you left, I washed and began to prepare for joining the ceremony. I figured I’d just climb back into my leathers and armor, so I went over where you have them hanging. But when I reached for them, I felt this weird sensation, like I was being pulled, and I realized it was making me go to the big chest – over there. So I went. No use fighting that kind of thing.” She sighed again. “I opened the chest, and there on top was the peplos, folded up, looking new. I thought it must be yours, but when I shook it out, it was obvious that it was my size. I held it up to me, and then I heard a sound behind me . . .

“Who – who are you?” Xena’s whispered.

A white-haired figure in a white robe stood before her. It was a woman, but there was some kind of a distortion in the air around her, so it was hard to make out who she might be. The figure stood silent, not speaking.

“Who are you?” Xena asked again. A voice, whispering, sibilant, answered swiftly on the heels of her question.

“I am Xena,” the figure said.

“How can that be?” Xena asked.

“I am the You that you will someday be.” The figure riddled.

Xena held up the peplos. “So, if that’s true, what’s all this about? Clothes make the woman? Am I supposed to dress like you?”

The dark figure stood, silently staring at her.

Xena scowled. “Has this got something to do with Ares?” She spat out the name.

The figure shook her head vehemently. “NO! It has nothing to do with him – but it has everything to do with you. You can’t go backwards, now, Xena. It is only forward, into the Light of what you call the Way, which your love and your need and your desire are urging you to follow. And to do that requires a renunciation. And a visible sign that you have done so. And there may very well be a certain power that comes with it – that, you will have to discover, as you and the Bard go on together.”

“And if I refuse it?” Xena whispered.

“You have every right to refuse it. That is your free will. And that will affect the outcome of all that you wish to do, for the Bard and for the Tribe. It will be a difficult path, regardless of your choice. It is the kind of difficulty that you must choose.”

“And the renunciation?” she asked, knowing already what the voice would say.

“You would kill no more - ever.”

Xena bent her head, as her hands fingered the material of the peplos. In a guarded voice, she asked, “And the visible sign?”

The figure of herself, a look of compassion on her face, gave her the condition. “The moment you don the peplos, you will have to bear the scar that you received in Jappa. And you will bear it for the rest of your life.”

Xena looked at Gabrielle’s tear-stained face, and she got such a wistful look on her own countenance that Gabrielle had to lean her head against Xena’s and take the hand that lay limply in her lap, and bring it to her lips, and kiss it.

“It’s all right, Xe. Tell me the rest.”

“Gabrielle – I did what I thought was best. I chose for both of us, by putting on the garment. Can you forgive me? For I think I must have assumed too much. Now I think I have given you too much pain, by

doing so. How can you ever look at me, again, and see this, and *not* feel the agony, all over again?" Her hand crept up to the rough, puckered scar. "How could I make it so? For I would not have you see this, every waking day. . ." she broke off, her eyes filling with tears, and her voice shaking.

Gabrielle closed her eyes a moment, and put her head down into her hands. Then she stood, and turned, and pulled Xena up from the bed. "My Xe – trying to protect me from the last thing - from my own sorrow. If I had half my old anger, I'd take the chakram and . . ." her voice died to a whisper, as she stared over Xena's shoulder, at the place where Xena's weapons hung. "Xe . . . look!" she whispered. Xena just kept looking at Gabrielle, her face streaked with dust and tears. Gabrielle looked back at Xena. "The chakram - Where is it?" she asked,

"Here," Xena placed her hand on the scar around her throat. "It's here."

Gabrielle stared at her, uncomprehending.

"I . . . I don't . . ."

Xena sighed. "Once I made my decision, then I could no longer be a creature of Ares' making. I could no longer hold the chakram he gave me – a weapon of death. That weapon had to be transformed, so that it would never be able to be used by anyone, ever again."

Gabrielle nodded. "Ah . . . I see . . ." She paused a long moment, her head on one side, her eyes searching the face of the miserable woman before her. . ."Come with me, my love." Gabrielle stood, and reached her hands down to Xena. She pulled the sad-eyed woman up to her feet.

They exited the lodge, and hand in hand, they moved off past the darkened lodges, until they reached the ghostly path among the giant cedars, and followed it into the forest - lit by the full moon overhead. . .

She took her Xena to the hot springs. They emerged from under the canopy of silent giants, their fragrant boughs sweeping down to screen the hidden pool. She turned, and wrapped her arms around Xena, and hugged her fiercely. Then she methodically stripped every band, bracelet, necklace, bodice, and kilt of her Amazon Queen's garb from her body. When she was completely naked, she moved to Xena, who had been standing, silently watching. She loosened the girdle at Xena's waist and let it fall to the ground. She unfastened the ties at each shoulder, and let

the peplos fall in a heap at Xena's feet. And taking Xena's hands, she stepped back down into the warm waters of the spring, pulling Xena down with her, until they were both in the swirling water. From a stone bowl at the lip of the pool, she picked up a cake of soap. She rubbed the soap between her hands. Then, running them through Xena's hair, she lathered the dusty black tresses. She cupped her hands in the warm water, and repeatedly poured it over Xena, rinsing the soap and dirt away. Then she took up the soap once more and repeated the process, her fingers washing the dirt from Xena's face. She stroked down the long neck. She bent her head, and lovingly, with a feathered softness, lightly touched the circled scar. Then she moved down, lathering the shoulders, the arms, and the soft breasts. She stroked the long back, pausing to add more lather to her hands, and continued down the ribs and stomach. Then, she cupped her hands once more, and poured the water again and again over Xena's body. In utter silence, Xena never took her eyes off the Bard's face.

Gabrielle broke the long silence. 'I worship you.' She said, simply. And she kissed Xena's forehead, then each eyelid, then each cheek, then a long, passionate kiss on the mouth that caused Xena's legs to tremble. Then she placed gentle kisses all around the livid scar. She sank to her knees in the warm, swirling waters then, before Xena, and kissed each nipple of Xena's breasts, gently cupping the soft globes in her hands.

Xena hands slid down Gabrielle's arms, pulled her back up, and brought the Bard's hands up to her mouth, and kissed the palms. Then she took up the soap, and she lathered her own hands, and then ran her fingers through the golden hair, and then the face and neck of her Beloved. And cupped her hands, and poured the water, over and over, rinsing away the sweat and the tears and the fatigue of the long day. She mirrored Gabrielle's ministrations, stopping to place the kisses, and the tender touches. She soaped the broad shoulders, then on to the muscular back, lightly moving her fingers, tracing the sinuous curves of the dragon's form, feeling the delicate ridges of the image under her fingertips - that were forever imprinted on her Beloved's back. The emotions rose up in her, and she wrapped her arms around the silent Bard, and she whispered fiercely in Gabrielle's ear, "Now we each have our own kind of mark, don't we?" And Gabrielle nodded, her face tight against Xena's neck, her cheek nuzzling the roughened skin, as her tears flowed yet again.

Then Xena reached around and pulled Gabrielle's body even closer into contact with her own. Sliding her thigh between Gabrielle's legs, she could feel the heat of Gabrielle's sex, throbbing with desire, and she moved, increasing the friction between them. Gabrielle moaned, and held

Xena tighter. Gabrielle's hand slid down between them, and her questing fingers found Xena's mound, and slipped down between the soft folds, to the open, welcoming, pulsing, velvet core. Her fingertips found the bud of Xena's sex, and steadily, gently began their dance of arousal, as Xena's head went back, and her breath came in powerful, measured gasps. As she moved, her body giving in to the urgent need to follow the rhythm of desire, her breath stopped in that curious focused attention and silence, as the intensity built and built, and Gabrielle's fingers lovingly stroked the node of nerves to an incredible rhythmic sensation of utter ecstasy. Each stroke brought a sobbing note of sound from Xena's throat, until she was panting in huge gasps; and then, all at once, an explosion of exhaled breath, as Xena came in a flood of nectar, and Gabrielle slid down, putting her mouth to the sweet channel, her tongue steadily stroking the soft folds, as surge after surge of the sweet warm richly-scented offering that was Xena's love flooded out, and Gabrielle took that offering, gladly, with all the love in her heart..

Xena slowly sank down, pulling Gabrielle up to cradle her in her arms. She was still panting, and the moments passed until her breathing had returned to its normal rate. Gabrielle's head was resting on Xena's breast, her arms wrapped around Xena's torso. Xena hugged her close. Then she reached down, and her long nimble fingers found and entered Gabrielle's core – down the soft, warm, slick channel. She found Gabrielle eager, her sex swollen and erect. Gabrielle gasped, and clutched Xena even closer. She licked Xena's nipple, which immediately stood erect. Xena arched her back, as a wave of passion swept through her. Then Xena slid two fingers down, down, again into the soft folds, and began a steady, slow and gentle circling. At the top of each stroke, her finger flicked Gabrielle's bud, causing her to arch and gasp. The intensity built again, this time for the Bard, whose breath was coming in short, explosive exhalations. And then Gabrielle arched back - her body rocking in the cradle of her lovers' arms, her orgasm exploding in her own flood. Xena went in deep, then. Two equal streams of liquid light they became, flowing together until there was no separation. Eyes locked on one another with this huge focused awareness, as their dance of arousal increased its pace, sobbing notes of sound from both their throats, until they were taking in huge breaths, up and up to the peak. Then their breath stopped; in that curious pause of silence where their souls reached out to one another - the light swirling all around them in an ecstasy of timelessness - and they merged into some other Being, who was both of them. And they both came again, in unison, with powerful rhythmic breaths. And then, as their vision slowly returned, the golden light gradually faded from their eyes, they both rode the long, slow free-fall, as their selves split apart and became Xena and Gabrielle once again.

* * * * *

When they had returned to their bodies, Gabrielle was still wrapped around Xena – her head once more resting in the hollow of Xena’s shoulder. They held one another as the warm waters swirled around them, gentling them into peace.

Xena was silent a long time. In the distance, they could both hear the sounds of the drums and the singing Amazons, as they finally found a release from all *their* sorrows. It was a good thing, she thought, that at least they could put some of their pain behind them. She looked down at the quiet woman in her arms, and seeming without volition, the words came pouring out.

“Gabrielle,” she whispered, “I will never kill another soul again, for the rest of this life.”

Gabrielle lifted her face to Xena’s. “What did you say?”

Xena repeated it. “I will . . . not . . . kill . . . ever again. It is over. It is done.”

Gabrielle put her hand to Xena’s cheek. “Has the Mother of Peace arrived, so soon?”

Xena turned her head, her lips kissing Gabrielle’s palm. “Well, not exactly. That is for the next life, my love. But I have to start sometime, and I must start here and now. How better to learn the Way?” And she thought to herself, “*Ah, Xena – this would be the renunciation . . . and now it is complete.*”

A solemn look on Gabrielle’s face. “No better way – if it means you can finally be at peace with your own soul, Xe. If that is the price of bearing a living chakram – it is worth it.”

They exited the pool, and dressed again in their clothes. Gabrielle caught Xena’s hand in hers, and came close to the dark-headed woman, “I think I like you in white.”

Xena smiled, and kissed her Bard. “I hope so. But I’ve had enough of conditions. I think I’ll just get ordinary clothes, from now on.”

* * * * *

The two figures appeared; arms around one another, in the light of the torches that had been placed all around the courtyard. The pyre had burned down to a glowing bed of hot coals. In several suns time, they would take the ashes, and scatter them in the sacred Grove. The drumming and singing had stopped, and now there were just groups of the Amazons, clumped here and there, sitting and talking, sharing wine, and comfort.

Eponin, sitting with her arms around Talia, looked up, and saw the two returning. She flung up a hand, beckoning to them. They crossed over, and sat down on the big fur hides that had been placed on the ground. Talia passed them the wine skin, and they drank thirstily. Eponin handed them some strips of dried meat, and cheese.

“Are you all right?” she asked, cautiously.

They both looked at one another, and nodded. Eponin stared at the scar on Xena’s neck, in spite of herself. Then she looked away, the tears glinting in her eyes. Xena leaned over, and patted her on the knee.

“It’s really all right, ‘Poni,” she said, gently. She chewed thoughtfully on the meat strip.

Eponin nodded silently, and wiped her eyes. ‘I had no idea . . . “

Gabrielle took her hand, and tugged on it. “Hey, old friend,” she said. “Do not grieve for us – we’re here, aren’t we? We will see better days.”

Talia gave ‘Poni a kiss. “Come on, my Regent! It’s time for us to get some rest!” She pulled her up; then turned to the seated couple. “Thank you, my friends, for everything you have done for ‘Poni, and for our Tribe. And for everything you *will* do!”

Gabrielle smiled, and caught ‘Poni’s hand once again. “‘Poni, will you do something for *me* tomorrow morning?”

“Sure – anything you say.”

“Will you pass the word at the morning meal that we will have four days of rest? No work, other than normal things. This Tribe is in mourning. Xena and I will meet all of the Tribe, in a High Council, at dawn on the fifth day.”

“Of course,” Eponin said. “Thank you, my Queen – my friend! . . . I . . . I can’t tell you how glad I am that you are both back home! But I . . . I’m so sorry . . .” She sighed. Talia hugged her close, and they wandered off, back to Eponin’s lodge.

* * * * *

Gabrielle put her hand on Xena’s shoulder, her fingers softly touching the scar. “Does it hurt, Xe?”

Xena nodded, once. “Except when you touch me.” she whispered. And the sadness crept back into her eyes.

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Chapter 4

The days passed, and all were grateful for the Proclamation of Mourning from their Queen, and spent them quietly resting; sharing their memories of Kypris, and honoring her. In the afternoon of the second day, Gabrielle and Eponin went together to the bed of ashes that was all that remained of the pyre, and gathered the fine white ash that lie in a light layer on top of all the other wood ash and cinders, and put them in a carved wooden bowl. They gathered the skull and the bones separately, and set them gently in a square of cloth and wrapped them. These they took to the sacred Grove, and intoning the proper prayers and supplications, they buried the bundle at the foot of the statue of Artemis, then deposited a small amount of the ashes at the foot of each sarsen stone, and then moved into the forest, and scattered the rest among the ancient sylvan matriarchs. Some of the trees had girths of twenty feet and more. Some said they were planted there by the Titans.

As they completed this task, and walked back through the forest, they talked.

“What do you see happening now, Gab? Do you think there is still some of the Tribe who are opposed to you?” Eponin asked.

Gabrielle sighed, as she walked into and out of the beams of light that filtered down from the canopy above. “I am certain of it, ‘Poni. And I want everything out in the open, and soon. We need to be sure that the Tribe feels listened to, and that they can have a voice I want a thorough discussion of all the concerns they are holding. All their points of view must be spoken, if I am to find ways of using those disparate voices for the good of the Tribe.”

Eponin nodded. “Has Xena said anything about what she wants to do?”

Gabrielle shook her head. “Just a few tentative things, ‘Poni – she wants to see what the surrounding territory is like, now – how people are living, and what dangers are still present, that might pose a threat to the village.

She also is pretty anxious to see how things are faring in Amphipolis – and with Toris.”

Eponin sighed. “Yeah – we’ve had some traders come through from there, but only sporadically. And we haven’t heard or seen anything of Toris in probably two seasons. I hope he’s all right.”

Gabrielle nodded. “I hope so too, ‘Poni – for Xena’s sake.”

As they entered the clearing, they could see Xena sitting and basking in the last rays of the setting sun, on the steps of the Queen’s lodge. ‘Poni grinned. “She sure looks good!”

Gabrielle smiled, “O, yes, ‘Poni. She surely does! We’ll see you at the meal.”

Eponin raised a hand to Xena, and then walked off.

Gabrielle sat down next to Xena. The sun felt glorious. She leaned affectionately against Xena’s side. The dark head leaned over, and rested on the gold head.

“Feeling lizard-like?” Gabrielle drawled.

“Definitely,” Xena said. “Do you want to sit a moment more with me, until it is gone?”

Gabrielle responded, “Do lizards *like* the sun? *Absolutely* I do!” And they sat in a deep, companionable silence.

* * * * *

At the dawn of the fifth day, all the Tribe was assembled in the courtyard, before the dais, where the Queen's chair and the Regent's chair were now set up. All the streamers and banners of the Tribe were hoisted on long poles ranged behind the dais, and they were hanging quiet in the morning air.

Gabrielle sat, as did Eponin. Xena stood behind the Queen's chair. Her hands rested on Gabrielle's shoulders. She was dressed again in the grey tunic and the leggings. Gabrielle made a mental note that they would have to get her some new clothing, soon. May be when the scouting party went out to Amphipolis . . .

Gabrielle decided it was time to begin. She called out to the assembled women.

"The High Council of the Queen shall now begin!" She leaned forward, and continued.

"Now this Tribe must begin to set itself aright! I have been fortunate in having the council of our Regent Eponin, who has been trying to give me a picture of all that this Tribe has suffered, in the last ten seasons. The Council of Elders has also told me their own stories, of their hard and often thankless efforts to keep you all together and out of harm's way. And I must say to you that in all this, they have been unfailingly mindful in telling me of the many and varied feelings and beliefs that you have expressed to them, over those ten seasons. These are feelings and beliefs that don't always agree with the majority of views, or with those of the Council. And yet, they reflect part of the whole reality that faces this Tribe, and so they must be listened to, and heeded."

Gabrielle could see, as she spoke, the mixture of expressions on the faces of the Tribe: caution, skepticism, thoughtful attentiveness, anger, and sadness. She let the buzzing go on, until it died away, and they once more waited for her to speak.

It is my understanding that there are two main – and conflicting – ideas of what the Tribe should now do. Who will speak for these two ideas?"

Silence – then a voice spoke, angry. "Kypris was our best voice. She is silenced, now."

Gabrielle responded immediately. “Then you must take up her voice! And speak, as she would have spoken!” Silence again. “Be brave, my Sisters! Will you not do honor to her memory?”

A figure stood, among the sea of faces. A stocky Amazon, with powerful musculature, and a plain, honest face, her hair shaved close to the skull; and with tattoo marks across the cheekbones and the bridge of her nose.

“Your name, my Sister?” Gabrielle asked.

“Althaia, my Queen.”

“Althaia, will you speak for Kypris’ now-dead voice?”

“I will, my Queen.”

Then please do.”

“My Queen, there are those of us who want the Tribe to abandon this place – to migrate to the North, to our long-ago origin lands, and there find our long-lost Sisters, and become the fierce Warriors of the Steppes that we once were. We have never felt safe here! Now, with the end of the Romans, and the death of the Gods, we feel even more that life is becoming untenable, here. We have endured enough of being the target for every lawless band of brigands and vagrant, leaderless soldiers! We want you to listen to our plea, and help us find a new land, and a new life!” She sat down.

Gabrielle sat, watching the faces, as Althaia spoke. Fully a third of the women nodded, and seemed to agree with her words.

“Now, who will speak for the conflicting idea?”

Alysia, in her dark robes, stood, her hands folded in front of her.

“My Queen, I will speak.”

“Very well.”

“My Queen, this Tribe counts an unbroken lineage of a five hundred seasons in this place. We came here when the mightiest of the matriarchs among the Sacred Grove were half the size they are now, and we came at the bidding of Artemis, Herself – who wanted the temple constructed,

and the Rites followed, and the Sacred Grove protected. Our legends say that Artemis brought us here, herself. That we are the Guardians of the Temple, and of the Sacred Grove, and that we leave them unprotected at our peril! As long as the Grove is here, and the temple, Artemis protects us!" She sat down. More than half of the women nodded agreement at Alysia's words.

Gabrielle spoke. "Strong sentiments, and heartfelt beliefs, from both sides. I acknowledge your words, and thank you for speaking for your Sisters. But now I have some thoughts of my own, and these I will share with you all" She paused; then continued. "How long has it been, my Sisters, since anyone here has ventured out beyond the confines of our walls? Beyond the Sacred Grove and its environs, beyond the valley in which it rests? "

Silence, again. Now Eponin's voice responded. "Fully four seasons, my Queen. At least that long."

Gabrielle nodded. "Yes. Well. And since I have returned, I have patiently waited for someone – anyone – to ask me what is going on, out there! I realize that it has not been very long, granted, since I walked in through that gate – and yes, much of great moment has occurred, since then. But I have not seen much interest at all about that - and I must tell you that it concerns me – deeply!"

She got up from the chair, and began to pace restlessly. Xena stood, immobile, but watched her Bard with a fiercely joyful expression in her eyes, her face carefully masked.

"You have all been very good at staying here, in the safety and security of what is familiar to you – even if it is anathema! – And arguing about what might be! You have all managed to survive, here, and yet you seem to have preferred to stay here, and endlessly bicker with one another; - because it is always easier to argue with each other than to actually do something about the situation. Now four years have passed, and you are four years more isolated from the wide world beyond these borders, and therefore more ignorant of its perils – or promises – and also therefore less able to judge the actual merits of either point of view! And curiously less interested in finding out what might be real – or fantasy – about each."

She shook her head, and sighed, as she continued to pace. "Now I am even more thankful that I am back here, among you – because we are now done with the arguing, and done with the contention. We are now

about to begin the business of finding out what is real, and what is possible. That can be our *only* basis for decisions about what this Tribe will do, or where it may go, or whether it will stay. And I will certainly have some of it to tell you, and some of it you will be sent out to find out for us, and – with any luck – you will survive to return and tell us. And until *that* is done, I will make no decisions for this Tribe with respect to either position.”

Io, sitting with her companions, hugged herself in her excitement, and whispered to Paphos, who sat leaning up against her. “Oh, she is so magnificent!” Paphos nodded, watching with adoring eyes.

Gabrielle returned to her chair. As she sat, Xena’s hands came back down and clasped Gabrielle’s upper arms, and the Queen’s hands instantly went up, crossing her chest, and clasped over Xena’s, for comfort.

“Now, my Amazons, it is time for some fierce work. I am directing each of the Council Elders to gather two of you, and to conduct an inventory of all that the Tribe holds: land, herds, horses, fowl, food stores, grain, clothing, stores, medicines, materials, tools. Xena and Eponin will take the rest of you, assessing the fighting strength, the weapons stores, and the condition of the defenses of the village and the surrounding Amazon land. You have the next three days to complete these inventories, and get the results back to me. Xena, meanwhile, will be forming two advanced scouting parties, which shall each be made up of four Amazons who hold with the idea of abandoning the Sacred Grove, and the village.” She stopped, and looked long and searchingly at Althaia. “My Sister, are you brave enough to lead one of these parties?”

Althaia rose, and clasped her fist to her chest. “Yes, my Queen! I will gladly serve!”

Gabrielle nodded. “Very well: meet with Xena after the Council. Bring her seven more of you, who are willing to undertake this. But be warned, Althaia! You must all be prepared for the possibility that you will not return.” She smiled, sadly. “The world is indeed a bitter place, my Sister.”

“Eponin will be forming and leading a party of you to go out to Amphipolis, who will attempt to make contact with Xena’s brother Toris, and assess the state of things in the town. This group will go out as soon as the surveys are done. The other two groups of emissaries will depart thereafter. Make yourselves ready, all of you!”

She glanced up at Xena, who returned her gaze with a nod of approval. Then she looked out at them all, once more. Their faces had changed. They were sober, but respectful. The anger was gone, the sadness was gone, and there were some new expressions: hope, determination, and pride.

A figure arose from their midst, and spoke up. "Queen Gabrielle? May I speak?"

"Of course you may, Kythereia."

The young Amazon hesitated; then seemed to gather her courage. "I hearken back to something you said earlier . . ."

There was a sudden hum of voices, as some of the women began to talk in low undertones.

Gabrielle's voice rose, sharply. "Silence, my Sisters! Although she may be young in years, Kythereia is well respected by the Queen for seeking to speak in your company. I would hear what she has to say." They hushed. "Go on."

"My Queen – will you tell us what the wide world is like, now? Since you have been there – and have lived to return . . . what have you seen?"

Gabrielle smiled. "Ah, you should all come to this young Amazon, for lessons in courage." The women laughed, and Kythereia blushed. "But that is a story for another gathering. I will consider it, however, and see if I can be ready with my tale, at our next meeting." She stood, and Eponin and Xena moved up next to her. "The Gathering of the Tribe is ended. Go now, and do your work, and report back to us when you are done." She waved her hand, and they all rose up, and began to disperse.

Xena put her arms around Gabrielle, and hugged her close, and kissed her full on the mouth. 'Poni and some of the others chuckled, as they tactfully averted their eyes.

"You fill me with awe, my Queen," she murmured in a low, seductive voice. "When can I fully express this to you?" Gabrielle smiled, "Regretfully, my Champion – we have too much work to do: how about later – in our lodge?"

"Oh yes, my Gaby. I'll see you there."

And with that, she tapped 'Poni on the shoulder, and they walked off toward the group huddled next to the dais, waiting to discover the details of their missions.

Gabrielle stretched, and yawned. "Sleep, I think, is what I need." And she stepped down off the platform, and walked off toward the lodge. Once inside, Gabrielle yawned again, and then sat down at the table. She pulled a half-unrolled scroll toward her, picked up her quill, paused for a moment, and then began to write. She wanted to record the meeting, before she would let herself rest.

* * * * *

It was late in the afternoon before Xena was able to get away from the bustle of all the preparations and planning. The groups were picked, and had been briefed and instructed, and were now gathering together their kits for the journey, and making whatever preparations they could in the event that they were not to return. Last minute time to spend with their friends; last minute thoughts and prayers to whatever goddesses they still believed in; last minute passion spent, love exchanged, and desires quenched; last minute solitary thoughts, night-sweats, and night-mares. She knew their terror, and their courage. The others were busily assessing the defenses.

Eponin had also picked her group, for the foray to Amphipolis. She was taking Io, - "for seasoning" she said – and Xena knew that Gabrielle would object. And two other Amazons – steady sorts, good with all weapons, and savvy in tracking and defensive evasion, according to 'Poni. The best they could hope for. Xena continued to feel uneasy about Amphipolis, though. There was something nagging at her, and she couldn't sink down deep enough inside, to what it was.

"A little help from Gabrielle, I think . . ." she mused, as she walked back to the lodge.

She bounded up on the porch, the spring back into her step. She was beginning to re-own her body, now – remembering the resiliency and the power of it, and she exulted in the energy she felt coursing through her.

She ducked past the door cloth, and went inside. It was cool, there – the afternoon heat was kept out by the log walls, and Gabrielle had the shutters wide. Xena crossed to the bathing room, and splashed her face

with water, and wiped it dry on the linen cloth hanging nearby. She stripped off her leggings and boots; then wandered back into the main room. She could see Gabrielle, lying on the bed, on her stomach, her head cradled by her crossed arms. She could hear her soft breathing.

Smiling, Xena moved over to the table, and picked up the scroll. She read over the Bard's words, nodding at the language. Then she noticed a small square of parchment, lying on the floor under the table. She picked it up, and glanced curiously at the words written on it. They were arranged in a strange shape, on the page. As she read, her face turned pale, she exhaled sharply, and slowly shook her head.

You burn
me.
Your dragon breath hot
On my flesh
Your razor claws, raking me
Each time you writhe, and
Slither your knife-like
Scales across my back.
I long for you to be tamed
And let me sleep,
Dreamless,
Again.

“Oh, my Beloved! How is it that you have not told me?” She crumpled the paper in her fist, the knuckles white with the force of her grip; then smoothed it back out, folded it, and tucked it in her belt-pouch. Her eyes were filling with tears. She wiped them, impatiently, and moved to the bed. Kneeling gently next to the sleeping Bard, she looked down at the indigo ridges, which formed the image of the dragon. It had begun as a tattoo, in Jappa. Not painful, after the initial application. They had put the soothing aloe poultices on it, so that any residual discomfort would be soothed, and healed. Gabrielle had taken it like a warrior – Xena had been so proud of her, and so thankful that she had agreed to its application. They knew it would be a strong warding, against the struggle coming to both of them. It was the best defense Xena could provide, for her sweet Gabrielle.

Now, she could see that the image had changed, with the powerful assault that Higuchi had made, throwing that fireball at Gabrielle's back,

when he attempted to deflect her from the Water of Life. The dragon's power had saved her – but now Xena could see the price of that saving. For the tattoo was changed - it had been burned into her flesh, the exact image of the dragon. And so each line was now a scar. And each scar had been a burn. And each burn had been pain. And, it seemed, still was.

“How is it that I never knew? All that time, inside of her – and she masked it from me!” She put her spread-fingered hands a scant distance above the surface of the Bard's back, and focused her mind, and went to that quiet calm place where all her power lay dormant, and summoned a low wave of soothing, healing energy, and sent it down through her arms, and into her hands, and out through her fingers, as she moved her hands over the outlines of the dragon. And Gabrielle slowly, gradually, seemed to lose a subtle tension, and rigidity, in how she lay. And in her sleep, she sighed, and murmured, “Xena . . .” And Xena answered, softly, “It's me, Gabrielle. I'm here.” And she sank next to her Beloved, and kissed her gently on the shoulder, and lay down there, her eyes never leaving the sleeping woman, as the tears slowly spilled down her cheek.

Later, she slept. And then awakened, as she felt a soft brush of lips across her collarbone, and opened her eyes, and saw Gabrielle, and her eyes filled with such love that she couldn't speak. She swallowed; her throat all dry from the sadness.

“You've been crying,” Gabrielle whispered. “What's wrong?”

Xena turned on her side, and looked at Gabrielle. “Why didn't you tell me about the dragon?” she asked, her eyes pleading.

Gabrielle's face changed, a moment of bleak sadness. “It seemed a small enough thing, for having saved me, at Mt. Fuji. I thought it was just my burden to bear.” She put her hand up, gently wiping Xena's residual tears away with her thumb. “I've gotten used to it, Xe. It's just the way it is, now.”

Xena pulled her close. “Does my touching you . . .?” she was afraid to go on.

“No – oh, No! Never! In fact, that seems to help, oddly enough.” She smiled. “That's something, isn't it? I touch yours and yours doesn't hurt. You touch mine – the same.”

Xena sighed, “We truly must do something about all this, my Gabrielle.”

Gabrielle smiled, pensive. “Any time, Xena.”

And they wrapped their arms around one another, and found some measure of comfort, there.



Chapter 5

The next morning, Gabrielle met with Paphos for her first lesson. She found the young Amazon waiting, as she had been instructed, on the front porch of the Queen’s lodge. Her water skin was beside her, and she had also a small pouch tied to her belt. When Gabrielle came out, the young woman jumped like a startled animal.

“Good morning, Paphos. Did you sleep well?” Gabrielle crossed the porch, and sat down on the step where the youngster had been sitting. “Come, sit here next to me.” She patted the warm, rough boards. “The sun feels so good, don’t you think?” She put down the things she had brought out with her, gathered on a small wooden tray next to her.

Paphos came, shyly, and dropped down next to Gabrielle. She sat, twisting her hands in her lap, her head averted.

Gabrielle watched her, taking joy in the young woman’s healthy good looks. Then she just sat, looking out at the courtyard, watching the women passing to and fro, as they went about their morning routines. Paphos gradually settled, with cautious sidelong looks, wondering when Gabrielle would speak.

“It’s going to be hot, today, I’ll wager. Do you think they will get all the surveying done by tomorrow?” Gabrielle mused.

Paphos shrugged. “Like as not.” she answered. “They were at it till really late past the moonrise, last night.” She sighed.

Gabrielle looked sideways. “I bet you wish you were going with them, don’t you?”

Paphos looked wistfully at her. “Yeah – I begged ‘Poni, and I even begged Althaia – but they just laughed at me.” She sighed again. ‘Guess I’m just not enough of an Amazon, yet. *Io* gets to go – I don’t know why I can’t, too!’” Her misery was palpable.

Gabrielle felt a chill run over her. “*Io?*” she asked. Paphos nodded. “Uh huh, the Regent told her she was going to take her along – to Amphipolis. Said she needed ‘toughening.’ I could use some toughening, too!” she pouted.

Gabrielle filed that away for later. ‘Poni was going to get an earful. “Well,” she said. “Don’t worry. I’ll give you plenty of toughening of your own. Besides – I know just how you feel.”

‘You do?’”

“Oh, yes. Don’t you think I’d like to go out there with them, too?” Gabrielle flashed a quick smile at the girl. “Instead – I just have to stay behind here, with all of you, and worry about them every minute.” She ruffled Paphos’ curls with her hand. “Not much fun, is it?”

“I guess not.”

‘Well, lets get started with your first lesson, shall we?’ Gabrielle took a piece of scroll parchment, and smoothed it out on the wooden tray, and slid the ends under two thin bands of leather cord that were tied around each end of the tray, so the parchment was kept flat on the surface. Then she removed the stopper from the small pot of ink, and taking up a quill, she dipped it into the ink, and began to draw shapes on the parchment. As she worked, she talked.

“I’m making a practice sheet for you, Paphos. Each of these signs are the sounds that we make when we talk our words, and when we put them together, we can sound them and read them, and make sense out of them. Now, since you already know how to make the sounds, and how to talk and make sense when you talk, these will be easy for you to understand, once you have learned their shapes, and how to make them yourself. Under each shape, I have drawn arrows, so you can see how to make the shapes. When you finish with me today, I want you to take this with you. Stop at the potter’s workshop, and get a slab of wet clay from her. Put it on this tray, and smooth it out over the entire surface, keeping it thick. You will use the clay tablet as a practice for drawing the shapes, instead of using parchment and quill, until you have learned the shapes. You can

smooth the clay over and over, and practice a lot. And when you are not using the tablet, keep a wet cloth over it, and it will stay soft, that way.”

Paphos watched, absorbed, as Gabrielle’s quill flowed over the parchment, leaving tracks behind. Little arrows zoomed all over next to the marks. She was getting really excited about making these shapes – it looked like fun.

Gabrielle finished; then from a small pouch, she sifted some sand over the ink on the parchment, to dry it. She then handed it to Paphos, who took it gingerly, and sat staring at the sheet, her eyes dancing around the lines.

Gabrielle smiled, a warm feeling flooding through her. Gods, they were so sweet! She loved them, for their tender hope and sunny nature. She had been just so, once . . . following along behind the Warrior Princess, her heart joyous and her confidence so boundless. . . .

“Now, what have you brought today, to share with me?”

The young woman tucked her hand into her pouch, and brought it out again, curled around something small. She held out the fist, inviting Gabrielle to receive it. Gabrielle held out her hand, palm up, and Paphos released the object. A small, perfectly formed snail shell dropped into Gabrielle’s hand. It had delicate whorls, and beautiful striations of pink, purple, and grey coloration. Gabrielle caught her breath.

“OH! How beautiful!” she whispered. She smiled, her green eyes shot with golden flecks, as Paphos fell headlong into the biggest crush she’d ever felt. Paphos gazed in rapture.

“So, Paphos,” Gabrielle said, “tell me its story.”

* * * * *

Later, Gabrielle came back into the lodge, to find her mate still asleep in the bed. This was fairly unusual, as Xena was almost always the first one up in the morning. Gabrielle stretched out on the pallet, and tickled the lobe of one exposed ear.

Xena jerked, and twitched, and suddenly lunged, wrapping the Bard in two long arms, and finding her willing lips ready for tasting. They spent a long moment, before coming up for air.

“Well,” I guess you are ready to get up, now!” Gabrielle laughed, breathless.

Xena leaned back on one arm, and smiled lazily at her. “What? I can’t mend my bad habits, and get a good rest? Remember how I used to go for days without my proper sleep? You used to scold me mercilessly about that!” She grinned happily. “I just love you!”

Gabrielle looked at her, lying there so tousled and sleepy and satisfied. Her eyes blinked rapidly, and she swallowed. “Oh, Xe – I’ve honestly never seen you so happy in all the long time I’ve known you! Please, don’t ever lose this look!”

“Not a chance, my love,” Xena’s blue eyes warmed with her smile. “It’s one I ordered specially, to bring back with me!” She patted the fur next to her. “Come here?”

Gabrielle obliged.

“How was the first lesson?” Xena asked.

“Oh, Xe, she is so sweet! And eager! I’m really reminded of myself, back when . . .”

Xena nodded. ‘Yep – I can see it.’

Gabrielle looked pensive. “I think, maybe . . . I’m training a successor, Xe.” She looked at her partner. “Does that seem . . . morbid?”

Xena shook her head. “Not at all, love – not at all. They’re our future, Gabrielle.”

“Yes,” she whispered. ‘I know . . .’

* * * * *

Eponin and her group of warriors checked their horses, making sure they had all their gear stowed. They were taking one extra horse, to hold their supplies, for they would not stop in any other settlements, and would camp rough at night. Xena and Gabrielle, and all of the Elders were there, before the big gates, to see them off. Xena had some last-minute

instructions for ‘Poni.

“‘Poni, you know the drill. Go fast, don’t stop, and stay on the road only if it is deserted. Fade into the surroundings, if you see anyone along the road. Keep your eyes out for what you can see, and make note of everything unusual. When you get near Amphipolis, enter by the hidden ways, and at night. Avoid encounters with anyone. Try to get to Toris at the Inn without being seen; and meet with him secretly. We need to find out as much as possible from him. If there is any way he can come back with you, see if he will do so. And ‘Poni? Don’t tell him about me! If he will come, it will be better to find me here, and get through that shock, than to leave him with it, there.”

Eponin nodded. “All right, Xena. You can count on me! I will do all as you say.” She mounted her horse. Talia moved over next to the chestnut mare, and put her hand on ‘Poni’s leg. “Take care, love,” she said, huskily. Eponin leaned down, and kissed her. “O, don’t worry about me,” she laughed, elated to be out and doing, again. “I always come back!”

Gabrielle stood next to Io’s pony. The young Amazon was looking a little scared, but excited. She nervously twisted the reins in her hands. Gabrielle patted her on the thigh. “Take care of ‘Poni, Io – watch her back, will you - for me? And be sure to take care of yourself, too. Do *exactly* what ‘Poni tells you. I’m waiting for that commission, remember?”

They stepped back, as the party of Warriors and horses wheeled, and rode out through the opening. The big gates swung shut, and the gate watch lowered the crossbeams. A short interval; and they could hear the birdcalls, as the outer watchers noted their passing.

“They’ll be fine, won’t they, Xe? It’s just to Amphipolis, after all.”

Xena nodded, her head still turned, as she listened for their horses’ feet, and heard them, faintly – long after all others had lost them to the wide world beyond. “Only Amphipolis, after all,” she murmured. Her brow furrowed.

* * * * *

The darkness would be so much darker, out on the road, with no moon, and no lights. They had been traveling cautiously all day, doing just as Xena had advised. They didn’t have much excitement – the road was

deserted. That, in itself, was worrisome to Eponin. There should have been the odd merchant wagon, and occasional riders, in normal circumstances. She didn't like the deserted, empty feel to it. Even the birds were silent – only an occasional high hawk, circling. Once they climbed out of the fertile, sheltered valley that was their home, the road grew steeper, the land around them more hilly. It was sparsely covered in gorse, thickets of prickly pear, and occasional olive and juniper trees. The ground was stony. They saw evidence of mountain goats – but little else in the way of animals; and no people. It made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. They pushed on, covering a good third of the way, by dusk. There were no settlements, yet. No remote huts or cultivated patches. It was empty land.

The day had been hot, and they were all getting thirsty and tired of sitting the horses. She raised her hand, and they stopped.

“Let's get off the road, up onto the slopes above, and find a sheltered place to make camp amongst the trees.” She said. “I want it to be hidden, and we must keep silent order. Our voices carry, in these hills.”

They turned the horses, and began to make their way up the rocky slopes. After about a half a candle mark, they found a hidden ravine, high above the road, sheltered by several old olive trees. They dismounted, and Eponin had Io see to the horses. “Don't wander far,” she warned. “I can hear a brook, over there. See if you can get them watered and fed, and unload them. Then picket them close under the trees.”

The other two, Makaria and Boiotia, set about making camp, and getting them some food. They made no fire, so it had to be dry provisions, and water from their skins. They all ate hungrily, resting on their saddles and blankets. They did not talk.

* * * * *

The Tribe was a silent group, at the evening meal. They were all aware that the emissaries to Amphipolis were likely a third of the way there, and were all preoccupied with thoughts of how their sisters were faring - subdued and desultory talk from only a scattered handful of women.

Xena and Gabrielle sat with Talia, Dika, Kythereia and Paphos. Gabrielle wanted then together, since their dear ones were absent. The partners of the other two Amazons had chosen to stay in their huts.

Gabrielle looked up from her food, and realized that the mood of the Tribe was glum, at best. She squeezed Xena's hand. 'Xe? I 'm going to see it they will take a story from me.'

Xena smiled at her. "Whatever you want, my Bard – I'll gladly listen, too."

Gabrielle stood, and spoke to them. "My Sisters! It is a long, empty wait for our loved ones, out on the road tonight and far from our sides. How say you, if I give you a story? We can do this each night, to help pass the weary hours. And you did ask me, Kythereia, did you not? How say you?"

They murmured and nodded their pleasure at their Queen's suggestion. They moved, converging on her, as she stood at the head table, and found places nearer at hand – the better to hear her words. Xena sat at the end of the table, just a few feet away, her blue eyes sparkling in the light of the torches.

* * * * *

"I sing the song of Gabrielle, Bard of Potedeia, Queen of the Last Tribe of the Amazon Nation, and Heir and Consort of Xena, the Warrior Princess. . . This is the story of her long exile from the Amazon Nation . . ." she began, her voice low pitched and solemn.

The women leaned in, and all eyes were riveted on her face. Xena, as the words were uttered, got up, and moved to sit right beside her Bard, putting a gentle hand on her back. The others looked on, approving.

With a vivid economy of words, she sketched for them the stark bones of the events in Jappa. She told of the cause for their journey there, the wild, flame-filled scene of their arrival, and the way she and Xena had averted the fire from engulfing any more of the town. She told of the battle against the army of the warlord, and of finding the chakram, bloody, in the dirt of the smoking forest. She told of the search for her Soulmate, and the finding of her, there, in the camp. She told of the swordfight, in the dark, pouring rain, as she battled for the right to reclaim her dead Xena's head. She told of meeting Xena again, in the floating world of the spirits, and of Xena's captivity there. She told of

the getting of her dragon. She told of the gargantuan battle between Xena and Higuchi, on the heights of Mt. Fuji, as Gabrielle raced against time to save her spirit, and restore her to life, desperate to keep possession of the ashes, and to return them to the Water of Life, before the sun had set.

And she told of Xena stopping her hand, and asking her to let go.

The Amazons were hushed. Many had tears, from the power of her words and images. Gabrielle remained dry-eyed. She had moved them; and in so doing, had finally told her story – their story - for the first time.

“After, I took ship from Jappa, and sailed down the long coast, and around to India. And from India, I sailed on further, until I reached the Red Sea, and then overland, from there, to Egypt. It took a long time, that trip. It seemed endless. By chance, I met up with Autolycus during the last part of the journey, and asked him to send word to Toris, back in Amphipolis, and through him, to you.”

The women sat; quiet, as her voice died away. Their eyes showed a new respect for the two figures before them, wonder and sorrow reflected there, as well.

Gabrielle heaved a sigh, and looked up and around at them all. She smiled. “Tomorrow, I shall resume my story. I bid you all – sleep well, tonight. Think on our Sisters, and hope for the success of their journey, and their swift return to us, unscathed.”

They quietly departed the tent, leaving the two solitary figures,

Xena stroked the hunched back of her mate, who sat quietly beside her. Gabrielle sank back into the circle of Xena’s arm, craving the contact.

“I did not think you would go there tonight, sweetheart.”

“O, it was more than time for it, Xe,” she replied. “I must make my peace. And I have wanted this, because it heals me. It heals us.” She sighed again. “Are we sending out the others, tomorrow?”

Xena nodded. “Yes. They leave at dawn.”

“What do you think their chances are, of finding anyone, and getting back here alive?”

Xena shook her head. “As good as any other venture out there has, now. I am even less sure than you, of the state of things. But something is

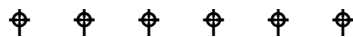
scaring you, Gabrielle. All along, now, I've sensed it, in you. What is it?"

The silvery-blond head rested on Xena's shoulder. "Coming back from Egypt, I passed through Rhodes. And I heard news of a new conqueror. They said he wants to rule the entire world. They said he would not cease, until he has it all. And he is coming, Xe. They said he was unstoppable. They said what he wants is way beyond anything Caesar dreamt of. "

Xena went very still.

Gabrielle looked up at her, the green eyes pleading. "What are we to do, Xe?"

The dark head bent, and the soft voice whispered in her ear. "We will do what we can, for our own, with what we have. We will survive."



Chapter 6

The next day dawned with the threat of rain. In the dim light, the cluster of figures around the horses was subdued. The voices were quiet. The whickering of a horse, the small-talk of last moment questions and answers, as they awaited the coming of the Queen and the Elders.

Gabrielle and Xena, followed by the Elders, crossed the courtyard before the gates, and came to the waiting warriors. The travelers had hooded cloaks, and were dressed in dull colors, and their horses were heavily laden, for the unknown that lay ahead. The two group leaders came forward to meet them.

"Althaia . . . Laodameia . . . are your Sisters ready?" Xena clasped their arms in greeting.

"Yes, Xena . . . We're ready," they answered.

"Good. Then gather them around. Gabrielle has words for you." Xena

turned, as Gabrielle came up next to her.

Gabrielle waited, as they huddled closer to her. She put her hands on the shoulders of the two of them, and stood with the others surrounding in a circle.

“I know we are sending our very best to try this, my warriors. I know you will carry out your mission with all of your hearts, and your best skills, and your dedication to the cause of the Tribe. I know that you will try to bring news of our clan to those other Amazons, out there in the darkness of the world. And I know that, should you succeed in finding them, and they are struggling in desperate ways, that you will do everything in your power to bring them back to us, if that is what is needed. But, O, my Sisters – if the way becomes too difficult, and you face the choice of turning back without finding them; do not think of your pride! Do the prudent thing, and return to us as quickly and safely as possible. For we have need of you here, too, when all is said and done. Be smart about this! I command it! And I send you out, now, with all my confidence, and all my love for you!” And she embraced Althaia and Laodameia, and each of the other Amazons in turn.

“My Queen, we will not disappoint you!” Althaia said - her voice low and full of emotion. Laodameia mounted up, and turned her horses head, and walked it up to Gabrielle. She reached down, and Gabrielle put up her hand. Laodameia leaned over, and bowed her head down until it touched the back of Gabrielle’s hand. “My Queen, I will serve you with all my heart, for this honor. I will be true!” Gabrielle swallowed convulsively, the tears sudden in her eyes.

Then the others mounted up, and they slowly cantered out of the village, into the watery light of the morning. And the quiet rain began to fall.

Gabrielle put her arm around Xena. And they stood at the open gates. Xena raised a hand, in farewell. They stood long, watching the receding figures. And once again, the bird-calls sounded the “all-clear.” They turned back to join the others, and the big gates were shut once more.

The figures of Kythereia and Paphos swarmed up the ropes on either side, and took up their posts on top, staring out into the mist.

“And now the terrible waiting begins.” Gabrielle muttered.

Xena nodded. “Yes, it does. But not without plenty to do, for those of us left behind. Let us go and break our fast, and then get started.”

And they head toward the meal tent, the Elders trailing behind them.

* * * * *

The rain was getting to be a real aggravation. They had been traveling all day, and it wasn't letting up. Eponin muttered and growled to herself, taking another swig from her water skin. She turned in the saddle, and took stock of the others. Io rode behind; her face obscured by the deep hood of her cloak. Boiotia and Makaria rode together, bringing up the rear. They occasionally conversed, in muffled tones.

Eponin slowed and turned her horse, and came up by Io's horse's head. She reached out and grabbed the halter, causing the horse to slow and stop. Io looked up, startled out of her reverie.

"Wha . . .? What's up?" Io asked.

"Nothing; I'm just thinking we should try a shortcut. We are about twenty five leagues outside Amphipolis. I want us to get a good night's rest before we make the last leg. We'll have to lay up close in to the town, and wait for dark, before we go in, tomorrow. And that will be difficult enough. I haven't been there in a while –I don't know if the old place is still there, and any good for hiding." *"And, she thought silently, 'I've been having a bad feeling, all day, and I don't know what is it, and I don't know why.'"*

Boiotia, coming up on the conversation, agreed. "Yes – the horses are getting tired. What do you propose, Eponin?"

"There used to be a nice snug little cave, near Amphipolis. Xena used to use it, often. I think I can still find it. But I'd like to take the fastest route to get there –though a deep canyon, near here." She stood up in the saddle, and quickly surveyed the surrounding landscape. "Follow me, carefully, all of you. I'll show the way." And she turned her horse off the road, and struck off through the hilly undergrowth. The land had changed, again, as they moved further south and east. There was starting to be more trees – although they were mostly stunted old oaks, and wild pear, and more olives. But there were some groves of juniper, as they went up in elevation, towards the mountains. And there was a river nearby; the same

one that flowed past the town of Amphipolis. It was a frothy, leaping thing, here, as it made its way downhill to the Aegean. Further upstream, 'Poni knew, it came through the long canyon, and beyond that, it broadened out as it wound through the valley of Amphipolis. The cave, if it was still there, was at the other end of the canyon. And so she led them forward. And the rain pelted down on their heads.

* * * * *

A hundred leagues or more away, to the north, Althaia and Laodameia's mounted party of eight came to the parting of their ways. They had traveled north from the Amazon village together, as far as they could go, by the same path. They were not following any roads; as it had been decided that they were more likely to encounter solitary enclaves of their Sisters by traveling cross-country, looking to the isolated, sparsely-populated mountainous areas. And so their journey was the more arduous, and slow. Camp each night was going to be very rough, especially now, with the rain. It would be cold. But now, at the confluence of two high mountain ridges, their roads were forking. Althaia and her three would go more westerly, toward the coast, while Laodameia's party was to go on to the north, towards the high steppes. They sat their horses, silently. The two leaders clasped arms, and then embraced, still on their horses.

"Travel lightly, my Sister – and go well." Althaia said.

"And you, my Sister," nodded Laodameia. Then they were away, down the ravines, and were lost to one other's sight. And their silent companions followed after.

* * * * *

Xena and Gabrielle sat in the Queen's lodge, curled up on the furs that were spread before the fireplace. They had built up a good blaze, to ward

off the chill that had come upon them with the early rain. The summer was almost over, and the autumnal equinox would be coming before they knew it. Meanwhile, the reports from the various members of the Council were coming in to Gabrielle, detailing everything she had asked for, and more. Xena and her group had done a thorough evaluation of the village defenses, and Xena had been pleased at the general readiness, and the amount and quality of weapons.

Gabrielle sighed, as she let fall the last scroll, listing all the quantities of preserved foodstuffs. She rubbed her head, and stretched. Xena lay prone beside her, half propped up by a pile of pillows made of stuffed bearskins. Gabrielle settled down by draping herself across Xena's lap. She curled her arm under her head, and watched the flames. Xena looked down, as she wrapped her arms around Gaby.

"Tired?" Xena quizzed.

"O, yes."

"Want to fall asleep, right here?"

"Um hum."

"Well, go ahead. You've got your pillow!"

Gabrielle snuggled down deeper. She yawned. Xena reached past the Bard's figure, and snared a woven shawl from a bench nearby. She unfolded it, and draped it over Gabrielle. Then she wrapped her arms around her.

"Xe – I have a confession to make."

"What's that?"

"I keep thinking – we should have been the ones to go out – at least to Amphipolis. We surely would have done that, in the old days. I feel guilty – sending out the others, instead. Do you think we are - oh, I don't know – protecting ourselves?"

Xena stroked the pale hair, as she gazed into the flames. "I know what you are feeling. I, too, have felt uneasy at working this way – behind the scenes. It is definitely different that the old days. But you know, Gabrielle, it also feels right. Our work has changed – and we are not the active players in this story. Our Amazons are. And we must do

everything we can to support them. It's as though we are keeping our own strength and power in reserve – for something yet to come. I don't know what that will be, but I definitely feel that it will require everything we have – and maybe even more – and this means we need to take care of ourselves, while we wait.”

Gabrielle sighed. “Yeah, I know. I trust your feelings about this, Xe. All right – I'll stop!” She looked up at Xena, a soft smile for the beloved face hovering above her.

“Sleep. I'll sing you a lullaby,” Xena murmured. And she began to croon a high, sweet wordless song. Gabrielle smiled drowsily, and dropped off, her head sinking into the warmth underneath.

Xena's song slowed, and she brought it to an end. She looked down at the sleeping woman, her face soft in the firelight. “*How long?*” she wondered to herself. “*How long will we have it, like this? Such peace - even though I know it is a false peace, and will fly away too soon, as it always has. I don't care. She deserves whatever small measure of that I can manage – and so do I! And meanwhile . . .*” her thoughts jumped again, as she gently hugged the sleeping woman, “*Every day, I grow more moved, and grateful, to have this incredible woman by my side. It seems that her time in the desert brought forth in her talents that I had only begun to glimpse, before. She surely was beginning to be a formidable leader – with her speech at Helicon – and her actions at Jappa told me she would survive. But now, I am so much more amazed at her! And I am more than sure that she is every bit an equal to anything I even thought I was, before Jappa. And this is surely a good thing. . . Because we are going to need all our strengths, and all our wits, to get through this safely. I feel it in my gut.*” She stared at the fire. The flames were dancing, as the winds outside gusted in through the chimney. As she watched, her eyes slowly drooped, opened; and drooped again. Her head nodded, then dropped back, into the soft pillow behind her, and she, too, slept.

* * * * *

The entrance to the canyon loomed through the curtain of rain. The river sounded loudly, beside them. Eponin slowed her horse, and then stopped. The others came to a halt behind her. She raised her hand. They sat, silent. The bad feeling that she had been fighting all day was getting

stronger, and she wanted to stop and try to figure out what was wrong. She didn't think it was illness. But there was *something* – and she needed to know what it was, soon.

She turned, and made eye contact with Makaria. The woman guided her horse up next to 'Poni. She raised her eyebrows with a questioning look. 'Poni used hand-signals. She pointed at the opening to the canyon, ahead of them. Then she indicated that they would stop where they were. She pointed at Makaria, then made the crawling sign and pointed up at the top of the ridge to their right. Then the walking sign, two fingers across the hunched back of her hand, then pointed at her eyes, and then the two-finger pronged sign for looking. Then the come-back sign. Makaria nodded, then shinnied down off her horse, handed the reins to Eponin, and made her way through the bushes, and began to climb up the hump of the ridge, carefully and slowly, so as not to dislodge anything as she went. They watched her, as she mounted to the ridge top, then she took a long, careful cautions look; and then lost sight of her, as she headed on along the top of the ridge.

An endless while later, they saw her returning, fast and low. She skittered down the slope of the ridge, and then came through the scrub next to where they sheltered. She took the reins from Eponin, and remounted her horse. She motioned for them to go back the way they had come. They turned the horses carefully in the narrow defile, and made their way back out onto the slope of the hillside they had lately come down.

Eponin stopped. "What is it?" she hissed.

Makaria spoke, her voice low and urgent. "There are a group of horsemen, camped in the canyon, next to the river, not five hundred paces from the entrance. We would have been seen! We've got to get further away than this!" She made to turn her horse.

Eponin reached out and held the horse. "Wait!" she muttered. "How many were there?"

Makaria looked impatient. "I made it to be thirty, at least."

Eponin looked at the other two, silent figures. Io was clearly frightened. Boiotia looked grim. "Well, what now?" she whispered to their leader.

Eponin thought. She could take them back to the road, and they could stay on it, and try to find another stopping place. But the road was now at least a half a candle-mark back the way they had come, and it was getting

dark. She didn't want them to be thrashing about in the dark for shelter.

She shook her head. No. They would have to find someplace close, but under cover. And take their chances that the men would leave with the daylight, and be on their way. Either the men would be headed back the way her group had come, or they would be moving on towards the town. Then she and her party could use the canyon to make their own way safely to the cave. And later, to Amphipolis..

She looked around at the terrain. The others waited patiently. But there was not much in the way of cover. She motioned Makaria back over to her.

“When you were up the ridge, did you get a look at the other slope of the ridge – the side away from the canyon?”

Makaria nodded. “Yes. There is a small ravine – not as deep, but it parallels the canyon. It is full of scrub and rocks, though – not very hospitable.”

“Poni shrugged. “It'll have to do, though.” She straightened up. “All right, Makaria, you go. We'll follow.” They got off their horses, and began to lead them, single file. They cut through the tough and prickly bushes that lined the entrance to the canyon, moving away to the right, and skirting the hump of the beginning of the ridge, which rose up sharply in front of them. The way immediately got tough, and they had a terrible time picking their way through thorny underbrush and over boulders and stony scree that choked the ravine. They finally, after several awful minutes, found themselves in a sort of a clearing - really no more than a clear patch surrounded by more of the unfriendly shrubbery. The rain was still falling, and the horses snorted and moved restlessly. They were all tired, thirsty, and hungry. And felt very exposed.

Eponin raised her hand. “We'll stay here,” she whispered. She motioned to Io, who came up next to her. “Io, gather the horses together, and tether them well to one of those scrub trees over there. She pointed at two low, gnarly old stumps. “Then get the horses their feed bags. They got watered at our last stop, so they should be all right until morning. Don't unload the horses. Take only your water-skin and your bedroll! We have to be prepared to run, if anything happens.”

She pulled the others close, and whispered, “Only your bedrolls and water-skins. We'll make a brush shelter, and sleep in it. Eat when we're set up. Cold rations. No fire – they'd smell the smoke. Boiotia, you help Io. And get some cloths, to wrap the horses' feet. Makaria, let's get the

shelter set.” They went to work, quietly and cautiously. In moments, they were huddled together under a rough tumble of cut bushes, chewing on dried meat, and sucking from their water-skins. It was going to be a long, tense night.



Chapter 7

The gathering that night was a somber one. All knew the weather was not making things any easier for their sisters, out on the road and in the hills, and they were sad. There was only quiet, desultory conversation, as they all sat around the tables. The side flaps of the meal tent had been lowered against the rain, and a fire put out comforting heat from the fireplace that stood at the far end of the tent, behind the head table.

Gabrielle finished her cup of mead, and then got up from the table and moved over to the fireplace. Xena sat on the high, wide stone hearth, one long leg stretched out, the other hanging down, her body turned sideways to the fire. Gabrielle sat down, so she was nestled in front of Xena, her back leaning up against Xena’s front, half-turned to the women seated out at the tables. She felt Xena’s arms go around her. She said, quietly, “Here we go – the second part of the saga of Gabrielle.” She felt the arms squeeze, and a soft kiss on the back of her neck.

“I sing the song of Gabrielle, Bard of Potedeia, Queen of the Amazons, and Heir and Consort to Xena, Warrior Princess – and of her sojourn in the Land of the Pharaohs.” The audience stirred, and shuffled themselves close, once again, and settled in for the story.

I went to Egypt. Why? I will tell you. It was because that was where we were going, so long before, in that interval after Helicon. Xena was restless, and had a notion that we could go back to Egypt, now that Caesar, Anthony, and Cleopatra were gone. We might actually get a break from all the death and destruction that had long plagued us through the Twilight. If the messenger from Jappa hadn’t found us, we would have gone there directly. We were both tired, almost to death, and so weary. Not really any good to anyone, truth be told. I hoped that with

a brief visit there, in the dry heat of the desert, that we could rest, and recover some of the old energy, and passion, and then come back, ready to rejoin the Tribe, and begin anew. But that was not to be. So I went there, alone, after - bereft. I carried the urn, and the chakram. And the legacy of my lost love.

I thought I was bearing up, under the strain of that grief. I soon found otherwise. For as the ships ferried me south, ever south, I discovered that my grief was taking a strange way to manifest itself. As I finally came to land, and changed to camel travel through the deserts by the Red Sea, I had a terrible dream that my dragon had come to life, and crawled off my back, and wound its powerful tale around my neck, and was slowly suffocating me. I woke up in a panic, gasping for breath. I thought I was finally dying, my poor heart broken beyond repair, and I was going to go home to my Beloved. Instead, the next morning, I found that I had lost my voice. I could not speak! You can imagine such a calamity for a Bard! No voice, no stories. No stories, no way to live.

I did not know why I was mute. I didn't yet understand the way of the heart, and how it will protect itself, in grief, and give itself a chance to heal. For me, it was too fearsome to tell the stories of Xena. I could not tell them, because to do so would bring my grief too painfully close, to taunt and terrorize me. Like having a wound that never heals, but must be constantly reopened, and tormented. And so my soul protected me; and drove me in a way that I did not understand. To take a path I had not considered. I was in deep despair, for I did not see how I was to survive, in such a state.

I managed to make my way to Thebes. I thought that there was a chance that I might find some sanctuary at the Temple of Isis, in that city. I heard rumors that they would take in wanderers, especially women, who needed help. And surely, I did! So I went to the Temple. I requested, through signs and dumb-show, an audience with the High Priestess, I waited, in the shadows of the Temple walls, for days. They do not hurry, in Egypt. They have the long view – Eternity is a sacred space, and life goes on forever. They only would summon me when the time was right. And they never would tell me when that would be so. It was a weary time, my sisters! I learned humility, there. Long, hungry days and nights full of the agony of my dreams. I don't remember eating, or sleeping – although I must have slept. I had sunk into a kind of daze. I know I was tired, so very tired.

Finally, the time came. I don't know how it was any different than all the other days I had waited! But they summoned me inside. I followed the

silent female acolytes down this wide, cool passage. It had wonderful sights, painted on the walls! I stored them up, in my memory, for stories. And when we arrived in the Inner Sanctuary, I was pushed down on my knees, and made to put my head down on the floor in front of me. And I waited again. Suddenly, there was a cool breeze wafting through the room, and I smelled a strong sweet smell of incense. And I heard the padding of many bare feet across the stone floor, and a flaring of the torches. And a low, melodious voice said something to me in Egyptian – and I was hard-pressed to remember what I had learned of the language, when Xe and I had been there, before, in the Caesar years. But I managed to make it out. I lifted up my head – and, O! She was a wondrous sight, my sisters! She was tall - taller even than Xena! And her skin was the color of ebony-wood. She wore a long, slender, translucent white robe, and had a tall, conical headdress, also white, that stood up from her brow. She was beautiful! Her eyes were the nicest brown, too, and she had a kind countenance. Her gait was serene, and she moved like liquid – like a slow dance. Each gesture was economical, and she had such an aura of power, about her! I was in awe of her. She seemed ageless. The acolytes told me later that no one knew her true age. She had been there, it seemed, forever. Perhaps she was Isis. I often thought so. She asked me why I had come. And then, - a wondrous thing! – for I could not speak, to tell her, but somehow, I felt her come into my mind, and she asked me again – ‘Why have you come?’ I started to tell her, in my mind, without words across my tongue, and so we talked, in that way, and she saw into my heart, and heard my anguished tale. And took pity on me, and gave me a home.

And so, for eight long years, I stayed in the Temple of Isis, under the protection of the High Priestess. I was instructed in the language of the hieroglyphs, and learned much of the religion and history and customs of that land. They let me work in their gardens, and care for the plants growing there, and I also helped with the Healers, for I had learned much from Xena in that realm. I could not speak, but my hands seemed still to know how to heal. But I remained dumb, and could not dare to approach my sorrow, and my pain – for I had buried it deep within me, and battled my despair every day.

It was strange, for them, to have a person such as I was, living in their midst. They do not have very many blonde, fair skinned people in Egypt, my sisters! But they were an easy people, outgoing and friendly, and quick to laughter, and having the same joy that we have, for the simple pleasures of life.

And slowly, gradually, as the years went by, something strange also

began to happen.” Gabrielle paused, and tightened her hold on the long arms that held her close, and sank for a long moment into the embrace of that still, quiet figure behind her. And the audience watched their silent communion – and they rejoiced, at its deep, deep love. “. . . For I began to hear a still, quiet voice inside me, and I knew, better than I could ever say, that it was my Xena. And somehow, each day, she would send me a small, fragile, single hope – a single good reason to live another day, to carry on, and heal, and become a whole person, again. And each day, I found that the thing I despaired of ever happening, -was happening - and I was getting my strength back, and my spirit; and my heart’s hole was slowly, surely, mending. As if that warm presence now lived there, and was filling it with love.

As time passed, I determined to find a better way to communicate, since it did not seem that I would regain my voice, any time soon. I thought I could devise a way, using my hands. Much like the signals we use for the hunt, and for silent battle-order. And so, I invented such a language of the hands. And I began to teach the young women of the temple this hand-language, and then my conversations became once again full of the complexity and power that I had had in speaking. And I even began to write my poetry, once again. And as my voice returned, inside of me, my long healing moved me back towards the Light, and the hope that I could heal, and return to my beloved Greece, and to the Tribe. And so it came to pass, that I finally began the long journey home. And when my feet touched the shores of Greece, my long silence ended. I awoke the next morning, and I felt a loosening in my chest, and I coughed, and my voice came back to me. It was dry as dust, and creaky! But it was mine. I had reclaimed it. And then I set out, to come home. “

Gabrielle’s voice came to a stop. There was a long silence. The women sighed, and smiled at the two figures, sitting so close, the fire’s embers dying to a deep red glow behind them. They went out from the tent, and made their way to their quarters for the night. The rain had ceased.

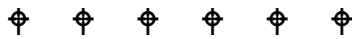
“It was you, Xe.”

“Yes.”

‘All along. . . .’

“Yes.”

And they kissed. Deep, deep as the pain that once had been.



Chapter 8

Althaia and her three companions pushed on, over the rocky hills and upland heights of the land between their village and the coast. They were often cold at night, for they had got to the foothills of the higher mountains. It was not a fertile place. They kept company more often than not with mountain goats, and some kind of a relative of the Asian pikas. These they found to be good eating – catching them in snares. They saw few people; an occasional herder of semi-wild pigs, and some goatherds. They traded for some cheese. They always asked them if they had heard or seen of any Amazons, thereabouts. And always, the answer was the same. No, none here – not for a long, long time. And when they'd ask, "Where have they gone?" The answer was always the same. "Gone – all gone. Killed off."

It was discouraging. And still, they pushed on. Then after a long, long day of riding in the hot sun, they stopped at a remote, tumble-down shrine, where they found a spring of clear, cold water, and they stopped to refresh themselves and their thirsty horses. The rock walls of the temple were in ruins, and seemed older than they could imagine. They sat, resting, on the roughly-hewn blocks, the surfaces pitted from seasons of weather.

"This is a goodly place, I think," one of the women said, as she gazed out over the peaceful scene. They could hear birds singing in the trees about them, and the breeze was soft on their faces.

Althaia nodded. "Yes, it is. I wonder who built this place." The others shrugged. Then all of them sat up, suddenly, as they heard the sound of a small bell, ringing faintly. They listened, alert, to try to determine what direction it was sounding.

It seemed to come from above them, and then, as they searched all around with their eyes, they began to hear the sound of footsteps, now coming from the hillside above the clearing.

And into view came a strange figure. An old woman, her skin completely wrinkled all over its surface, and dressed in the skins and furs of animals, entered the dell. One hand held a long, carved stick – a

fighting staff. The other was entwined in the coat of a large goat. Its pelt was long and curly, and its extraordinary curled horns curved out from either side of its head. Its golden eyes, with their strange, slotted centers, looked at them, and it halted. The old woman stopped too; - her head came up, and she seemed to be listening intently. She had a band of brightly colored woven material tied around her head, and her long hair, white as the goat's hair, radiated out in a halo from under the headband, and cascaded down her shoulders. The Amazons froze in their places.

The old woman opened her mouth, and then cleared her throat. It seemed she was not in the habit of speech. She began again. "Hola – who is here at my spring?" Her head swiveled around. "I can smell you. I can hear you. I can tell you are right before me! Speak, strangers!"

They looked at one another, as they began to understand. The old woman was blind.

Althaia stepped one pace closer, and stopped.

"Hola, Mother. We come peacefully to this sacred ground. We are travelers, and are far from home. We thirsted, and desired a safe spot to rest, and refresh ourselves."

The woman listened, thoughtful, her head cocked to one side. The goat cocked its head the same way. It was comical, and Althaia had to make a quick hand signal, as one of the women stifled a sudden snort of laughter.

"There are four of you." The old woman nodded - and the goat nodded, too. Another woman clapped her hands over her mouth, and doubled over. Althaia glared daggers at them.

"Yes, Mother, it is so. Will you permit us to stay here? For our journey is long, and our beasts are tired."

The old woman cackled, suddenly. Her whole face scrunched up with her laughter. "Stay? Stay? Of course you can stay! Do you think I would ever turn away Amazons in distress?" And she nudged the goat, and came forward to meet them.

* * * * *

Farther to the north, the wind moaned across the high plains with a cold edge that spoke of the coming weather. It was empty here and there was nothing to obstruct the sweeping view: endless distances, in all directions. Nothing moved, for hundreds of leagues, but the gently waving grasses, that rippled and swayed like a living thing when the winds swept across them. An eagle's cry pierced the silence, as it hovered high, high above. And in the distance, on a small rise of land, four quiet shapes lay still, still, in the cold sun.

Laodameia and her Sisters would not be coming home.

* * * * *

'Poni shifted uncomfortably, one of the twisted branches of the brush sticking into her side, She swore softly, and sighed, and then sat up. Io, who had been taking the first watch, leaned over the sleeping forms of the others, and put her hand on 'Poni's knee. She signaled that all was quiet, and then turned over, and pulled the fur up over her head, and fell quickly asleep.

'Poni began her concentrated listening. She turned her head, slightly, marking and identifying to herself each area of sound. Io had been right. It was quiet; nothing but the sound of the wind in the branches, and an occasional owl. The rain had stopped – that was the one good thing. But it was chilly, and she shivered, and wrapped her fur closer around her shoulders. Damn being old! The cold made her joints ache, and she felt stiff all over. And so she sat, thinking of what to do, when the morning dawned. She would have to get them all out of there, safely, and somehow get through the canyon, and to the cave. They could lay low, there, and then push into Amphipolis at dark the next day. And so to the Inn; - and so to Toris.

As the light slowly quickened in the sky, 'Poni reached over and shook them each awake. Finger to her lips, she motioned them to huddle close. In a whisper, she spoke to them.

“Stay here, don't move about! I am going to make my way back down to

the entrance of this ravine, and get under cover there. I will wait to see what the men do. When they have passed by me, or when I see that they are gone in the other direction, I will make the sound of the hawk. That will be your signal to come down after me, and we will then make our way through the canyon, and to the cave. It lies at the other end of the canyon on the side left-hand side of the canyon wall, close to that end of the wall. We will see where the entrance is by the image of a hand that is in the colors of the rocks above the entrance. It's not something that stands out, but if you are looking for it, you will see it. We'll lay low there, until closer to nightfall, and then make our way into town and to the inn. I'll go inside, and find Toris, and talk with him, while you all wait under cover, outside. Then we can go back to the cave, and start back to our village the next morning."

She paused, and looked at each of them solemnly. "Do as I instruct you! We rest on a knife-edge . . . and I would have much to answer for, to our Queen, if this should go awry." They nodded.

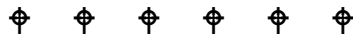
She crawled out, then, and carefully and quietly made her way back down the rock and scrub-choked ravine. When she reached the confluence with the canyon opening, she found a scant niche among some tumbled boulders, and concealed herself there, becoming still as a hunting cat. And she waited. Before long, the answer came to her sharply-tuned hearing: the sounds of horses, and muffled voices – coming her way, and quickly. She made herself even more still.

A knot of men and horses came into view, picking their way single-file through the narrow aperture. They were heavily armed, and had crossbows and shields. She could not make out what, if any, army or warlord they owed allegiance to, since they bore no coats of arms or devices: renegades, then, and brigands. More passed, and she silently counted. Twenty-five, twenty-six, thirty . . . She waited; - nothing, She waited some more; - nothing. Softly, she stood, and stepped silently into the open trail. She looked after the departed band.

Before she could move a step, or even turn, she heard the sound of the approaching arrow, and then the shock, as it entered her back. Her body arched, she sagged to her knees, and pitched forward in the dust; and was still. The sound of hooves approached, a figure leaned over and looked at her, and spit. Slinging his crossbow over his shoulder, the rider cantered off after the now-unseen departed host.

The sun grew stronger in the sky, as it mounted up over the high, enclosed hills. And there was silence, but for the soft breeze, as the

morning chill burned off. It blew a puff of dust from 'Poni's cheek. The globule of spit slid slowly down its curve. All was still - no sound of a hawk was to be heard.



Chapter 9

The old goat-woman and the four Amazons sat around a crackling fire, as she stirred the contents of a small pot which hung suspended above it. The savory smells of stew made their mouths water. It had been quite a while since they had enjoyed hot food. The goat had folded its legs, and settled down right next to the woman, and its odd eyes were strange, as it stared into the fire along with them. The woman often reached to pat the goat, rubbing the space between its horns, and it lifted its head in enjoyment each time. One of the horns was worn shiny, where the old woman must have constantly grasped it.

“Old mother, what are you called?” Althaia asked.

The woman chuckled. “Oh, that is of no matter. It has been long, long since anyone who might have known me has lived, and they were the only ones who could have remembered my name. I don't need a name, any more.” She rubbed the goat's head some more. “Even Amalthea, here, doesn't know my name.”

“Well, venerable one, we are thankful to you for sheltering us. We have traveled far, from the Sacred Grove of Artemis, looking for others of our kind. And you are the only one we have found.”

“Ah.”

“Where have they gone, Mother?”

“Ah . . . well. You had best tell the Bard and the Warrior that home is on Lemnos. They will need to get you all there, and soon! There is not much of what you call time left.” She shook her head morosely. “The Doom is gathering – oh yes!”

Althaia started. “How do you know of Gabrielle and Xena?”

The woman snorted. “Do you think I am some feeble, ignorant old hill woman? Her sightless eyes turned to stare at the women. “I am Eldest! And although my eyes are sightless, I See - Just as Xena Sees. She will be the next, after me.” She nodded.

The Amazons looked at one another, mystified.

“You will make a gynaiokratumene there – the whole island will be ruled by women. The best of our nation will gather, and live there. It will be the last bastion.” She cackled again. “No man will set foot there!”

“But how is it, then, that you are not there, yourself? Why are you still here, and vulnerable?”

“How, not? Someone had to wait, to give the word to you! I have stayed here long, long years, now, waiting for you to arrive. Now my task is done. And I, too, can leave.”

Althaia looked puzzled. “But, how will you manage?”

The crone scowled at them indignantly. “What do you think? I will wait just long enough for Xena. And the Bard. And all of you, to come gagging here, to take me with you! Ah, Amalthea, these young Amazons are dense!” The goat cocked her head, and looked at Althaia. She could have sworn that it smiled at her.

* * * * *

Xena awoke, suddenly, in a cold sweat. She shivered, and sat up. She instinctively scanned the darkness of the lodge, checking for intruders. Nothing. She listened, her sharp hearing extending to the area outside, seeking any presence. No one. She sank back down into the soft, warm cocoon of Gabrielle’s body heat, and the Bard’s arm came back up, and pulled her closer.

“What is it, Xe?” her sleepy voice whispered.

“Nothing . . . no one. I must have dreamed . . .” but Xena wasn’t sure. She felt – distressed. And wary. She extended her senses more, scanning

with her inner sense, for the subtle signals that might explain her feeling. And there it was. A somber grey smudge of smoke – a figure in her mind’s eye that hovered, silently and patiently, waiting for her to notice. She sent her mind out to it, and was startled to realize that it was Eponin.

“‘Poni? What is it? Where are you?’ Xena asked, in her head.

The figure of smoke swirled, restlessly. She seemed sorrowful. Xena sensed the woman’s distress, which was palpable.

“What are you trying to tell me, ‘Poni?’”

Silence. The figure faded away.

Xena muttered something unintelligible. Gabrielle’s eyes came open, and she stared at her mate in the dim morning light.

“Xe – what is it?”

Xena shook her head. “It’s Eponin. I don’t know what. But I have a bad feeling.” She threw back the furs that covered them. “I’m sorry, my sweet – but I think you and I have got to ride out of here, and soon. Something is *very* wrong.”

Gabrielle swarmed into action. She caught up her clothes, and moved to the wash room. They both got themselves ready.

Within moments, they were at the stable, and saddling two of the horses. Then they led the animals to the cooking area. A silent Amazon was tending the morning cook fires, and nodded at them as they approached.

“My Queen – Xena,” she said. “Can I get you anything?”

Gabrielle nodded. “Please – we need several full water skins, and a goodly packet of food to take with us – fill this bag, will you? And I need you to find Alysia, and tell her that Xena and I have had to go out towards Amphipolis. We are going to meet Eponin and her group. and I need her to take charge of things until we return.”

“Yes, my Queen.” The woman moved with alacrity, stuffing food into the bag.

Xena mounted up, and Gabrielle followed. She secured her staff to her saddle. Xena had her sword and scabbard, strapped to her back. They

cantered off toward the gates.

Xena whistled up at the gate wardens. Two heads appeared, above.
“Open the gates for us, will you?”

They swarmed down the ropes. Running to the gates, they disengaged the crossbar, and pulled them open. The two mounted figures went through. Once outside, they kicked the horses into a gallop, and rapidly moved off through the trees. The birdcalls echoed after them, in the early morning light.

* * * * *

Io was restless. The sun was getting higher in the sky, and the hawk call hadn't come. She was worried. She looked at the other two women, who were sitting patiently nearby.

“It's been too long,” Io hissed. “We've got to go see what's happening.”

The other women shook their heads. “We wait for Eponin's signal.”

Io sighed. But the feeling was growing inside her, that something had gone terribly wrong. She stood, suddenly, and ducked out of the snarl of brambles and branches. She turned to the two Amazons, and whispered again.

“You wait – I cannot! I tell you something is wrong! I am going down. Follow me if you will!” And she picked her way over to the horses. They scrambled to follow. Making their way down through the bolder-choked ravine, the trio was careful not to make a sound. They kept the cloths tied over the horses' hooves.

When they got to the bottom, they paused to listen intently. It was silent. Io signaled them to wait, and indicated that she would proceed alone. She moved off, leaving her horse there.

She ducked past some bushes, and came up behind a large boulder that edged the trail to the canyon. She cautiously peered around it. And gasped, at the still figure huddled in the dust. She looked sharply to either direction, then swiftly strode out, and knelt.

“Ah, ‘Poni!” she exclaimed, as she reached to touch the shaft that stuck out from the still woman’s back. She gently turned the head, so that she could see. Her tears blurred her eyes, and she dashed them impatiently away with her sleeve.

“Ah, my Regent! My . . . my teacher! Don’t leave us!” She bowed her head, and wept, as she hugged and rocked the figure in her arms.

The other two women emerged from behind the rock, and led the horses closer. They, too, were shaken with silent tears, as they knelt in the dirt, and mourned.

After a while, Io raised her head. The tracks of her tears streaked her dirty face. She wiped her face again with her sleeve.

“You’ve got to take her home.” she said, flatly. They gaped at her.

“We do? And what about you?” Makaria and Boiotia looked at her.

“I’m going on, to Amphipolis,” she said, dully.

Boiotia sighed. “You must be mad. ‘Poni would have turned right around and gone back. You remember what Xena and Gabrielle told her!”

“I don’t care! We need to find out what’s happening, there! We need to talk to Toris! If we all go back, now, without having done any of that, what will come of it? I can go on. I know I can do this! I must do this – don’t you see? For Eponin!”

They sighed, resigned. The young Amazon was adamant. They knew they could not dissuade her. And so, leading ‘Poni’s horse up, they went about preparing ‘Poni for her last journey home. Makaria broke off the end of the arrow, and they wrapped her in her sleeping fur; and, struggling, the three of them lifted her body, and draped it over the horse’s saddle, and tied it down. Then they mounted up. Io did too. They sat, looking at one another,

“Farewell, Io,” Boiotia said. “Be very careful. We will tell them what happened.”

Makaria nodded. “Io – please come back to us! Don’t you get killed, as well!”

Io smiled grimly.

“Oh – I will be very careful, my sisters.” And she turned her horse, and cantered off down the canyon, towards Amphipolis.

The silent figures of Boiotia and Makaria, and their sad burden, set off toward home.

* * * * *

Xena and Gabrielle pushed their horses hard. They kept at a gallop most of the way, and stayed on the road. They knew that speed was more important than caution, and they wanted to get there as quickly as they could. Fortune was kind – for they saw nothing, and encountered no one. It was as if the whole world was in suspense. They ate and drank as they rode, stopping only for necessity’s calls. On through the day, and deep into the night. A new moon helped with scant light – enough to show the road in a faint way.

At dawn the next morning, they had slowed the horses to a walk, to give them a rest. They didn’t talk, except to croon encouragement to their mounts. They turned aside, finally, to the riverbank, to water the tired steeds, and refill their own water skins.

Gabrielle stoppered the last skin, and sat back on her heels. She sighed, and reaching down, cupped a handful of the cold water, and threw it on her face, rubbing vigorously to help wake herself up. Xena knelt beside her, doing the same. Suddenly, Xena’s head came up, and she lunged to her feet, pulling out her sword with the same motion. She stepped away from the horses, and circled, wary. Gabrielle rose, and moving to her horse, she pulled the staff out of its carrier. She, too moved from the horses, and up next to Xena.

“What is it?” she breathed.

Xena shook her head. “Someone is out there, coming our way. I make , , , three horses. They are not moving very fast.” She waited. Gabrielle could hear them now, too.

Out of the dimness, they saw a somber sight. Boiotia, Makaria, and their mounts came into view. And the other horse, with them. And no sign of Io or Eponin. Xena sheathed her sword, and move to meet them. Gabrielle followed.

“Hola! Where are the others?” Xena asked, reaching up to catch hold of the lead horse’s bridle.

Boiotia looked down at her, the tears and grime clearly visible on her face. She shook her head, and gestured behind her.

“Io went on to Amphipolis. Eponin . . . Eponin . . .” and her voice broke, and she wept again, her head bowed almost to the saddle.

Makaria spoke softly, her eyes on Gabrielle. “We are bringing her home, my Queen.” And she gestured to the horse behind her own.

Gabrielle, in a trance, moved up to the third horse, and put her hand gently on the still form tied there. She bowed her head, and rested it on the fur. Xena came up to her, and held her close, as the tears came.

Then Gabrielle’s head came up, and she spoke, her voice grim.

“Makaria and Boiotia – escort the Regent home. And give her over to the care of Talia and Dika. We are going on to Amphipolis, to find Io. We will come back as soon as we can. Tell Alysia to prepare for Eponin’s Farewell.”

The two Amazons nodded, and set off, leading the third behind them once again.

Gabrielle looked at Xena.

“Xena – my heart is breaking.”

“I know. - so is mine.”

Hours later, they were approaching the outskirts of the town. Gabrielle rode close up to Xena’s horse, and grabbed Xena’s arm.

“Xe?”

“Yeah.”

“How do you want to play this?”

“Thinking about it.” She paused. “Think we’ll have to just do this the old-fashioned way.” She looked side-long at Gabrielle. “We’ll just walk right in See what happens.”

Gabrielle nodded. Then she was distracted, as she gazed in astonishment at the surrounding scene.

“Xe . . . look at this!”

Their heads swiveled around, as they began to take in what they were seeing. The town was all but unrecognizable. The long stretch up from what had been the ford was now packed tight with buildings. The river had been dredged, and a small wharf now sat where the ford had been. Small boats were tied up there. They could see in the distance ahead that there were many more buildings, all around the place where Cyrene’s Inn had once stood alone. They could just see the corner of its roof, amongst the cluttered buildings.

Xena’s mouth gaped, in surprise.

“Whoa! What has happened, here?”

Gabrielle shook her head sadly. “Progress, Xena. Progress. What a wreck!”

She was referring to the trash, and detritus of what had now become a small city. Broken down buildings, old parts of wagons and other mess littered the roadsides. People were stirring. They lounged in the doorways, and they looked unhealthy. They eyed the pair suspiciously. No one greeted them. No one seemed to recognize them.

They rode on, up the hill. Outside the inn, they dismounted, and tied their horses to the rail.

Xena took a deep breath, and looked at Gabrielle.

“Just like old times, huh?” she grimaced. Gabrielle put her hand on Xena’s shoulder.

“Yeah,” she muttered. “Exactly. Well, let’s get this done.”

They stepped up on the porch, and went through the doorway.

Inside, the atmosphere was hazy. The air was blue with smoke, and the sweet smell of it pervaded the room. Gabrielle coughed, her eyes smarting. “Ghaaa – what is that?”

Xena looked grim. “Hashish. Remember India?”

Gabrielle nodded, choking. “Oh Xe, I don’t like the look of this!”

“Neither do I.” She pushed forward through the figures huddled around the filthy tables. The floor was strewn with old straw and discarded food. Gabrielle followed behind her. Coming up to the long counter, Xena confronted the surly-looking fat man standing there, a greasy bit of rag tied around his middle. He was pouring watery-looking ale into a mug. She lunged across the counter, and grabbed a fist-full of his shirt. Pulling him up against the counter, she glared in his face.

“All right, scum, I’m only going to ask this question once. You better have a good answer!”

He looked at her, his mouth gaping open. Gabrielle averted her face – the stench of his breath was overpowering.

“Where is the owner of this place? Where is Toris?” Xena lifted him higher on his toes.

He looked panicky. “I . . . I don’t know who you mean! We got no owner here named Toris!” His eyes rolled in his head.

Xena yanked harder. “Oh yeah? So who owns this place? And where do I find him?”

“I . . . I own this place.” He quailed as her eyebrows drew together in a fierce frown.

“Oh, right!” She hissed. “And how did that come to be?”

“I . . . uh, I got it in dice game . . . about three seasons back! I got it fair!

Ask anybody! The guy who had it was killed in a knife fight!"

Xena's grip slackened, suddenly. Gabrielle gasped, behind her.

Xena let him go, and he slumped back down on his feet. "Aw, you didn't have to do that! I'll serve you anyway! What'll it be?" He looked at her, hopefully. You might as well have somethin' - we'll all be dead, before long, anyway." He leered at her. "Have some of the smoke! It'll take the pain away, when they sweep over us, and we all go straight to Hell!"

Xena muttered. "Keep your swill." She turned away, her face grey in the dim light. Then she turned back on him. "What do you mean, about someone 'sweeping over you'?"

He grinned again, gap-toothed. "The Doom is coming – the Conqueror. Haven't ya heard? Scorched earth – that's all he leaves behind – him and his screaming hordes. We haven't got long – they said he was a half day out, and they're coming fast." He wiped his face, and grabbed at his crotch "Wanta little ride? Passes the time . . ." he smacked his lips.

"Seen anything of a young Amazon, in the past day?" she scowled at him again, ignoring the lewd suggestion.

He backed up quickly against the wall behind him. "N . . . no! No Amazons here!"

"How about young girls? Any young girls about?"

He licked his lips, and nodded. He didn't like the look of this woman – her anger, and the nasty scar that ringed her neck. It stood out, livid against the tanned skin. "Yeah – one . . . she's . . . she's up there." He pointed up above his head. "Have fun – if you like that sort of thing – it's on the house!" He shrugged, as both of the women lunged for the stone steps leading up to the upper floor, and the rooms above. He stared after them, licking his lips nervously.

Taking the steps three at a time, Xena and Gabrielle raced into the long hallway at the top. Xena drew her sword, and began kicking the doors open as she moved down one side. Gabrielle did the same, on the other. Then a shout from Gabrielle. "Here!" she moved into the room, Xena right behind her. In the light of the open window, they saw Io, lying on the filthy bed, her arms and legs tied to the corner posts. Her face was bruised, and she struggled weakly against her bonds.

With the flash of a knife, Xena had her free. Gabrielle put her arms around the sobbing young woman, and held her close, murmuring to her. Xena whirled, and charged back down the hall. The sounds of crashing and shrieks floated up in her wake.

Gabrielle rocked the young woman in her arms. She stroked the sweaty head, bowed against her breast. The sobbing gradually diminished, until Io was quiet. Gabrielle kept on rocking. It got quiet, down below. Then she could hear Xena's steps, returning. The dark warrior came back into the room. She sat down next to Gabrielle, and put her arms around them both.

"Its over." She said, flatly. "I gave them some real pain to remember this by. They'll all be singing the high notes, from now on."

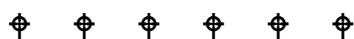
"Io?" Gabrielle whispered. "Can you walk? We need to get out of here."

Io tried to nod, but her head lolled against Gabrielle's shoulder, and her chest still heaved with silent sobs, her breathing ragged. She seemed too shaky to stand.

Gabrielle looked at Xena. Xena stood, and in one motion, she swept the young woman up in her arms, and carried her from the room. Gabrielle retrieved her staff, and followed. They descended to the first floor, and picked their way past the broken tables and benches - the groaning forms littered among the wreckage - and out into the sun. Xena swung Io up into her saddle, and then pulled herself up behind the young woman. She put her arms around her, and picked up the reins.

Gabrielle mounted her own horse, and they galloped off down the long hill to the docks, and on down the road out of town.

As they rode, Xena crooned a low, wordless song into the ear of the young woman slumped in her arms. She kissed the bowed head, and they rode on. Beside her, Gabrielle - grim-faced, and silent.



Chapter 10

Althaia and her companions worked their way back down the mountain from the place where they had left the old Amazon. They looked back, and saw her on the slope above them, now astride the weird goat. She held up her staff, and circled it over her head, once, in farewell.

They talked, as they rode.

“Well, that has to be the strangest thing I’ve ever seen!” One of them laughed. “Was she real, or did we imagine her?”

Althaia nodded. “Oh, she’s real, all right. She’s probably the Mother of us all! Anybody want to bet how old she really is?”

The laughed. “O, no – Althaia. What do you think?”

Althaia grinned. “Oh, I’d say at least three hundred seasons!”

They chuckled. Then got silent. One turned, and looked back one more time. “I wonder . . . what did she mean, about the Doom? And about there not being much time? And she seemed certain that we’d all come back here. What do you think about that?”

Althaia frowned. “I think we’d better quit loitering, and get our feathered Amazon tails back to the village. Xena and Gabrielle need to hear what she had to say – and we need to get that message back to them quickly. Let’s ride, my sisters! We’ll take the shortest route, this time!” And they kicked their horses into a gallop.

* * * * *

Paphos and Kythereia were up in a huge cedar tree, on the outskirts of the village. A platform, hidden in the branches, provided them with a flat area to perch, while they kept look-out. As they kept their eyes on the surrounding area, Paphos listened, while Kythereia quoted her the Amazon Laws, which she murmured in a whisper – since they were really supposed to be being quiet, and hidden.

Suddenly, Kythereia’s voice died away, and she tugged at Paphos’ elbow.

“Look, oh – look!” She pointed. Through the branches, they could see

three horses approaching, and two figures. Paphos gave the birdcall, to alert the watchers on the gate that riders approached. Then they watched, as the figures came closer. They both launched themselves down through the branches, landing in a crouch at the base of the huge trunk, and moved up to meet them. It was Makaria and Boiotia. They reined in their mounts, and sat, slumped.

“Hola! Where are the others?” Kythereia asked.

Boiotia looked bleakly at them. She gestured back the way they had come. “Xena and Gabrielle went after Io . . .” she murmured, her voice hoarse. “We . . . we are escorting . . . Eponin.” Her voice died away, and she hunched over in the saddle, hugging herself.

Paphos and Kythereia, their eyes wondering, stepped past Boiotia’s mount, and looked up at Makaria. The woman’s face was ravaged with grief. She stared at them, and it was evident that she was near exhaustion. They’re eyes moved to the rider-less horse, tethered on its lead, behind Makaria’s mount. The form, covered in fur and tied onto the saddle, drew them close.

Paphos reached out her hand, and touched the soft fur. She licked her lips, her throat suddenly dry.

“Oh . . . Oh, NO . . . !” she whispered. Kythereia’s sudden sobbing sounded behind her.

Then Paphos took the tether, and untied it from Makaria’s saddle. Kythereia followed, as they slowly made their way to the gates. Stopping in front of them, they looked up at the two faces, peering down at them from above.

“Open the gates!” Boiotia called out. “The Regent of the Last Amazon Tribe has come home.”

The faces disappeared, as urgent high-pitched ululations sounded, and the gates swung open. Amazons came running from all directions, as the Regent’s body was ushered into the compound.

Talia appeared, pushing her way through the standing figures. Halting suddenly, she groaned, and sank to her knees on the ground, her head bowed in grief. All she could hear was ‘Poni’s voice, laughing, and her last words, “*O, don’t worry about me,*” - “*I always come back!*”

She whispered, through her tears, “O yes, my love, you do.” And she dragged herself up, and followed her to the House of Healing, and the last intimate devotions she could do, for the love of her life.

* * * * *

Io woke up, suddenly, disoriented. She hazily realized that she was no longer on a horse. She looked around, as everything slowly came into focus. She was in a cave. She could hear a fire crackling, nearby, and the lights and shadows danced on the cold stone walls. She turned her head, and saw two figures, seated nearby. Xena and Gabrielle.

She moaned, and closed her eyes again. Every part of her hurt. She felt weak, and thirsty.

Gabrielle and Xena both stood, and moved over next to her. Gabrielle bent over, and wiped Io’s forehead with a cool cloth.

“Io,” she called, in a low, gentle voice. Io could hear her, but couldn’t seem to speak. She heard Gabrielle, now talking to Xena. “I think she’s coming around. Will the herbs make her sick, do you think?” Xena’s voice, soft, answered. “Yes, they will. We’d best be ready. Do you have that water skin?”

Io suddenly had the overwhelming urge to retch. She thrashed, and tried to turn, and Gabrielle quickly helped her roll onto her side. She was sick, onto flat stone floor next to where she lay.

She groaned again. And was sick, again. Then she realized that she also had terrible cramps, and moaned, and clutched her belly with her hands. Gabrielle soothed her, murmuring.

“It’s going to be all right, Io. You’ll feel better, soon.” And she held out her hand, and Xena gave her some soft, wet, clean cloths. Io felt Gabrielle’s hands pulling at her kilt. She moaned again, trying feebly to fight off the assault.

“Hush, it’s all right, Io. I need to help you, now. Let me help you. I promise, I won’t hurt you.” She pulled up Io’s kilt, and pulled down her breeches. She washed between Io’s legs, careful to take her time, and use only gentle touches; then pulled up the breeches, and refastened the kilt.

Io moaned again, and clutched her belly, as another wave of nausea came rolling up. When it had passed, Gabrielle held a water skin up to her lips, and Io sucked thirstily at it. Breathless, she sagged back. But the nausea now seemed to be going away. They had given her the bitter herbs, to purge her of any trace of the vile men who had ravaged her so cruelly.

Xena's voice sounded again. "Io, you are safe here. No one will come near you. I've taken care of the bastards. They won't hurt anyone, ever again!" Io could hear the anguish in Xena's voice. She weakly put up her hand. She felt Xena's large, warm hand take hold of hers. She dizzily opened her eyes, and saw both women's faces, hovering anxiously above her.

"Th . . . thank you!" she whispered. "Oh, my Queen! I'm so sorry! I . . . I failed you! And Eponin!" She wailed, and covered her face. And wept. They held her then, and rocked her in their arms and comforted her in her grief.

* * * * *

Half a day later they returned to the village. They found the Tribe in shock. A team of three Amazons were working on yet another pyre, piling the long, fragrant cedar branches against the sides of the platform. Their motions seemed leaden. Xena jumped down from her saddle, and then turned and helped Io down. Gabrielle also dismounted. Two women ran up and took the horses. They would unload their things and drop them at the Queen's hut. Walking slowly, they helped Io to the Healer's House. As they entered the cool quiet room, they saw Talia and Dika, standing near the bier where Eponin lay.

Xena stopped, and picked up Io, cradling her in her arms. She moved over to an empty cot, and lay Io down on it. "Stay here," she murmured. "I'll send Dika over to you." She
Went to Dika, and whispered in her ear.

"Dika, you must go to Io, now – she needs you badly." Dika hurried over, and sat on the cot next to her friend. She put her arms around the haggard figure, and hugged her close.

Xena crossed to the two figures, standing bowed over the body of Eponin. They had lovingly prepared her. The smell of lavender was

strong, and Xena realized that they had packed her with it, to soothe her waiting, until they could bid her a final farewell. She leaned over, and kissed the cold lips, and smoothed the still brow.

“Eponin, you are our own, our own - and we have lost part of our hearts, now – that we will not regain, until we see you again, in the Amazon Fields. Take care of our hearts, Eponin! We will come to reclaim them, soon enough!”

Gabrielle broke down, and wept. Xena held her close, and through the fabric of Gabrielle’s tunic, she could feel the fiery heat of the dragon lines, throbbing under her touch. She soothed her hands over them,, again and again, until Gabrielle calmed.

Xena embraced Talia, and spoke to her. “Talia, I am sorry. I am sorry.”

Talia looked up at them, her face ravaged. “Xena – it would have come, soon enough. She died as she lived, serving us. And serving her Queen. She died with honor.” And she, too, kissed the brow of Eponin.

Gabrielle leaned into her love. “Take us home, Xe.” She whispered.

They wearily entered the Queen’s lodge. Their packs had been deposited on the floor inside the doorway. They stumbled past them. Xena stripped off the scabbard and sword, and dropped them on the floor. They sank onto the bed. Wrapped in one another’s arms, they pulled the furs up, and fell into an exhausted sleep.

A scant two candle-marks later, Gabrielle dragged her way up into consciousness. It was dark. She immediately realized that she was alone in the bed. She leaned over, and fumbled for her flints, to light a candle. She heard Xena’s voice, low, from across the room.

“Leave, it, Gabrielle. Please. No light.”

Gabrielle got up, and felt her way across to the voice. Xena was sitting on the low cushioned platform, before the fireplace. A low, banked pile of coals were flickering. She saw Xena, silhouetted against the glow. She sat down next to her, and put her hand lightly on Xena’s back.

“Did you sleep, at all, Xe?”

“Barely,” She shifted restlessly. “Gabrielle, we have to move fast, now. I don’t know how long we’ve got, until all Hades breaks loose. And I need to know what you intend to do, because that will determine what *I* do, about this.” She stroked Gabrielle’s cheek “We’ve got to come to a decision, my love.”

Gabrielle leaned into Xena’s hand. “I know.” She gazed into the heart of the fire. The warmth felt comforting. She held her hands out. “It seems so strange, to be comforted by this fire – when it is likely fire that will destroy all that we love.”

“I think we are going to have to run.” She said, finally, her voice breaking.

Xena nodded. “Yes, I know. I think so, too.” She turned, and put her arms around Gabrielle. “The question is; will they follow us? Can we get the Tribe away, in time? If what that creep said is true, then we will be helpless, before them. They’ve got Greek fire. They’ll burn the Grove. They’ll burn the village. They’ll burn everything.”

Gabrielle nodded, and sighed desolately. “Well, I’d best gather everyone together, then. And get them started. We’ll have to leave Eponin behind. There won’t be time for the ceremonies.” She got up, and walked to the doorway. “I’ll see you out there.” Xena handed her the strap, and the katana, and her fighting stick. She started grimly donning her armor.

Gabrielle went out. She crossed the courtyard, and stopped beside the tall framework next to the platform that held the Queen’s chair. This held a large metal gong. She picked up the striker, swung it and hit the gong forcefully. The loud reverberating tone echoed in the still air of the night. She struck it again. Figures began to come out of the various lodges, headed her way. She struck it a third time. Then she mounted the platform, and stood before her chair. A torch flickered, and then others, as they were lit by the Amazons. The crowd of them increased rapidly.. She waited, as the last stragglers arrived. Xena appeared silently, next to her.

“My Sisters!” she called out. “Come in close – I have much to say, and little time in which to say it!”

The Amazons gathered around, silent in the flickering torchlight..

“We are in dire trouble, my sisters! You all know, now, what has

happened to Eponin, and to Io. We have also discovered that a huge and rampaging army is headed our way. They will begin to enter our territory within only two candle-marks from now. And with them, they bring total and utter destruction. They are following a scorched-earth policy, and they have by now left Amphipolis in ruins! They will not stop, and we cannot stop them. And so we must depart from this home, and find another. And we must move quickly!”

“But what of Eponin?” someone cried out, in the crowd. “We have not yet sent her on her way!”

Gabrielle gripped her staff, her knuckles white. “I know, my Sister. And I am sorry for it. But she will go, nonetheless. And the burning of our village, and the Sacred Grove, will be enough to send her, will it not?” She gazed compassionately down on their upturned faces. “I know how hard this must seem, and cold, But we must do what Eponin would have wanted us to do. We must leave her to guard our Grove, and we must go on, and live, and thrive, as she would have surely helped us to do, had she been able to come with us.”

She lifted her head, and her voice grew louder. “Go, now, and gather anything you can carry on your own persons, and on your horses! Bring only the clothes on your backs, and bring your weapons! Talia and Dika, gather as much of your healing herbs and medicines, and get Io onto one of the wagons. Kythereia and Alysia, secure the Amazon Law scrolls, Paphos, gather up the scrolls from my quarters, and get them into my scroll cases, and strap them to your horse. Those of you who are the Honor Guards! Issue weapons to all everyone! Elders! I will put you in charge of gathering our goat herd. Rope them all together! And have some of our sisters to help you load as much foodstuffs as possible into the wagons. Xena and I will see to Eponin. We must be ready to move out in one candle mark! So speed to your tasks, my Amazons! And every one of you - be sure to have your own full water skin! Do not tarry!”

They all sprang into action.

Gabrielle sagged, leaning on her staff. She looked at Xena, who stood, watching the scurrying figures.

“Well, Xe.” she said. “Let’s take Eponin to the Grove, shall we?”

Xena nodded, and they stepped down off the platform, and walked to the Healer’s Lodge. A short time later, Xena emerged from the doorway, carrying in her arms the body of their friend. Gabrielle walked behind,

carrying the Warrior's mask, and her weapons. They disappeared in the gloom of the forest.

When they reached the sacred circle of sarsen stones, Xena gently laid Eponin down on the altar of Artemis. She smoothed the hair on Eponin's head, and gently laid the Amazon mask over her face. Gabrielle kissed the cold folded hands, and whispered something, as she bent for the last time over her friend; then gently placed her weapons at her side.

Then they turned, and walked together to the silent statue of the Goddess. Gabrielle put her hand on Xena's arm, and they stopped. She looked silently up at the looming figure, standing so quiet in the night.

"Artemis, we are leaving your servant Eponin, last Regent of the Last Tribe of the Amazons, to guard over your Sacred Grove, for as long as she can, until the cleansing fires send her on her way to her Just Reward. Please watch over her, Artemis, and kiss her on her way! And do not think too harshly of our departure. We must try to save your Amazons for yet a little while longer, in this cold world. I pledge to you, that we will do everything in our power to make it so." She stiffly brought her arm up across her chest, and then walked away, her Soulmate at her side. Neither one of them saw the small figure that crossed behind them, and sat at the side of the altar, deep in shadow, her long staff at her side.

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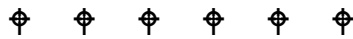
Within the candle-mark, they mounted their own horses, at the head of the throng of heavily laden Amazons. Gabrielle turned in the saddle, and surveyed the large group of silent women. She searched, until she had found Dika, and Io, and Paphos and Kythereia. They watched, silently awaiting the signal.

Gabrielle looked at Xena. "Well, my dear Heart, where shall we go?"

Xena looked searchingly at her. "We will follow Althaia. To the Aegean Sea." She said, and she gave the signal. And the Last Tribe of Amazons moved out, behind their Queen, and her Consort. The silent, deserted village lay behind them. The future loomed, ahead.

* * * * *

In the quiet Grove, the small figure moved, and sighed. The stone was hard, where she sat, and she decided that she would be more comfortable sitting in the Chair of Artemis. She laboriously got to her feet, patted a loving hand on the breast of the sleeping Warrior; then huffed over, and sat down in the embrace of the carved stone throne. She stretched her arms on the low armrests, and sighed. It felt good. Comfortable - even. Her head nodded. She just wasn't used to all these late night activities, any more. An old woman shouldn't have to put up with it. She deserved her rest. She'd have to complain to Gabrielle, in the morning . . . her head nodded, and she fell asleep. The silent stone Goddess, looming behind her, smiled a secret, granite smile.



Chapter 11

The Amazons pushed hard. They wanted to get as far from their valley, and the Grove, as possible, by the dawn. Xena kept them at a brisk pace. About an hour had passed, since they left the village.

Dika, Paphos and Kythereia were riding together, near the back of the caravan. They were silent, for the most part, thinking about everything that had happened to them.

Kythereia suddenly straightened up, and then stood in her stirrups, and scanned the heads of the women walking and riding ahead of them. She turned in agitation to Dika.

“Dika, Paphos! Look closely! Do you see Ephegnia, anywhere?”

They did the same: standing up in the saddles, they scanned the women, horses, goats and wagons ahead and behind them. They shook their heads.

“No – nowhere . . . are you sure she's not in one of the wagons – maybe the one with Io in it?” Dika asked.

“I don’t see her there – the wagon with Io is just ahead.” She turned.
“And the other one is back there.” She pointed.

Paphos looked at the other two women. “Do you suppose she stayed behind? Maybe she got confused, and is still back there!”

They looked at one another, and then, they instinctively pulled up, and cut their horses out of the crowd, off to the side of the road. They looked at each other, and the same thing telegraphed among them. As the last of the caravan passed them, they turned their horses, and took off down the road, back toward the village.

They rode hard, full out. They knew they were going to be cutting it close. As they neared the valley, they began to see a deep orange glow against the skyline. The trees that rimmed the valley showed as jagged black silhouetted against the sky. They cast worried glances at one another, but rode on.

As they approached the rim of the valley, they pulled up their horses, aghast. The village was down, ahead of them, at the sheltered end of the valley. And it was alight. Flames leaped high into the darkness. Small figures danced and careened in the light. Fearsome frameworks ringed the village, and as they watched, horrified, they saw fiery molten balls of Greek fire being launched at the ancient trees.

“We’re too late!” Paphos moaned. But Kythereia yelled back, “NO! I bet she is in the sacred Circle, with Eponin! That hasn’t burned, yet. See?” She pointed. The fire, it was true, was only approaching the Grove. They could see the outermost wall of trunks beginning to be tasted by the licking flames.

They wheeled their horses, and set off at a gallop, circling around to the right of the valley, so as to approach the Grove from the side, and cutting around the burning inferno of their homes.

* * * * *

Gabrielle and Xena called a brief halt, to water the horses at the stream,

before they turned down the ravine that led east to the Sea. They rode back down the line of silent figures. As they neared the back of the group, Gabrielle, agitated, began to frantically search the faces of the Amazon riders.

“What is it?” Xena asked. Then her head too began to turn, as she scanned the riders and wagons. “Where are they, Gabrielle?”

Gabrielle turned, frantic with worry. “I don’t see them, Xe!” She trotted the horse to the end. Then she halted, and whirled around. “They’re gone! O, Xena! What have they done?”

Xena looked back down the dark road. She shook her head. Then she turned, and shouted for Alysia.

“Yes, Xena? What is it?” Alysia brought her horse up to where they sat.

“Alysia, we need you to take charge, and keep the Tribe moving as fast as you can. Xena and I have to go back. Dika, Paphos, and Kythereia are missing!”

Xena muttered, shaking her head,

“What, Xe?” Gabrielle asked.

“And Ephegnia,” she added. “Ephegnia is gone, too.”

And she and Gabrielle clapped their legs against their horses’ sides, and took off back down the road to home.

* * * * *

The three young Amazons threw themselves off their horses, shortly after they arrived under the canopy of the ancient trees. They led the beasts through the silent matriarchs, aware of the sharp odor of smoke that was sifting through the clearings, and the distant sound of crackling and snapping, and the background roar of flames from the village. And it was getting hot. They coughed, too, as the smoke reached their lungs. They cut through the forest, and came in closer to the sacred Circle from behind it. As the approached the clearing where the sarsen stones kept

their vigil, they could hear the thump as the fireballs landed among the trees. And worse, they heard the yells and sounds of men, carousing, from the clearing ahead of them.

They burst out of the trees, moving quickly to the stones, and took shelter behind them. They cautiously peered around them, to see a sight that curdled their blood. Five gesticulating figures, clanking in their armor, capered and cavorted around the altar of Athena, drunkenly singing and shouting. They danced and jeered around the silent figure lying on the altar. And beyond the altar, they could see a huddled form, seated in the Throne of the Goddess, her head at a broken angle, like a discarded doll. They came charging out from behind the sarsen stones, their weapons drawn, ululating a piercing Amazon challenge, as they swept down on the desecrators. They surprised the louts, who whirled and staggered, so drunk they could hardly function. And the men were cut down where they stood. Dika then ran to the Throne, and bent over the still form. She wailed, as she gathered the old body close in her arms. But Ephegnia was gone from them.

Paphos and Kythereia ran over to the altar, and stood on either side, weapons ready, in case any more should come to disturb the rest of their Regent. They were desperate, because they could not think of leaving, as long as the forest was swarming with the raging hordes, and yet, the fire drew ever nearer. They could see the big trees beginning to burn, and the odor of the sweet cedar smoke was thick. And the air was getting too hot to breathe. They looked at one another, and the grim reality of their likely end dawned on them, and their fear rose up in their throats. The roaring of the flames got louder. Great tongues of flame shot up, up, higher than the mighty treetops, in the sky above them. Dika carried Ephegnia's body over, and laid it down next to Eponin. And then they embraced one another, and made their peace. They stood, guarding their own, and awaited the end. And then first one, and then another, fell over and succumbed to the overwhelming heat.

* * * * *

Then, as the last figure was close to passing out, two racing figures burst out into the clearing. Xena and Gabrielle - moving swiftly - each grabbed an arm of the remaining figure, and yanked her urgently towards the far

side of the clearing - away from the village. They were shouting, but the sound of the fire was too loud, and they could no make themselves heard above it. The two women were soaking wet. They had doused themselves in the river, before entering the inferno. Gabrielle carried a dripping wet blanket bundled under her arm. She shook it out, and threw it over the young woman's head; then they led her, coughing and retching, off through the trees, as fast as they could manage, ever deeper, eastward, into the forest. They kept moving, stumbling and gasping, until they reached a spot that seemed familiar to Gabrielle. They stopped at a huge fallen tree, and as they bent over, trying to get their breaths, Gabrielle realized where they were, and pointed. Ahead of them was the deep hole; the place where Io had fallen and Kypris had died. And Xena and Gabrielle, urging her with frantic hands, pushed her to the edge. They turned themselves; and hanging by their hands, they all dropped down into the hole. Once they recovered from the jarring landing, they had her move up against the side of the hole that was deepest, and urged her to lie down, and cover herself completely with the wet, clammy material.

As the roaring got louder, and the heat more intense, there was just enough time for Gabrielle to throw herself on top of Xena, wrapping her arms around her. Burying her head in Xena's neck, she prayed to all the Gods and Goddesses in the Universe to look after them now. She felt the wet material of her tunic hiss, as the water evaporated from the cloth. She felt the cloth begin to disintegrate, and she could smell the stench, as the hair on her head began to smoke.. She screamed, then, as the dragon finally awoke, and lashed its tail, and flexed its claws, and roared out its challenge to the God of Fire, and the fire in its belly shot out of its gaping jaws, as it leaped from its crouching place on her back, to meet the advancing flames. And Gabrielle saw darkness, and fell into it.

* * * * *

The fire raged for an entire day. And at the end, when it had turned everything into a deep drift of ashes and stinking black snags, and charred lumps that might have once been a familiar mossy spot, or a pool of hot water, or an altar, or a standing stone, or a gentle horse, or a beloved home; only devastation remained.

And deep in the silent, smoking bed of ash, a black hole yawned. And

from down inside it, came a sound of coughing, and gagging, and gasping. A huddled shape moved, and then erupted from under the covering that had sheltered her, and clouds of ash rose up in the air, as the figure staggered to her feet, and looked around in wonder. Then she stumbled over to two bodies, a little way off, and still lying prone. These had no covering but they just seemed to be sleeping. The slight, wiry form of the shorter woman lay, covering the larger, lankier woman. The silvery blonde hair of the one on top was lightly singed, and blackened on the tips. Her back was bare, the cloth having burned right off, in the conflagration. And as she huddled next to the figures, she gasped, to see what had happened. For on Gabrielle's back there was a new image. It was sea-green, with iridescent blue-green scales, and it was also a dragon – but this image was different. It was curled, its long tail tucked under itself, its claws retracted. And its head rested on its own coiled body, and it seemed asleep. And her skin was untouched; - clear, and healthily tanned, but otherwise unharmed. Lying under her, Xena was also unharmed – but her clothing was in shreds. And her hair was now completely white. Her arms were wrapped around her lover, and she breathed peacefully. The young woman stood, awed by the image. Then she knelt beside the figures, and prayed to the Goddess Within her, and thanked Her for their salvation; and grieved for the loss of her friends. And as she finished, the two figures stirred, and sat up, and looked at her, and at one another. And fell into each other's eyes.

* * * * *

As they made their way through the devastation, they spoke little. Xena was wrapped in the robe, until they could retrieve their horses, and she could dig out some clothes for herself. The young Amazon was very quiet. They came up on the cave, northeast of the grove, where Gabrielle and Xena had sheltered their horses, and Xena gave a low whistle, and they heard the horses, blowing and whickering, within the deep entrance. They went inside, and Xena immediately handed them water skins, and they drank thirstily all around. Then Xena pulled some clothes from her saddle bag, and dressed herself once again. Gabrielle hugged Paphos to her, and stroked her cheek, and gentled her, as they waited.

“Paphos, I am so sorry. I wanted to save you all . . .” Gabrielle stopped, her voice breaking with sorrow.

“No! My Queen! You did all that you could! It was our fault – we should

have just stayed with the Tribe. We were fools!” she burst into tears.

Xena came over, and put her arm around Paphos. ‘No, young one, don’t fret. You were all very brave, to go back for Ephegnia. No one else cared as deeply as you. Don’t count that as foolish. You were heroic, in your defense of what was most dear to you. Artemis would have been proud of you – and so would Ephegnia – and Eponin.”

The young woman looked up, through her tears. She seemed awed, once again, at the two women standing so naturally with her. For it seemed to her that they must be Goddesses. She shook her head in amazement. “How did you survive, like that? Do you know – how . . . how much you have changed?”

The two women looked at one another, their eyes gazing deep, And they smiled, and looked again. Xena walked toward Gabrielle, and then moved around her, looking at her as if for the first time. She stopped, behind, and reached out her hand, and touched Gabrielle’s back. And she moved up behind the quiet woman, and put her hand on the dragon, stoking it with her fingers. “It is so beautiful, my Love,” she whispered. “I will describe him to you, later.” And Gabrielle smiled, and bowed her head. Xena handed her a new tunic, and Gabrielle pulled it on, over her head. Xena ran her hand thorough the back of Gabrielle’s hair, and spoke again. “And I’ll trim off the singed tips, when we get to our first camp. You’ll have to have a shorter cut, for a while, until it grows back.” And she dragged her fingers down Gabrielle’s neck, as she moved around to face her. And then they kissed. Paphos shyly averted her eyes, and gave them their privacy.

And Gabrielle put up her hands, and gently traced the wide, banded scar around Xena’s neck, that had somehow acquired the same pattern as her original chakram had borne, the patches of light and dark forming the pattern of the original etched geometrics. And she ran her fingers of both hands through Xena’s hair, and pulled it gently within Xena’s view, so that Xena could see its transformation, as well. Xena’s still coal-black eyebrows furrowed in surprise, as she looked down at the snowy white, slightly wavy hair. And she looked up at Gabrielle in shock, her eyes slightly glazed, And Gabrielle smiled, and kissed her again, deeply, and put her arms around the rigid body, and coaxed it into her embrace.

“It’s all right Love.” she whispered. “You are drop-dead gorgeous, now!”

They rested briefly, in the sheltering cave, while they ate some trail food, and drank more water. They were all powerfully thirsty from the effects

of the heat, and the long wait for the ash to be cool enough to get out of the pit.

They rode the horses single file through the drifting, smoking ash of the ruined forest. Paphos sat up behind Gabrielle, her arms around her Queen, and her head pressed against the warm back. She daydreamed about the dragon that lay sleeping, just below her ear, as her head rested there. And she slept. Gabrielle held the arms wrapped around her close, and smiled.

They made their way slowly through the ring of sarsen stones. There was no trace left of any of the bodies – neither Eponin nor Ephegnia; Dika, nor Kythereia. They were completely vaporized by the intense heat of the fire. The drunken men were gone, as well. The statue of Artemis loomed up, its surface shiny, where the intense heat had melted the surface of the rock. The sarsens were similarly coated. And when they arrived at what was left of the village, they stopped in utter dismay. It had burned to the ground. Only a pile of ashes lay in each location where once a building had stood. And the horses that the girls had ridden in on were also apparent victims of the inferno. Xena rode her horse over by Gabrielle, who had stopped and was looking down at what was left of their lodge.

“The scrolls are all gone, Xe.” She said, quietly. “All of them.”

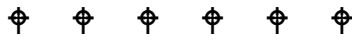
Xena nodded. “Well, yes; - except for the ones in Athens, my Love. And Now you have Paphos – so you will make them, anew.”

Gabrielle smiled, sadly. “O, yes – we will. But I have lost forever the one from Sappho. “

“Yes – but I will sing it to you, any time you wish to hear it again, my Bard.”

“You have it by heart?” Gabrielle gazed at her, the love pouring out of her face like a sunbeam.

“By heart,” Xena nodded, gravely. And they moved on, leaving the ruins behind them, forever. They had to move cautiously, now, because the Conqueror’s horde was between them and their Tribe. And they didn’t want to run into one, and miss the other. They took a more northerly route, up into the hills; and could they have known, they were tracing Althaia’s route almost exactly.



Chapter 12

The Tribe continued on its way, meanwhile, pressing at a furious pace, so as not to be overrun by the armies of the Conqueror. They pushed on, almost to the point of exhaustion; and without knowing if their Queen and Consort, let alone the others, would ever come back to them.

As they neared the coast, they slowed. Maybe it as just fatigue, but also, Alysia and the Council were getting more and more uneasy about the time passing without the return of the Queen and Xena. They conferred, and decided that they would try to find a secluded spot to make camp, and there wait the outcome of the search for the lost Amazons. They luckily found a good place, easily defended, on a wooded hill that also had a strangely beautiful rock formation. It looked like a seated figure, with a crown. They pulled in close to the base of the hill, and hid themselves in amongst the many large rocks that lay tumbled around. Alysia sent look-outs up onto the formation, so they could keep watch in all directions – both for the return of Gabrielle and Xena, and for the Army, and even for Althaia and Laodameia. And the vigil began.

Three days passed, and still there was no sign. They were restless, and some of the younger Amazons began to grumble and agitate to be moving on. Several arguments broke out. In the middle of one, a hawk cry from one of the lookouts brought them swiftly up to where the scout was hidden. She pointed to the north, and they could see four Amazon ponies and their riders traveling at a fast pace, and coming their way. They went back down the hill, and Alysia mounted her horse, and rode out to meet them.

Alysia's horse burst from the shelter of the hill, and move toward the approaching figures. They converged, giving the Amazon salute and laughing with astonished glee.

“Alysia!” Althaia called out to her. “Hola! What brings you out this far?”

Alysia shook her head. “Let’s get back under cover, Althaia. We’ve got a ravaging army on our tails. And we’ve got almost the entire Tribe, over by that hill.” She gestured toward the rocky height.

Althaia shook her head in amazement. “Whoa! All right. Let’s go, you three.” And they cantered off toward the rocks. As they rode, Althaia spoke.

“I’ve got important news for Xena and Gabrielle,” she said. “We met up with the strangest person! And she had a message for them. She called them by name!”

Alysia nodded, distracted. “Well, if they ever come back to us, maybe you can tell them,” she muttered, and then let loose a weary sigh. “I’m sorry, I’m just exhausted. We are all exhausted. It’s been terrible, Althaia. We’ve been traveling without stopping for four days. Paphos, Kythereia, Dika and Ephegnia got separated from the Tribe, and Xena and Gabrielle went back for them. And the horde was just about to descend upon the village, as we left! They said it had already swept over Amphipolis, and left only scorched earth – so we don’t have much hope that any of them will come back.”

As they dismounted from their horses, Alysia took them over to a group that was seated in a circle around a hot, smokeless fire. They were heating up some stew, and they poured the women some herb tea, and welcomed them back safely. They sat, in the shade, and stretched out, resting their weary bodies. Many of the Amazons were asleep, trying to recover from their fatigue.

Toward dusk, another hawk cry went up, this time from a lookout facing West. They sent up a runner, who soon returned with the news that two riders were coming, fast, and it looked like at least one horse had doubled up riders. They were still too far out to tell who they were. The excitement in the camp was palpable.

Finally, the suspense was over; the cry of the merlin went up, followed by the sound of the mourning dove. It was Xena and the Queen. And one other. Their horses rounded the base of the hill, and they all stood, and gaped, as the riders came into sight.

Gabrielle stopped her horse, and let Paphos down gently. Then she dismounted herself. And behind them, Xena’s horse came up, and the tall figure slipped from the saddle. Bringing the reins over the horse’s head,

she caught Gabrielle's mount's reins, as well. Then she turned, and gestured for one of the Amazons to take them. They were all standing speechless, at the sight of her white head.

Gabrielle came forward, and embraced Alysia. Then, seeing Althaia, her exhausted face broke into a smile, and she hugged the tough, tattooed woman to her, murmuring greetings and exclaiming over her. Xena advanced, and grasped the woman's arm. Then they greeted the other three wanderers. Gabrielle finally caught sight of Io, who was hanging back a bit from the bustling, milling figures. She went up to the young Amazon, and pulled her close. Then she turned, and gestured for Paphos, and Paphos and Io clung to one another, and cried. And Gabrielle put her hands on both their shoulders, and counseled them to care for one another, since they were the last of the friends.

Gabrielle then turned to the assembled women of the Tribe, and spoke.

"My sisters, we have managed to return to you, but at a terrible price. You don't have to know much, to see that we are diminished. When we are all safe again, I will be able to share our story with you. But now, I must beg you to let us get some rest, before we all have to move on. Alysia, will you continue your excellent watch over our Tribe, while we try to recover with a few candle-marks of sleep?"

Xena and Gabrielle wearily found a secluded spot, behind some large boulders, and threw down their kits. They spread out the furs, and cast themselves down on them in relief. Xena, on her back, held out her arm, and Gabrielle lay down next to her, and curled into her side, and lay her head on Xena's shoulder. Xena pulled the fur up over them both. She sighed.

"I think I got a lot older on this journey, my Gabrielle," she murmured, her lips close to Gabrielle's head.

Gabrielle hugged her tightly, and whispered back. "The better to love me, my dear."

And Xena, as she drifted off into a well-deserved rest, muttered. "The chakram and the dragon . . . and my silver head."

* * * * *

At morning's light, they were all packed up, and gathered together before the start of the last leg of their journey. Xena and Gabrielle were waiting for the last of the Tribe to join the throng surrounding them, as they stood in one of the wagons. Finally, they were all there.

"Amazons!" Gabrielle saluted them. "We have managed to escape the army of Doom, but not without cost. We have lost some of our dearest kin: Eponin, Ephegnia, Kythereia and Dika were protecting the Sacred Grove, and the Altar of Athena was their final resting place. You can rest secure that they must surely have gone quickly to the Amazon Fields, escorted by our greatest Queens and Regents, for such noble sacrifice is honored even there! And we who are left behind will sing their praises, and honor them - as the Heroes they were - with their stories, when we have reached our final destination And we will long grieve their noble sacrifice."

"Now I must tell you that we have got word, brought to us by Althaia and her companions, from one whom we do not know, but whom we honor nonetheless: for She is the Mother of all the Amazons! She has been waiting, season upon long season, in her rocky fastness north of here, for us to come wandering, adrift from our home, and desperate for direction. And see how the long-awaited thing has come to pass! We are going to go to her, my sisters, so that we may bring her with us – to our new home!"

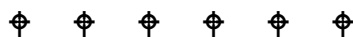
"Where is that, our Queen?" someone in the throng called out.

And Xena, rising tall beside Gabrielle, turned, and pointed northeast. "Lemnos!" she cried out. "Lemnos; that we will make the Isle of the Amazons! It lies in the middle of the Aegean Sea, close by the fabled Isle of Lesbos, home of the Poet Sappho."

And there was a roar, as the Amazons shot their fists into the air, and cried out their approval.

Gabrielle spoke again. "Well and good, my Amazons! So let us not tarry here any longer! Let us ride North, and meet our Foremother, and then on to Lemnos!"

And they struck out to the North, on the last leg of their journey – home.



Chapter 13

The old woman muttered to her self, and to her goat, as she sat on the rough stones of the old wall. The bees were buzzing in the wildflowers, and she could hear the sound of the crickets that liked to live in the cool cracks between the stones. The goat shook its bearded head, bleating and making the small bell tied around its neck chime sweetly.

“Oh, don’t fuss so much, Amalthea! You never were very good at waiting!” She chuffed and scratched the flat front of Amalthea’s nose. The goat playfully butted up against her hand.

The sun felt good on her old bones. She stretched her legs out, and sighed blissfully. It was so much easier, now – the waiting. Now that she knew that the Amazon Tribe was on its way to her, and she would finally be able to go home. Each Foremother had lived here, in turn, passing on the responsibility to her successor: to wait until the Warrior and the Bard would come out of the South, with their Tribe, and pass over to Lemnos. Each Foremother had spent their span of three-hundred seasons the same way she had – waiting, sightless, with the Goat Amalthea - in the sanctuary of the Old Goddess’s temple.

She suddenly stood, her keen ears picking up the sound of horses – many of them, by her count. They were making their way up the side of her mountain. She sat back down again.

“Not long, now, Dearie,” she cackled, her face wreathed in a smile. She folded her hands, leaned against Amalthea’s warm wooly coat, and nodded off into sleep.

About half a candle-mark later, Xena and Gabrielle rode into the bowl of the little valley, at whose far end stood the ruins of the old temple, and the gnarled grove of ancient trees that surrounded it. Althaia rode with them, as guide. The rest of the Tribe waited, further down the slopes of the mountain. The three women approached the ruins, Xena and Gabrielle looking around in great interest at the scene. Althaia stopped her horse and pointed.

“There,” she said, indicating a sunny spot, where two old sections of wall came together, the branch of an old olive tree bowing overhead, sheltering the old woman and her companion.

Gabrielle and Xena dismounted, and walked over to where she sat dozing in the sun. The Goat stared at them, silent. Then it greeted them. “Meh . . . eh . . . ah.” Xena raised her hand, in greeting.

“Good morning, Amalthea. We have come to meet your mistress.”

The Goat nodded, then nuzzled the still figure. The woman opened her sightless eyes,

“Good morning, Mother,” Xena bowed her head, her arms spread wide.

“Well! It’s good that you have finally arrived!” The words were acerbic, but the smile was genuine.. She put out her hand, and Gabrielle came forward, and took it in both of her own. She bowed and kissed the hand.

“We have come to take you home, Mother.”

“Althaia?” the woman turned her sightless eyes toward the Amazon, who stood to the side of Gabrielle. “You have done well. I was afraid for you and your companions. The others will not be joining you.” She shook her head, her long, long hair swaying.

Xena spoke sharply, “The others?”

The old woman turned her head, and spoke to Gabrielle. “They are resting, on the high steppe. They have gone to the Ancestors.”

Gabrielle nodded, casting a look at Xena and Althaia. “Laodameia,” she said.

“Yes,” Xena answered, her voice bleak.

Gabrielle helped the woman to her feet. She put her staff into her hand. The Goat arose, also, the small bell sounding as it stood. The old woman grasped the Goat’s horn. “I am ready,” she said. And she and the Goat moved off.

Xena, Gabrielle, and Althaia went back to their mounts, and they then followed the odd pair, walking their horses behind them.

“Xe,” Gabrielle said, as they walked along behind the woman and her Goat. “What did you call the Goat?”

Xena looked at the creature, as it slowly ushered it’s mistress along the stony ground. “The Goat’s name is Amalthea.” she replied. “It has been around a *very* long time. It suckled Zeus, as an infant. That Goat is practically a Goddess, herself. Some say, she was once a nymph.”

Gabrielle stared at Xena, her mouth open in amazement. “How did you know all this?”

“Well, I’m not sure . . .” Xena hesitated. “But I think I found out about this when I was with the teachers . . I just know that when Althaia told us about this place, and the Old Woman’s message, it all came flooding into my mind, like I’d already known it.”

Gabrielle linked arms with her. “You’re awfully good to have around, do you know that?” she asked.

Xena grinned at her. “If I didn’t – I know now.” And she stopped, and cupped Gabrielle’s head in her hand, and pulled her in for a kiss.

Gabrielle caught her breath, laughing. “Oh, Xe – When I get you on that island . . .”

Xena smiled delightedly. “Promises, promises . . .” she shook her finger at her partner.

“O, yes . . . and more than promises!”

* * * * *

Down to the coast, the wanderers traveled. And when they reached it, they camped on the shore of the brilliant blue sea, and the susurrations of the waves lapping at the sand soothed their exhaustion, and mended their wounded spirits. They set up a fairly permanent camp, for it would take some time to organize the next leg of their journey. Xena and Gabrielle would have to make for the closest port, and arrange for the purchase of a ship big enough to transport them all to Lemnos.

Several tents had been erected. One was reserved for the Old Woman, but she refused it. And one for Gabrielle and Xena. The tribe was

gradually getting used to Xena's new appearance. They had not seen the Queen's Dragon, but word of it had spread, after they had heard the stories told by Io and Paphos. They were called upon to be their own Storytellers, around the campfires at night, since Gabrielle was not seemingly ready to resume her Barding.

* * * * *

They lay on the furs in their tent. And Xena turned to her Beloved, and smiled.

"I seem to remember my saying something about . . . what did I say? "Time enough, later' – was that it?" She paused, watching the green eyes watching her every expression. "Gaby . . . I need . . ." Xena's voice was stilled by the hand that came up and touched her lips, that was then followed by Gabrielle's lips; and their breath sweetly mingled, tasting of mint; and their tongues took turns. Their bodies thrilled as the jolt of passion soared into a surging tide of feeling, sweeping over both of them, and they strained to connect - wanting every surface to touch and merge. They could not hold each other close enough – the strong aching need to be One.

"Yes, my own – I can give . . ." Gabrielle whispered, ". . . all that you can take . . . and more . . ." and her hands were everywhere, dancing over the surface of her lover's long body, memorizing the places she had visited so often before, and now once more *there*, for her. The hollow at the collarbone, just beneath the chakram pattern; the slight crease, just to the side of the left nipple; that made it list a little, endearingly, to the left. The rock-hard muscles of her biceps, and the long smooth strength of her thighs. She danced more, along the ridges of the ribs, and down to the sweet whorl of the navel. Meant for kissing. And on down the tender skin of the belly, to the silky curls below. They were still as black as the wonderfully mobile eyebrows, which were working overtime, now, as Xena panted and gasped, letting Gaby's hands, lips and tongue speak so eloquently the language of love to her. And the questing lips found the willing center, and moved lightly across the surface of the inner thighs; the soft, soft skin jumping, ever so slightly, as the exquisite nerve-endings telegraphed the sweet murmured messages of love to her core, and the flood of her nectar rushed out to meet Gabrielle's lips, as she sought to kiss that other sweet mouth – to capture it, as well, and make it her own. She whispered the words that once more flowed like honey

from the depths of her soul. They arched, and the rhythm of their breath increased, and they soared into that place where they both lived, joined - One Being, One Light, One Life.

They slept, and loved, and slept again. The healing was necessary – as necessary as living, and breathing. They needed to restore the balance of themselves. They needed to heal the ache in their hearts, for all that were lost to them. So they could move on. So they could lead. So they could be the source, for their Tribe. And all around them the Tribe, to lesser degrees, did the same.

* * * * *

Two days later, they heard a bell outside the tent, and the figure of the Old Woman felt her way inside. The Goat did not follow, but they knew it stood just outside. They sat up on their bed of furs, as the woman came slowly forward and sank to a crouch at their feet.

“The passion is strong in you, yes!” she said, nodding her head and smiling. “It is stronger than I have ever felt, from anyone – and that is a long time of Seeing – a long time, indeed.” She sank back on her heels, wrapping her boney arms around her knees. “I think it is time for me to tell you some things.”

They looked at one another, and the feeling of inevitability was strong. The air around them hummed with energy.

“It is my Charge, to tell you the story of your Origin. Ah – I can tell you are uneasy because I say this – but don’t be afraid. It is a simple thing, when all is said and done. For you, Xena, the Way has been somewhat revealed. Over the course of your long struggle with redemption, you wondered if you had some kinship to the God of War – and you came to believe that you owed your origin to him. But I say to you, it is not so! Ares played a part, to be sure – because his responsibility was to give you the task of experiencing all that such a path of redemption would reveal concerning the role that aggression plays, in all the human condition. For you have emerged, whole and alive, at the far side of that aggression, Xena! And so it is, for all humans - that your eternal spirits are greater than pain, greater than the illusion of loss, greater than death itself. Your spirits continue on. And you had to learn this, if you would

become the Goddess Within.”

She turned, and her sightless eyes seemed to bore straight into Gabrielle’s chest; and Gabrielle’s heart jumped at the power of the Elder who sat so unassuming before her.

“And you, sweet Bard of Potedeia,” the ancient voice continued, “are much, much more than you ever imagined yourself to be. You, too had the mistaken belief that you were just a simple peasant girl, born of simple folk. You knew, to be sure, that no golden-haired children came of that stock – but you did not have a ready answer, and so you tucked it aside, to take out and examine periodically, as you made your way into the wide world. To no avail. So now, I will help you lay that confusion to rest. For you are born of Gaia, Great Mother of the World. Both of you were created by Her, to come into this life and live, and learn, so that you might bring the Knowledge of Her, and the inner wisdom of Her, to the hearts of all who will follow you. The Gods and Goddesses of Olympus, and even the God of Eli, have played their parts, to teach you about yourselves – but She Who is the Earth was your true Mother. As She was mine.”

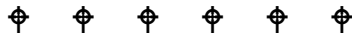
The ancient crone smiled. And all the wrinkles of her face creased upwards, and they could see that those lines were born in laughter, and the joy of living. They sat, humbly silent, in her presence.

Gabrielle leaned forward, and took the old woman by the hand.

“Mother, we thank you for this gift. I am speechless.” She paused, and put her hand up to her chest. “I feel such peace in my heart, now. It is strange, how your words have healed a place that even our love” - she cast a quick, apologetic glance at Xena – “had not yet been able to heal.”

Xena put her hand on Gabrielle’s shoulder. “I feel that, too,” she said, her voice soft and low.

The old woman cackled delightedly. “Aaiiee – it is Gaia! She *will* have her way with you!” And she rose up, and turned, and in two steps she was out of the tent, and gone. They heard the soft sound of the bell, tinkling.



Epilogue

The figure - dressed in a simple linen robe - finished writing, and put down her quill. She sanded the parchment carefully, then shook the grains back into the olivewood tray that lay nearby. Then she rolled up the scroll, and tied it. She rose from the table, and carried the scroll over to the wall, where a deep cabinet stretched the entire length of the room. In its recesses, hundreds of scrolls lay, each nestled in its own niche. And she slid the scroll into its waiting place..

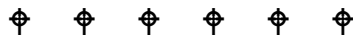
She walked back over to the open arch, where the brilliant sun entered the deep well of the sill. She sat on the warm surface of the stones, and looked out at the vista beyond. The house perched on the hillside; and below, a garden of olive and apricot trees shaded the ground. It was covered in sweet-smelling thyme, which had spread between the flagstones that lay in courtyard. A grape arbor arched over one corner, the vines heavy with the fat purple globes. In the opposite corner, a statue stood looking over the wall at the sea. It was the image of Eponin,. A small bird alighted on its shoulder, and burst into song. Others answered from the treetops. And beyond, Paphos could see the deep blue of the harbor, where the town spread down to the sea. Multiple low arched roofs, all brilliantly whitewashed, shone in the glare of the hot sun..

Many seasons had passed, since the coming of the Tribe to Lemnos. They had founded the town, and, as they passed, other Amazons, and other women, had made their way across the Aegean; seeking sanctuary on the island. The Tribe had prospered. They had indeed established a gynaikokratumene there. One of the first things the Tribe had insisted was that they have two Queens. And so at last Xena came into her own right as an Amazon, and joined her beloved Gabrielle as the first dual Queens of Lemnos. And ever after, that was how it would be.

A low voice called to her, from the doorway. She looked up, smiling, as Io walked in, and crossed to sit beside her on the sill. They kissed, and Io draped her arm around her mate, and leaned her head against Paphos'

head.

Paphos sighed with contentment. And as they sat there, they heard voices from below, and leaned out, watching. Two figures came into view, climbing up the hillside. They entered the low, walled courtyard, strolling slowly, their arms around one another. The two heads were both white now, and their simple white chitons set off their tanned skin. The taller figure bent and kissed the other passionately, and they laughed, and sat together on a stone bench in the sun.



The End
of
The Chakram and the Dragon

* The lines are excerpted from the poem “In Time To Come” by Suzanne Gardinier