

The Judging of the Queen

By
Pysta

Disclaimer: It has been so many years, now, since the XWP series ceased its regular seasons, and since the release of the DVDs of the Series' episodes. The hugely unreal idea that the producers, directors, and actors of the original series would ever consider reviving the thing is probably a fading fantasy.

With today's inhuman conglomerates it's anybody's guess who really owns the sole rights to the characters and stories of XWP - but as far as I know, Xena: Warrior Princess, Gabrielle, and all other characters who have appeared in the syndicated series Xena: Warrior Princess, are the sole copyright property of MCA/Universal and Renaissance Pictures. I feel fully confident that I'm depriving no one of their rightful livelihood by writing this story.

I'm just grateful that the characters of Xena and Gabrielle were invented in the first place, and were given a chance to grow - through the (occasionally inspired and, when unfettered by the conventions of corporate sponsors, even uninhibited) good offices of a few good writers and producers. We all know there were some episodes that Really Mattered, and others that were Sooo Baadddd. Mostly, though, I pay homage to the considerable courage and passion exhibited by the lead actors Lucy Lawless and Renee O'Connor, who brought the characters of Xena and Gabrielle to life. Their performances inspired me to write this story. If they are cursed to be remembered mostly for their work in giving these characters depth and dimension, they could suffer a worse fate! Creating new and viable archetypes is no mean feat, and deserves the accolades of grateful generations of women yet to come, who will, I am sure, be inspired by them.

Violence: It is doubtful that this story will include violence, other than in flashback. Gabrielle and Xena had enough lifetimes of that in their early years together. They have passed on to greater things, now. This story seeks to explore that premise. It is post-FIN, in terms of the original series. It, too, is an attempt to arrive at closure that satisfies the soul, beyond the debacle of the series' finish. So if you want kick-butt action, there are some excellent fanfic stories out there for that.

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. Luckily, they don't have to be Warrior and Bard in our current time period, where people are so cowed and limited by the repression of our society, and so very, very afraid of "the love that dares to speak its name." (And yes, the misquoting is intended!) But if you are enthralled by that peculiarly twisted and regressive form of prejudice, read no further!)

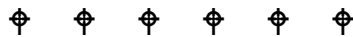
Feedback about this story is gladly accepted. It's my first venture onto the high wire of fanfic, so please be honest, but kind!

[Note: Quotations are credited at the end of the story. I recommend the sources!]

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Chapter 1

I would rather see her lovely step
And the motion of light on her face
Than chariots of Lydians or ranks
Of foot soldiers in arms. (16)

The late morning sun slanted through the widely-spaced boles of the ancient cedars, increasing the scent of the aromatic trees, Undergrowth thick with salal, ferns, and a carpet of mosses added a spicy under note.

A soft breeze intermittently sighed through the high branches overhead, and soft calls of chickadees and siskins could be heard, busily relaying their message, "*All safe – the Queen passes.*" A calm figure moved through the trees, following the winding path, her footfalls quiet on the springy turf of old needles.

Always alone, she came. Always, dressed in her simple suede kilt, and high soft boots; the short deerskin top bared her midriff and back, revealing the dragon tattoo still crouched, rampant; the short sleeve tops showing the wide, strong shoulders. She carried only her worn ash staff,

the wood polished to a dark sheen from years of the touch of her hands. The weapons - the sais, the swords and chakram of Xena - and the trappings of feathers and bead necklaces that were her signs of office - all were left behind. Only the necklace with the one stone, cleft in half, that dangled from the fine silver chain at her throat, adorned her body.

The grove of Artemis saw the visitor come, regular as the sun rising and setting, every day, eleven times, now, since her return – always at the same time of day; always with the same routine. She would walk, silent as a shadow, to the clearing, at the center of the grove, where the standing sarcen stones encircled the sacred space. There, a simple, sun-warmed stone chair, carved all round with images of the Goddess, marked the Point of Power, where the Goddess had of old revealed herself, on the Solstice feast days, to the Amazon Nation.

The space seemed neglected, unused. A distinct aura of sadness hung palpably in the quiet air. As Artemis' Chosen, Gabrielle, Queen of the Amazon Nations, Bard of Potedeia, and Heir and Consort of Xena, Warrior Princess, had been the sole person permitted to sit on the Throne of Artemis, during the normal rituals and law-giving councils. And now that the Nation was in such a precarious state - because of the absence of the Queen for so long - there was hardly any reason for anyone else to dare approach with such intent. One could arguably say that the Nation was in a deep and possibly mortal decline. Artemis hadn't been seen since before Helicon. No one came to the Grove, much, anymore. What was the point? The Gods were gone – or so it seemed.

Her ritual, once she arrived at the clearing, was invariably the same. First, she would walk to the flat stone rectangle – the tomb of Artemis, some would have it - that served as an altar. This sat at right angles to the stone chair. It, too, was carved with a frieze of images, depicting Artemis and the Amazons in feats of war and peace. Atop the altar, set in the center of it, was the bronze urn. It had acquired a patina of verdigris, over the years, and looked like it weighed more than a bronze urn should weigh. Gabrielle would have said that it was weighted down with the immensity of her sorrow, in addition to the precious ashes it contained. She would draw close to the altar, and stretch out her hand, to touch the urn, feeling it warm from the sun. And each time, her slightly husky, modulated voice, rich in timbre from years of barding, would issue quietly into the still air.

“O, Artemis, Sacred One, I understand that you have much anger, on my account. I know that when I chose to take Xena's part, and Eve's, and fought with them to throw down the Olympians, you all tried everything

you could to fight back. I understand that it would be foolhardy for me to think that I can lay claim to the title of Artemis's Chosen, when by association, the blood of the Gods is on my hands. But I am not here for myself. I am before you, as a suppliant, for the sake of my Tribe – for the Amazons, who still need your guidance and your protection, if they are to survive in this world. I have returned to this place, in order to make my own amends to them – and to you, if it will help them. Come forth, O Artemis – an Amazon calls out to you!”

Then, she would sink down on her knees - her head bowed - and wait for some sign of the Goddess. She would remain in this posture, the whole long day - quiet, unmoving. At times, odd images, fragments of dreams, memories, and snatches of conversation would float up to the surface of her mind. She would wait, patiently for them to fade away, so that the velvet silence of the empty void would remain. At other times, it was most difficult to let go when she would hear yet another voice – Xena's voice – whispering inside her head. Xena . . . Goddess knows she had that happen often enough, over the seasons since Jappa. Some places, and some times, when the conversations got too painful for her, people had thought her mad. If the Furies had still been around, she might have believed it, too.

No matter. She was resigned to whatever the Goddess would require of her. Anything from her immediate death, to long trials of torture – she expected anything. She had gone to Egypt, after Jappa, not only because they had planned to go there, anyway – but because she wanted to get as far away from Greece and whatever ire remained from the Olympians, while she grieved, and attempted to put her life back into some semblance of order. And that had proved a weary, terrible exile.

As had happened ten times before, the sun slowly sank into the West and the day drew to another weary close. Her head came slowly up, a small sigh escaped her lips, and she drew her hand across her brow. A single tear crept down her cheek, and she wiped it with the back of her hand. Slowly, she pulled herself upright with her staff and bowed once to the empty chair. Softly, she murmured, “Your will be done, Sacred Artemis.” Then, walking once more to the altar, she gently bent and kissed the urn. And turning, she passed through the standing stones; once more to take the winding, silent path to the Amazon village, and another long and tortuous storm-tossed sleepless night.

Eponin, the Weapons Master of the Last Tribe of the Amazon Nation,

walked slowly across the open square that marked the center of the village. She was old, now – in her fifth decade of life, and she counted that a miracle, every day.

It was only just past sunrise. She was headed for the Queen's quarters, now once again home to Gabrielle. She shook her head as the thoughts went careening around inside her.

“Goddess! I don't know what to think of this whole thing. Ten seasons she disappeared – none of us knew where - and we had all but given up on her. We were this close,” she held up her finger and thumb about an inch apart, “to all-out war with each other! Twice! And both times, the Council got so Goddess-damned shuddery that we just dug in our heels and pushed back the tide. It felt so much like Artemis was giving us a BIG piece of her mind, and howling at us to keep Gabrielle's Rite of Caste in place. I know many here feel that Artemis is dust, and the Gods are gone – but damned if I didn't feel Her around us, when it came down to those fights over the Succession!”

She shook her head, sighed, and stopped at the threshold of the Queen's lodge, hesitated, then rang the small bell that hung just beside the doorway.

“Come in,” said a low voice from within. Eponin lifted the woven cloth that covered the doorway, and went in.

Gabrielle, who sat at the table, looked up as Eponin entered. Her face was pale, and she looked exhausted.

“Morning, ‘Poni.”

“Gabrielle, are you gonna go back out to the Grove this morning?”
Eponin asked; her face full of concern and love for her friend.

“You know I am,,” she replied. She took a drink from the cup of water in her hand. “The ritual requires that I submit to twelve full days of supplication, if I am to have any hope of an audience with Artemis. She bowed her head, “I owe you all that much - after abandoning you for so long. If her anger at me is causing all of this hardship for the Tribe, I must do something to make amends. I swore a blood oath, on that day at Helicon. Remember, ‘Poni? I said ‘...the Amazon Nation will live on forever. That is the duty that we carry and the everlasting honor that we hold.’ The words are carved in my heart, ‘Poni – I know I have betrayed that trust!”

“You think that, Gabrielle – but I tell you, it isn’t so! I don’t care how it looked - the way they treated you when you came in. I don’t care what all the younger Amazons think – what do they know about it? I was there, at Helicon. I know. They’ve got to be made to understand – they need to hear from you, Gabrielle. Somehow, we’ve got to convince them that you have a right to lead them! You know I would do anything, to help you keep the promise you made that day. I can’t believe we’re going to see it all slip away – not when we’ve been through so much, and suffered so long . . . “ Eponin’s voice, stumbling always with matters of the heart, roughened with emotion.

“Oh, ‘Poni,,” Gabrielle rose and crossed to the Amazon, pulled her into a hug, then held her at arm’s length, and looked at her with tears bright in her eyes. “In all these long seasons we have known each other, even when exiled from this place I call home, when my travels with Xena took me so far away, when we had to come back from the dead! Gods, even when we were deep-frozen in Ares’ cave and you probably thought you’d never see either of us again - you have been such a friend and Sister to me! I can’t begin to tell you how much you have helped me! Anybody else would have given up on me a long time ago. But this part I must do alone. Artemis requires it of me – and not of anyone else! With a steadfast heart, maybe I can win her help for all of us. It’s almost completed, now – just one more day. I’ve had to endure much worse, in my life! We’ll get through this, too – somehow.”

Gabrielle moved toward the doorway, stopping only to retrieve her staff. Pulling Eponin in to her side, she wrapped her arm around ‘Poni’s waist, as they exited the lodge.

“Look – if this turns out the way I hope it will, I will certainly need your help when I return from the Grove this evening. I pray that I will have something more than failure to share with you and with the others, at tonight’s meeting of the Council. Until then, please just help me by doing what you do best – keep talking with the Elders, and try to keep a lid on the cauldron of revolt, until I return.”

Eponin nodded, too close to her disappointment to speak, The Amazon held out a full water skin to Gabrielle, who managed a flash of her old smile, as she accepted the offering and turned away toward the path to the Grove. Eponin looked after her, shook her head sadly, and then made her way to the communal eating area.

Twelve days earlier . . .

It was mid-day, and most of the Tribe was about their business. A group of them were working drills with Eponin, in the practice yard, which was located behind the main courtyard and the circle of structures that surrounded it. The Healer was looking after one of the younger Amazons, who had come in from a hunt with a lame foot. Others worked around the communal eating area, tending the roasting spits and cauldrons. The noise of someone playing a flute could be heard faintly, from one of the buildings. Everyone had their appointed tasks. The area near the gate to the village compound was quiet, dusty, and baking in the summer sun.

A cat scampered along the base of the perimeter wall, chasing a field mouse.

The gate, which had been erected several years back, when the raids by the marauders had been at their peak, was kept shut during the day, as well as at night. They had a ring of lookout posts, at about a bow-shot from the village, in the big cedars, and each post was kept occupied at all times to keep watch over the approaches to their compound. Each Amazon had an assigned time for outpost duty. They were a small community, stretched thin, mostly, but they managed. There hadn't been any surprise raids in three years. Some trading had even started up again, sporadically, between them and Amphipolis.

There was a sudden creaking sound, as the right-hand gate moved on its hinges. A figure came through the opening, and into the area inside. It was the slight, wiry figure of a woman, wearing a light hooded cloak, covering a short top, a deerskin kilt, and high boots. A dusty pack slung over her shoulders, a staff in her hand. Sticking out of her pack were the hilts of two swords. A wicked-looking sai was clasped to the outside of each boot. At her waist she wore clipped to her belt a round metal circle of silver and gold. She stood, quietly looking around at the village.

There was a sudden flurry of frantic reaction, as the two Amazons who had gate duty, and who had been standing on the walkway suspended above the gate, came swinging down from their perch.

“Ware! Intruder!” they shouted out. They ran to take up positions on either side of the woman, pinioning her between them, and one had a knife to her neck in a flash of movement.

They glared right in the woman’s face, and questioned her. “Who are you? What are you doing here? How did you get in here?”

The woman stood quietly, completely relaxed. She did nothing to antagonize them. She merely waited until they were done shouting at her - then spoke softly.

“I am Gabrielle, Bard of Potedeia, Heir and Consort to Xena, Warrior-Princess, Once Chosen of Artemis, and Once Queen of the Last Tribe of the Amazons. I have come home. Could you please let Varia and Eponin know that I am here?”

The two Amazons gaped at her, dumbstruck. The knife sagged away from Gabrielle’s neck, and the two young women stared at her as if they’d seen a ghost. Several other Amazons ran up, their weapons drawn, and formed a ring around the guards and the stranger. An older Amazon who seemed more in charge spoke next, “You – Philippa and Casta – didn’t you see her coming in? How is it that you let her get in here? Who does she say she is? Where are the warriors assigned to the outposts? How did she get past them?”

They quailed at the woman’s anger. “We – we didn’t see her! I could swear to you, she wasn’t there! I mean, we were looking *right down* at the outside of the gate! And then we heard the creaking, and turned around and looked down inside – and there she was! I swear on Artemis’s Helmet!’ The other woman nodded vigorously. “It’s true! She – she says she’s Gabrielle! She’s asking for Eponin!”

Another disturbance interrupted the interrogation, as sounds of more approaching Amazons erupted from around one of the buildings. A woman burst through the growing crowd, and threw herself at the slight figure of the intruder. She wrapped her arms around the woman, and held her close. She was crying, laughing, and babbling at the same time. Her curly short salt and pepper hair, her lined, tanned face, and her wide shoulders and stocky, muscled form marked her as the Weapons Master of the Amazons – Eponin.

“O, my Goddess, look at you! You’ve come back to us! O I cannot believe it! My heart will break!” She wept more, pulling back and holding the woman at arm’s length. “Look,” she laughed, “you haven’t changed! You’re still the same sight for sore eyes!” Then she turned to face the group of women, her arm still wrapped around the shoulders of the stranger. She spoke to the crowd. “Look, you – this is our Queen, Gabrielle! She has finally returned from her long exile!” She stopped, as the women stared at her and the stranger.

“What is the matter with you?” She roared, her face turning dark.” Where is your respect? Show your Queen the fealty she is due!” She turned, and stepping back from the woman, she gave the fist-to-chest Amazon salute, and bowed her head. The others, still and silent at first, slowly began to imitate Eponin’s actions.

The woman stood, patient at the display, then bowed her head and returned the salute. Then she drew back the hood of her cloak, revealing the golden head, the finely-chiseled cheekbones, skin tanned from living out under the sun, and the emerald-green eyes. She looked around at them, wearily, and then swayed, slightly. She passed her hand over her eyes, and turned to Eponin.

“You know, ‘Poni – I could use a drink. Got anything stronger than water?”

Eponin, grinned at her, and hugged her close again. “Oh, you know it, my friend. Let’s get you settled, and then we’ll have such a feast as you haven’t seen in a long time, I bet!” She turned to the women, still standing in silence around them. “Well, hel-lo! Philippa and Casta, hadn’t you better get back up there and work a little harder at guarding the gate?” She chided them. “And somebody find out who all was taking cat-naps in the lookout posts! Send them to me, when you find out -I’ll want to knock their heads together!” Then she ducked her head close to Gabrielle’s and whispered, “Oh, I know you, Gab – you did some Xena tricks on ‘em, didn’t you?” Gabrielle smiled, and nodded slightly. They walked off together,

The other women stood, gaping, silent. Kypris - who had challenged the gate guards - sneered as they walked off. “Well, that’s a fine thing! She sneaks back in here after – what? Ten seasons? And we’re supposed to kiss her boots? I don’t *think*so! If I were Eponin, I wouldn’t be so sure that everything is so

wonderful. Come on, we need to talk about this situation.” And she and a handful of the others went purposefully toward one of the lodges. The rest wandered off, in small clumps, to resume their chores. A runner slipped through the gate and headed for the outposts. Philippa and Casta pulled themselves back up on the ropes that hung down on either side of the gate. Once back up on their catwalk, they bent their gaze back out over the cleared area, watching the trees, and the broad path that went off through them, into the woods. Philippa muttered to Casta, “I don’t care – we didn’t see her! She *wasn’t* there – and then she *was*!” Casta sighed, nodded, and they resumed their watch.

Meanwhile, Gabrielle and Eponin approached the Queen’s lodge, where once Gabrielle and Xena had lived. Eponin spoke, “I’ve kept it just like you left it, Gab. You’ll be pleased - I hope . . . I think there are even some of your clothes.” She pulled back the woven cloth that masked the entrance. “Here you are!”

Gabrielle ducked and entered the room.

Inside, the octagonal room was hung with colorfully woven wall-coverings, Across from the doorway, a screen covered with Egyptian hieroglyphics partially masked the bedstead. A large window, shutters open, was to the left of the entrance, and to the right opposite the bed, was a doorway to another, smaller room, with a glimpse of a large wooden tub for bathing. Under the window, a serviceable table and two chairs took advantage of the light. Further around the outer wall, an ornate carved chest held other garments and linens. Beyond this, another cabinet with deep niches held many scrolls. A candle in its holder stood on the table, and in a deep and comfortable fireplace, between the bed and the door to the bath, the makings of a fire was laid. It was a bit dusty – ‘Poni never being very much of a hearth-mistress - but otherwise it looked so good. So dear. So familiar. Gabrielle swallowed, her throat aching with emotion.

She shrugged the heavy pack off her shoulders, removed her cloak, and hung it on one of the several pegs on either side of the doorway. She leaned her staff there, as well. Then she came back and sat down at the table, with ‘Poni. For a long moment, they just stared at one another – seeing in their faces the long years, and the changes.

Gabrielle’s hair, still the color of sun-lit wheat in September, was

cut as short as it had been before Jappa. The green eyes still sparkled, but they had a depth that only great suffering, and wisdom dearly bought, reveals. Eponin could see the fine pattern of crows-feet at the corners, and the tanned skin, from the years in the Egyptian sun. The crease at the corner of Gabrielle's mouth still deepened when she smiled. Her fit form still exhibited the strength and agility that regular engagement maintained. Her face was leaner, with the passage of time – the expression more thoughtful and self-assured. 'Poni sensed a palpable power in her that was new - a pronounced, calm, quiet about her, and her attention was direct and undiluted.

"You are much as I remembered you to be," 'Poni said, 'and more, now. I think you have grown very deep, my friend."

Gabrielle smiled at 'Poni, her face thoughtful as her eyes, too, memorized the face of her dear friend. 'Poni had aged well, all things considered. Her tough body, strong shoulders, back, and solid torso still presented a fighting body – she had lost none of her solid strength. Her face was more lined, it was true, and her hair, now cut short and curly, was a large mixture of grey and white, replacing the brown of her youth. But her open honest expression remained the same. Gabrielle reached across the table, and took Eponin's hand in her own, and squeezed it affectionately.

"You, too, 'Poni – I think we have both come through pretty well, don't you?" She sighed. "Well, in all the uproar, I didn't see Varia. Is she here?"

'Poni's face fell into sadness. She shook her head. "Ah, no – Varia's gone, Gab – gone to her rest. She fell to the coughing sickness – it hit us hard, two seasons past. We lost six to the cursed thing." She shook her head again. "It was bad. Talia – she's our Healer – was hard pressed to cope with all of it, because most of us came down with it." She shivered. "Goddess, I hope we never go through that again."

Gabrielle sighed. "I'm so sorry, 'Poni. I know Varia and I had a convoluted relationship – but once we got things straightened out, she was a good friend - even though she got so weird at Helicon. I was so angry with her! But even so, I mourn her passing. May she rest easy."

"Yeah, we gave her a righteous sendoff - the full panoply. Well,

she was a Queen, once, anyway – even if she lost it. And she fought bravely, at Helicon, didn't she, Gab?"

"Oh yes she did, my friend. She surely did." Gabrielle said.

'Poni sighed, and then looked up. "Do you still want something stronger to drink? I'll go get us a flask of ale from the kitchens, if you like.. Do you want something to eat, too? The general meal won't be happening for a few candle marks, yet. Generally, everyone gathers about dusk. I can bring you back something now - and I'll help, if you want, to get the fire going, and heat some water for the bath. I bet you'll want one, after your long day traveling. What do you say?"

"Goddess, that sounds so good." She sagged in her chair. "All the dust and the walking all day is starting to catch up with me. I'll unpack my stuff, while you're gone." Eponin got up, and turned toward the doorway.

"Poni?"

"Yeah?" 'Poni paused, and turned back.

"I – I'd just as soon hold off on socializing with the rest of the Tribe. And with the Council . . . I know that's probably going to be unpopular. But I just need to collapse, for a bit, and try to get myself settled, before I have to start baring my self to everyone." She looked up, her green eyes troubled, and sad. "Do you think that will make enemies of the rest of them?"

Eponin growled, "If it does, they'll make one of me, as well! I'll see to it – don't worry. You're our Queen, Gab – you can do whatever you need to do." She lifted the door cloth, and was gone.

Gabrielle got up, and wandered all around the room, pausing and touching the familiar, dear objects. She opened the chest, gazing down at its contents, then went over to the cabinet that held her scrolls. Pulling one out, she unrolled it, and read a few lines – recognizing it as Sappho's poem – the one Xena had given her on her birthday, just before they had left for Jappa. Gabrielle looked away, tears blinding her eyes, then back at the scroll, as she read the sweet lines, once again:

Oh – it
Puts the heart in my chest on wings
For when I look at you, even a moment, no speaking
Is left in me

No: tongue breaks and thin
Fire is racing under skin
And in eyes no sight and drumming
Fills ears
And cold sweat holds me and shaking
Grips me all, greener than grass
I am and dead – or almost
I seem to me . . . (30)

She rolled the scroll back up, and carefully tied it, and placed it back in its niche in the cupboard. Then, she crossed to her pack, opened it, and began pulling out her things. A bag full of writing materials – scrolls, quills, some cakes of ink, a rubbing stone, and a small stoppered pot of ink went onto the table. A bundle of clothes were tossed into the open chest. Then, a full set of leathers, with greaves, arm bracers, and bronze armor - which she carefully hung on the set of pegs the other side of the doorway. The two swords came next – the long leather scabbard with the broadsword, its pommel chased, the stone set in the hilt; then the katana - both of these she hung next to the armor. Then, taking out a piece of chamois, she unhooked the chakram from the hook on her belt, polished it carefully, and hung it with the swords, on its own peg. She took off her sais from their places on the sides of her boots, and set them aside on the table . . . and last, - the urn. She would have to take it to the Grove, and place it on the altar, there.

As she went about gathering up the makings of a meal, Eponin mulled over all that she remembered of what had occurred after Helicon, when Gabrielle had followed Xena to Jappa. Some six moons later, the Tribe got the news they had been dreading. Xena's brother Toris had come from Amphipolis, bearing the awful news that Xena had been killed, and that Gabrielle was rumored to be in Egypt. Cyrene was in mourning. The Council of Elders met, and decided that the Amazons would continue to hold the Queen's seat for Gabrielle, until they had some sure knowledge

of her fate – or until such time as she would return to them.

After the battle at Helicon when so many of their Tribe had been slaughtered, there were only a score of Amazons left standing. The steady flow of young women from the surrounding areas of Greece who had, in times past, come in search of a better life for themselves through adoption by the Amazons, had dropped to a trickle. The word was – the Amazons were finished. The chaos in the Known World, after the fall of Caesar and the Twilight of the Gods, saw an increase in lawless bands of marauders, who seemed to put the frightfully reduced Amazons at the top of their sack and pillage list. Constantly on the defensive, the weary Amazons had more and more trouble maintaining their territory. Tribes from the North and East stopped sending representatives to the Solstice Celebrations. Artemis was gone – had withdrawn her protection of them. Some felt great anger at Xena and Gabrielle, for what they saw as a betrayal of the Tribe.

The Helicon survivors became the Council of Elders, sworn to uphold the oath they had taken on the battlefield: “To a strong Amazon Nation.” But the harsh reality of the loss of their Queen – however temporarily – so soon after the battle, left them leaderless at a time when they most needed a sure hand to guide their recovery. They were becoming fewer, with the subsequent passing of the seasons, and they began having trouble with the younger Amazons, who had only been children when the battle was fought, and who had only vague memories of the Queen. Some among them began agitating for a return to the nomadic ways of the past. They wanted a new Queen, who would lead them in search of some new territory where they could reestablish themselves. Factions began forming – some backing the Council, some promoting Varia as their choice. They scoffed at the stubborn conviction of Eponin and the other contemporaries of Xena and Gabrielle - that the Bard would somehow make her way back to them.

Five seasons later, the Council had again met, to consider if they should maintain Gabrielle’s right to the monarchy. Without knowing her fate, they had no means of determining who – if anyone – had inherited her Right of Caste. Again the chorus of dissent was raised, Once again, the Elders had held firm – Gabrielle would return. But privately, among themselves, they had begun to wonder.

'Poni headed back to the Queen's residence, her arms laden with food and drink. They had a lot of catching up to do. . .

* * * * *

After Gabrielle accepted the water skin and set off for the Sacred Grove, Eponin headed across the courtyard to the communal eating area. This was a roofed spot with open walls, where long tables and benches were set for the Tribe to take meals together. Adjacent was a large fire-pit, where roasting spits and large cauldrons sent up savory smells from the food being prepared. Amazons could come in and out and get food when they wished from the communal pots. Large casks of mead, cider and beer were tapped. Fresh fruits, vegetables and roots were harvested from the communal gardens for greens. She grabbed a trencher and wooden bowl, and got herself some food, then moved to where two or three of the Elders were seated around an end of one of the tables. She sat with them, and began disconsolately picking at her food.

"So, Eponin – no luck today, either? Let me guess – she turned you down?" ventured Talia - Healer of the Tribe, who was seated to her right.

Eponin shrugged. "Yeah – she did. But she seems to think this ritual will somehow bring Artemis back to life and then, hey - all she has to do is do some silver-tongued, bardly fast-talking, to convince the Great Goddess that She shouldn't be pissed as Tartarus at Gabrielle for helping Xena wipe out every Godly relative She ever had – not to mention *offing* Artemis Herself!" She snapped her fingers. "Piece of Nut-Bread! What could be easier?" Eponin shook her head morosely and went back to poking her food. "Personally, I don't know what can happen. But she's my friend, so I'll just wait and hope, and see. She seems to have kept that mixture of confidence and faith that never *ever* swerved, when it came to Xena pulling off a miracle or two. But you know," she mused, "she always seemed to have a blind eye when it came to seeing *herself* that way. Maybe that's changed. And maybe we all should have more faith in her!"

A clutch of Amazons, some from the erstwhile Varia faction, were seated a short distance away at the same table, and had been listening in on the conversation. The one known as Kypris put down the cup from which she had been drinking, and offered her comments. "Why *should* we have more faith in her, Eponin? She hasn't *been* here for ages! Frankly, some of us are getting right tired of your defense of her. She can't just rest on

her laurels, you know. How about an explanation – say, where the heck she’s *sbeen* all this time, and why she just *abandoned* us, here - to start with! Every day, since she walked in here, all she’s done is clean up her quarters and wander off into the woods all day, with hardly a word for anyone. Damned moody – *I* say! How is *that* supposed to instill confidence in us – I ask you!” The others in her coterie nodded their agreement. Kythereia, one of the younger Amazons, piped up, “Yeah – just because the Olders say she’s the Queen, doesn’t mean the *Tribe* thinks so. All those stories, about how she and Xena killed all the Gods, one right after another. What did they think that would accomplish? Look how awful it’s been, ever since! We’ve been punished, because of them! I say, get over it! Get us a new Queen, one without so much *baggage*, to lead us.”

Eponin surged up off the bench and lunged across the table at her. She grabbed a fist full of shirt and brought the youngster up on her toes. “You use some civil language, you young pup, when you refer to OUR QUEEN! No matter WHERE she’s been, WHAT she’s been doing, and WHETHER she tells the likes of you, or not!!”

The young woman held up her hands, placating. Eponin let go of the shirt, smoothed the material back down, and then poked her with a solid forefinger with each emphasis as she spoke once more: “When YOU have done as much for the Amazon Nation as Queen Gabrielle, and when YOU have saved as many of our lives as OFTEN as Queen Gabrielle, and when YOU have learned the true nature of the Amazon Way, you can ask for forgiveness and we’ll SEE if you can earn it!” Then she turned to Kypris, “And as for you – well, you backed Varya – which just goes to show how unrealistic you are! If you didn’t take the trouble to understand why Varya would never have tried for Queen - after Helicon – then, why would you have the sensitivity now to know a good thing, when you se it? And make no mistake – Gabrielle is a good thing!”

The older Amazons chuckled at the exchange, as the woman sat back down, her face sullen. The others in her group exuded a prickly silence. Talia reached over, a hand on Eponin’s arm. “Ease up, old thing – you’ll scare them out of a week’s growth! You don’t really want to intimidate them, do you?”

“Hey – I’m the Weapons Master! If they’re not intimidated by me, who *else* would it be?” But she grinned at the younger woman, Kythereia: “Aw, lighten up – everything will be made clear to you - you’ll see! It’s a Gabrielle Thing. She does it every time! She’s got stories out to *here* about Xena’s feats. Of course, nobody tells a

story *half* as well as Gabrielle. She was a Master Bard, ya know – way before she became an Amazon Queen. When all this is past us, *you’ll* see what I mean – she’ll get back into telling us the old tales, again. And you’ll see for yourselves what a good leader she is.” ‘Poni sat back down, and began eating her stew. One of the other older Amazons piped up, “Remember the time Xena and Gabrielle took some of us out on patrol?” The others laughed, and the storyteller went on with her tale. Kypris and her hostile band of followers muttered, then got up and huffily moved off. Kythereia wandered after them.



Chapter 2

...But you, O blessed one,
Smiled in your deathless face
And asked what (now again) I have suffered and why
(now again) I am calling out

And what I want to happen most of all
In my crazy heart. Whom should I persuade (now again)
To lead you back into her love? (1)

Gabrielle, kneeling in supplication before the Throne of Artemis, was suddenly thrown backwards, as a wild gust of wind hurtled at her, seemingly from out of nowhere. The afternoon sun, which was sinking now below the zenith, took on a darkish hue, as though an eclipse was happening – though no heavenly body of the usual type obscured its glow. She caught her breath, sharply, trying to overcome the feeling of having been knocked in the chest with some force. Her limbs ached from the enforced stillness they had endured for twelve long days. She wasn’t at all sure she could stand..

Looking up, she saw a swirling collection of sharp, fractured fragments of light, suspended above the seat of the Throne. As she watched, the spiraling fragments coalesced into small, glittering motes of light,

millions of them, swirling together and taking on the form and substance of a mortal woman.

She sat, her head bowed low, waiting.

“You have much courage, Gabrielle of Potedeia – to dare to supplicate me! I should strike you down where you stand!” The Goddess’ eyes flashed – her face a mask of anger.

“Well...” Gabrielle answered quietly, looking up – her face solemn, but the hint of humor evident in her green eyes, “...you surely could... I’d likely be eternally grateful to you, if you did.”

“Oh, no – that is too easy a path for you, Bard. I have a much better idea – one that I think you’ll find rigorous enough, to say the least! You have to grant me my right to some kind of penance from you, for what you have put me through – you and that wild woman Soulmate of yours!” The Goddess sat down huffily on her throne, leaned back, and hitched one golden-greaved leg over the arm of the seat. She looked at the quiet figure before her from under half-lowered lids, her head thrown back. “No, no – I have a much more interesting problem to set you, Queen Gabrielle. You must face an Ordeal, of three parts.” She nodded her head decisively.

“An Ordeal. . .” Gabrielle looked at her, waiting.

“Oh, yes, *Chosen One*,” the Goddess spat out, spitefully, “assuming, of course, you still have the least bit of interest in keeping *your monarchy*! You’re already dealing with the vestiges of my wrath, with your restive and – shall I say, *unwilling* – followers? Ah, yes – you’re going to have to go some, to prove your worth to them, now. Yes,” she mused, “things are a little bit dangerous for you, I’d say . . . I’d watch my back, if I were you.” Artemis’s face turned suddenly pained with grief. “You realize I have not named any other to that high honor, since you . . .even though it was my right to do so, since you rejected the honor of a liaison with me, as all my Chosen Ones have had . . .and, even though you colluded with *that woman* to slay me – but I won’t mention that!” She glared fiercely at Gabrielle.

Gabrielle was silent.

Artemis arose from the throne, and stepped down to stand directly in front of Gabrielle. She reached out her hand, and grasped Gabrielle’s chin so that they looked directly at one another.

“But you have done nothing *since then* but bring me honor. So what am I to do, now? You just keep bouncing back, coming back, no matter what happens to you! Zeus knows, there have been enough attempts to silence you, Bard of Potedeia, but you somehow keep returning – like a gadfly, to my sacred territory, and my Amazons! You manage to turn everything bad into something good! How can I punish you? You delight me with your tenacity, and fighting spirit! Then you drive me mad with your contradictions! By the time you have fulfilled the terms of your penance, and finally found the nature of your true destiny, perhaps I will understand you much better, Gabrielle. And maybe, along the way, you will understand me. And all that has happened will at last be clear. Are you prepared to accept the terms of the Ordeal?”

Gabrielle rose to her feet, squaring her shoulders, ‘Do I have any choice, Artemis?’

The Goddess laughed. “Of course you do - you can turn right around and walk yourself out of my Grove, and out of my Amazons’ village, and out of this world, if you like! There is this new *thing* called Free Will at work in this world, now. Some by-product of the Twilight, “ she waved her arm negligently, “and, lucky you! You get to be subject to that first - even before Me! So if I could still*make* you accept the challenge, it would mean that you’d never know how the story *could* have turned out. That’s really what’s bothering you, isn’t it? The idea of being a victim of your own story has been bedeviling you for ages, now – hasn’t it? You’re a Bard, Gabrielle! It’s in your blood! You want to know how the stories turn out, because you want to *decide* how they turn out - especially when it’s *your own* story!”

Gabrielle, dumbstruck, stared at the Goddess. She was right! That was exactly what was wrong – wrong from the beginning – wrong about the Olympian Gods and Goddesses messing with their lives whenever they wanted to - wrong about Jappa – wrong about all the anguish and suffering afterwards! It was what had paralyzed and upset her, for so long – the idea that *she had no choice*. That she couldn’t make it come out the way she had wanted. That she couldn’t have mattered more than all the suffering souls in Jappa. She feared more than anything else that the story of her own life would end in failure. She feared that she would lose the heart, and the will to keep the stories – *her* stories - and through them, the memory of Xena - alive. And, she feared that she couldn’t lead the Amazon Nation back from the brink of annihilation, because of her crippling grief and despair.

Artemis smiled at her. “Well, Gabrielle? What is it to be?”

Gabrielle dashed the tears from her face with the back of her hand. She took a deep breath, and settled herself.

“I accept the Ordeal, Artemis. Because I have nothing else left to fear.”

The Goddess looked pleased. “Oh, my Chosen One – with that statement, you have already overcome the first obstacle. Sit down, and I will lay it out for you. Quickly now, for lately, my coming and going has been a little ragged . . .”

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Artemis returned to her Throne. Gabrielle sat cross-legged on the ground before her.

“Your Ordeal is to be this: first - somehow, before two more days, you must manage to survive being challenged by your Amazons, for your right to be Queen. So we’ll see how badly you want to live, Gabrielle, and rule these Amazons. It would be so much easier to let go, and die, and go join your Soulmate in the Elysian Fields. But I want more entertainment from you, than a mere challenge will provide. So, second, you must convene the Amazons here, in the gathering of the circle. All of them must be present, and must stay throughout the ceremony. And third, you must convince them that you are worth forgiving and worth reinstating you as their Queen.”

“And just how would you have me do that, Artemis?” Gabrielle wiped the palms of her hands on her thighs, to remove the sudden sheen of sweat on them. She had to fight the unwelcome feeling of vertigo that assailed her. A sudden, vivid memory of the first journey together by boat surged into her mind’s eye...she automatically felt for the pulse point on her wrist, and pressed it. hard.

“Ah – that is really very simple, Gabrielle. What you must do is tell them *your* story. My rules, Gabrielle, are these: you cannot know what you will say in advance, and you must make *yourself* the hero – no sagas of Xena, Warrior Princess this time, Bard. *She* cannot come into your tale, *this* time. Oh, and one more thing – at the end of this telling, your Amazons must name you their choice as Queen, and must bear witness to the qualities they find so appealing in you.”

“You don’t make it half hard, do you?” Gabrielle laughed shakily. “And if I succeed...?”

“When it is done, no one can say that you have not fulfilled the terms of the Ordeal, and no one will ever again question my Chosen One’s Right of Caste - to lead the Tribe of the Amazons to their place in the annals of history.” The Goddess paused, arching an eyebrow at Gabrielle. “I cannot tell what else might accrue in the doing of it,” She muttered, vaguely, “- you will just have to wait and see.”

The long-suffering woman shook her head, slightly, as if the answer wasn’t as expected. Her eyes strayed suddenly to the standing stones, and beyond them, to the tall cedars ringing the clearing. “And if I fail?”

The Goddess cast a cool, unflinching look right into the soul of the Bard of Potedeia. “Well, then – as you said – you have nothing left to fear.”

A chill washed over Gabrielle. And as she watched, Artemis began to break up into the sharp, brilliant shards. The Goddess’ voice echoed eerily faint as the fragments changed back to the cloud of swirling, sparkling glittery points of light, and slowly began to fade

“That... too, you will have to see....”

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A slight figure ducked out of sight behind one of the standing stones, then faded silently back into the darkness beneath the hoary cedars. The young woman found her heart racing, and her whole body shivering, as she tried to grasp what she had illicitly witnessed at the foot of the Sacred Throne of the Goddess. She leaned up against one of the trees, hidden from view, as Gabrielle moved onto the path that returned to the village. As the Queen passed the tree and the hidden Amazon, she hesitated, listening. After a moment, she smiled, and said softly, “If you have need of understanding, sometimes it is better to try daring things – even when they are forbidden. At least, that’s what *I* discovered.” Then she walked on, and was soon hidden among the giants.

The young woman gasped, as she found herself alone. How was she going to face Gabrielle? Would the Queen know who she was? Eponin was going to tan her hide, for sure! She was always going on about how they flaunted traditions! But she was for sure going to tell her companions that she had actually seen Artemis! They’d be impressed,

she thought, wild with anticipation. Everyone knew that Xena had killed Artemis – or so they were taught. Wait ‘til she told them otherwise! A chill passed over her, as she realized that she was standing not fifteen strides from where the terrible Artemis had stood and breathed and spoke. In a sudden panic that the Goddess would sense her presence and hurtle her right into the Amazon Afterlife, she bolted out of cover like a startled deer, and ran pell-mell down the twisting path. As she ran, her panic surged. “Oh, Gods!” she gasped, “Am I ever in the centaur poop, now!”

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When Gabrielle got back to the village, she immediately went in search of Eponin. She found the Weapons Master in her lodgings. ‘Poni was sitting on a low fur-covered couch, working on fletching some new arrows. She looked up as Gabrielle hesitated at the doorway.

“Ah – you’re back,” ‘Poni said.

“Yes. Is it all right if I come in?”

“ ‘Course it is., “ ‘Poni flashed a grin. “ You know you’re the closest thing to a sister I have, Gabrielle. It’s still hard to believe that you’ve really come back - I have to pinch myself, every now and then – just to remind me that you’re really here! It’s like after you came back from Ares’ cave – only difference is, Xena’s not . . .” She stopped, abruptly. “Aw, just ignore me, Gab – I’m sorry.”

Gabrielle, rested her hand lightly on ‘Poni’s shoulder, sighed and then went over to the table, and poured a cup from the wine flask. She sat down and stretched, a huge yawn escaping in the process. “Goddess, I’m so tired,” she said. She drank deeply from the cup. “I expect that there’s a young Amazon telling her sisters a good tale, right now. I caught one of them – I’m not sure of her name – you know the one with the russet-colored short, curly hair? Anyway, she was hiding out behind the sarcen stones, during my little talk with Artemis . . . Oh, yes, “Poni,” - who turned a startled look on her friend, her mouth dropping open in surprise - “I saw her, right enough - large as life, and just as prickly and demanding as she ever was! Anyway, I had just left the circle and was passing the first rank of cedars when I heard the young one trying desperately to keep quiet behind one of the bigger trees. I let her know I knew she was there. I think I may have made an impression on her that she won’t soon forget! Not to mention the eyeful she must have got of

Artemis!” Gabrielle chuckled. ‘You know, ‘Poni, I never thought I’d get old enough to appreciate the humorous view Xena must have had of me, when I was a young pup, straggling along in her wake!’”

Eponin chuckled. “Hah – that’s young Io. She’s one of the few I thought I’d gotten straightened out! Now she pulls this stunt, and I think maybe I haven’t. after all. Goods damned these kids! They have no respect for the old rites and beliefs, Gabrielle, I don’t know how we’re going to get them turned around!”

“Now you’re sounding like an old lady, ‘Poni!” Gabrielle gave her a playful slap on the arm. She shook her head. ‘Well, never mind. Time enough for all that later, I guess.” She slumped down lower on the couch, and looked on as Eponin continued working on the arrows. “And besides, I would guess that there is more to it than you are telling, ‘Poni. Could it be that the women of the Tribe have been questioning my right to be Queen? And that would be a fair question, my friend – even were it from the mouths of babes.”

‘Poni glared at her, shaking her head, a protest forming on her lips. “Aw, no, Gab.... It wasn’t those kids – they’re too wet behind the ears for that – it’s Kypris, and some of the older women,” she bit her lip, and stopped, shaking her head. “They’re just a pain in the ‘you-know-where’! It’s been hard enough for all of us, all these years – without their divisiveness. Goddess, I am so sick of it!” She slammed her fist into the surface of the couch,

“Ah, ‘Poni - I have much to answer for, and much to tell to all of the Tribe. And I hope in the telling to once more regain everyone’s trust and respect. And, “she added softly, “your love, as well.” Those clear green eyes look longingly at her friend, the sadness in her face heart-rending to ‘Poni.

“Gab – you don’t ever have to even think that is gone, because we have way too much history that anything you could do would make me turn away from you, my friend. I’ve always felt close to you,,,” Then, embarrassed, she stuttered to amend, “I mean, I don’t guess I even come anywhere near what Xena....”

“Hush, ‘Poni – its okay. I understand, and I am so glad that I can still call you my friend – because you are, and always will be.” They smiled at one another. Eponin picked up the arrow she had let fall, and though her hands were trembling at the emotion so strong between them, she went back to wrapping the shaft with the waxed twine....

. . . Eponin finished the arrow she had fletched, and looked up, to find Gabrielle curled up, sound asleep. She grinned, then snagged a blanket from the chest at the side of the couch, and unfolding it, she gently covered the sleeping figure. She then blew out all but one of the candles, and made her way out of her quarters, to go to the evening meal. She would bring back some food for the Queen, for later.

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Gabrielle woke with a start – disoriented. Where was she? She looked around, seeing only a guttering candle in the gloom of the lodge. Across the single room, she made out a bed, holding the form of a sleeping Eponin, softly snoring. Her eyes tracked to the low table, next to the couch where she was - seeing a flagon, a cup, and a trencher, covered with a cloth. She smiled: *Ah, that 'Poni – she is such a good soul!* She poured herself a small amount of the liquid, and drank – Gods, she was thirsty. It was cider, sweet and cold. Removing the cloth, she found a roasted quail, some cooked squash, and a slice of nut bread. She ate, hungrily.

When she was done, she sat, still, musing. She should go back to her own quarters. She should spend the rest of what was left of the night thinking about what Artemis had said to her, and what she must do. She wondered when the challenge would come, and from what quarter. She didn't know the women any more, and would have to consult with 'Poni as to likely challengers. And what of this story of herself? Best not think too much, for her bard's instinct was to try to compose her tale – and that had been prohibited. Mostly, she was used to worrying – worrying about what would come, and whether she could prove herself to them. Was that really what she was meant to do? Would she ever be acknowledged by them again? Could she be trusted to lead them, once more?

Gods, stop beating yourself up, Gabrielle. You always were too critical of yourself - always analyzing everything to death... to death.... she shook herself - *and morbid, as well.* She sighed.

Her musings were interrupted by a sound from the bed. Eponin was having a nightmare – she began moaning, restlessly thrashing about. Gabrielle moved swiftly to the bed, sat down, and put her hand on 'Poni's head, softly stroking her cheek and whispering soothing words.

“Hush, ‘Poni – hush. It’s all right. It’s just a bad dream.”

Eponin woke with a gasp, pushing herself up to a half-seated position. She shook her tousled head.

“Goddess – that was awful...” she muttered. “Oh, sorry, Gab – I didn’t mean to disturb you...”

“On the contrary, my friend,” She smiled. “Do you want to tell me about it? Or maybe I should just get out of here, and let you get back to sleep. You’ve done enough on my behalf, already. A good night’s sleep would be welcome, I’m sure.”

Eponin put her hand on Gabrielle’s arm. “I... I wouldn’t object if you would stay, at least a little while. I know it’s probably not a good idea, but if you aren’t in the mood for sleep, I’d like talk, for a while. If you want to...” she added, shyly. “I hardly ever sleep straight through the night, anymore. One of the rewards for living so long,” she added, wryly.

Gabrielle looked searchingly into ‘Poni’s eyes, and then responded. She pulled back the covers, pulled off her boots, and crawled in next to ‘Poni. ‘Poni looked at her, amazed.

“Gab – I don’t mean... I didn’t think that you’d...” she stuttered to a stop, not sure what to say.

“”Eponin, listen to me,” Gabrielle sighed, “I want to be clear with you, my friend, because our relationship means a huge amount to me, and I don’t think I can get very far down this road to my own redemption without your support. I don’t think that we should go very much further without a good talk. You and I go back - way back –longer that anyone else left here. You probably know me better than anyone else, now – even though I have been gone this time for ten more seasons. Some things never change, at least – anyway I hoped that would be so - and when you welcomed me back, I could see that our friendship had survived, in spite of all the lost time. And I was so grateful for that, ‘Poni! “

“Aw, Gab – I felt that, too,” Eponin replied. “While you’ve been busy bending your knee to Artemis, out there, I’ve been thinking and remembering a lot; and worrying, if you’d like to know, about whether you still wanted me as a friend.” She hesitated; then rushed on. “I have to tell you that I’ve only been in relationship – as a partner, I mean – with Ephiny. And then with Granella – that was while you and Xena were in

Ares' cave. After their deaths, I guess I decided that I couldn't do any more close commitments – not like I had with them, anyway. I've been having a kind of no-strings-attached thing with Talia, lately. I don't know what she sees in me – I'm an old woman, for sure. She could have her pick of the women in the Tribe who are closer to her in age. I never was very good at the mushy stuff. Those heart-to-heart talks, I mean – umm – sort of like we're having now," she mused, a crooked grin on her face.

Gabrielle took 'Poni's hand in her own. She squeezed it affectionately. "Yeah – I know – you and Xena used to leave all those to Eph and me. And that worked out, pretty much, you know... but I appreciate your telling me about this. Goddess, we have so much catching up to do! A Couple of lifetimes, at least! I'm glad that you have Talia, and that you are still willing to be a friend to me."

Eponin looked uncomfortable. "There's something else..."

She paused. Gabrielle looked searchingly at her. "What is it, 'Poni?"

"Ah, I don't know quite how to put, this, Gab – but I guess you'll hear me out! It's just that, well, it's strange, you know – seeing you like this. I mean, we're, what? Both close to sixty seasons, aren't we? But you – you still look like you just celebrated your - well, at most your thirtieth birthday! I don't know – it's just strange, somehow, that you've aged so well! "

Gabrielle smiled. "Oh, yeah – that.... Well, I guess it's because of that "beauty sleep" in the Ice Cave. That is about the only thing I thank Ares for, 'Poni. But more to the point, my friend – you are hardly unappealing! Any Amazon would be proud to call you their partner. And, don't you underestimate yourself - you're just as sexy as you always were! Besides, 'Poni – I always *did* like older women, you know!"

'Poni blushed, "That makes me feel a *whole* lot better." The grin just as suddenly faded. "But what about you – Gab? How are you managing, all this time... or is that too hard a question? You don't have to say, if you don't want to," she added, hastily. "It's really none of my business..."

Gabrielle looked down at their hands, still clasped. "Oh, well... I....I've been celibate - I guess you'd say - 'Poni. And I will stay that way, now, I think, for the rest of my life." Her face took on a wistful, musing expression, in the flickering candlelight.

'Poni looked at her, seeing the long time of solitude etched in the lines of her face, and the thought crept into her head, *"Goddess, she's so beautiful, so strong. You can see her whole insides, right there in her face. It just glows, even when she's looking sad. But how can she bear it - so alone? She's so vulnerable, and yet so full of strength."* Followed by another, unbidden thought – *"I wonder if that's what someone looks like, when they've turned into an immortal?"*

"Goddess, Gab – it makes my heart break, to think of what you've had, and lost..." she broke off, not daring to continue. *Shut up, shut up, you goon! Don't make her keep going back to that! Not good!* She railed at herself, silently.

Gabrielle sighed, and patted the hand that she still held, then pulled it up and kissed the back of it, before letting it go. She looked at 'Poni, a soft smile playing about her mouth.

"It's really all right, my friend. I have made my peace, I think – at least, as much as it is possible, while I am still here in this physical body, and in this life." She stretched, and yawned. 'And if I'm lucky, it won't be a terribly long stay."

Gabrielle then told Eponin the details of the Ordeal, and Artemis's demands. And they talked about the likelihood of a direct challenge to Gabrielle's Right of Caste, and who might try to overthrow her, Eponin was all for assigning Amazons to be her escort, at all times to guard their Queen, but Gabrielle shook her head at that. 'No, 'Poni – I'm long past that kind of foolishness. I have to be able to feel at home here, if I am ever to stay and succeed. I have to show that I am not afraid of them. Even though I hate the violence that may show it's ugly head here, I can't cower. Just tell me who you think the likely challenger will be, and I'll just have to figure out a way to deal with them, when the time comes."

'Poni thought a bit then nodded, once. "Oh yeah – I know. It'll be Kypris, for sure." She's a dangerous bitch; too full of herself, by a half. You know the type – all posturing and snarling ego. She's a damned good fighter, though, with a knife.' 'Poni added, pensively, "She would make a perfect assassin, actually."

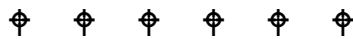
Gabrielle sighed. "Well, I'll keep that in mind. Now that I know what to expect, I'll know what to watch for – but I'd sure feel better, 'Poni, if I knew you were watching my back."

Eponin grasped Gabrielle's hand, and squeezed it tightly. "Gab – you know I would give my life, for you."

Gabrielle nodded. "I know that, 'Poni. But I don't think that will be necessary. How about just letting me share your bed, tonight? Is it ok if I just curl up here, with you? I sort of need some company, right now."

Eponin grinned. "No sweat. I'd just as soon stay away from nightmares, for the rest of the night, myself! What else are friends for?"

They both lay back, and were soon asleep.



Chapter 3

*You came and I was crazy for you
And you cooled my mind that burned with longing (48)*

The next morning, Gabrielle took the path that led to the hot springs, just outside the Amazon village. It lay in a small, protected dell surrounded by a rocky outcropping, in the midst of the giant cedars that made up the Sacred Grove of the Goddess. She took her staff, a sea sponge, a chamois and some herbal soap, a water skin, and her scroll case. Before calling the Council of Elders, she wanted some time for purification, and to work on a bit of verse she was trying to finish. The sun was already warm – it would be a hot day. She had agreed to catch up with 'Poni, who was engaged that morning in drilling the younger Amazons in stave fighting. Gabrielle had promised to meet her at the sparring ground, and view some of the bouts, before the mid-day meal.

Gabrielle lay her things down on the soft moss that surrounded the lip of the pool. It was fed by a spring issuing from the rocky wall. She quickly shed her clothing, and slipped in. The Amazons had long ago lined the sides and bottom of the pool with smooth flat rocks. The water was wonderfully hot, in contrast to the still-cool air of the morning; and she lay for some time, submerged up to her neck, in its gentle embrace. Lying

in hot water always reminded her of being with Xena. There was precious little else in life that comforted her much, anymore, or that could bring her to the level of physical ease that she had always felt in Xena's arms.

In truth, she had to admit that in this state of relaxed floating, she could easily enter into one of those secret, always-comforting conversations with her Soulmate. As she lay back, she would imagine the dragon on her back begin to glow with an unearthly blue light; and in her mind's eye, it would flow off her back, grow huge, and float around in front of her, wavering in space; and Xena would be there, riding on the dragon's back. She would vault lightly off, wave her hand in a languorous fashion, the dragon would disappear, and in the next heartbeat, they would be in one another's arms, and it would be so-o good.

'Gods, I've missed you,' the deep, melodious voice whispered, as Gabrielle felt her lover's arms around her, and the soft, spicy leather/cinnamon scent - so distinctively Xena's in life - enveloped her senses.

And Gabrielle turned her head, and sighed,

And felt the soft touch of her cheek against that other cheek.

In an agony of desire,
 And longing,
 And loss
A thrill moved across her skin
And she could feel her nipples stiffen Ache
And the electric jolt
 Moved
 Down her belly,
And opened her to her core –
And her back arched,
 - An involuntary reaction
To the ghostly hands that moved over her –

Searching,
 Stroking.

And she gasped,
As her soul leapt out to join with that sweet Other's
In a flood of love so strong it seemed it would

never stop.

And she hovered,
For as long as she could,
In a sweet, bodiless ecstasy
Of complete surrender,
And merging
Into her long-lost Love....

* * * * *

‘I live for this - with you,’ Gabrielle murmured, when once again she was back inside her body, and her breathing had calmed.

“As I do, for you, dear heart,” Xena answered.

“Ah, well - I guess I can make it as long as I live, if you can come to me like this, every now and then,” Gabrielle replied. She chuckled, “I’ll just have to arrange to stick close to this hot spring, is all...”

A low, ghostly laugh: *“I know you will my sweet heart. Will that be so hard?”*

Gabrielle’s eyes widened, as the thoughts of her coming ordeal flooded back into her awareness. “Gods, Xena! I hope not! I am in such a scary place, right now! Got any words of wisdom for me, oh Warrior Princess as Ascended Master?”

“Ah, my Bard, you were always the one for the wise words -what makes you think you won’t have them, when you need them? You always seemed to have more than enough words, as far as I can remember,” Xena teased. Gabrielle now lay quietly nestled in Xena’s arms, in the pool, her head resting on Xena’s shoulder. She looked up as Xena stroked her belly and continued softly nuzzling her cheek.

“Ah, yes – but you were always the main event, Xena. You were the focus and the reason and the adventure. You were the Hero of my life.” Gabrielle’s voice caught. “I...I don’t know if I can tell myself, without you being there, everywhere. You are *inside* of me, Xena. How can I leave you out?”

“Well, my love, you can do it only if you remember one thing.” Xena’s brilliant, electric blue eyes looked earnestly into hers.

“And what is that, Xena?”

“Just remember that, from the inside out, your life and mine are the same.”

Gabrielle looked searchingly at her Beloved, desperate to understand.
“But, Xena...”

“There is only love, Gabrielle, in the end. We are the same. And that beats all the odds.” Xena drew Gabrielle’s hand up, out of the water. Gabrielle watched, fascinated, as the drops of water dripped from her hand, the sunlight sparkling as they fell onto the surface of the pool, making small spreading circular wakes. Xena gently kissed the tip of each finger, and then smiled,

“Lao Ma once recited a poem to me, Gabrielle. I think it even ended up in her Book. It went like this:

*“Knowing other people is intelligence,
Knowing yourself is wisdom.
Overcoming others takes strength,
Overcoming yourself takes greatness.
Contentment is wealth.*

*Boldly pushing forward takes resolution.
Staying put keeps you in position.*

*To live till you die
Is to live long enough.” **

The brilliant blue eyes seemed to fill all her awareness. Gabrielle gazed longingly into her partner’s face. “Id rather the last verse was different,” she said, sadly.

“How’s that, my Love?” Xena asked,

“I’d write it:To die until you *live* / Is to *die* long enough.”

Xena clasped Gabrielle’s face between her two ghostly hands, and their lips met in a fiercely passionate kiss. Gabrielle spiraled down, down into

the depths of it . . .

* * * * *

After washing her hair and body clean with the scented soap, Gabrielle swam a few languid strokes under the surface to rinse off, then stood and moved out of the pool. The water cascaded off of her still finely-toned body, as she slicked her hair back from her face. Reaching down and retrieving the chamois, she briskly wiped the moisture from herself, then sat down, cross-legged, and continued vigorously rubbing her hair with the soft cloth, until it was dry. Then she sat, idle, enjoying the sun on her body.

She pulled the scroll case out from under her clothes, and twisted off the lid. The case was of brass, ornately decorated with designs, and the cap was attached to the top of the long tube with a fine metal chain. She fished out the scroll within, unrolled it, and smoothed it out on the surface of the flat rock paving stone that served as her sun-bathing spot. She stretched out on her stomach, and let the sun bake the dark indigo dragon, once more in its place on her back.

She had been working on this piece ever since her sojourn in Egypt, and she could feel that it was almost done. Just a few words still niggled at her, but as she re-read it, she suddenly felt that it was as complete as it would ever be. She thought it might be good enough to send in to the Academy, to be put alongside her other stories and poems. It had been a long time since she had sent anything on to them. Her mind briefly strayed to memories of a trip to Athens, long ago, that had added several more tales to the rolls of her stories of the Warrior Princess.

She sighed, and shook her head. “No— it’s too easy to let my mind drift into the past. I need to keep my wits firmly in the present, today.” She chuckled to herself, “Right, Gabrielle – like you managed to do while you were in the pool! Get real – you idiot. Your mind just goes wherever it’s summoned – especially when a certain Warrior Princess is the caller!”

“Ok,” she sighed. “Get a grip, Gabrielle.” She took a swig from the

water skin she had brought along, and then she read the poem once again, this time aloud:

In seafoam, in swirlings and imaginings
I am fish, tadpole, crocodile.
I am an urge, an idea, a portent of impossible dreams.
I lie between heaven and earth, between goodness and evil, patience and explosion...
I have always been here, a child in the silence of things, ready to wake at any moment.
I am possibility.

What I hate is ignorance, smallness of imagination,
The eye that sees no farther than its own lashes.
All things are possible.
When we speak in love and live by love, truth in love will be our comfort.
Who you are is limited only by who you think you are
What I know was given to me to say.

There is more.

There are words that exist only in the mind of heaven, a bright knowing, a clear moment of being. When you know it, you know yourself well enough. You will not speak.

I am a child resting in love, the pleasure of clouds.
I read the book of the river. I hold the magic of stones and trees.
I find god in my fingers and in the wings of birds.
I am my delight, creator of my destiny.

It is not vanity.

There are those who live in the boundaries of guilt and fear, the limits of imagination.
They believe limitation is the world. You can not change them.
There is work of your own to do.

You will never reach the end of your own becoming, the madness of creation, the joy of existence.

Dance in the moment.
Reach down and pull up song.
Spin and chant and forget the sorrow that we are flesh on bone... **

She smiled to herself. Yes, it was complete; she rolled it up once again, and slid it back into the case. Donning her clothes, she retrieved her staff and water skin, and made her way peacefully back down the track to the village. She would be ready for her ordeal. She felt certain.

* * * * *

When she arrived at the training ground, she saw that there was quite a group of Amazons gathered around the edges, and the dust was being kicked up into the air by the exertions of the pairs who were sparring together in the open center square. She moved up and joined the line of warriors, who were jeering, cat-calling, and clapping when their favorites made bad or good moves. Gabrielle even overheard a few bets being made, as to which of each pair would come up the better fighter.

Roving around amidst the pairs, Eponin kept an eagle eye on them, stopping them now and again, to demonstrate a move, or correct a position. She bore a fierce look of concentration on her face, which was covered in a fine coating of dust – as they all were. And it was very evident, from the quality of the sparring going on, that she was indeed a Master at her work, and was managing to fashion a fine crop of fighters, confident in themselves and their abilities. After a good workout, ‘Poni put two fingers to her lips, and blew a sharp whistle. All the women stopped instantly, and turned to look at their teacher, grateful for the break, and the chance to catch their breath.

Eponin spoke “You are doing very well at maintaining your focus; and your speed and agility and ability to execute the necessary moves is getting better every day. I am proud of all of you for that! But I have to tell you that *all of you* are suffering from one very glaring handicap. You are thinking about your next move, and anticipating your victory over your opponent, and – in some of you - falling under the spell of ego; already thinking about how you’ll celebrate your victory and win your bets (here she cast an eye out over the line of now silent spectators – and nodded at Gabrielle, in the process). You are forgetting to listen, and to attend to what you hear, and you are forgetting to PAY ATTENTION to what your senses are telling you about your opponent. Regrettably, this means that most of you, by the end of a real engagement, would, sadly, be very, very dead. “

She paced back and forth as she spoke, making sure to make eye contact

with every fighter in the group. When she had uttered the last three words, she stopped, folded her arms across her chest, and just stared at them, silent, for a couple of heartbeats. Without moving her gaze from their faces, her voice rang out once more.

“My Queen, would you do me the honor of sparring with me?”

There was a sudden motion, as the line of spectators’ eyes turned to the golden-headed figure in their midst, and the fighting pairs also turned, now aware of her presence, as well.

Gabrielle’s eyes danced, though her face remained solemn. She inclined her head a fraction, and responded. “I’d be delighted, ‘Poni,” she drawled.

She dropped her things in a pile next to the wall that curved around the training area, keeping only her staff in her hands. She stepped out into the middle of the now-cleared ground. The young Amazons had all lined up, making a wide circle around her and Eponin - who had pulled a staff out of the hands of a gawking youngster, and moved up to face Gabrielle. They both held their staves slightly angled down, with the left arm straight, and the right hand holding closer to the back end of the staff, with the elbow bent. In absolute silence, Gabrielle began to move, slowly, slowly, circling around ‘Poni – her eyes watching, her face a mask of stillness. If she stopped, Eponin stopped, too – then, slowly, slowly, she started up again, reversing her direction. ‘Poni was hard pressed to match her moves.

Gabrielle made the first foray, She stopped suddenly, turned her head slightly - and in one burst of motion, she was flying toward Eponin, moving her staff parallel to her body and shoving it out as she hurtled forward. Eponin’s staff came sharply to the vertical, held out rigidly in front of her. The two staves made contact, with a sharp CRACK - then both opponents moved into a flurry of parries and thrusts, counter-thrusts and counter-parries, that seemed to go on forever.

Then, just as suddenly, they split apart, and stopped still. Again, the staves came to a downward angle, and the slow circling, halting, listening, and circling began again. Eponin attacked. Another flurry of perfectly-executed parries and thrusts were countered just as perfectly by Gabrielle. The circling began, once more. They were both panting, now, and Eponin was beginning to visibly sweat. She swiped it away with her forearm, never lessening her grip on the staff. Then, unexpectedly, she crouched down, and launched into a move designed to bring her staff,

held rigid at arm's length, behind Gabrielle's legs; then continue the sweep on around, so that it would pull Gabrielle's legs out from under her.

But Gabrielle had, after all, invented that particular combination – so with a look of fierce concentrated joy, she leaped straight up in the air at just the moment before the staff came behind her legs. While still airborne, Gabrielle curled herself up, tucked her head under, and did a flip over Eponin's crouched form, landing behind her. Then, fast as a cat, she whirled up behind her friend, lowered her horizontally-held staff over Eponin's head, and brought the staff up under her opponent's chin - forcing 'Poni to her feet, and pulling the woman back against her body. They held their positions, absolutely still once more, but for the silent panting as they caught their breaths,

In that instant, Gabrielle caught the distinctive sound of a crossbow releasing its quarrel, fortunate in the hushed stillness of the crowd, who all stood mesmerized by the performance they were witnessing. A whispered, flashing thought – that it would surely come straight at them, for a killing spot. She dropped her staff and brought both hands up in a quick, clapping motion, directly in front of them. A moment of stinging pain to her palms, and she had captured the bolt, just inches away from Eponin's heaving chest.

She looked in the direction from which it had come, her face darkening in outrage. She cried out, "Come forth – you mewling creature! Show yourself and challenge me like a True Amazon! How can such a cowardly action win the hearts and minds of this Tribe?" Absolute silence – not a single figure stirred, and no one answered her challenge.

Then, Gabrielle released her hold on 'Poni and stepped out from behind her. She held up the crossbow quarrel, and then brought it sharply down across her uplifted knee, breaking it in two. Throwing it down on the ground, she trod upon the pieces. Then she retrieved her staff, and set it butt-down onto the ground. Poni turned, walked up to her, bowed, and dropped her staff at Gabrielle's feet. She then stepped up to Gabrielle, and they locked opposite arms at the elbows, in the Amazon Gesture of Solidarity. Then they turned, and both faced the crowd of Amazons.

The spellbound group of young Amazons stood, transfixed, at the sudden violence of the attack, and at Gabrielle's catching of the bolt in mid-air. They erupted in a clamor of sound.

Eponin, her chest still heaving, raised her hand, forcing quiet upon the

spectators. She picked up her staff.. They gradually stopped their noise, and clustered around the two silent women.

“Now you have seen stave fighting as it should be done, when it is done as a meditation between Masters. Someone,” her eyes raked the group angrily, “has also seen fit to give you a chance to see the masterly defensive capability of your Queen, Gabrielle. You have witnessed the cowardly attack on both me and her – for surely, if she had not stopped that quarrel, we would both have been dead before the first among you could have reacted. I would remind you all of the criticism that I shared with you before we began this demonstration. I hope you were paying close attention, because you need to take your memory of how the Queen and I fought, and how Gabrielle saved my life, and hers, today - and think on what I have said. If you learn anything, today, it should be the importance of ATTENTION. Your pride and your ego will not save you, in a real fight. You don’t have a prayer, if you don’t use your eyes, your ears and your wits.” And she added, challenging, “I think you all owe a gesture of respect to the Queen, for her willingness to teach you – even in the midst of having to defend herself to the death. And what happened here should show you that she is the finest stave fighter in the Known World – bar none.” She waited, as they shuffled awkwardly. Then, raggedly, they began to make the Amazon Salute – fists to chests.

She turned to Gabrielle, her eyebrows raised in question. “My Queen, do you wish to say anything to these warriors, before I release them to go get cleaned up?”

Gabrielle looked around at the sobered and thoughtful faces, and she reckoned that she’d won a few hearts and minds. She had seen the shadowy figure, melting into the tree line, just after she had caught the bolt. Not clear enough to identify, but she reckoned that would get sorted out, later. She took a long pull at her water skin; then grinned – her nose wrinkling in that trademark mischievous way – and shook her head. “Go,” she said to them. “Go to your rest. I’ll have enough to say, after this evening’s Council, and tomorrow will bring its own surprises.”

She went over to retrieve her things, and then she and Eponin walked out, their eyes keeping a wary watch around them, and headed for the dining area, followed by a group of very quiet, thoughtful Amazons.

“That was a close call, my Queen,” Eponin muttered. ‘Looks like you picked up that Xena trick real good. Thanks! I guess you’ve bested the first part of your ordeal”

Gabrielle, clasped her on the shoulder. “What are friends for?” She answered. “But, no – I don’t think so. That wasn’t a challenge – it was pure malice. I won’t let down my guard, just yet.”

. * * * * *

Gabrielle and Eponin sat, together with the other women of the Council of Elders, at the head table in the communal eating area. Talia, too, was there, sitting on the other side of ‘Poni, and listening intently as ‘Poni recounted the events at the training ground to her friend. Talia leaned against her, and sipped frequently from ‘Poni’s cup. Gabrielle sat quietly, keeping her thoughts to herself, and to her ghostly companion.

‘I don’t know, Xena - how am I going to handle a challenge?’

“With all the silver-tongued skill you’ve got, my Bard.”

“Ah, so you think I can call her out, and still avoid a fight?”

‘It’s what your best, at, my sweet! You’ll handle it – I have great confidence in you.’

Gabrielle arose, taking her own cup, to fetch a refill from the large cider barrel, close to one of the other tables. There was a line, so she gazed around while she waited, and as she watched ‘Poni and Talia, she smiled. She could see how much Talia loved her friend, by the single-minded attention she displayed to ‘Poni’s every move. Talia, at the moment, was trying to get ‘Poni to eat small bits of meat, which she was feeding her by hand. ‘Poni would take them from Talia’s hand with her lips, and go right on talking as she chewed – and never missed a beat.

“I don’t care how much ‘Poni protests it, she’s got a real thing going, there,” Gabrielle thought to herself. Then her eyes wandered to the closest table, where her sharp hearing picked out the conversation going on among some of the younger Amazons. She thought she recognized some from the crowd at the match.

*“. . .I’m telling you – she was incredible! It was like watching some kind of a wild animal – a mountain lion, maybe, or, or – I don’t know - maybe one of those big cats we’ve heard stories of – that roam in the deserts of Egypt? . . . anyway – she just moved like she was *stalking* Eponin...”*

“Uh-huh! You got that right, girl – it was fantastic! First she moved one

way; then she'd stop dead; then move another. But you couldn't tell *which* way – it was like she was made out of stone! “

“Yeah, then the next second – whoa – she was moving like lightning! And then came that attack! Do you think it was staged?”

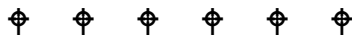
“Nah, no way! The Pony looked too surprised, for that. And did you see that grab? Woo – I never saw hands move so fast! She is too awesome!”

‘Yeah – but who do you think did it? It seemed – I don't know – kind of creepy. It made me feel sick. Where's the Amazon honor, in something like that?’ They all looked uncomfortable, like they were afraid to name names.

Gabrielle listened, a bemused look on her face, then it went blank, as she found her mind suddenly thrust back into the memory of her swordfight with the Samurai General, in Jappa, in the middle of the night, in that Gods-forsaken horrible cold, drenching rain. She shivered, feeling again the clammy feel of the heavy padded blue silk kimono, sopping wet, and how slippery the sword handle felt in her hands, how incredibly exhausted she had been, how almost certainly at the end of her endurance, and how much she understood the absolute need to remember what Xena had taught her – to listen, listen for the single, crystalline, pure moment of Now, that would reveal her opponent's direction an instant before he moved, giving her the briefest, scant second of advantage that would allow her to overcome the odds, and win the engagement. To listen, and screen out all the other noises, until she could hear the movement of the foot that would show his direction. And win back her Beloved's head, and the poor violated body... And keep on, exhaustion or not, terror or not, revulsion and heartache and gut-wrenching sorrow or not - to try so hard... to try anything....

“Gab? Gab, are you all right?” ‘Poni's voice came closer, and louder, as her vision returned, back down the long, dark tunnel of memory, to the torch-lit scene, her ears cleared of the dull muffled buzzing, back to the chattering of voices, and the face of her friend, leaning in close. “Are you all right? You were standing there, and you just turned white as a . . . well- you just looked like you were going to pass out!”

“Yeah,” she sighed. “I'm here.” She filled her cup; then walked back to the table, with ‘Poni hovering, behind.



Chapter 4

Yet if you had a desire for good or beautiful things . . .
... Shame would not hold down your eyes
but rather you would speak about what is just (137)

As the Amazons finished the evening meal, and the tribe dispersed to their quarters, the last few women assigned to clean-up got the area ready for the morning food preparers. The Council of Elders stayed behind, collected at the head table, to conduct their normal weekly gathering. This night's agenda was, however, to be devoted entirely to the issue of Gabrielle's return.

As the nominative head of the Council, Gabrielle was expected to take her rightful place at the head of the table. The Elders were surprised, then, because she made no move to change her seat. Rather, she stayed where she had been seated during the meal. After an uncomfortable silence, Alysia, the tribe's Lawgiver, cleared her throat, and spoke up.

"My Queen, we are waiting for you to take you rightful place. . . We need to discuss this attack on you and Eponin, and what we are to do . . ."

Gabrielle, her head down as she studied her hands, folded before her on the table, was silent for a long moment, then looked up at Alysia, and slowly shook her head.

"Well, you know? From where I am sitting, my sister, I am not certain that is where I belong." She looked around the circle of women, making eye contact with each, in turn. "And, quite frankly, I am not prepared to talk about this day's attack. 'Poni and I are working on that, and although I feel certain that we have not seen the end of this, I would rather you take up our meeting, tonight, as though it had not occurred. I am more comfortable, right now, presenting myself to you as a person who has wandered far, and been absent long, and who has finally made her way back to her people. I am here to ask that you to take me back into your Tribe. That is my first request, and it is all I am prepared to ask of you,

until I have proven myself worthy of more. I therefore ask you to tell me – have I your permission to reclaim my position as an Amazon? What must I do to regain that right?”

Eponin turned to her friend, and her voice rose with passionate emphasis. “Gabrielle, as far as these women are concerned – and I think I speak for all of us,” she searched each face, in turn, the question asked, and their faces replied in unanimous consent, “I see that I do – so I will say it again: as far as we are concerned, you have never renounced your kinship as an Amazon, and you have done nothing to have it revoked. You ARE an Amazon, and you ARE a fully-fledged member of the Tribe.” She took her friend’s hand in her own, and added, gently, “You’re home again, Gabrielle. Home, where you should be; - and we are so very relieved and thankful that you are.”

All the Elders were nodding their agreement, now, and voicing the same thing. Ephegnia - the oldest on the Council, turned and spoke next; her softly wrinkled face wreathed in a smile. “My dear daughter – this council has waited a long time, hoping against hope that you would come back to us; that your long trouble and unhappy solitude could come to a place of solace, and healing. We have long talked among ourselves as to how we would best help you, upon your return, for we knew that you would be suffering, and we felt we could at the very least give you back your peaceful home, and our sisterhood, and restore your ability to trust in us, as your family. We are ready to do this, in whatever way you need us to.”

Gabrielle replied, her voice wobbling a bit, “Then, with all my heart, I am very glad to be home! And I hope that the Tribe will find it in their hearts to accept me back into their midst. I do not expect them to welcome me instantly – it has been too long, and some of them, have big questions about my right to walk in, as if I had never been gone – but I will try my best to get to know each of them, and give them every chance to get to know me.”

Talia now spoke up. “So now, sister, what will it take to get you back into that chair?” She pointed at the empty place at the head of the table. A low murmur of assent again echoed around the group.

Gabrielle took a deep breath, straightened up, her head held high. “Now this is the next issue I ask you to consider. I will tell you how I see it – and I know some of you may not agree with me,” she smiled at ‘Poni; “but again, I must ask that you let me share with you my reservations in this matter.” She paused to marshal her thoughts, and then continued.

“When I came walking in, thirteen days ago, I wanted to be careful not to overstep my bounds, and as I was ignorant of all that has passed in the long decade since I left you, I decided to behave as a visitor would; except, of course, for announcing myself as Queen, because, to be exact, that *was* my title, and my role, at the time that I left you. So I sought shelter with you.”

“Now some among you were offended: thinking that I would assume that I could act as your Queen – just pick up where I had let it fall, long ago. And the Tribe must surely be angry with me, for all just reasons. It wasn’t but moments after my return before I could see that my long absence has caused much dissention among the Tribe - and so I immediately withdrew from you, in a kind of hermit-like retreat. But you have to understand that I felt – and indeed, still feel, that I had a duty to Artemis, first and foremost, to present myself as a suppliant at her feet . . . and to find out what retribution she would exact from me.”

No, my friends, “she raised her hand as they raised their voices in protest,” you must acknowledge the state of things at the time that I went away! Let me refresh your memories, for I can see that you would just as soon forget all that, and move on – as well you should – and I, too would like to do the same. But the Goddess is a major player in our little corner of Greece – even now, even as one who has seen Her universal worship and adoration wane, severely damaged by the Twilight of the Gods! For the sake of all that she once meant to us, as Amazons, I could do no less than treat her with the respect and the honor that I *still feel* for her.”

“So, I *expected* that She would be furious with me. Consider: I was her Chosen One. I had assumed the mantle of the Queen, through the Right of Caste passed to me by Terries. I had successfully defended my Right - at first myself, and then, when I was injured, through Xena, my Champion, in besting Velasca – who then continued to challenge me and wage war on our Tribe, as a demigoddess, once she had eaten the ambrosia. It took bringing back Callisto – which I know you liked as little as I did – to get rid of her! I came back often - while Ephiny, as my Regent, held you in her capable hands - and we did our best to continue to protect the Tribe, and the Centaurs - when *they* were threatened. And in all these things, Artemis was glad, and found favor in me for what I and my Champion had done.”

Gabrielle sighed, and then continued, her voice now at a lower pitch. “But then, again, my world went spinning out of kilter, and all the dire events began to cascade down upon my head, and I found myself at odds with Artemis - indeed, with all of the Gods – and ended up actively

working to destroy them. Xena did destroy Artemis – at least, that is what we understood to have happened. But then, when have the Gods we lived with ever stayed dead? Or anything else, for that matter? Who could know if they would just show up again, like they’ve always done? And then, when the Tribe was vulnerable, bereft of the Goddess’s protection, the terrible events that we all experienced at Helicon occurred. Even Xena, with all the force and power of her own strength and battle-savvy experience, could not prevent what happened to us.

And I swore a blood oath to you, at the end of that bloody day, remember? I said, ‘I will do whatever it takes to keep you alive.’ Don’t deny me – you know I said it!”

Now the tears came, running unbidden down her cheek, and her voice, thick with emotion, went on. Not a few around the table were wiping their own tears. “And then what did I do? Did I come back here, with the handful of you that were left, and work side by side with you? Did I? I did not - for once again I had to follow my Heart, and my Soul – to abandon you all to your fate, while I followed my own - and Xena’s - to Jappa.”

“By all that once was sacred, and because of what would have been a certain result of such actions during the height of the power of the Gods of Olympus, I expected that Artemis, if she was able to return, and capable of using her considerable powers. would probably strike me dead. And from her point of view – she would have been justified. Honestly, I’ve been sort of expecting her to do so for years. That is partly why I went to Egypt, after Jappa. I needed time to grieve, without being pursued by one righteously angry Goddess.”

The women, their eyes now downcast, nodded their understanding at her insight.

“And so I thought it prudent to enact the age-old rite of Supplication. What better place, than at her Sacred Grove, and before her Throne? For twelve days, I scrupulously followed the prescribed ritual. I bathed each morning, and went cleansed to the Sacred Circle in the Grove of the Goddess. I humbly presented myself to Her, recited the boon I would ask of Her, and remained there, in all humility, fasting, from the sun’s rise to the sun’s setting. I waited for her to respond, and when she would not, I acknowledged day after weary day that Her will would be done in this matter. I have to confess that I was afraid that she would *not* come back, would*not* respond - would just ignore my plea. But I felt, nevertheless, that it was the right thing to do.”

Alysia, who had all this time been listening very thoughtfully to Gabrielle's analysis, now spoke.

"Gabrielle – I think this would be a good time to take a break. Your speech has been a truthful, clear-eyed, and passionate one, and it has moved all of us much. We need a short time to compose ourselves, and prepare ourselves for the rest of the meeting. I am sure that you have a proposal for us to consider, and we want to give it the best review that we can muster. Sisters, let us adjourn for a short time. Shall we reconvene; say in about half a candle mark from now?"

The others nodded and murmured their consent. Gabrielle answered, "Thank you, Alysia. That would be fine."

As the women got up, stretching and moving off to recompose themselves, Gabrielle turned to 'Poni and Talia.

"I need to go be by myself for this break. Will that upset you?"

Eponin leaned over, letting her forehead touch Gabrielle's. "Not a problem, friend." She drew back, never losing eye contact with Gabrielle, until she saw the familiar hint of the smile, "You go, girl." she murmured.

Gabrielle got up, and walked out from under the roofed-over space, and disappeared in the darkness beyond the torch-lit yard.

* * * * *

She walked blindly off, into the night, towards her own lodge. Stepping up onto the porch, she pushed aside the curtain masking the doorway. Without bothering to light a candle, she moved forward, guided by the hint of light from the window, to her bed. She swayed, and then crumpled onto the soft furs. She wept, harder than she had in a long, long time.

After a while her tears ended. She felt purged. Cleansed, of what she suspected was a last, hard kernel of guilt - that had lain hidden deep within her, since Helicon.

She was suddenly aware of her Soulmate, as a ghostly arm softly came around, and hugged her across the middle, and she could feel the familiar

body, curved to fit against her back. The tender voice, just by her ear, spoke softly there.

“You are going to be all right, my Love. You are doing this so well.”

Gabrielle grasped the arm she felt so comforting, and a last shuddering sob escaped from her chest. She whispered, “I know, Xena. But I’m still so afraid.”

“It will pass. It will pass.” The voice, now faint, replied.

Gabrielle sat up, and shifted to the end of the bed. She stood; then walked back through the doorway, and back into the darkness. She was ready to make amends.

* * * * *

Once again, they all sat round the table. Fresh torches had been lit, and there were now pitchers - wrapped in heavy covers - that held hot tea; and a tray of cups. Alysia brought the meeting back to focus.

“All of you: please – our younger sisters have thoughtfully prepared some mint tea for us. Please help yourselves, and we can get back to the issue at hand.” They took a few moments to pour the strong, fragrant brew for themselves. ‘Poni poured a cup for Gabrielle, then reached over, and pulled a covered pot closer. She took a large dollop of honey from the pot, and stirred it into the cup, and handed it to Gabrielle.

“Here you go – just the way you always liked it.”

Gabrielle raised her red-rimmed eyes to ‘Poni, a grateful smile peeking out, in spite of their sadness. “Thanks, friend,” she said, and blew on the surface of the tea, and sipped it gratefully.

Alysia once again spoke. “It is now time to judge the words of Gabrielle. You have heard her account of her arrival, and of what she has thought, and done, since her return. You have heard her lay herself out for you, baring her soul by telling us true how she sees her actions, words and deeds, since assuming the mantle of Queen. You have heard her humbly beg to be welcomed. You have unanimously enfolded her back into the arms of her sisters - her family – her Tribe.”

“Now, we must summon her to tell us again, and true, what she heard, and saw, and did, on the last night of her vigil at the feet of the Goddess Artemis, Gabrielle, please reveal to us the Judgment of Artemis.” She sat down, and they all silently waited.

“Well, I can truthfully report to you that she did not strike me dead!” She mused, wonder and humor creeping into her voice. “Although I must say, I did ask her to do so.”

They looked at her, shocked. She shook her head. “Don’t be surprised, at that – for I have wanted it, often, often, in these last ten seasons.” Her voice changed, went harsh, and ragged. She half whispered, “I would have helped her, if I could. . .”

“But she denied me that solace. She said it would be too easy, that she wanted more from me – more than my death! Can you imagine? I did not know what to make of that. But she had made her decision, and I could see that she was not going to humor me.”

Gabrielle stared morosely at her cup, turning it round between her hands. Then she sighed, deeply, straightened up, and continued. “So -by the command of Artemis, I am to undergo an ordeal, which has three parts. First, I am to withstand a challenge to my Right of Caste, as Queen. I have already been attacked, today – but I do not think that was a proper Challenge, and so I expect that to come, yet – probably tonight, or tomorrow morning. Second, you are to convene the Tribe of the Amazons, tomorrow evening, at dusk, in the Sacred Circle in the Grove of the Goddess, Every member of the Tribe must be there, and every one of you must stay there, for as long as it takes.....for as long as it takes me to complete my Ordeal. All of the Tribe must bear witness. All of the Tribe must sit in judgment of me.”

“The Elders looked at her, their faces full of concern, and then at one another. Whispers of, ‘What can she mean?’ ‘How can it be?’ Alysia motioned them to silence, then turned in her seat, facing the silent figure.

“And what is it, exactly, that we are to judge, Gabrielle?”

Gabrielle paused; then continued. “That is the third part of the ordeal. I am to tell you all – my story. My life – what I have learned from my life. I am not to compose this, in any way, before I open my mouth tomorrow night, and I must make myself the Hero of the story.” Her voice broke, “And Gods! - somehow, somehow... I cannot bring Xena into the telling of it, at all.” She looked around at all of them, her face anguished.

The silence was thick about the table. They were all trying to take it in – their minds were already imagining the scene, and wondering what she would say, and how....It would be too difficult, too cruel –

‘Talia shifted uncomfortably, and then spoke. “Gabrielle, do you think you can do this thing?”

Gabrielle shrugged. “Well, like I told Artemis – I have nothing else left to fear. I may as well try. I expect I will be up to the Challenge of my Right of Caste. Eponin will stand by me, as my Champion, if need be. The success of managing to ensure that every last member of the Tribe attends will lay with you; and, partly, with how they perceive my handling of the Challenge. As for the last – well, I wasn’t named Chief Bard of Athens for nothing! And if I fail – if I fail to speak in my own defense... or if... if I am not convincing enough to my sisters – well, it would be best to find out, and have it be resolved, finally, somehow. Better I should try, and fail – than not try at all.”

‘Poni reached over and put her hand on Gabrielle’s arm. ‘Gab – did she say... what would happen if you failed? I mean, besides having to give up being the Queen...did she seem like she would punish you – further?”

Gabrielle shook her head. “No it was strange – she seemed pretty benign, about that. She just said that I’d have to wait and see.’ She paused, frowning, thoughtful, “...but then, she said the same thing, if I succeeded. . .”

“What do you mean?” ‘Poni asked.

“I’m not sure, ‘Poni – she just said that if the Tribe felt that I was worthy, and could identify the qualities in me that they want in their Queen, then I would have braved the ordeal, and that I would take my place again and lead the Amazons. Then she said she wasn’t sure what else I would find out – she seemed uncertain – which is sort of weird, for an omniscient Goddess – and she told me I’d just have to wait and see about that, too.”

“So, my sisters; - that is the Judgment of Artemis. That is your charge, and my ordeal, and the Tribe’s responsibility. Please – grant me this request, and ensure, as best you can, that it is done – and done properly, as She has instructed.”

Gabrielle slumped, wishing for a back rest on the bench, and waited for their reply. The Elders moved down to the far end of the table, where a

whispered conference ensued. It went on for some time, and she took the opportunity to refill her cup from the tea pot. And added more honey, for her throat was beginning to feel raw, from all the talk. All she wanted was an answer, and then sleep.

Faster than she expected, they moved back to stand behind their seats at the table. Alysia then spoke, her tone authoritative and solemn.

“Gabrielle: Artemis’ Chosen, Once Queen of the Amazon Nations, Bard of Potedeia, and Heir and Consort of Xena, Warrior Princess, you have come before the Elders of the Last Tribe of the Amazon Nation, to request of us that we permit you to undergo an Ordeal, prescribed and bound on you by Artemis, Goddess of the Hunt and Protector of the Amazon Nation. You have agreed to enter into this fully, with no reservations, freely to attempt this Charge from the Goddess and to do so in the full presence of all of your sisters of this Tribe, and the Council of Elders, and for aught we know, the Goddess Herself. The Tribe is charged to enter into this, and sit in judgment of you, without reservation and without exception, for the full course of your penance, until you have finished telling your story. And when you are done, they are charged with deciding your fate, as Sometime Queen of this Tribe, whether you are to continue as such, or no. We, the Council of Elders, are charged to ensure that you fulfill this Ordeal, and do not shirk from it; and that we further ensure that no act or omission of the Tribe shall prevent or impede or hinder your actions or words. By the Charge of the Goddess, and by the consensus of the Council, we accept your request, and hereby order it to be made to be so.”

She pulled out her ceremonial knife, and rapped the butt of the handle on the tabletop, three times. Then she sat down, and the rest of the Council sat down after her.

Gabrielle then rose to her feet, resting her hands on the table top, her arms rigid as she closed her eyes briefly, fighting the black pinpricks that moved across her vision.

“I thank the Council for their consideration, and for their patience. I will do your bidding, and I will abide by the decision of the Tribe – whatever it may be.”

* * * * *

She then turned, and walked away from them, and out into the shadows of the torch-lit night. All she could think of now, was the oblivion of a

good night of sleep. She could almost remember what that had been like – long ago. And she devoutly wished that it would be granted to her, just this once, and that her Soul would not be... alone, the whole night through, She also prayed that the Challenge would wait, or that, at least, her Heart's Champion would watch over her this night.

Perhaps Artemis took pity on her Chosen, even now, even despite Her infamously irascible nature. Or maybe the Goddess Aphrodite still hovered, somewhere, high overhead – a *deus ex machina* who would still drop by to help out her favorite Bard in the “heart department.” For whatever reason, when Gabrielle had peeled off her sweat-soaked clothes, and curled up under the fur robes that covered her bed she was granted her wish ... in every respect.



Chapter 5

] you will remember
] for we in our youth
did these things (24A)

Gabrielle awoke, surprised that it was full morning. She shook her head, groggily, “Gods, I don’t believe it. I slept the whole night through!” She stretched, yawned - and sat up suddenly, “OH! . . .Oh, Xena! You *were* here – right through the night! I remember! Oh.... I don’t think that’s happened – since before Jappa...” Her voice trailed off. “By all the Powers that Be, Thank You!”

Her reverie was interrupted by the sound of running feet, several of them, coming towards her door. The curtain was thrust aside, and ‘Poni and three youngsters crowded into her hut. Gabrielle sat, unruffled, as they all pulled up short – and four pair of eyes suddenly searched for anywhere to look but at Gabrielle’s naked chest.

‘Ah, Oh – sorry, Gab!’ “Poni muttered. “We should have knocked.”

“No problem, ‘Poni – what can I do for you?”

‘Poni turned and gestured at the three Amazons, who were standing - bristling with braid, feathers, armbands, leathers and weapons - around the foot of her bed. “Tell her!”

They gaped at ‘Poni, then at anywhere but Gabrielle.

Gabrielle, her face working to keep from bursting out in gales of laughter, cleared her throat and gestured at ‘Poni. “Eponin, can you hand me the tunic you’ll find over in that chest? And the leggings folded next to it? Thank you.” ‘Poni fetched them with alacrity, and Gabrielle pulled on the clothing. Then, standing, she moved over to the table, poured herself some water, drank, and then returned to the bed, and sat, cross-legged, her finely arched feet tucked under. She had learned that pose while they had been in India, and she now preferred it, for active listening.

“Oh, come on now, my fine warriors! Be bold, Sit here with me and tell me your tale.” She gestured for them to sit on the floor around her. They plopped down, sighing,, and then looked at each other, then at her – uncertain who would begin.

Eponin sat down at the table, and snorted. “OUT WITH IT!” she roared.

They all jumped, and one of them finally stuttered. ”Wwwwelll..we...we can’t find Io! Anywhere! I mean, she’s been gone for over a day, now, and she usually doesn’t go out hunting by herself – I mean, we never go anywhere except in *pairs*, just like The Pony...I....I mean.... Eponin... taught us,”

One of the others wailed, “Oh, Gods, we didn’t *mean* anything by it!”

Gabrielle looked fixedly at them, sighed, opened her mouth, then shut it again, shook her head, and then spoke. “Ok - first things - first.” They all nodded. “”Poni, is this the same young woman whom I encountered, of whom I spoke yesterday?”

‘Poni nodded. “Uh huh. Her name is Io, and she’s a novice bowyer - apprenticed to me, actually. A little bit of a thing – but she sure can hit a target, spot on, at 100 paces! And she’s got a knack for working the arrows and the bows – nimble fingers and a good eye for design.” ‘Poni added, proudly.

Gabrielle smiled, then. “Great. I guess we’d better locate her, then, hadn’t we? Bowyers are hard to come by,” she added, wryly. Then she turned her clear, piercing gaze back to the second youngster,

“All right, now suppose you tell me the rest of it.” Her look was serious, now – but compassionate. “But first, can I have your names, please? I’m Gabrielle,” she added. They all gaped at her.

The young woman swallowed, and twisted her hands in her lap. “I...I...I’m Paphos, P..p..pleased to meet you! W...w..well, that same day – you know, in the afternoon, it was – after she got into trouble with Eponin - she went off – said she had to find out something, for herself. So we all said we’d see her later, and then, well, about four candle-marks later – I think it must have been – she came just flying back down the path out of the forest, and she looked like the Furies were after her!”

The other young Amazon nodded, “Yeah, “ she added, “she was acting really strange – like she was sort of – I don’t know – possessed, or something! All panicky and wild-like. She kept looking all around her, like she thought someone was sneaking up on her, or something.... Oh!..... I’m Dika,” she added

The third Amazon stuck her chin out defiantly, and spoke next. ‘Well, *I’m* Kythereia. And I don’t think there’s anything wrong with what we said to her! She was the one who was acting crazy – talking about seeing Artemis and all – Huh! Everyone *knows* that Xena killed *her* dead!” She glared at Gabrielle, defiantly.

Gabrielle threw another searching look at “Poni. “Is this the young woman you had a tussle with, the other day, and that you were telling me about the other night?

‘Poni, nodding vehemently, began to rise up, her face darkening. Gabrielle put out her hand, commandingly, motioning her back down into her chair. She looked piercingly at Kythereia. The girl tried to keep her eyes fixed on that stern face, but she couldn’t – and looked away. Gabrielle carried on with the conversation,, her voice calm and quiet.

“So tell me Kythereia, what *did* you say to her – that was so harmless?”

The young woman swallowed. “Well, we just said...well, I mean, *I* just said that I didn’t *believe* her. I said I thought she was just saying those things to impress us, or something. It wasn’t *my* fault, she got so upset! I

said I wasn't impressed, and she'd have to do something to prove herself – you know, like a test, I just - well, I just dared her to *prove* that she was worth believing. She got real mad, then – said she figured seeing a Goddess ought to be enough... but I *told* her – WE didn't see the Goddess – so how could we know that she really *had* seen anything. And," she added defiantly, "besides, she was taking your part – going on about how she thought you deserved to be Queen, again, because of the stories about you, and Xena, and all But Kypris says that's nonsense...." she trailed off, miserably.

"So?" Gabrielle paused.

"W..ww..we..ll....we sort of dared her to do something brave. To show us something that we could *see* and then we'd be properly impressed." She answered, miserably.

"Puppies!" Eponin growled, still furious.

Gabrielle cast a look at her, a world of memories of their youth flowing between them. Young Amazons,...so brash, so impulsive... so competitive! She turned again to Kythereia.

"So, my fine young warrior – what was the test?"

The young woman hung her head, unable to look Gabrielle in the eye. Her voice dropped to mumble., "We told her to bring us....to...borrow...." she gulped, "....the chakram...." She whispered. "We said, if you were so almighty perfect, you'd forgive her for it . . ."

Gabrielle started up, involuntarily, her eyes wildly seeking the place across the room, where the armor and weapons of Xena had hung, since the day two weeks ago, when she had brought them back with her, bundled carefully in the pack she had borne for so long. She could see herself, hanging up the chakram on the now-empty peg, after everything else was done. She had taken her sais out of their places on the sides of her boots, The katana and Xena's long sword. And the chakram from the hook on the belt at her waist. She had polished the chakram, and hung it – there.... The empty peg stared back at her.

Gabrielle walked up and down the room, her head bent, lost in thought. The three cowering figures' heads swiveled back and forth, as they watched her. Eponin, however, was having a terrible time keeping her calm, as Gabrielle had commanded. She shook her head like a mad bull, and fumed.

Gabrielle returned to the bed, sat down once more, and looked at each of them, in turn. Then she spoke.

“Well, I expect she is probably really worried, now, about what will happen to her, as a result of this caper!” she looked inquiringly at them. “So, I would suggest to you that this would be a good time to return the chakram to me. Isn’t that why you have come? Then we can go pull her out of whatever hidey-hole she sulks in, and get back to what passes for normal, around here.”

Dika, her face crumpling in tears, cried out, “O, my Queen! We don’t have it! Io has it, still! She said she wasn’t coming back with it until we believed her, about Artemis!”

Gabrielle stared at them, agape, “I can’t believe this, ‘Poni! What four young Amazons get themselves into, without even half trying?” She threw up her hands,, then stood abruptly. “All right. Let’s get this problem solved, because I’m getting really hungry, and this is not a good day to start something that we can’t finish the same day. Not to mention that Io has a date, along with the rest of you, with Artemis tonight – and attendance is NOT optional!” She watched, as the three pairs of eyes glazed and the mouths hung open, dumbstruck. “So, let’s see.... ‘Poni,, I want these three to accompany me, while we sort this out, because I’m damned if they are going to get out of learning something useful out of this! So, will you please see that they are waiting outside my quarters while I have a wash?” She got up, and walked toward the bathing room; then stopped and turned back, “and then, will you please ask the Council to organize the procession for tonight, and make sure no one *else* goes missing, in the meantime?”

‘Poni hustled the three still-stuttering young women out the doorway, and into the yard. She kept up a non-stop rumble of invectives, in the process. Dire warnings of consequences, and extra drills, and punishment duty, and anything else she could think of, rained down about their ears. They stood, heads hanging, miserable in the glare of the morning sun. Other Amazons, going about their business, cast covert looks at them, as they passed on their way to break their fast. Low murmurs and knowing smiles. The three youngsters blushed furiously. Eponin hissed, “That is the least of your worries, you lot – you can just forget about saving face!”

Gabrielle emerged moments later, looking more refreshed for having poured a pitcher of water over her head.. Her hair was still damp, and she

fluffed it with her hand as she stepped off the porch. She stopped by the huddled little group of misery.

“Thanks, ‘Poni – I’ll take it, from here. After you’ve organized the Council, why don’t you go find Talia? I’ll find you, once we’ve got Io back.” She walked closer to ‘Poni, and added, her lips barely moving, “Keep your eyes and ears open – if anyone goes out of the village after we’ve gone, you’ll have to follow them, and be ready for anything.”

“Do you think she has got far?” ‘Poni asked.

“Don’t know, yet - but I’ll have a pretty good idea, soon..“

“I’ll watch your back, Gab.” ‘Poni strode off.

Gabrielle looked at the chastened warriors, and sighed. “Kythereia, Kythereia . . Hmmm, let me remember . . . do you know that Sappho made a poem to you, Kythereia?” The young woman looked at her, startled.

“Oh yes.... believe it! Let’s see, now – how does it go? Ah, yes . . .

“...Kythereia
What should we do?
Strike yourselves
Maidens
And tear your garments” (140)

Gabrielle looked sidelong at her, “Seems rather appropriate, doesn’t it?” she said, dryly. Firmly grasping her staff in her hand, she started across the yard, toward the forest. She motioned for them to follow her. They scrambled after, abashed.

When she reached the first turning on the path to the Sacred Grove, there was a wide spot, next to a giant Cedar that had fallen, eons ago, and which now was serving the purpose of nurse to a dozen small seedlings, lined up along it’s flank The little cedars stretched their boughs up toward the filtered beams of light coming through the canopy above. Gabrielle held up her hand, in the hunter’s signal for stopping silently. They halted, watching her every move. She turned, leaned her staff

against the side of the big log, and looked at them.

“Well, here’s where we’ll start this little exercise. I want you to wait over *there*, because I have a little conversation I have to have, so we can find Io and get my chakram back.” She paused. “And, I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t interrupt!”

Scrambling over to the other side of the trail, with a hasty murmur of compliance, they stood, awkward, not knowing what else to do, and plainly nervous about what was to come next. This woman was like no one they’d ever seen before.

Gabrielle slid down, so she was seated on the ground, with her back up against the log. She closed her eyes, and turned inward.

“Xena, love,” she called, mentally. “I need you. We’ve got a little problem, here.” She waited patiently, letting her senses stretch outside her body, for the moment when she felt her Beloved approach – a warm glowing light-filled golden essence that was Xena- that floated up and enveloped her where she sat. A low chuckle. Gabrielle grinned. *“Yep – you heard? OK, so where is the little brat? Can you show me?”* Xena playfully tousled Gabrielle’s hair, her laughter echoing inside her,

“Gods, “ Paphos breathed, the goose-bumps standing out on her arms, ” do you see that?” They watched, as Gabrielle’s hair seemed to take on a life of its own,

“You lead, my Champion – you know I’ll follow you anywhere,
“ Gabrielle thought.

She sat up straight, a slight shiver coursing through her. Then she got up, retrieved her staff, and turned to look at the *very* silent trio. “All right, you three. I’ve got to do some serious tracking, here – so you all just follow behind me – and keep quiet while you do so – got me?”

Three heads bobbed in unison, their eyes as big as Athena’s owl’s.

* * * * *

Now Gabrielle began the stalking of Io. She stood perfectly still, and stretched out with her mind’s eye, until she could “see” Xena’s warm

glow, faintly waiting for her to follow. It moved off, and as it did, she simply followed blindly where it led her. The three Amazons followed after her, awed by this strange behavior. For she did not track as normal - no bending over to look for footprints, no checking of foliage to either side of the path, for broken branches or signs of passage. She just walked, her head slightly cocked, and her gaze slightly averted. It was even stranger, when she led them off the path entirely, and they were walking through the undergrowth, through fern beds and around clumps of salal, and over huge hummocks of detritus that had accumulated under the big trees. She didn't even look where she was putting her feet, it seemed, as they struggled to get through the maze of stuff, and still keep up with her. She was moving at a pretty good pace, swinging her staff alongside of her as she walked,

They traveled on, in this way, for about a half a candle mark. As they reached a somewhat larger clearing, Gabrielle suddenly stopped, and again held up her hand. She again appeared to be listening. They listened, too. They heard nothing - other than the usual sighing of the wind in the cedars, and the cheeping of the chickadees and siskins, whose running commentary always accompanied any intruders to their forest home.

Gabrielle turned sharply to the left, and burst into a run. She leaped over a half-buried log - the trio crashing away behind her. As they, in turn, cleared the obstacle, they suddenly saw a huge hole, gaping in the ground up ahead. Gabrielle was already kneeling at the edge of it, and peering down into the blackness. They came to their knees to either side of her, their breath harsh in their throats.

Gabrielle spoke, "Quick! Do any of you have a length of braid? Or a rope?"

Dika suddenly started yanking at her clothing. "Here! I do! I use it as a sort of a belt, in case of....well, this!" she said, breathlessly, as she hurriedly unwound the coil of rope from around her waist.

"Good thinking, Dika!" Gabrielle flashed a grin at her. The Amazon handed her the rope. Gabrielle immediately tied the rope to the middle of her staff, then handed it to Dika. "All right. I need you three to space yourselves along the staff - you Paphos here, at this end, - and you, Kythereia at the other end. Dika in the middle. Hold tight to the staff. Keep it level! I've got to go down there, and there will be two of us to bring back up! Can you do it?"

They followed her instructions with alacrity. Gabrielle, took the other end, and threw it down into the darkness. Then she turned around, so she faced them, and braced herself, the rope held firmly in her hands.

“Ready? On my mark, I’ll start down, You’ve got to hold it tight! Don’t let the staff waver, while I’m on the rope! I’m depending on you to get me down safely, and Io and I back up, the same. I’ll see how she is, and we’ll figure out what to do to get her out of there.” She darted over to a nearby cedar, and pulled at the shaggy bark, stripping off some long strands of the cedar. These she bundled and stuffed under her belt.

They all three lined up, holding the staff tight in their hands. Gabrielle slowly let herself down, over the edge of the hole, bracing her feet against the sides, and hand over hand, moved carefully down into the dark.

The sides of the hole were crumbly, and she could hear the dirt, being dislodged from her boots, cascading down below her. She hoped that Io wasn’t near the wall she was facing, in case the whole thing started to give way. Her hands ached from the effort to keep her motions slow and careful, and she could feel the burns already forming on her palms..

Damn, they were going to be painful! Ah, well...all in a day’s work....

Her thought stopped as she felt her boots touch the bottom. She felt at her waist, for the pouch in which she carried her flints. From her belt, she pulled out the handful of cedar strips. She separated out one of the strips, which she then rolled up, so that it formed a small bundle, then wrapped the tail end of it around the middle of the bundle, to secure it, and left a goodly length of the strip sticking out. This bundle she then struck her flints to, and gradually coaxed a spark to flame, with some slight breaths blown gently, until it caught, and flared, and she had her improvised torch. This she swung around, at arm’s length, held by the tail, while she surveyed the space, locating the figure silently huddled in the opposite corner.

She moved over to the still form. Bending over, she checked the girl’s condition. While she worked, she murmured quietly. *“Oh, Xena, is she all right? I know, thanks for the compliment . . . I have learned a thing or two, you know, in the past ten years! I’m just glad you were around to help me, Love . . . this might have taken a lot longer, otherwise! Hmmm . . . she seems to have no broken bones . . . just bruised and battered. Probably shocked by the fall. All right, let’s see if we can get her conscious.”* She called out to the Amazons above, “She’s down here,! I think she’s going to be all right, but she needs water. Paphos – I need your water skin. Just pitch it down here – aim for the light!”

There came the sound of the skin, splatting on the ground at her feet. She reached for it, the low murmur coming once again. *“Nice throw! She almost bagged a Queen! Oh, you’re a big help – why didn’t you just float me on down here, wonder woman? Look at my hands – they’re going to be a mess!”* She stopped, abruptly, as she felt the hands on her hands, turning them palm up, and the feel of those soft lips, kissing the scrapes tenderly. *“Ah, Xena.....”* she whispered. She waited, letting the ghostly ministration finish.

Then she gently pulled Io up, cradling her against her chest, and began giving her some water from the skin. Io coughed, suddenly, and gasped. Her eyes fluttered open.

“Whe...where... am I?” she asked, weakly,

“You’re in a big hole, my dear, “ Gabrielle answered,

“Am...am I dead?” the girl quavered.

Gabrielle laughed. “No, sweetheart, you’re just all banged up. You fell in here about a day and a half ago. Probably knocked your self right out. I think you’re in one piece, but I need to check you – make sure there’s nothing serious, and then we need to get you out of here.”

The girl gradually was getting more alert, and she looked up at the vision before her – a golden-headed Goddess who had come to save her. She sighed. “You should probably just leave me down here – I don’t deserve to be rescued. I’ve betrayed my Amazon Oath. I’m an outcast,” she cried, tragically.

Gabrielle chuckled. “Oh, I don’t think you have to go *that* far! My guess is, all will be forgiven.”

“Oh, but it shouldn’t be!” the girl answered. “I have to make amends for this. Surely you won’t make me just carry on, as if I’d done nothing!”

Gabrielle looked gently at her. She wiped a smear of grime off of the girl’s forehead. “I’ll make a bargain with you, “ she said.

“Oh! What?” the girl asked hopefully.

“You return to me that which you have taken, and I will make sure Artemis is there, tonight, at the Gathering of the Tribe - for all to see.”

The girl hung her head in shame. She reached under herself, and pulled out a dirt-encrusted sack. Inside, Gabrielle could see the gleaming gold and silver whorls of the chakram. The girl mutely handed it to her. Gabrielle clipped the chakram on her belt.

“Thank you, my dear,” Gabrielle said, softly. “Xena was missing it, you know.”

“I – I’m sorry,” she cried. “I didn’t mean to do it. They made me! I just wanted them to believe me!” The young woman looked at her confusedly. “It’s okay – you don’t have to do anything about Artemis.

Now I don’t care if they believe me, or not. *I* know what I saw. That’s all that is important.”

“Oh, no – Io. I keep my promises. It *is* important for them to know, too. And they shall – they shall.” She nodded at the girl. “You did it for all the right impulses, my dear – you just picked the wrong way to show them.” She gave the girl a hug, “Now, let’s see about getting you out of this place, shall we?”

Together, they stood, and Gabrielle made Io test her weight on her feet. No bones being broken, she helped the girl walk over to the rope, which was still hanging down from above.

Gabrielle called up to the waiting trio, up above. “We’re going to start coming up, now. I’ll tell you what to do..” She turned to Io. “Your friends are up there, Io. They helped me find you, and they will help both of us get out of this, now. Are you ready?” The girl nodded, “All right. I am going to have you pull yourself up the rope. They are at the top, anchoring you with my staff, so you won’t slip. I’ll be coming up behind you, and I’ll make sure you don’t fall.”

“All right, up there – we’re going to come up, now. Just keep the staff level, like you did when I went down. Io is coming up first, and I shall follow after, so make sure you are well-braced!” Slowly, then, the two figures made their way back up the rope.

As Io first emerged from the edge of the hole, she immediately became aware that something was wrong. The rope, which had been tied around Gabrielle’s staff, was now tied off to a nearby tree. Her three companions

were standing back from the edge of the hole, and were surrounded by six Amazon warriors, all in full regalia and bearing weapons. One of the figures moved up, and took Io off to join them. Then, as Gabrielle pulled herself up and over the edge, and got to her feet, a tall, lithe woman with dark brown hair braided in many strands, and carrying an unsheathed sword, stepped up to her.

“Ah, the *Chosen One* crawls out from Tartarus, come back from the dead to lead us all to fame and fortune!” she sneered, as she wove back and forth in front of Gabrielle, her sword at the ready.

Gabrielle stepped slowly, moving sideways to get her back away from the yawning pit. She held her hands, palm out, her arms extended at her sides. She kept her face calm, without expression, as she quietly responded. She made no movement to take up the chakram, which still was seated on its hook at her side.

“You must be Kypris . . . I have heard much of you.”

“Oh? Yeah? I can bet. Probably an ear full from Eponin – she’s playing at being your Fool, isn’t she?” Kypris hissed. “Well, she’s not here to distract us, now! And that suits me just fine. For I have business with you, Gabrielle – you of the honey-tongue and twisted purpose! Don’t think you can come back here and act like nothing has happened! Act like you’ve got some kind of royal birthright over us! Well this is what I think of you and of your *Right of Caste*!” At this, she stepped up closer to Gabrielle, and spit full in her face.

The four young Amazons gasped. Gabrielle stood, unmoving, as the spit slid down her cheek. Her face never changed, – not a muscle twitched.

Kypris continued her taunting, “There’s only one good thing about your coming back, *Gab-ree-elle*, “ she drawled out the sounds, “and it’s that *this* time, you’re alone. No hunky Warrior Princess Champion jumping in to fight your battle for you, now . . .so this time, it’s gonna be different. *This* time, you get to finish what you started, and take your beating, and we’ll finally have done with the legendary great *Gab-ree-elle*, who we’re all royally sick of bowing and scraping to, and singing songs and telling sopping bad stories about over our ale, for *way* too many seasons!”

Gabrielle wiped her face carefully with the sleeve of her tunic, then raised her head, and stared directly into Kypris’ eyes – her own green eyes brilliant, her face solemn and suddenly hard-chiseled, as from

marble. “This would be a Challenge, then, Kypris?” she asked, her tones measured, calm and deliberate.

The woman nodded, once, sharply. She continued weaving her sword back and forth, back and forth.

Gabrielle shook her head, never dropping her gaze from Kypris’s face. “No, I don’t think it is, Kypris. Why would you want to have a Challenge to the Queen here, out in the middle of the woods? This is something of great Moment to all the Amazons, and should rightfully be done at the Amazon Village, before all the Tribe. This is the tradition, Kypris. What you have here is personal – your own revenge, or misguided need to beat me. And I think you have very little of the welfare of your Sisters on your mind. This is all about *you*.”

Kypris started toward Gabrielle, her face convulsed in hatred. The sword came up, and she shoved closer to Gabrielle, the naked blade now up against Gabrielle’s throat. Gabrielle continued standing, quietly. The Woman was right up in her face, now.

“You are so wrong, *Queen Gabrielle*,” she spat out. “I will cut you down here, as you stand, and my Sisters will hail me as their new Queen!”

There was a sudden commotion in the undergrowth in the trees behind them, Out leapt twelve Amazons, in full battle gear, lead by Eponin. They ululated their Amazon war-cries as they burst into the clearing.

Gabrielle raised her hand sharply into the air.. She spoke in a rapid and crisp tone. “HOLD! Sisters! I command you!” They all stopped, instantly. She continued, once more standing at ease, her hands down and at her sides. “Kypris has issued a Challenge to the Queen! You must honor the protocol!”

Eponin, her face enraged, swore, and moved up, putting her sword at Kypris’ own neck, and said, thickly, “Throw down that sword, Kypris, or I swear, I will strike you down this instant! By the Goddess, Gabrielle – this is no Challenge! This Amazon has violated the Code! She cannot challenge you!”

Kypris drew in her breath in a hiss. ‘What do you mean? I don’t know what you are talking about!’

‘Poni pushed Kypris’ sword away with her own sword, and then yanked the woman’s blade out of her hand. She grinned, and pulledout of her

belt the broken pieces of the crossbow quarrel that Gabrielle had caught and snapped in two. She held them up in front of Kypris' eyes. "Then how do you account for this, you lying bitch? This is your crossbow arrow! You tried to assassinate both me and the Queen – a direct violation of Amazon Code - and I can prove it!"

Kypris laughed. "What? You are crazed! A quarrel is a quarrel! You can't prove anything!"

Gabrielle, waiting patiently, now spoke. "Eponin, how can you prove it is Kypris' quarrel?"

Eponin, never taking her eyes off of Kypris, gestured with her arm. "Io!" she called out. "Come here!"

Io, her whole body shaking, stumbled over to the tense trio of figures. Eponin held up the broke quarrel pieces. "Tell them!" she ordered the frightened young woman.

"W-well," she stuttered, "I – I made that quarrel for Kypris. Two moons ago, I made her a crossbow, and a score of quarrels – all the same – all with the grey goose feathers for fletching – because she said she liked those best." Eponin held the piece with the feathers high, and turned so that all present could see that it indeed had grey goose feather fletching.

Eponin stepped forward, then, and disarmed the woman. She signaled the Amazons who had come with her, and they disarmed the other women who had been with Kypris. She then turned to Gabrielle, crossed her fist to her chest, and ducked her head. "My Queen, we await your orders. What would you have me do with the prisoners?"

Gabrielle looked at the dejected group of women, and slowly shook her head. "Take the others back to the village, Eponin, and release them all. Take the youngsters back, as well. But leave Kypris here, with me."

'Poni turned, a shocked look on her face. "What? Gab, are you mad?"

Gabrielle smiled at her. "No, Eponin – not mad. Kypris and I have some things to work out, together. It should not be a problem for anyone else. Go, my friends – go back to the village. There is much to prepare for, this evening, and the time grows short. Go back." She waved them off.

Eponin growled, and shook her head. "If I must leave you alone with this *coward*," she spat the word out forcefully, "it will only be if she is

unarmed.” She walked over to Kypris, and roughly patted the woman down, searching for any other weapons the woman might have secreted about her person. She found and removed a wicked looking knife, concealed in the woman’s arm brace. Then she turned, giving Gabrielle a very long, quiet look, nodded once, and then went off, leading the group of women off through the trees, towards the village.

Gabrielle turned to face Kypris, once the group had gone, and they were alone under the giant trees.

“Kypris, I am not under any illusion that I can somehow turn you around, and make you care about me, or in any way force you to support me as rightful Queen of the Amazons. I also understand that you feel strongly that you want to kill me, to avenge the difficult time that this tribe has suffered from my absence and neglect. I understand your feelings, about this. But I cannot give you the satisfaction of fighting you to the death. And for that, I am truly sorry.”

Kypris - her face a mask of anger – looked at her opponent. “What exactly does *that* mean?”

Gabrielle sighed. “It means, Kypris, that if we were to fight to the death for the right to rule this Tribe, I would have to kill you. And **I will not** do that to you, Kypris! I also will not allow **you** to kill **me**. So you see – it is useless to even continue this – it’s pointless. You have too much still left in your life to do, hopefully for the good of your Sisters and your Tribe. We have lost too many Sisters, already, to senseless acts of violence. We need to make our Tribe strong again – and this kind of bad energy will only drag us further down into the mire. You are a strong woman, Kypris. The Tribe needs you – needs your strength and your leadership. But not as its Queen, and not after driving them into strife and dissention, just to murder me.”

Kypris looked at her, then shook her head. “I can’t. I can’t just let it go. I will not support you. I’d rather die.”

Gabrielle smiled a sad smile. “Well, then – we’re at an impasse, I guess. Because I won’t do you the favor of killing you. Your road is going to be a hard one, that’s all. As I see it, you have a difficult choice to make. Either you come back with me now, and stop your divisive behavior – or you will have to try to murder me with your bare hands – or you will have to be banished from your Tribe and stripped of your Amazon right of caste, and go into exile.” She watched the woman closely, seeing the pride and fierce passion in her, and grieved for her dilemma. “I would

not want to be in your boots, Kypris. But I will sit her with you, for as long as it takes, for you to make your choice.” And with that, she went over, and sat down on a fallen log, in a warm beam of sunlight. And watched, and waited.

Kypris stood, silent as a stone, for a long moment. She looked at the silent, golden figure of the Queen, and all her rage and unhappiness and dismay welled up in her. She cried out, once, sharply, and then ran, full-tilt, and threw herself over the edge, and down into the deep pit.

Gabrielle, startled, rose up, and started after the distraught woman, but it was too late. She halted at the edge of the pit, and peered down into it. The sun was higher, now, and a shaft of light was falling into it, illuminating part of the floor of it. And in the beams, she could see the body of Kypris, her neck at an unnatural angle, lying still and silent.

The Queen bowed her head, and an anguished cry escaped from her lips. She bowed her head, and began to croon the hymn for the dead, learned from Xena, so long ago. And a ghostly voice joined, in chorus.

* * * * *

As she emerged from under the canopy of the forest, and entered the village’s main compound, Gabrielle immediately spotted Eponin, who sat talking with Talia on the porch in front of Gabrielle’s hut. She walked slowly over to the shady spot, leaned her staff against the rail, turned, and sat down beside her friends.. The four arrant young women were still there, standing at attention, lined up in front of them – looking decidedly sheepish, and disheveled.

Eponin looked at Gabrielle. “Where’s Kypris? She asked. Gabrielle shook her head, and sighed heavily. “She’s at the bottom of the pit out there, ‘Poni. She threw herself over the edge, before I could do anything to stop her. We’ll have to bring her home, and prepare a pyre for her. Talia stood up. “I’ll go attend to it. You two need to talk.” And she walked off.

Eponin turned to Gabrielle, who was taking a long draught from the water skin, and throwing some on her face. “Are you all right?” she asked.

“Oh, yes – I’m all right.” She looked up at the four silent figures, their

heads hanging in the hot sun. “But I don’t think these youngsters are doing so well.”

The Weapons Master folded her arms across her chest, and scowled fiercely at the four young Amazons, who had the sense to look abashed. “Well, my Queen – what shall their punishment be, for this stunt?”

“Ah, ‘Poni, I think they’ve suffered enough mortification for one day. However, they know now that they *do* have an obligation to me, that they must fulfill this night.” She looked thoughtfully at the youngsters, who were again looking uneasy and apprehensive. “But I have something more that I want done,” she continued. “‘Poni, have Paphos, Dika, and Kythereia been apprenticed, yet?”

Eponin shook her head, a look of speculative curiosity on her face. “Nope – they’ve been dithering around about it for some time, now; - can’t seem to settle on anything. Why? You got an idea?”

Gabrielle got up, and moved over behind the four, who were standing quietly, now, and listening intently to the conversation between the two older women. She rested her hands lightly on the shoulders of both Dika and Kythereia. “Then I want you to arrange for them to begin their apprenticeships immediately. Dika,” she turned the young woman slightly, so that the girl was looking up at her, “should begin studying with Talia – that is, if it’s all right with her.

“Well, I don’t see why it wouldn’t be, “ ‘Poni drawled.

“Dika, suppose you go catch up with Talia, and see if you can help her with organizing the retrieval of Kypris’s body,” Gabrielle suggested, and the young woman nodded, silent, and went off toward the hospice.

Now Gabrielle addressed Kythereia. “And as for you, Kythereia - I have thought deeply about this, as I walked back here,” she began, “and I think that you would best serve by apprenticing to Alysia.” She nodded at ‘Poni, who was looking surprised. “Oh, yes – ‘Poni – this young woman has the instincts of command, but she must learn to temper them with justice, if she’s ever to be of greater service to our Tribe. Will you escort her to Alysia, and make my suggestion known to her, and acquire her consent?”

“Absolutely I will, my Queen.” ‘Poni grinned at Kythereia. “C’mon you young whelp – let’s go!” And she marched her off.

Gabrielle now turned to Io, who hung back, her head bowed, as she stubbed her toe in the dust of the compound.

“And now, Io,” Gabrielle said. “I have a special task, for you.” She smiled, as she took the young Amazon’s chin in her hand, and lifted the troubled face to look at her. “I have need of a new bow, and quiver, and stock of arrows, and a new leather guard for my arm.” She raised a quizzical eyebrow at the youngster. “So, I am commissioning you to make them for me.” The young mouth hung slack, a look of amazement on her face.

Gabrielle continued, “So, I expect that if you have any questions of me – like what materials I prefer, and if I have any special requirements – you know - things like that – I will expect you to confer with me, from time to time, as you work to complete this commission.” Gabrielle waited, quiet, watching the young woman, as she struggled to take it in.

“Will you do this, for me?” she asked. “I promise, I will not put them to the uses Kypris did.”

“H-h-how long do I have, to get them done?” Io stuttered.

“Well, a craftswoman sets her own pace, and has her own schedule for these things. There’s inspiration involved, and creativity. These things take time – and far be it from me to dictate them to you, Io! I know that with my stories, sometimes it takes me quite a while – but I’ve never had anybody tell me when I had to get them done! That’s an insult to my art! I would certainly see your work in the same way.” She paused, and nodded decisively. ‘Oh - I’d say, I’ll be glad to get them from you, when you decide they are done.’”

Io swallowed convulsively, and straightened her shoulders, and her head came up. “I would be honored, my Queen, to accept your commission!”

Gabrielle grinned. “Well, then – the sooner you get yourself put back together, today – the sooner you can get started, tomorrow. You have the Gathering, tonight, don’t forget, I would suggest that you spend some time getting cleaned up. Stop by the hospice and have Talia check you out, just to be sure you are physically ok. Then maybe some rest, and some food?” She added, “I think I’ll follow the same advice, myself!”

Io gave her a look of pure adoration, and sped off towards the hospice.

Paphos, who all this time was looking more and more forlorn, stood alone now, her head down, waiting in an agony of suspense to hear her fate. She hoped it would be something good, but she feared that because she was last, she might be somehow not as good as the others.

“Now, Paphos, you are probably really scared, right now, aren’t you? You probably think that you’re not worth much, huh...” Gabrielle rested her hand on the young Amazon’s shoulder. The young woman nodded, not able to look Gabrielle in the face. Gabrielle put her hand under Paphos’s chin, and lifted her head. Paphos was suddenly looking at the warmest pair of green eyes, and the kindest face, and a grin that made these cute little lines show on either side of Gabrielle’s nose, and nice laugh lines alongside her mouth, and the young woman just soaked up that radiance, like a flower turned to the sun.

“So, here’s what I have in mind for you,” Gabrielle said, ‘of course, if you are willing...”

“Oh, Gods, yes!” Paphos nodded, eagerly.

Gabrielle continued, “Tell me, Paphos – can you read or write?”

The young woman’s face fell, instantly, from joy to absolute dismay,

Gabrielle added, quickly – “Not to worry! It is of no consequence, because I will teach you all of that- and more. I need an assistant – someone who can help me by recording, and to take care of my scroll library, and assist me in a project that I have in mind. I will be preserving the history of the Amazon Nation, and that is a long tale, that requires much careful remembering. I have it all, pretty much, in my memory, but it needs to be written down, and that means I need to tell the story to someone else, who can write what I speak. Do you think you would like to learn to do that?”

Paphos nodded vigorously. “Oh, yes! I would dearly love to do that!”

“Then you shall.” She looked speculatively at the young woman, then went on, “You will have to give me a little time, though, before we can get started in this project together. I have a big thing to get done, first – starting tonight. I don’t know what the outcome of it will be, but whatever happens, I will honor my promise to you, and you will help me to do this. Shall we clasp arms, and make this pact?” She held out her hand. Paphos gripped Gabrielle’s forearm with her hand, as Gabrielle gripped hers, and it was done.

“Now, I think you’d probably better go get cleaned up and get some rest, before the business tonight. I will see you at the Gathering of the Tribe, and I will let you know more, when I know. “

“Yes, my Queen,” Paphos replied, breathlessly.

‘Oh, and Paphos,” Gabrielle said, “Thank you for all your help today, and for being there for me, tonight.”

“Gosh, you’re welcome!” the girl gulped, and then ran off.

Gabrielle sighed, shook her head, crossing the porch to the door. Inside, she leaned her staff up in its place on the wall. Then, she walked over, unclipped the chakram from her belt, and polished it on the bit of chamois that hung near the empty peg – and then hung the double-whorled circle in its place once more. She poured herself a drink from the pitcher of water on the table, then crossed and sat on the edge of the bed. She suddenly felt all of her seasons of age – however she counted them - and then some. She looked at her hands, lying limp in her lap. Held them up, inspecting the raw scrapes and rope burns across both palms. They stung mercilessly.

“Right,” she muttered. “A bath, I think - then some salve, then a bit of food, and then – definitely – a nap!”

She pulled off her boots; then stripped her belt, tunic and leggings off, tossing them onto the chair at the table. She then wandered into the bathing room, and slid gingerly into the large tub. Ducking completely under the water, then surging up, smoothing the water out of her hair as she slicked it back with her hands. That made them sting even more. She hissed in pain.

“Ah, Gods, that hurts! There’s nothing worse than rope burns. And I need my full concentration, tonight. These are going to be a problem.” She climbed out of the tub, wiped herself off, and moved to the cupboard that held the healer supplies that had been Xena’s.

She was not surprised to feel once again the soft glow that was Xena, hovering just behind her. The low, seductive voice sounded in her head.

“You better get some salve on those. And then wrap them in some gauze. If you use that aloe salve it should do the trick. They shouldn’t be too distracting, then.”

“Xena, how am I doing – really?” Gabrielle sighed, as she pulled out the pot of salve, and some clean strips of linen gauze. She applied the ointment, and then tried to wrap the bandages. She shook her head in frustration, “Darn it! This is hard without . . .” She stopped suddenly, and watched as the strips of gauze wound themselves around first one hand, then the other, and were neatly tied off.

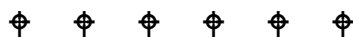
“Like a Champion, my Bard – Like a Queen...” Xena said, and even Gabrielle could detect the note of pride in her voice. “That speech you gave Kypris was pure gold, my dear one – I was so proud of you.”

Gabrielle sighed again, “Ah, well - it didn’t feel like it- much. I didn’t expect her to do that – just kill herself, like that. What a waste, Xena! She could have been of use,” she cried, anguished.

“Ah, my Bard – there is no accounting for the human heart. Kypris was too conflicted. But she, too, will learn the Way, and get her chance to help.”

Gabrielle’s eyelids drooped. “Oh, Goddess, forget the food. I’d better get that nap. I’m sure going to need it, tonight.”

Xena’s glowing form moved up closer, wrapping the weary figure in her arms. Gabrielle sighed again, and they drifted over to the bed.



Chapter 6

*Full appeared the moon
And when they around the altar took their places (154)*

Gabrielle awoke suddenly, to the sound of a single, slow, rhythmic beating of a drum. The sun was sinking - dusk was rapidly approaching. She could hear the sounds of the Amazons, as they gathered in the village courtyard, preparing to form the ceremonial procession to the Grove of the Goddess and there assemble in the Sacred Circle. Gabrielle got up, and went into the adjacent room. She wet a cloth, and wiped her

face, and then went to the chest that held her clothing. Opening it, she took out a deerskin tunic, tanned to a buttery softness, and put it on. She drew on a pair of leggings, dyed a dark brown, and pulled on her boots. She freed the necklace so that it hung in front of the tunic, the split half of the moonstone, set in silver, glowing softly. Xena had worn the other half. She had given it to Gabrielle in Jappa, before the battle, to keep for her. Gabrielle had later put it in the urn. where it still rested,

Gabrielle then sat down at the table, and poured herself a cupful of wine from a flagon – she guessed that Eponin had had it brought in, while she slept. There was also a simple wooden platter, holding a single bunch of grapes, and a wedge of cheese. Gabrielle ate it all, between sips of the wine.

She could hear the drum, joined now by other drums, and through the window, she could see the flickering of the torchlight. Then, the procession of the Amazons began, accompanied by the drums. They sang as they marched off into the forest.

Now she was alone. She sat, in the silence.

“Xena, please – speak to me now – I need you so badly…….Gods! I feel so alone!”

The candle on the table guttered, and a slight, soft breeze swirled around her figure. And then she was alone no longer.

“I’m here, my dearest love,” Xena’s voice sounded, clear and ringing, in her head. *“Don’t be afraid – all will be well.”*

“This is so hard, Xena, because I’ve never had to turn my back on you - at least not like this. All those other times - like after Hope, and Solon, and when I didn’t protect Eli, and when I had to betray you in Chin – and even when you kept me from pouring your ashes into . . .I never turned my back on you. . .this feels so wrong. . .” she shook her head, tears streaming from her eyes. “All I can think of is everything I’ve done wrong - done to hurt them all . . . Let them down . . .”

“Hush, hush, my Soul, my Life – you aren’t turning your back on me! Can’t you see? You are going to go before your Tribe, and yes – even Artemis - as though you were alone, and completely vulnerable. But that is only how you will appear to them! You need to only realize one thing, Gabrielle – and your fear will let go, you will see the good of what you have done, and I swear to you - you will be able to fulfill the challenge,

and accept the judgment of your Tribe.”

“Well, you’d best remind me what that one thing is, because I’m miserably clueless at this point,” Gabrielle muttered.

“Gabrielle, the secret of this is that you don’t have to think about me, or say anything about me, because I will be there, inside of you, the whole time. With you,” Xena’s arms went around Gabrielle, and she was held so surely, and completely, that her whole body sagged, with the relief of it, *“Because that’s where I’ve been, all along, my love, since Jappa. You’ve kept me in your heart, even when you were the most bereft, and even when you could not speak your stories, of me, for all your sorrow. That’s where I’ve stayed – and that will never change. You can go there, and be who you are, and tell your story, without any fear that it will cause me pain, or make me feel that you have rejected me. I know better – because I have seen your heart. Remember what I said to you, my dearest – from the inside, we are the same. We have walked the same road, and struggled over the same lessons in this life.”*

Gabrielle’s head came up, her tears stopped, and she looked inside herself, and saw the golden core of light that was Xena, deep inside her. And she understood, and knew that this was true. She dried her eyes, stood, and then hugged herself fiercely.

“Notwithstanding the sweetness of my own bardic tongue, you sure do sound eloquent, when you get around to it, oh Warrior Princess of the Cryptic Remarks.”

“Well, what do you expect? Hang around long enough with the Bard of Potedeia and the strangest things begin to happen!” Xena’s chuckle sounded, low. *‘It’s time, now, love – you must go. I will walk with you.’*

Gabrielle blew out the candle on the table, walked over to the doorway, lifted the curtain, and went out into the dusk. She headed up the path to the Forest - toward her fate.

In the Sacred Circle, all of the Amazons of the Last Tribe, from the eldest to the youngest, were seated on the ground, in two concentric circles, inside the sarsen stones, surrounding the Altar of Artemis, and Her

Throne. There were torches fixed into the ground at intervals around the circle of silent watchers. All were dressed in their Amazon ceremonial beads and feathers, and the Council of Elders wore the fierce, bird-like masks. The drums continued, beating out a haunting, throbbing cadence that rose and fell in intensity.

The moment Gabrielle entered the space between the two portal sarsens, the drums ceased. In absolute silence, she crossed the open space inside the circle of watching figures, and approached the Altar of Artemis. The verdigris surface of the urn looked black in the torchlight, sitting as it was at the center of the oblong altar top. She stopped, bent over the altar, and kissed the urn. Then, turning back, she moved in front of the empty Throne of the Goddess, and dropped to her knees before it. She bowed her head, her arms held out in front of her, palms turned up. The bandages on her hands showed pale in the torchlight. She spoke.

“Oh Mighty Artemis, Goddess and Protector of the Amazon Nation, I humbly present myself to you, and to the people of my Tribe, for Judgment.. Do with me as you will.”

She lowered her hands, slowly, then rested them on her thighs, Her back straight, her head up, she waited.

They all waited. The torches flared, though there was no wind. Once, twice, three times they flared. Then the sound of crystalline shards of glass, tinkling against each other, was heard, as the fragments became visible, moving in unison in a slow spiral, changing into the millions of tiny points of light that took once again the shape of a mortal woman. But in the torchlight, she glowed, with an intense light around her that was painful to see. Many shielded their eyes with their hands. A soft gasp went up from the four score throats of the Amazons, and they bowed their heads in supplication.

Gabrielle sat, unmoving, as the awesome figure coalesced. She waited, gazing straight at the Goddess, her face serene.

And the Goddess spoke, her voice reverberating in their heads. And she was revealed, in her golden armor and helmet, arm bracers and greaves, with her bow and quiver at her back. She stood, and stepped forward, to stand directly in front of Gabrielle.

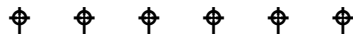
“Gabrielle, Chosen One of Artemis, you are brought before Me and before your Tribe, to answer for yourself. Heed my words, and speak true.” She then swept her scorching gaze across the bowed heads of all

the Amazons, who couldn't help but flinch at that terrible, beautiful expression. **“You women of the Last Tribe of My Amazons are here to pass judgment on Gabrielle. At Helicon, you suffered because of the war upon Myself and the Gods of Olympus – a war waged by the Warrior Princess, Xena, her daughter Eve, and by your Queen Gabrielle. You were deprived of my presence and my protection, Your number was decimated, the majority of your best leaders and warriors were slain, and only a few remained. You must determine now if you find her still worthy of leading you, if her heart is true, and if she is deserving of your faith and fealty, and if you will freely place yourselves in her hands, for the rest of your mortal days. Hear her words, with patience,. Heed my Charge! You must judge her with unfettered hearts, and open minds, for nothing less than the fate of your Tribe depends upon your judgment!”** She returned to her Throne, sat, and drank from a goblet that suddenly appeared in her hand.

Gabrielle bowed completely down before the Goddess, her head touching the ground in front of her. Then she straightened, and in one fluid motion, stood to her feet. She looked again squarely into the eyes of the Goddess, then turned, so that she looked out on the faces of her friends, and her sisters. She stood easy, balanced on the balls of her feet, her hands hanging quiet at her sides.

She slowly turned, looking at the Amazons, until she had moved in a complete circle. She closed her eyes, briefly, then opened them, and began to speak. And as she spoke, she would periodically move around the circle, stopping, at times to look each person in the face, and then move on. At times, her voice would falter, and sound faint, and when that happened, an arm would reach out, and hand her a water skin, and she would stop, and refresh herself, and hand it back. At other times, she would stop in front of the altar, and gaze upon the simple bronze urn - but would never tarry there long, restlessly moving again to pace the circle of open ground, And at other times, her eyes would lift to the tall, silent sarsen stones looming up behind the silent Tribe, and would smile, and nod, as though she saw some invisible, silent Watchers there. And when she was - at long last - finished, she returned to the center, and sat down cross-legged, and was utterly silent. And this is what she said. . . .

“I sing the song of Gabrielle, of Potedeia - of her journey toward understanding the lessons of her life and the sacred trust that was placed on her Soul; of the loss of her innocence and the gaining of wisdom; and her search to find a way to heal her broken heart, so that she might at last make her way home.. . .”



Chapter 7

Not one girl I think
Who looks on the light of the sun
Will ever
Have wisdom
Like this (56)

”I was just a girl when I left my family home in Potedeia, very like Io and Kythereia, Dika and Paphos. My youthful intensity, no less fiery than theirs, gave me a certain amount of bravado, which enabled me to dare the unthinkable – to seize the opportunity to leave the confines of my village, and strike out upon the road of life.

What drove me from my home, family, and friends? Even at that young age, I knew early enough that I was different: because I was a golden-haired child, in a family that had no history of golden-haired offspring. And because I had a nimble mind, filled with wonder, and a fierce yearning to grow and learn more about the world than my Father thought was best for me; and because, even then, I did not want the traditional life – of marriage, and children, and a hearth to keep. My family and friends were uncomfortable with me. They did not know how to live with my passion, and my imagination. I was often too animated, too outspoken - too full of words for their simple, ordinary world.

I had a golden head and a golden tongue – surely I could follow my Heart, and learn much about life, in the process. And because I wanted

more than anything else to become a Bard, it seemed that I needed to see much of life, in order that my stories would be convincing, and true. At that age, I was not unusual in thinking that I was somehow magically secure, and could pass through life with facility.

In short, I was thoughtless, self-centered, and too cocky by a half. I had all the right words, and no experience behind them, so I gave little thought to the consequences of my actions. I see some of you smiling – no doubt you recognize the folly of youth! Venerable Sister Ephegnia, even your sweet old face is wreathed in a smile, and your eyes are lit up with merriment at this description of the youngster Gabrielle.

Well, such is the short-sightedness of youth! And that lasted, oh, about half a day! For Life will Out, as it is said – and I was brought reeling to my senses, soon enough, when I was forced to see real people - in the world outside my protected village life - who had pain, and sorrow, and suffering, and who seemed unable to change the outcomes of their lives, and who were often in need of help, and solace, and – above all – a way to feel hope, again – hope for themselves and for their loved ones. Who needed rescuing from the terrible injustices that I soon saw perpetrated against them, every day.

And so, from the fantasy of using people as fodder for heroic tales that I would weave, and with which I would seek fame and fortune as a Bard, I found myself drawn to becoming their advocate, giving them succor, and learning how I could, myself, ease their suffering. I learned how to be a healer, and how to help bind up the more difficult wounds of suspicion and distrust. I became, over time, a fair negotiator, and could often get the most recalcitrant and obstreperous parties to sit down together and hammer out agreements that would eventually make them more secure and peaceful. I did not give up my stories! But I learned to use them in the context of this work, rather than only for the entertainment of others, and for a livelihood.

I came to the oft-heralded Amazons. It wasn't an accident, I now know, but at the time, I thought it fantastical that I should become one of you. I was still in my innocence, then, and my impulsive act – my attempt to somehow intervene, and change the outcome for Queen Terries did not succeed. But I did set the stage of my life for this day, and this judgment. As I stand before you even now, I can see her spirit, enshrined in her sarsen stone; and she looks over me, and all of you, and her face is serene. And I bow, in gratitude to her, for giving me this gift; to be a part of all of you, and learn your ways. And find a home.

I had to learn to toughen myself, to withstand the assault on my cheerful nature, and my youthful optimism and hope. I had to learn to defend myself, physically, so that I would not end up like all those others I saw, struck down in the midst of their lives. I had to get acquainted with aggression, and learn that I, too, had that quality, within me, that I must understand, and control, and use for good. And in the learning of these skills, I had not a little help from one among you, who even now deserves the thanks and gratitude I will someday hope to repay. For she has been with this Tribe since my first days among you, and has tirelessly worked, year after long year, to teach all among the Tribe those same necessary skills of self-defense. Don't bow your head to me, Sister, silver-streaked as it is! Let me rather salute you! Eponin, I have no doubt, dear one, that this Tribe will honor you with a sarsen stone, when you lay your head down to rest the Good Rest – but I hope for the sake of the youngest among us, that it is not soon! For they have much to learn from you, ere you go!

Yet and all, even after becoming adept at these arts, and even with such steadfast help, I could not tarry with the Sisters of my Tribe, and live out the rest of my days as your Queen. For I had yet more to learn, and more weary leagues to travel, in aid of my Heart's quest, and I was not ready to be your Queen. And so I put you in the hands of one who would prove to be one of the sweetest among you, whose steadfast heart, and undiminished dedication to the Tribe would guide you, in my stead, until such time as I could return, and rightfully take up the Queen's mask. She, too, rests here, and as I speak, I see her in her sarsen stone, and my heart is glad – for, truly, she was one of the dearest friends of my life. Ephiny, I bow in gratitude to you, for allowing me to learn what I most needed to know, and for bearing the burden of governance on my behalf. And lose your life, as recompense. It broke my heart. Such friendship is not usual, in this time, and this Tribe should glorify your name, and remember you, as Great among us!

As I once more took up my quest, I also learned the things I feared. For it seems that aggression and all its black expressions accompany one another, in this life. The Yang to all life - weapons and warriors, fighting and death. Ares' realm. Artemis knows it is so - don't you My Goddess? Ah, I can see you smiling that enigmatic smile, as you sit there, in your golden armor, and display for all of us the might of the Goddess of the Hunt! For you knew, that in the learning of this, my innocence would depart – as it must for each of us, if we are to grow into the fullness of our purpose.

Untold misery, I saw, as I followed my Heart. Countless thousands of

lives sacrificed to slaughter. Whole communities disrupted and destroyed. This I saw, in my journey – and all because I made the choice to follow my Heart. It sickened me. It filled me with revulsion. My soul cried out against the senselessness of it all. Time and again, I was forced to witness, with seemingly very little ability to change the outcome, these terrible events. From one end of the Known World to the other, I traveled, and I grieved. I was witness to the sweep of Rome, and the power that it wielded, to conquer and subjugate the peoples of Rome, and Greece, and Gaul, of Britannia, and Egypt, and the Levant – all the peoples of the Known World. And I knew, from my Heart, that it, and Ares, would someday, somehow, have to be stopped.

In the things I was most afraid of, I was blooded. And that was the power of Dahok over me. In all the senses of the term, I was blooded. - for I lost my virginity, I lost my control over the access to my body, I lost my long struggle to keep from taking another human life, and more than once, I lost my own life for a time. I was the deer, Artemis was the Hunter. I was driven before Her - seeking shelter, seeking a safe place where I would not suffer the arrows of that knowledge. I wanted to be protected. And for a time, I was. But in this entire grueling struggle for redemption, time and again the message of the Gods of Olympus was that I was powerless to do anything to change my life – to come through the fire of Tartarus, the agony of crucifixion, and the ordeals of Ares' capricious toying with me – to keep my dignity and my self intact.

But I had to lose everything, in order to find something much more important. And that was my Soul, and my Heart - the makeup of My Self – something about unconditional selflessness and sacrifice, friendship and sisterhood, trials endured, commitments kept, principals upheld, and – after all was said and done – something about Love. And that was your intent, all along, wasn't it, Artemis? And so I began the long struggle with the Gods of Olympus. For in all my wandering, in the company of my Heart, I wanted to understand my relation to them, and to Fate, and to what kept being called Destiny. And now, at long last, I think I understand.

For you see, my Sisters, it is true that the Twilight of the Gods came upon us all. Not because of one small child, born innocent of her parents' bloody past. Not because of one prescient soul, Eli, who learned himself through his own Soul's search, that Love is the answer. Not even because of the mindless craving for power of Caesar, Pompey, Brutus, Anthony, and Octavian. Not because of the lust for power and revenge of Callisto and Velasca, or even the youthful courage of Varya. And most of all, not because of my struggle, and the conflict of my Heart's Desire,

with the Olympians.

Now I know that the Olympians came among us as a manifestation of our own idea of ourselves, and our place in this world. They were the warp and weft of our own imagination. They were the stories we made up to ourselves, to explain all the wild and frightening things we had to learn, as we grew from childhood to old age, They were there as stand-ins for all of our fears, and desires, excesses and passions. They reflected those back to us, so that we could see what we were capable of, without the knowledge of Self. They were our Great Parents, there to bring this unruly bunch of humans to some kind of wisdom.

And once I found that wisdom, they could no longer rule me. Why? Because I learned that the way to this knowledge is by understanding that the aggression and violence of their world is not necessary, for me to live, and thrive, and grow, and flourish in this world. As long as I believed that my emotions were out there, in the world, and at the mercy of the Gods, I could not control them, and so I could be excused from being responsible for them, and for the consequences of their unbridled actions. I could blame the Gods, but never be responsible for myself. I could remain a child. I could believe it, when they said I was subject to their every whim and fancy, and think myself a poor human puppet, whose strings they could pull at will.

Because to grow up, is to finally understand that the knowledge of one's Self is all the guidance you need. If I want to know what to do with my life, all I have to do is look inside of me, to question my own Heart, and listen for its answer. If I have uncertainty or fear, all I have to do is ask my Self, and then listen, and I will hear my Heart tell me not to be afraid, that it will all turn out all right, and that I will have the strength and wisdom to carry on. The power of the Gods is inside us, now, my Sisters. And it is one thing only – and that is Love.

And now, I come to the last part of the story of Gabrielle, and it is also the hardest. For a long time, I thought that the most fearful thing for me was all the violence, and the killing. I was afraid I would die from it. It surrounded me - was in my face, over and over again – the cruelty and indifference which would sweep down upon all those around me. And several times, I was close to losing my life. Which is a very different thing, believe me, from dying. Dying, I have done. But I knew that I had not lost my Self, in dying. And I knew that what I brought back with me, from beyond death, was the knowledge that I was bigger than death. And

so I believed that I had overcome my worst fear, and could go on, and do my work, and follow my Heart joyfully to the next adventure, and the next, and say that, at last, I was ready – if you wanted me to be your queen, if that was to be my destiny.

And over all this time, and through all the incredible and wonderful and terrible things that happened to me, I had managed to avoid the one thing that I feared, more than violence, and more than death. And I can name that fear to you, now, calmly and even peacefully, because I have let it go, as well. My greatest fear was that I would go on living, but have to be alone. For you see, I had never been alone – not for very long, anyway. I was safe – for I had the warmest, most secure thing in the world. I had Love! I was alive, and I had love. And I wrapped myself in that with every ounce and fiber of my being. I drew it around me like a shawl, and a shield, and tried never to doubt that it would always be so.

But in the core of me, I was terrified – terrified that I would lose that love, terrified that I couldn't live without it, afraid that I would *have* to live without it.

And so, of course, that is what happened. The Gods were laughing, that day. All but you, Artemis – you knew that the deer was getting tired, and the hunt was almost ended, and you would have your prey right where you wanted it. You were excited, I am sure – the way only you can be, when you set your sights on something, and drive the game before you, until you have it cornered, and cowed.

You all know what happened. It has become the stuff of legend, now, hasn't it? It's a story that is told around the campfire, to the youngsters, as they grow. 'Let me tell you, child, of the story of Gabrielle, and her long-lost Love...'

And after, I walked in blind grief and despair, and wailed like a child, bereft. For long periods when I was crazed with the agony of it, and not fit company for any mortal soul, I was driven to wander, aimlessly, in the wide world. I literally lost my voice, and stopped the barding, and stopped the stories – for they had become unbearable reminders of what I had once had, and lost. Of what use, then, was I to be? I could not speak, I would not fight, and I had long abandoned my leadership of the pitifully few Amazons left in the world. The world, for me, became a very dangerous place. And I welcomed it! I wanted the death that would give me oblivion, and the chance to find my Heart once more.

But you see, my friends – that was the one thing I couldn't have. For I was truly in danger of losing my Soul; and no one can let go of life, until

they have *found* their Soul. I still had the hungry ghost of Dahok, hissing and snuffling along at my heels, eager to devour me, like the Hound of Artemis that he is.

And then, through all of this fog of despair, something wondrous began to happen. For when I was in the darkest pit of my mind, beyond tears, beyond caring, my Heart would speak to me, and whisper simple, truthful things – things I needed to hear – small bits of nourishment to keep my Soul alive, and remind me that I was not alone. To trust what I was hearing inside myself, and know that it was real, and alive, and capable of helping me reclaim myself, and come back to life, and to my world, and to my stories, and, at last – to you. That quiet voice inside me has worked on me for these long seasons since - caring for my poor Soul, doing more to save and succor and coax me back to life, and to my Self, than anything I was able to do, in my youth, for the one person in the world I wanted to save, beyond all others. . . .

I do not know what judgment you will pass on my fate this night, my Sisters. I do not have any more fear about that. You all have had your measure of suffering, and long trials, and those of you who are young will no doubt have your own paths to follow through this life. It is not mine to say.

I am saddened, and sorry, that tomorrow, we will have to bid farewell to yet another Sister of our Tribe, whose despair was too black, and whose heart was too burdened with anger, so that she could only think to hurtle herself out of this life, to find peace. I would have welcomed her home, and folded her into my arms. I am sorry for all our loss of her strong spirit.

I do know that I would try with all my heart to help each of you, and all of you, as I can, to understand yourselves, I would try, as we all must try, to make a good life for ourselves, and our descendants (Oh, yes – I believe we – even we! – will continue, in some form, in this world). I would like to help us take our rightful place, in the annals of time. I do not know how much time is still allotted to me – but I have come home, at last, and I would like to stay.

I have accepted your Ordeal, O Great Artemis! I have willingly followed the rules you laid upon me, for this ordeal. My people – the Last Tribe of the Amazons, have so far fulfilled the terms of their part – to listen, with open hearts and minds, and to stay patiently through this long narrative. I have kept my word. Now, in return, I am ready to ask my Boon of you!

Will you heed my call?"

The Goddess Artemis, her face burning with a terrible bright glow, arose from the Throne, the Point of Power, and drew up to twice her height. The torches guttered wildly, and grew dim before her radiance. And she answered:

"The Amazons of the Last Tribe have yet to reveal their judgment of you, Gabrielle. And yet, I deem that you have entertained me, sufficient for my purposes, with your tale of the Bard of Potedeia. So I will grant your boon. What is it?"

Gabrielle stepped forward, until she was directly in front of the towering figure. She looked up at the Goddess, a slight smile on her face.

"Then I call upon you, Artemis of the Race of the Olympians, Goddess of the Hunt and Protector of the Last Tribe of the Amazons, to speak the Charge of the Goddess, so that your subjects may at last hear the truth, and willingly take you into their hearts!"

Artemis looked down at the slight figure of the Bard, standing so infuriatingly self-possessed in her August Presence, and yet, the Huntress within her delighted at the power of her Chosen One, and she was moved to acquiesce.

"Very well, my Chosen One, you shall have your boon . . And so I say to all of you

I who am the beauty of the green earth, and the white moon among the stars, and the mysteries of the Waters, I call upon your soul to arise and come unto me.

Mine is the cup of wine of life and the cauldron . . .

. . .I am the Desire that is in the heart of woman.

Let there be beauty and strength, power and humility, mirth and reverence within you.

Before my face, let thine innermost self be unfolded, in the raptures of the Infinite.

Know the Mystery: that if that which thou seekest thou findest not within thee, thou wilt never find it without thee.

**For Behold!
I have been with thee from the beginning,
And I await thee now!” *****

The Amazons sat, spellbound, listening to the words of the Goddess, and watching this dramatic turn of events. They all felt a chill, as the meaning of the Charge washed over them, changing them in some subtle alchemy of power, and leaving them to feel strange glowing warmth in their chests. Followed by a sense of absolute peace. There was complete silence.

Gabrielle smiled up at the Goddess, then turned, and faced the Amazons. She clasped her fist once more to her chest, in the Amazon Salute.

“I await your decision,” she said, simply, and sat down, cross-legged, on the ground.

Artemis stood as unmoving as a statue. In fact, she *was* a statue. Hard as granite, silent as a stone.

* * * * *

The women of the Council of Elders all stood, their bird-masks obscuring their faces. They walked in procession, around behind Gabrielle, and stood in an arc between her and the statue of the Goddess, facing the assembled watchers. They folded their fists against their chests, in the Amazon Salute. Then the voice of Alysia cried out, “Amazons of the Last Tribe, What is your will?”

The silence was complete. Then, a solitary figure rose out of the ranks of the Amazons, and it was Talia, the Healer. And she said, “Gabrielle, I hear your voice, and I bear witness to your golden tongue. I pledge fealty to you, and fold you in my arms.”

Another figure arose. It was Ephegnia. And, though her voice was frail, she said, “Gabrielle, I hear your voice, and I bear witness to your steadfast heart. I pledge fealty to you, and fold you into my arms.”

Io, hesitatingly, stood next. In a quavering voice, she spoke, “G-

Gabrielle, I hear your voice, and I b-bear witness t-to your unflinching honesty, I pledge fealty to you, and fold you in my arms.”

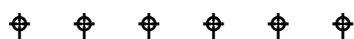
Eponin shot up like an arrow, her rough, husky voice thick with emotion. “Gabrielle, I hear your voice, and I bear witness to your courage. I pledge my fealty to you, and fold you into my arms, my Queen, my friend.”

Kythereia, next, arose. “Gabrielle, I hear your voice, and I bear witness to your humility. I pledge my fealty to you, and enfold you into my arms.”

At the other side of the circles of seated figures, the voice of another sounded. As she spoke, she stood up slowly. It was Dika. “Queen Gabrielle, I hear your voice, and I bear witness to your compassion. I pledge my fealty to you, and enfold you in my arms.”

Alysia and the Elders all pulled off their masks. Shifting them under their arms, they gazed out upon the assembled Amazons, and spoke as one voice, saying, “You have heard, and you have spoken! So say we all – Gabrielle is Queen!”

And Gabrielle rose up, and they formed two rows, and she walked between them to the foot of the Goddess, and turned, facing her Tribe. Alysia walked to the altar stone, and took from it the Mask of the Queen. She walked back to Gabrielle, and handed the Mask to her. Gabrielle held it up high above her, and brought it down over her face and head. Then, as the drums began to throb, echoing from all around the circle of standing stones, they all gave the Amazon Salute and cheers of exultation rose up, and with one Voice, they welcomed her home.



Chapter 8

O beautiful O graceful one . . . (108)

Soul beloved . . . (62)

My darling one . . . (163)

Stand to face me beloved

And open out the grace of your eyes (138)

The ceremony was long over, and the long night was slowly approaching the dawn, The Tribe had returned to the village, and to their well-deserved rest. Only Gabrielle and Poni remained, sitting at the foot of the Empty Throne.

“Well, Gab, isn’t it about time you went home to bed? I bet that the whole village will be sleeping in, tomorrow. I will, anyway!” ‘Poni yawned and stretched.

“Ah, ‘Poni, I’ll be along soon. You go ahead.”

“All right – will you be well? It is dark, and I feel the morning air will be chilling.” She put her hand on Gabrielle’s shoulder, comforting.

Gabrielle’s hand came up and patted ‘Poni’s. ‘I’ll be all right. I won’t stay here long. You go on.”

Eponin set off through the sarsens and was swallowed up in the gloom of the whispering trees.

Gabrielle got up, and walked, exhausted, over to the altar. She sat down on its surface, next to the urn, which still sat there. She could feel its weight, in her mind. She closed her eyes, and sighed.

And all around her, it seemed as though the silence got even deeper, and more silent. She couldn’t even hear herself breathing. She wondered, idly, if there was something wrong with her ears – maybe an onset of a fever, for she felt suddenly too warm. She felt her forehead with her hand – but it was cool, to the touch. She laughed, silently chiding herself. And then she heard the voice, low and vibrant, and so clear in that silence that her throat closed up in a sudden, overpowering ache at the sound of it.

‘You are truly golden-voiced, my Bard. I would never have guessed that you could work such a miracle as you have this night.”

Gabrielle’s breathe expelled in a soft gasp, as she squeezed her eyelids tighter, and a look of intense pain crossed her face. She whispered, “O, Xena! It is too much to bear!”

And the gentle voice went on, “No, dear Heart, not too much, not this time.””

And Gabrielle felt the warm heaviness of an arm, as it came up around her shoulders, and the touch of the strong fingers, that picked up her

other hand, and pulled it up, the warm, soft, moist, and tender lips gently kissing the fingers, one by one. She turned her head, infinitesimally, and slowly opened her eyes. Her heart was pounding in her chest as though it would burst, and she gasped.

“Xena . . . Alive? Come back to me?”

And it was real. And true. And their lips met, soft, tender. Real. And their tongues dipped in and out of one another, questing. Real. And only an occasional pause . . . to part, to gasp a breath. Real. And then, again, yielding to passion’s demand. Real.

* * * * *

Gabrielle, dumbfounded, pulled her hand free from Xena’s warm grasp, and wonderingly began to track the planes of Xena’s face. She traced the eyebrows, cupped the warm, soft cheek, and Xena leaned into her hand, tilting her head as she did so. Their eyes never left one another’s. Gabrielle then slid her hand down the side of Xena’s jaw, and on down the long neck, and across the shoulder. She barely breathed, sure the spell would break, and it would all vanish in the mist. Xena smiled, quiet under the questing hand.

“Gods, I must look ancient to you... now we’re the same age, aren’t we?” Gabrielle whispered.

“Well, I guess, if that means anything, anymore, with us....I think I’ve sort of given up trying to keep track.” Xena chuckled. “But no, you don’t look ancient – you look stunning - - how about me? Have I come through in one piece? I forgot to check....” She looked down at herself.

“Xena! You’re – you’re buck naked!” Gabrielle, startled, looked down in amazement.

“Well, yes,” Xena replied, somewhat shyly, “I guess that’s how you get to come back – sort of like being born, y’know? Hmmm.... well, upon cursory examination, it looks like whoever did this got it right – I don’t look like Callisto, or Autolycus! That’s a relief!”

Gabrielle was still in shock. She stared at the beloved body, her eyes tracing the familiar lines and curves, the scars . . .

“Scars,” she whispered, her finger traced the one on Xena’s shoulder. “But n-not that . . .” her voice breaking, her eyes unwilling to look again

at Xena's neck. . .

"Ah, no – dear Heart. I asked to keep some – but not that one. That was best left behind." She captured Gabrielle's eyes once more, and smiled gently at her.

After a long moment, Gabrielle's eyes again strayed, and took up their wandering route. Past the endearing hollow at the base of the throat, the sweet softness of the breasts. She shook her head, trying to clear the fuzziness out of her wits. She looked up again into those bottomless, brilliant blue eyes.

"Xena, we need to get you some clothes. You'll catch your death . . ." she stood up, looking around, vaguely; her eyes suddenly scanned the altar frantically. "Oh, where has it gone? Where's your urn?" She broke off, as her voice shook, and then, the tears came flooding out, and she collapsed in Xena's arms, and cried like a child.

Xena cradled her Soulmate, rocking her gently. "Shhh – it's all going to be all right, Gabrielle, I'm real. I'm not going to disappear. We have no need of the urn, any more . . . look, see? I have the necklace right here, around my neck, Look, sweetheart." She wiped the tears from Gabrielle's eyes, and lifted up the necklace, which lay on its fine silver chain around Xena's neck. She lifted up the stone, and then reached for Gabrielle's twin necklace, and fitted the two pieces together perfectly.

Gabrielle smiled through her tears. "O, my Love, it has been so long – so long. . ."

They stood, and Gabrielle's arm went around the slender waist, and hugged the bare figure close to her, Xena's arm went around her shoulders, and they walked slowly out of the circle of stones. The torches guttered behind them, and the silent Goddess was left with her still honor guard of Chosen Ones, to await the dawn

They came up behind Gabrielle's hut, and Gabrielle slowed to a stop. They were still hidden from the central courtyard, and no one else appeared to be awake and about. She turned to Xena, and spoke in a hushed voice.

"Xe – I don't think anyone else is ready for this – I don't think *I'm* ready for it. Let me just check and see if the coast is clear, all right?"

Xena grinned at her, one eyebrow lifting up in her signature, quizzical look. "Whatever, my Bard – I'm hardly in a position to argue!" She lifted

her hands, holding her arms wide, and looked down at herself, then up at Gabrielle.

Gabrielle cautiously peeked around the corner of the hut, then motioned to Xena to come on. They slipped around the side of the building, up on the porch, and through the doorway, the woven tapestry curtain falling shut behind them. Gabrielle moved to the table, pulled the shutters closed over the window, and then lit the candle in its holder. Xena, meanwhile, turned in a slow circle, her eyes taking in the familiar surroundings.

“It’s just as I remember it, “ she said, grinning at Gabrielle.

Gabrielle looked strangely at her, “But, but Xena, you’ve been here; at least – I’ve talked to you, here when you used to come to me...” she trailed off, looking perplexed.

Xena smiled, “Yeah, but when I was here, I couldn’t see you any clearer that you could see me. We were just sort of like glowing clouds, or something – right? Do you remember that?”

“Oh yes, I sure do, “ Gabrielle nodded. She moved over to the chest, opened it, and started pulling clothing out of the box, throwing it any which way. “No, darn it! I know I put them in here! . . . Ah, here we go,” she said, triumphant, as she reached the bottom of the chest, and unearthed a package. Untying the cords that held them bundled, she opened up a pair of leggings, and two tunics – one of light linen cloth, and one of deerskin. “Here you go, “ she said, bringing them over to Xena.

Xena took them from Gabrielle’s hands, and turned and draped them on the back of the chair by the table. Then she moved closer to the Bard, and took her in her arms. And kissed her, long, and deep, and passionate. And then she murmured, “ Not ready for clothes, just yet, my sweet . . .” as she lifted the dear body in her arms, and carried her to the bed.

They sank into the warmth of the furs covering the pallet, and in short order, Gabrielle was divested of her tunic, and her leggings, and her boots.

And there was no longer even the thickness of breath between them
No inside to them
No outside to them
No place where skin separated into skin
No sense of boundaries of any kind

As they passed the next long timeless interval reading the memory of one
another
Relearning the pathways
Remembering the Oh
Of Yes and
That and
Yes and
Please
And then, they soared up the long, slow, towering wave of their passion
Hesitated together at the brink
Their hearts pounding wildly
Their rocking like a boat upon the wave, completely matched
And then they soared out, together
Into the white light and heat of their coming
And their happiness and love held them,
Timeless
There
Yes
Just So
Long, - long
Yes
Before they slid back down the other side, down into their bodies in the
bed
And slept the sleep of the Just.



Chapter 9

Come to me now: loose me from hard
Care and all my heart longs
To accomplish, accomplish. You
Be my ally. (1)

They slept most of the next day. Indeed, the whole village slept; aside from a few solitary pairs of weary warriors, keeping watch over their

Sisters from the guard perches in the arms of the tall cedars that surrounded them.

As the sun reached just past its zenith, and began its slow descent into the waning of the day, Gabrielle drifted up from the deepest, most healing sleep she had had in ages. She half turned and nuzzled her head against the warm back that lay, spooned up against her, and slid her arm around and gently rubbed the firm belly. The figure twitched, slightly, then turned to face her, and the arms came around her, and the eyes opened just a trace, and a soft breathy voice whispered, ‘Well, hello there, . . . welcome back!’

Gabrielle smiled a beatific smile, and stretched, arching her back. She reveled in the touch of her breasts against Xena’s, and found her passion waking up once again, and she laughed at the sheer delight of it.

“Gods, I wonder if we’ll ever be full enough, again.” He face turned shy, and she looked away from Xena’s eyes.

:Hey, what is it?” Xena asked, looking concerned.

“Oh, nothing. . . I guess . . . I just still have some tiny, miniscule, hardly-worth-mentioning little niggling little corner of my Soul that is still kinda pissed off at you. But I won’t give it any thought, and I *certainly* won’t hold it against you!” she said, patting Xena’s chest, and then trickling her fingers down between them to Xena’s midriff. Where she began drumming a tattoo of loving taps down, down, to the soft dark curls below. Xena laughed, and pulled her close. . .

Later, they were sitting up in the bed, and Gabrielle put on her best barding voice and got down to the Big Question.

“All right, would you mind telling me just how this managed to happen?”

Xena looked sideways at her, her mouth quirking in a little smile, her eyebrow creeping up to her hair again. “Oh, Gabrielle, it was a big shock, I can tell you, “ she said, sighing. “When I got to the place where I would be staying – for forever, I thought – after Jappa – well, there were some – well, I don’t really know what to call them, actually – they were sort of like guides, I guess, or teachers. Kind of like bodiless Lao Ma’s. And they explained it all to me, Gabrielle – and I was so amazed, because it wasn’t anything like I’d expected. See – it wasn’t really anything having to do with all those souls from Jappa. The real reason I had to stay gone was because there was something important that *you* still had to learn,

and the best way for that to happen was for me to go, and stay gone, until you had learned it. And not only *that* – because you said it yourself, when you were telling all of them about it last night – but also because *I* had one last thing to learn, and the only way I could learn *that* was if *you* were alone.”

Gabrielle nodded her head, but looked totally confused. ‘So, if you were going to tell me all that in your usual, laconic, words-of-one syllable, Warrior-Princess-Way – what would it be?’

Xena laughed out loud in delight. “Just this. You had to learn that you were strong enough to be alone, but only if you learned to listen to that still, small voice inside you. And I had to learn that in order to finally gain my redemption, I had to *be* that still, small voice inside you. Helping you back, from the brink of your despair was what saved your soul; and by helping you, I saved mine, too.”

Gabrielle nodded thoughtfully. “Then I guess I we’re even, aren’t we?”

Xena nodded. “Yep, and that’s exactly where we’re supposed to be, now. Because we’ve got work to do, my Amazon Queen. You and me, we’ve got a mission. We’re supposed to help this feather-headed, leather-draped, fur-infested cantankerous and contrary bunch of wild women learn to be happy, peaceful, prosperous, and flourishing. And then, when we are all tuckered out from doing that, we get to have our own kind of special immortality.”

Gabrielle leaned away from her, looking sideways, her jaw sagged in amazement. “Whoa, Partner! Run that by me again. What do you mean, immortality?”

Xena grin grew even wider. Her eyes danced and sparkled. ”See, it’s like this – I get to come back, we both get to go on like there’s no tomorrow, look the same as we do now, pretty much, except we’ll probably get grey-headed, like ‘Poni, and we won’t get sick, or hurt or anything like that. But when we’re tired, and we know we need to stop being here – well, we’ll just kind of go together, gentle-like, and easy. And after we’re gone, we’ll start doing what *I* was doing with you – only with other Sisters, from inside them. So we’ll become *their* still, small voices, and we’ll be kind of like the new Gods, for them.” She patted Gabrielle’s head, and added, “ See – isn’t that just too much?” She leaned up against her partner, and snuggled. “Personally, I think it’s great! NO more swords, and YElIiElIIElIiIiIiI, and blood and gore and wrestling around with pig-headed sons of Tartarus. Kinda like a permanent

vacation!”

Gabrielle opened her mouth, then shut it again. She shook her head, and sighed. “Xena, that’s the most wonderful thing I’ve heard in my entire life.” She smiled, and kissed her Heart’s Delight, and added, “Can we say – ‘And They Lived Happily Ever After?’ “

And Xena nodded, ‘Oh, yes, my Bard. Especially when the story is told by you.”

~ *Finis* ~

~ *Epilogue* ~

Mythweaver..... (188)
Someone will remember us,
I say - Even in another time (147)

The poems in this story are from the following sources:

All Numbered Fragments From: Sappho, *If Not, Winter; Fragments of Sappho*,
Translated by Anne Carson, 2002.

* From: Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*,
Translated by Ursula K. Le Guin, 1997.

** From: *The Awakening of Osiris: The Egyptian Book of the Dead*,
Translated by Normandi Ellis, 1988.

*** From *The Charge of the Goddess*. Unknown origin.

This tale is continued in [The Chakram and the Dragon](#).