

~ He's Back or Make Love, Not War ~

by Greek Warrior

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Warning #1: This story contains love and sexual acts between two consenting adult women. If this offends you don't read this. But I would suggest that you seek professional help. So, if you're under 18, or whatever the legal age is in your area, do not read any further, just covering my backside.

Warning #2: This story contains violence. If this offends you don't read this; it's pretty graphic.

Note: This story immediately follows my story 'Dream A Little Dream'. It's not necessary to read that one first, but it might make a few things a little clearer. I can be contacted at I can be contacted at XWPScribe@aol.com. Please be nice!

The God of War stood just inside the entrance to the cave, watching the two women sleep. The warrior, tall and muscular with sapphire eyes and long raven hair that glimmered like polished black onyx when the sun graced her head. The bard, shorter with lighter muscle tone, emerald eyes and below the shoulder blond hair with red highlights. When his nephew, Strife, had told him that Xena and the bard had become 'More than just good friends', Ares knew he would be able to use this bit of information to his advantage. Ever since Xena had broken away from him and turned from being the fiercest warlord Greece had ever known into a 'champion for the greater good', she had thwarted each and every attempt he had made to get her back. He had tried deceit, manipulation, and even threatened her life. Nothing had worked. Ares was the first to admit, to himself that is, that he didn't understand love. At least not the love that makes one person willing to sacrifice everything for another, but he saw it in Xena's eyes everytime she looked at the bard. 'I may not understand what you see in that irritating little blond Xena,' Ares thought to himself, 'but I will use it against you and I will get you back. One way or another.' And with that thought, Ares vanished.

Xena's warrior senses woke her and she had the unmistakable feeling of being watched. She was lying on her side with her arms wrapped around Gabrielle's stomach and her head buried in the bard's soft silky hair. Without moving a muscle, she didn't want to alert the intruder if there was one; she let her senses explore. The only thing her nose could detect was the sweet odor that was her Gabrielle. A smile started at the corners of the mouth and she had to mentally pinch herself, 'concentrate Xena'. She let her hearing take over. Water dripping into the small pool at the back of the cave, Gabrielle's breathing, and Argo's steady intake and exhale just outside the cave entrance told her that her trusted war-horse was asleep. It also told her that no one could have gotten past Argo and into the cave.

She relaxed and lifted her head. It was still dark outside, but the sky was showing signs of awakening to another day. Xena sighed and laid her head down. She had promised Gabrielle she could sleep late this morning since they were only an hour or so from Amphipolis. They were

headed to Xena's village at Gabrielle's urging, 'Just in case your mother heard of your death and hasn't heard of your reemergence into the land of the living'. Xena thought the bard just wanted to test her latest stories on a captive audience, but it would be nice to see her mother. So she had given in to the bard. Xena would never admit this to Gabrielle, but she was curious to see how the bard would handle their relationship in her writings. 'Maybe I should ask her that before hand. There are still places that don't condone this kind of love.'

Xena knew she wouldn't be able to go back to sleep. She also knew that if she woke Gabrielle now, they would have plenty of time to make love before they needed to leave. Desire won out over her promise to sleep late.

Xena brushed aside Gabrielle's hair to expose her ear and neck. She placed her mouth next to Gabrielle's ear and whispered, "Gabrielle". The bard shivered, but did not wake. Xena took Gabrielle's earlobe in her mouth and sucked gently, moans escaped the bard's lips; but still not awake. Xena placed a line of kisses down her lover's neck and shoulder. Then pulling the blanket, that covered their naked forms, slowly down to reveal Gabrielle's arm and started kissing the newly exposed skin. Xena moved her hand to cover the bard's breast and gently started massaging the nipple between her finger and thumb. 'If that doesn't wake her,' Xena thought, 'I'll resort to more drastic measures.'

Gabrielle raised her arm and grabbed a hand full of Xena's thick black mane. "Oh, gods, Xena."

"I know I promised you could sleep late, but I couldn't resist."

Gabrielle turned over onto her right side to face her lover and started rubbing her leg slowly up and down the warrior's leg. "Let me see, sleep late or make love," Gabrielle paused, her head tilted back with an expression of serious contemplation on her face. Xena raised an eyebrow and stared at the bard. Gabrielle suppressed a grin, "Sleep late or." She didn't get to finish as Xena leaned in and covered the bard's mouth with her own.

Gabrielle pulled away from the kiss and grinned. "Definitely make love."

"I'll take that as a complement." Xena said. "Considering it used to take an act from Zeus to get you up in the morning."

"Xena, I know I keep telling you that you should communicate more, but right now can we have less talk and more action?" Gabrielle rolled onto her back bringing the warrior with her.

"Oh, I think that can be arranged." Xena stated with a gleam in her blue eyes.

Their lips came together, their tongues eagerly exploring the other's mouth. The warrior broke from the kiss and raised up on her hands and knees placing her leg between Gabrielle's thighs.

Gabrielle moaned loudly, tightening her thighs around Xena's leg and began to slowly move up and down against it.

Xena was having trouble controlling her own building desire when she felt just how ready her lover was. She mentally shook herself and focused on pleasing her bard. She lowered her head and started kissing Gabrielle's neck. She kissed her way down to the bard's breast and took the nipple between her teeth lightly flicking her tongue across the captured delicacy. She moved her mouth to Gabrielle's other breast and ran her tongue in circles around the nipple, then taking the nipple in her mouth sucking gently at first and then with more force as she felt her lover responding to her.

Gabrielle arched her back, holding on to fistfuls of the warrior's hair. "Xena...kiss...me." Gabrielle forced the words out between gasping for breath. She loved the feel of Xena's mouth on hers. All the warrior had to do was kiss her and Gabrielle's body would tingle with desire.

Xena released Gabrielle's nipple, kissed her passionately and removed her leg from between Gabrielle's thighs. She grinned wickedly as the bard groaned her disappointment, which quickly turned into a moan of anticipation as the warrior started moving her tongue and lips down her lover's stomach. She held her mouth just above where the bard was pleading for her to go.

Gabrielle's hips moved up trying to make contact with her lover. "Xena...please." She pleaded with her tormentor.

The warrior held a few seconds longer, lightly breathing on a most sensitive area, watching Gabrielle shudder with each exhale of her breath. She couldn't wait any longer to devour the sweet juice that was her Gabrielle, and placed her mouth on her lover. She slowly moved the tip of her tongue up and down the bard's soft folds. Every time they made love Xena felt like she should be waking up from another dream. She had dreamed of Gabrielle as a lover for so long she couldn't believe it was now a reality. The bard moved her hips in time with the warrior's tongue. She had let go of Xena's hair and was grasping their sleeping blanket so tightly that her knuckles had turned white. "Gods...Xena...that's...incredible."

Xena sucked hard on the bard's swollen center, pushing her lover closer and closer to the edge. Gabrielle's hips moved faster with each pull from the warrior's mouth. "Please...Xena I...need...to feel you...inside me." The warrior complied with the request by placing two fingers inside her lover, letting the motion of the bard's hips move them in and out until she felt the bard tighten around her and then drove in deeply one last time.

"Xena." The bard screamed her lover's name as pulse after pulse of orgasm rocked through her body.

The warrior moved to lie beside Gabrielle and pulled her close until she stopped shivering. "I love you so much, Gabrielle." Xena said as she kissed the bard's forehead and then the tip of her nose.

Gabrielle was so over come with emotion, she threw her arms around her warrior's neck and pulled her so close she thought they might pass out from lack of air.

"Are you ok?" Xena asked with concern.

The bard pulled back and locked her emerald eyes with eyes so brilliantly blue, she thought the sky must be jealous. "I'm much more than ok," she told her warrior, "as long as I have you, everything is great."

Xena felt herself melting from the simple words and from the look of complete love and trust in her lover's eyes. She knew that if she ever lost this woman, that her life would end.

Gabrielle recovered quicker than Xena expected she would and was surprised when she was rolled onto her back.

As the bard straddled her stomach and picked up the blanket they had used for cover while sleeping, she asked, "Do you trust me?" while a grin spread across her face.

Xena raised an eyebrow. "Do I have a choice?"

"No." Came the reply. "Give me your wrists."

The warrior held her crossed wrists up for the bard to bind. Gabrielle wrapped the blanket around them and tied it. She knew Xena could remove her arms at any time, but she wanted to see how long her lover would play along. She leaned forward pushing Xena's arms down to the ground above her head.

Xena knew her arms weren't tightly bound and she could release them in the blink of an eye. But the thought of being helpless, at least with Gabrielle, was starting to make her body tingle all over.

Gabrielle ran her tongue along the outline of Xena's lips. The warrior opened her mouth slightly, inviting her in. The bard accepted the invitation, kissing her passionately and letting her tongue explore every inch of her lover's mouth.

The bard had yet to lay a hand on her and she was aching from desire. A low moan escaped Xena's lips as Gabrielle placed her mouth next to her ear and breathed out heavily as she said. "Don't move your arms."

The bard moved down Xena's body and took a nipple, hard with desire, in her mouth. The warrior arched her back and let out a gasp as her lover made long sinuous pulls, sucking the nipple far into her mouth. "Gabrielle," Xena's breath was becoming labored, "that feels...so good."

The bard spent another moment there, then moved to the warrior's other breast and lightly took the nipple in her mouth, playfully pulling on it with her teeth.

The warrior felt the heat in her body grow until she thought she would explode. "Gabrielle, please." Xena forced out through clenched teeth.

She kissed the warrior once more before placing a trail of kisses down to where Xena needed her most. The bard spread her lover's legs as she moved between them. Xena's hips froze in the air as Gabrielle placed the tip of her tongue inside the warrior. Xena's breath came in short ragged gasps as the bard teasingly ran her fingers through the warrior's folds.

"Gabrielle...you're...killing...me."

She knew she had pushed Xena far beyond what she had hoped for, even in her wildest dreams. Gabrielle wrapped her arms around her lover's hips, which were now bucking wildly. She replaced her tongue with her fingers and moved her mouth over the warrior's swollen center, sucking hard and held on for the ride.

Xena's body jerked uncontrollably as orgasm after orgasm passed through her body and into her very soul. When she finally could open her eyes, she found Gabrielle next to her cradling her head against the bard's chest. "Xena, speak to me. Are you alright?"

She opened her mouth to speak, but a croak was all that emerged. She cleared her throat and started again. "Yes, I think so." She held on to her love. "That was wonderful, thank you."

Contented to spend the morning holding one another, they stayed in each other's arms and dozed.

Gabrielle woke to find the sun high in the sky and Xena still sleeping. She brushed the hair back that had fallen across the warrior's face while she slept and gently caressed her cheek. Xena opened her eyes, "Morning again."

"Almost afternoon," she replied and kissed her lover deeply.

Xena pulled away first. "Oh no. If we start this again, we won't get to Amphipolis until tomorrow morning."

"And just why would that be a bad thing?" Gabrielle questioned.

Laughing, the warrior got to her feet. Pulling the bard up, she wrapped her arms around her waist and kissed her on the forehead. "Get dressed." Xena said as she playfully slapped Gabrielle on the butt.

Gabrielle finished dressing and went to help Xena with her armor. "What's for breakfast? I'm hungry."

"You always are." Xena stated as she put her arm around the bard's waist and lifted her until their faces were level. With a sparkle in her eyes she added. "For one thing or another."

Gabrielle threw her arms around the warrior's neck. "I thought we needed to get going."

"We do, I just wanted a hug." Xena held the bard a few minutes longer then let her down. "Eat the rest of the nuts if you're hungry. We'll get something to eat when we get there."

Xena saw the guilty look on the bard's face. "You ate all the nuts." It was more of a statement than a question.

"I finished them yesterday. I'm sorry, I got hungry."

Xena said the word hungry at the same time the bard did.

"I'm still a growing girl." Gabrielle stated weakly, trying to find an excuse for the amount of food she seemed to consume.

As Xena was leaving the cave, she turned around to face Gabrielle. "Yeah, growing sideways if you don't watch out."

Gabrielle's reaction was to glance at her stomach.

Xena chuckled as she continued outside to saddle Argo. From inside the cave came, "Xena, that's not funny."

The bard joined Xena beside Argo. "I'm not fat." She glared at the warrior.

"I was joking Gabrielle." Xena didn't need to look at the bard; she knew every inch of her body. "You don't have an ounce of fat on you. And I should know."

They had walked in silence down the path back to the main road leading to the village. As they turned toward Amphipolis, Gabrielle asked. "Walking or riding today?"

Xena had been trying to decide how to explain to Gabrielle that it might sometimes be better if they keep the fact that they were lovers to themselves. "Walking first, we need to talk."

"Ok, what about?" The bard drew her attention away from the scenery and looked sideways at the warrior.

"Those stories you just finished, are they about us?"

"Yes. Why?"

"I mean. Are they about us as lovers?" Xena was struggling; she had never been good with words. She always preferred action. And this was the first time since they had met that she was getting one-word answers and questions from the bard.

Gabrielle was starting to get a little nervous. She wasn't sure she liked the direction this conversation was headed. "I didn't write down details but," the bard paused and took a nervous breath. "Yes I wrote how we felt about each other and the fact that we make love."

Gabrielle placed a hand on the warrior's arm and brought them to a stop. "Look at me." As Xena turned to face the bard who was trying to stay composed, the dam burst. "Why are you asking? Don't you want people to know?"

Xena heard the panic in the bard's voice. Xena took Gabrielle's face between her hands. "Gabrielle, if it was up to me I would climb to the top of Mt. Olympus and shout how much I love you at the top of my voice."

Gabrielle saw the deep love Xena had for her in the warrior's eyes. "Then what's wrong?" The panic gone from her voice.

They turned and starting walking again. "There are people that don't approve of this type of relationship. Some places even have laws against it."

Gabrielle had a puzzled look on her face. It had never occurred to her that people would outlaw love. "Why should it matter?"

"It shouldn't. But I should have told you this before now. But since we stayed with the Amazons for so long, helping them to rebuild, after Velasca and Callisto, I just kept putting it off."

"So you're telling me, we have to hide our feelings for each other." Part of Gabrielle was relieved, she had thought Xena wanted to keep their love hidden. Part of her was angry because she shouldn't have to pretend. She wanted everyone to know how much she loved Xena and how happy she was.

"In certain places, hidden would be best. In most places, just no kissing in the street would work." Xena said, trying to lighten the mood. It didn't work.

"Which kind of place is Amphipolis?"

Xena sighed. "Well, it's not against the law. But it's not looked upon favorably. It would probably be best if we didn't say anything."

"What do you think your mother would say? Are you going to tell her?"

"I don't think anything I do could shock my mother at this point. Actually, I think she would approve, she likes you. As far as telling her, I'll think about it." Xena put her arm around the bard's shoulder.

Gabrielle put her arm around Xena's waist. "I was going to ask you if we could stop by Potidaea, I wanted to tell my mother and Lila about us. Now I'm not sure I should. What do you think?"

"I think it's up to you. If you want to tell them, I'll be there with you. But keep in mind, as far as your parents are concerned, I was the reason you left home. They're probably not real fond of me." Xena jumped on Argo's back and extended her arm to Gabrielle. "We ride the rest of the way."

Gabrielle sat behind Xena with her arms wrapped tightly around the warrior's waist. "Xena did you ever notice, before we became lovers, that I started riding more and more with you?"

"Yes."

"Did you ever question it?"

She shrugged. "Not really, I thought you and Argo must have come to an understanding."

"Well we did, kind of. But that's not why."

"And the 'why' is?"

"I just wanted to be close. It gave me an excuse to hold you. I still can't believe you never saw through me and figured it out." She laughed thinking of all the times she had been so scared that Xena might actually discover her secret.

"I guess I was busy trying to hide my own feelings from you. Gods, I can't believe how much time we've wasted." Xena had known she was in love with Gabrielle since before the bard and Perdicas had married. But never considered that Gabrielle might have the same feeling for her.

"Considering that I have a hard time keeping my hands off you, I think we'll probably make up for a lot of it." Gabrielle squeezed her lover tighter and laid her head against her back.

Between the warm spring sun and Argo's steady gait, Gabrielle started to doze. Xena twisted her arm behind her to steady the bard so she wouldn't fall. And when one of Gabrielle's hands slipped from her waist and fell between the warrior's legs, she whistled for Argo to pick up the pace.

They were at the outskirts of the village. "Gabrielle, wake up."

"Mmmmm, Xena."

"Gabrielle if you don't wake up and move your hand the whole village will know we're lovers, whether we want them to or not."

By this time, the bard's hand had worked itself under Xena's leather tunic. Gabrielle woke up and realized what her hand was doing and jerked it back to Xena's waist. "Sorry."

"No problem, anytime." Xena was teasing the bard. "Must have been some dream."

Gabrielle could feel her face flush. "Well yes, actually it was."

Xena guided Argo to her mother's tavern and lowered Gabrielle down, then dismounted.

"Gabrielle! Gabrielle!"

The bard turned to see who had shouted her name. She saw Lila running towards her. Lila closed the distance between them and threw her arms around her sister, twirling her around and around in circles.

"Lila, what are you doing here." Gabrielle broke from the hug and stopped the spinning motion. She was getting dizzy.

"I'm getting married tomorrow." The young woman announced.

Gabrielle stood there with her mouth hanging open. Xena looked at the bard thinking, 'This is the first time I've seen her speechless, with her clothes on that is.' She thought back to the first time that they made love. She had rendered the bard speechless twice that night. 'Better not to think about that right now.' She struggled with herself to control her lustful thoughts.

Gabrielle had found her voice. "Who is he? Are mother and father here? I've got to get something to wear to the wedding. And why wasn't I invited?"

"We sent out messages, but no one could find you. We were beginning to get worried." Lila answered one of her sister's questions.

The bard's mother and father had spotted Gabrielle and ran to join the reunion. "Gabrielle, my baby." Her mother said with glee.

"My little plum puddin'." Her father exclaimed.

Xena choked back a laugh. "Don't even think about it Xena." The bard warned her.

Gabrielle's parents seemed to notice Xena for the first time. Their smiles turned to frowns. The bard noticed this and decided Xena had been right. Her parents blamed the warrior for her leaving home. "Let's all go inside, Xena needs to see her mother."

The warrior led the way in. Her mother was standing at one of the tables with her back to the door. "Not open yet, come back later." She called out without turning around.

"Mother." Xena called to her.

Her mother spun around. "Xena!" She ran to her daughter and put her arms around her. "You're alive my little one."

Xena turned her head to look at Gabrielle. "Don't say it."

"You mean don't say, I told you so? Wouldn't dream of it." She whispered so the warrior was the only one to hear.

"Why did she think Xena was dead?" Lila asked her sister.

Xena's mother answered. "Several people that know I'm her mother came to tell me that they had heard that Xena had been killed." She turned back to face her daughter. "Xena, why would someone start a rumor like that?"

Gabrielle answered as delicately as she could. "Cyrene, it wasn't a rumor, Xena did die."

The group turned as one to look at the bard. Cyrene's legs started to buckle and Xena helped her into a chair. "Xena?" Her mother questioned.

Xena glared at the bard with raised eyebrow. "I'm sure Gabrielle will be glad to explain, later." She turned back to her mother. "Do you have room for us?"

Her mother was still looking back and forth between the warrior and the bard with a totally bewildered expression on her face. She forced herself to concentrate on the question. "Ah, room did you say. I only have one, your old room Xena. Gabrielle's family is staying here and a, what did he call himself." Her mother thought. "Oh yes, a traveling salesman but I forget his name."

"Salmoneus." The bard and the warrior said at the same time.

"Yes that was it." Cyrene said. "Do you two know him?"

At that moment Salmoneus walked into the tavern. "Lunch ready? Xena! I heard a nasty rumor you were dead. Glad to hear it's not true."

Gabrielle grinned at him. "But Salmoneus, it was true."

"Long story Salmoneus." Xena stated before he could question them. "I'll go stable Argo and put our gear in the room." Xena said to Gabrielle as she got up to leave.

The bard watched Xena leave. She had her chance. She had been trying to get Xena to tell her the story of how she and Salmoneus met, but she had kept putting her off. "Salmoneus," Gabrielle called him over. "I want you to do me a favor."

"Sure, anything." He wiped the stunned expression from his face and turned to the bard smiling.

They all sat down at the table by the doorway leading back to the rooms.

"You are going to tell me the story of how you and Xena met."

"Oh no, not me Gabrielle. Xena would have my head. Ask her to tell you." He started to stand, but was stopped by a hand on his.

"I have, and she keeps saying she'll tell me later. Come on Salmoneus, you know she doesn't like to talk about herself. Please, for me?" She looked at him with pleading eyes.

He stared at the bard, his resolve fading. "Ok, but if she finds out you had better tell her you made me."

'Like Gabrielle could make anybody do anything.' Lila thought. 'I use to beat her up.'

Salmoneus started. "It was when she was still a warlord and some of her soldiers caught me trying to sneak past their camp..."

Xena had entered though the backdoor. She had come back to ask her mother a question, but when she heard Gabrielle's request to Salmoneus, she hid just inside the entranceway to the rooms. 'This should be good.' Xena thought.

"...and when the beast swallowed him they both disappeared." Salmoneus finished.

Xena came out of the shadows and gripped Salmoneus' shoulder, firmly.

"Xena!" Salmoneus said in a voice a least one octave higher than normal. "How long have you been standing there?" He was starting to sweat.

"Long enough." Xena winked and everyone at the table saw it, but Salmoneus.

"She made me tell it." He was pointing at the bard.

Gabrielle was looking very innocent. "Me?"

Salmoneus was very nervous now. Xena had sat down next to him. He tried to slide over but she still held his shoulder. She turned to look at him with her best ice cold warlord stare. He was on the verge of passing out. In fact everyone at the table was getting nervous except for Gabrielle.

"Salmoneus." Xena growled.

"Yes oh great warrioress?" He was wringing his hands at this point, trying to find a way out.

"You left out one very important detail."

"What was that, oh mighty one?" He squeaked out.

"That when my men caught you sneaking by the camp," Xena paused, "you neglected to mention that you were wearing a veil, a wig and a very ugly dress." Xena patted his shoulder and let go.

Gabrielle started laughing and Xena smiled as relief washed across his face.

"Xena, why do you do this to me? I never know when you're joking." He said as he breathed a sigh of relief that the warrior would let him live another day. Not that he thought she would really kill him, but on the other hand, why take chances.

"I know Salmoneus, that's why I do it." Xena replied.

Lila looked at Xena with wide eyes. "You know Hercules?"

"Yes and so does your sister." Xena replied.

"Hey, so do I." Salmoneus stated, feeling left out.

Lila looked at her sister with a little envy and turned the conversation back to her important event. "Gabrielle I want you to meet Manderon and we need to find something for you to wear to the wedding, you can't wear those old things." Lila got up dragging her sister with her.

Gabrielle's parents followed their daughters out the door.

"Salmoneus, don't you have somewhere you need to be. Other than here." Xena stated.

"Oh, right. I guess you two want to catch up. I'll just go...I'll...." She was making him nervous again.

"Later Salmoneus." Xena glared at him.

"Why don't I just go." Salmoneus said backing away from the table.

"Are you going to tell me what happened or make me wait?" Her mother asked.

"Gabrielle will tell it much better than I can, mother. Come on, I'll help you in the kitchen."

"Are you telling me you've learned to cook? Two miracles in one day, I don't know how much more I can take." Her mother said with a sly expression on her face.

"Sarcasm doesn't become you, mother. And for your information, Gabrielle eats my cooking."

"And likes it?" Her mother asked.

"I said she eats it, I didn't say she likes it." Xena said laughing.

"So that means I'll be doing the cooking." Cyrene stated.

After the lunch crowd left and before the dinner crowd arrived, Gabrielle related the story of Xena's death and how she came back. She followed with the story of Valasca, Callisto and the lava pit. Then explained about staying at the Amazon village to help rebuild. She left out 'the kiss' and what happened between the two of them while they stayed with the Amazons. She received mixed responses.

Lila to Gabrielle. "You're an Amazon Queen?"

Her parents to Gabrielle. "You were hanging over a lava pit?"

Salmoneus to Xena. "You ate ambrosia! Are you a god? Do you happen to know where there might be more?"

Xena's mother to no one in particular. "Thank the gods!"

"Mother, the gods had nothing to do with it. If you want to thank someone, thank Autolycus, the Amazons and most of all, Gabrielle." Xena explained. "No, Salmoneus, I'm not a god and I wouldn't tell you even if I did know where there was more ambrosia."

By this time, crowds of people began coming in. "It looks like it's going to be busy tonight." Xena's mother said. Word had spread that Xena was back.

Xena had relocated to the corner by the kitchen. She was sitting there with her back against the wall for two reasons. One, she always sat in the far corner away from the door in order to see trouble before trouble could see her. And two, because she wanted to observe the people. She knew most had revised their opinion of her since she had stopped the warlord Draco from destroying the village. But some people's opinions and distrust wouldn't change so easily.

The crowd continued to grow until all tables were occupied. Families, couples and friends sitting together filled the tavern. People carried on conversations, but all eyes were scanning the place, looking for her.

Xena watched all this with mixed emotions. She knew they had spotted Gabrielle sitting with her family, Manderon and his family and Salmoneus. But she knew they wouldn't spot her unless she wanted them to, the shadows were too dark. She watched the people who use to be her friends and neighbors begin to relax as they ate their meals.

Most people had finished their meals and she thought it was as good a time as any to reveal herself and see what the reaction towards her would be. She was about to stand when the door opened and five men she didn't recognize walked in. They were armed with swords and looked filthy. They walked over to a table, who's occupants scrambled to get out of their way, and sat down.

Cyrene walked out of the kitchen and saw the men. She looked to the corner where her daughter was sitting with a worried expression.

The warrior wasn't sure if the worry on her mother's face was because of the men or because of what Xena might do. She decided to observe a while longer.

"Ale, now." The one that seemed to be the leader shouted. His size resembled the side of a barn. He was very tall and muscular. His brown hair was shoulder length and in need of washing. His beard was down to mid chest and looked like he had enough food stuck in it to supply his next meal.

The serving girl filled five mugs and carried them to the table. The leader grabbed the girl around the waist.

"Let her go, Tomblin." Cyrene shouted from behind the bar.

He jerked his head around and stared. "Fine, old woman. We're gettin' tired of playin' with her anyway." He pushed the girl away.

Just then one of Tomblin's men spotted Gabrielle and Lila and pointed them out to his leader. Tomblin walked over to where they were sitting, leaned over between Hecuba and Herodotus, placed his hands on the table and stared at the two women.

"Well looky here boys, two pretty young girls just dyin' to have some fun."

Gabrielle was about to reply when her father jumped up. "Leave my daughters alone."

Tomblin placed a very large and very strong hand on his shoulder and forced him back to his seat with a thud. "Best mind your manners, pop."

Gabrielle grabbed her staff, jumped to her feet and planted the end of it in Tomblin's chest with enough force to make him stagger back a few feet.

"Back off." She warned.

He looked at her with a startled expression that quickly turned to rage. "You just made a big mistake little girl."

Everyone but Tomblin's men, had hastily moved from their tables and back against the walls when Xena appeared from the corner and moved to stand behind Tomblin.

"Not as big of a mistake as you're about to make." Xena stated and smiled and it wasn't friendly looking.

He spun around to see what fool had the gall to speak to him like that. He looked Xena over from top to bottom. Then started to laugh. "Hey boys," he called to his men. "It's a woman and she wants to play soldier."

Xena stood a few feet in front of him with her arms folded across her chest.

Gabrielle used the distraction to move everyone at the table except Salmoneus, he had disappeared when Tomblin had walked over to the table, back against the wall and stood in front of them with her staff ready. She then saw Salmoneus hiding under the table.

Cyrene came around the bar and started toward her daughter. Gabrielle grabbed her and pulled her back behind her.

"It's five against one Gabrielle." She stated with uneasiness.

"I know it's unfair but I'm sure Xena will give them a break and not use her sword." Gabrielle replied.

Tomblin caught his breath. "Woman, you better find some other line of work. You're not goin' to out fight me, I'm as strong as an ox."

"You're twice as strong as an ox, at least in the way you smell." Xena prodded him.

"Oh, I'm goin' to enjoy this." He smiled as he swung his right hand to connect with Xena's jaw. Disbelief crossed his face as she caught his fist in her left hand and stopped its momentum. She heard his men rise from the table and move toward her back. The warrior jumped. She pushed off Tomblin's chest with her left foot, kicked him under his chin with her right foot and flipped backwards over the surprised men, landing on top of the table they had vacated.

Tomblin sailed backwards landing on the table Salmoneus was hiding under. Salmoneus let out a squeak and scampered on hands and knees to hide behind Gabrielle.

Tomblin's men turned to stare at the woman who was now grinning at them with a deadly look in her eyes. They looked at each other hesitating. They weren't sure they wanted to attack someone that could do what she just did to their leader.

Tomblin pushed himself to a sitting position rubbing his chin. "What are you idiots waiting for? Get her."

His men hesitated a moment more, trying to decide if they were more afraid of their leader or this woman. They thought maybe she just took him off guard, after all it was four against one now. They drew their swords and moved in.

Xena back-flipped again and landed on the floor, so the men would have to go around the table to reach her. They split with two men coming from each side. The men on her left reached her first. She backhanded the one in front and sent him flying back into the second man, they both hit the floor.

The man in front on Xena's right raised his sword above his head and swung downward to split her skull.

All the spectators except Gabrielle and Salmoneus let out a collective gasp.

Xena turned to her right and caught the blade of the sword between the palm of her hands and pulled it out of the man's grasp. He stood frozen with his mouth hanging open. The man behind him decided against attack. The other two men had gotten to their feet but weren't making any move to attack either.

Xena had judged these bullies correctly. They weren't fighters. Their leader used his size to intimidate people. She tossed the sword back to the man, or boy he looked very young, she had disarmed. "If you can't use it, don't carry it, you'll end up dead." She advised him.

Tomblin wasn't quite as smart as his men. He started toward the warrior. She jumped and flipped forward landing on his shoulders, his head between her thighs. He looked up just as her fist connected with his face. He hit the floor hard, landing on his back. He opened his eyes to see her standing above him, her left foot on his chest.

The crowd was chanting, "Xena...Xena."

He looked at the woman above him. "You're the warrior princess? I heard you were dead."

Xena rolled her eyes. "Is there anyone who hasn't heard?"

To Tomblin she said. "I'm very much alive and if I ever hear about you terrorizing villages again, I'll hunt you down and I won't be as nice as I was tonight. Now get your sorry hide out of my sight before I change my mind and finish you now."

Xena removed her foot and watched Tomblin and his men sprint for the door as the crowd started cheering.

The crowd settled down and returned to their tables. Xena and her mother joined Gabrielle and the others at their table.

"That was amazing." Lila commented to Xena.

"Gabrielle, what do you think you were doing by attacking him? He could have hurt you." Herodotus reprimanded his daughter. He had felt the strength in the bully's hand when Tomblin had forced him back to his seat and had been scared. He was also a bit humiliated by his little girl defending him.

"She can take care of herself." Xena replied to him. "That's an Amazon fighting staff and she does know how to use it."

The bard's father was trying to relieve his embarrassment and fear by turning everyone's attention to the fact that Gabrielle might have been the one hurt. He huffed, but he made no more comments.

Gabrielle was a little annoyed. "I knew Xena was close if it had gotten out of control, father." 'He still thinks of me as his little girl', the bard thought to herself.

Xena saw the dejected look on the bard's face. "Gabrielle?" Xena grinned at her. "You've got a room full of people, a captive audience. I can't believe you're not already telling a story. What are you waiting for, a formal invitation?"

Gabrielle's eyes lit up. "Is it alright?" She asked Cyrene.

Xena's mother smiled and asked the crowd if they wanted to hear a story or two from the bard. The people clapped and cheered.

Gabrielle flashed Xena a thank you look and moved to the fireplace. "Ok folks, who wants to hear the story of how Death was captured by King Sisyphus?"

Xena shook her head. "I can't believe I encouraged her." Xena disappeared from the room. She went to the stables to check on Argo.

She spent time brushing and talking to her companion. She gave Argo her dinner and returned to the tavern.

The bard was just finishing the second story of the night, about the Black Wolf. She chose this one because she knew some of the villagers would remember Flora, Xena's childhood friend. She received applause when she finished and boo's when she said that was enough for tonight. She promised to tell more another night.

The women had grouped together around Lila and her mother was explaining the cleansing ritual that she needed to go through before the wedding was mostly an excuse for the women to get together and gossip. But they all decided that a bath in the hot springs sounded inviting and decided to keep with tradition.

They found Xena had beaten them to the bathhouse and was already soaking in the hot water. As they started to disrobe, Gabrielle noticed Lila standing there still dressed. "Lila, what are you waiting for?" She asked her sister.

"I've never undressed in front of anybody before." She said shyly. "I mean, besides you and mother."

"Lila," her mother said. "There is nothing to be afraid of. You're among friends and family."

"I know, I'm just being silly I guess."

"Well, I'm not waiting any longer." Gabrielle stated. "That water looks too inviting."

She undressed and stepped into the water. "Gabrielle, you're too skinny, you need to eat more." Hecuba scolded her.

Xena cracked up. "Eat more?" The warrior started laughing and had to catch her breath before she could add. "She never stops eating!"

Gabrielle was trying to glare at Xena but found it hard not to laugh also. It was very rare for the warrior to let go like this and she couldn't help but enjoy it even if it was at her own expense.

Lila had taken the opportunity to disrobe while nobody was paying attention and slipped down into the water.

Gabrielle moved to sit by her sister. "Lila I can't believe you are a grown woman and getting married. It seems like it happened overnight."

"You've been gone more than two years, Gabrielle. Tell me what you think of Manderon."

"He's very nice and he's cute. He seems to worship you. Are you going to live here or in Potidaea?"

"Here, mother and father are not real happy about it, but I keep telling them that it's not that far away."

Manderon's mother had been listening to the sister's conversation. She had another son who would be about five years older than Gabrielle. His wife died in childbirth last year and it was time he thought about marriage again. She would have to start playing matchmaker. She could start by putting the two of them together at the wedding. Having them dance together and sit together would be a good start. "Gabrielle, how long are you staying in Amphipolis?"

"I don't know. Xena and I haven't talked about it. We just came back to let her mother know she was ok. She likes to keep moving, not stay in one place too long."

"That must be hard. Traveling from one place to another, not settling down." She was trying to get information. She needed to know how long she had to get her son and Gabrielle together.

"Gabrielle," Hecuba interrupted, "where do you sleep at night and what about food?"

"Last night we slept in the caves just east of here. But mostly we camp wherever we find a good location and Xena usually hunts each night." Gabrielle explained to her mother.

"Gabrielle how can you live like that, it's dangerous, it's unpredictable, it's...it's..." Her mother was beside herself. She had always assumed that they slept in village inns, like normal travelers.

The bard interrupted. "Calm down mother. I knew when I followed Xena it would be dangerous. When I caught up with her, she told me she was sending me home the next day."

"Why didn't you?" Hecuba addressed the warrior.

Xena explained. "She told me that if I sent her home, she would just leave again. She said she wasn't the little girl that you wanted her to be." She stared at the bard with a sparkle in her eyes.

"And you said, it wasn't easy trying to prove you're a different person." Gabrielle finished. She was not very good at hiding the love she had for the warrior. Her emotions were showing in the expression on her face.

Cyrene could see the bard's face clearly. She would have to talk to her daughter. She wondered if Xena realized that Gabrielle loved her and if she did, how far things had gone between them.

Hecuba thought. 'Of course she's not what we wanted her to be, she hasn't had a chance. She's traipsing all over the countryside, sleeping in caves and hanging over lava pits. This has to change, we have to bring her home.'

"If I stay here much longer I'll resemble a prune." Xena said as she stood and let the water run down her body before stepping from the pool.

The women sitting in the water stared openly at the warrior. Gabrielle stared at her with desire burning in her eyes and had to look away before she reached up, pulled her back down and made a complete fool of herself. Most others thought they looked at what could only be a goddess. The light from the oil lamps illuminated the water cascading from her body and gave the impression of a perfectly sculptured golden statue. Cyrene, on the other hand, noticed the scars that lined her daughter's body. Granted, there wasn't very many, but to a mother it still meant that her baby had been in danger and in pain when she hadn't been around to comfort or care for her.

Xena was dressing when Cyrene excused herself so that she could walk back with her daughter. They had entered the tavern and walked back to the door of the room that the warrior and bard were sharing. "Xena, can I come in for a minute? I want to talk to you before Gabrielle gets back."

The warrior looked at the expression on her mother's face and thought, 'Oh well, we hid our feeling for almost half a day. We're definitely going to have to work on this.' She entered the room and held the door open for her mother.

"I don't know any other way to ask this other than just being direct." She paused and looked at her daughter. "Do you realize that Gabrielle loves you?"

Xena knew exactly what her mother meant but wanted to get a feel for how she would react to the thought of her and the bard being lovers. "Mother, when two people spend as much time together as we do, they either love each other or hate each other."

"Gabrielle is **IN** love with you, I saw it in her eyes when she looked at you in the bathhouse. I'm not sure how you feel, I don't want her to get hurt, Xena." Her mother said with frustration, Xena was not making this very easy on her.

"So you're asking me if I'm in love with her? Or is it that you just want to know if we're having sex?" Xena was beginning to get a little defensive. She wasn't sure if her mother's irritation was due to Xena's avoiding the issue or because of how Cyrene might feel about the two women being lovers.

The door opened and Gabrielle walked in. She looked from mother to daughter and back. "Am I interrupting?"

"Come in and shut the door." Xena took a deep breath and calmed down. The bard always had a soothing effect on her. "I owe mother some answers and you should be here." Cyrene's annoyance also evaporated as Gabrielle closed the door and sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Yes mother, I know that Gabrielle is in love with me." The warrior stroked the bard's cheek with the backs of her fingers. The bard opened her mouth to say something, but Xena moved her fingers to her lover's lips to stop her.

"And the only way I can answer the second question is to say, that I am so much in love with Gabrielle," Xena spoke with so much devotion and honesty in her voice that no one could doubt her feelings, "that I would die if I lost her."

The bard stood and hugged her warrior tightly. When she pulled away she had tears running down her cheeks. Xena brushed them away with her thumb.

"The answer to your third question is, yes." She stated simply.

"What was the third question?" Gabrielle inquired.

Xena just looked at the bard with an eyebrow raised.

Gabrielle thought for a minute. Then her eyes got a little bigger. "Oh." Was all she said.

"Well mother, are you going to condemn us or congratulate us?"

"I can't condemn two people that are obviously so much in love. And I hesitate to congratulate you either. You're going to run into a lot of opposition and trouble."

The bard starting laughing. "That won't be anything new."

"What I can do is to thank Gabrielle. I haven't seen my little one this happy in a very, very long time." She hugged the bard and her daughter. She opened the door to leave but hesitated. "There is one thing I can warn you about that might help you," she paused, "thin walls!" She winked and shut the door behind her.

They looked at each other. "Is my face as red as yours?" Xena asked the bard.

"Definitely. You know, this is the first time I've ever seen you embarrassed."

"It wouldn't have been if you had ever caught me staring at you while you slept and fantasizing about all the things I wished I could do to you."

"Mmmm, you tell me yours and I'll tell you mine." Gabrielle teased and moved close to the warrior.

"Thin walls and your parents and sister are in the next room. And Salmoneus is across the hall." Xena reminded her.

"If Salmoneus heard anything, he wouldn't dare mention it. He wouldn't want you mad at him. And my father snores so loudly that I doubt my mother would hear anything, much less him. But Lila's bed is against the wall of this room."

"We could take a blanket and go to the stables." Xena suggested.

"I'm not going to be driven out of a perfectly good bed. If she hears us, I'll just explain it to her. She should understand, after all she's in love, too." Gabrielle reasoned.

"You've got a lot of faith in people, Gabrielle. I hope you never have reason to change." She leaned down and kissed the bard.

"Xena we have a room with a bed and a door which means no one can just walk up on us. Why are we still dressed and standing?" Gabrielle asked in a voice husky with desire.

The warrior saw the passion burning in her bard's eyes and couldn't resist the urge to tease. "But Gabrielle, you simply have to tell me all about Lila's fiancé and all about his family. And you simply have to tell me all about the wedding plans."

Gabrielle placed her hands on her hips and stood facing the warrior. "The day you want to hear about someone's fiancé, his family and their wedding plans is the day I'll ask Joxer to marry me."

With each word the bard moved forward forcing the warrior backwards. Xena was trying very hard not to laugh at Gabrielle. She came to a stop as her back made contact with the wall.

The bard knew she was being teased but kept on with her verbal lashing. "And further more, I have been aching to get my hands on you ever since you stood up in the pool. You did that on purpose didn't you? You know what it does to me to see you naked."

"Do I need to remind you, my feisty one, who's hand was where during the ride here today?" Xena countered.

"Oh yeah, I forgot about that. But you didn't have to torture me like that." The bard raised her voice with the last statement.

Lila sat up in bed, she thought she heard arguing from the room Gabrielle and Xena shared. She placed her ear to the wall. "Torture, Gabrielle said something about Xena torturing her." She listened some more.

Gabrielle put her hands around Xena's neck and pulled her down for a kiss. Xena pulled away and whispered. "Patience my love, we've got all night."

The bard ran her hands leisurely up the warrior's thighs and under her tunic. 'We'll see how long patience is going to last.' She thought to herself.

Xena closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the wall. "Mmmm, that feels nice."

The bard kneeled down and placed a line of kisses along the path her hands had previously traveled, slowly making her way to the warrior's center.

Xena felt her knees grow weak from the feel of her lover's mouth on her. She reached down and pulled Gabrielle back up to her and kissed her passionately. Her hands moved down to undo the laces of the bard's top and pushed it from her shoulders. She knelt down and slid Gabrielle's skirt over her hips and let it fall to the floor also. She gazed up at her lover and caught her breath. "You are so beautiful."

Lila heard voices but couldn't make out the words. "I guess I misunderstood, I'll ask Gabrielle tomorrow." She lay back down to sleep.

"Xena, lose the clothes now." Gabrielle growled, her voice thick with desire.

"Ok, ok." Xena said as she was removing her leather tunic. "I'm working on it."

The bard reached down and grasped the warrior's shift, pulled it over her head and flung it to the side. "Definite improvement." She said as her eyes moved up and down the warrior's body. She licked her lips subconsciously in anticipation of things to come.

Xena placed her arms around the bard's waist and lifted her until their eyes met. She kissed the bard's neck repeatedly before sucking sensuously on a particularly sensitive spot. Gabrielle wrapped her legs around the warrior's waist and moaned. Xena carried her to the bed and lay down on top of the bard. "So much for patience." Xena whispered.

"It's not in the sexually stimulated's vocabulary." Gabrielle replied.

Xena stared down at her lover and wondered for at least the hundredth time why the bard had fallen in love with her. Gabrielle used the momentary lapse to roll the warrior on her back and straddled her stomach. She leaned down and kissed her lover sensually. She broke from the kiss and eased down Xena's body until her mouth was hovering above her breast. She kept her eyes on the warrior's face as she raked her tongue across the already hard nipple. She grinned as her lover's body shivered from the touch. The bard took pleasure in knowing that Xena, who was always in control of any situation, would relinquish complete control of her body to her during their love making. Xena had placed her hands on Gabrielle's head and was running her fingers through her hair as the bard began to circle the nipple with her tongue.

Xena spread her legs apart as the bard placed her knees between them. Gabrielle decided the warrior's other breast was in need of equal time and took it into her mouth. She lowered her hand down between the warrior's legs and started caressing gently with the tips of her fingers. When Xena tried to move her hips so the bard would apply more pressure, Gabrielle would pull back to allow only the barest contact. "Have I ...told you lately...that you're ... a tease?" Xena inquired of her lover, between gasping for breath.

Gabrielle disengaged her mouth. "I had a very good teacher." She replied grinning.

Xena released the bard's hair, grabbed a pillow and placed it over her mouth to muffle the moans that were now beginning to radiate uncontrolled from her throat, as the bard started circling her tongue lower and lower down the warrior's body. Gabrielle placed two fingers deep inside her lover. Xena raised her hips to take in as much of the bard as she could offer. Gabrielle placed her other hand on the warrior's swollen center and began to massage it as she moved her fingers in and out with increasing speed.

The warrior's moans were becoming loud even through the pillow. Her hips moved faster as the bard increased the speed of their lovemaking. Xena tensed and then began to shudder as each tremor passed through her body.

As the bard felt her lover's body tense she drove her fingers deep one last time and held them until Xena's body collapsed into the bed.

Lila's sleep was a restless one; she had been getting more nervous the closer it got to the wedding. She sat up in bed again thinking she heard sounds from the next room. 'If father would stop snoring I might be able to hear what's going on in there.'

The bard straddled her lover's stomach and lifted the pillow covering her face. "Xena?" The warrior's eyes were closed and her breathing was rapid. She opened her eyes. "Good teacher huh? Well let's just see if the teacher can still teach the student a lesson or two."

"Uh oh." Was the only response the bard could utter as she was flipped on her back and the warrior covered her mouth with a long lingering kiss. Grinning wickedly Xena held the bard's wrists and pinned her arms by her sides. "Xena, what are you going to do to me?" Gabrielle's breath was already coming quickly with anticipation.

The warrior ignored the question while she repeatedly flicked her tongue over one nipple and then the other. She inched down the bard's body depositing a trail of kisses. With her body between the bard's legs she very lightly kissed her lover's center. Gabrielle raised her hips but Xena pulled her mouth away. "Oh no, love, it's not going to be that easy." Xena grinned wickedly. She turned her attention to Gabrielle's inner thighs. She ran her tongue up one and down the other. She started back up her thigh with kisses, massaging the skin with her lips and tongue. She paused at the bard's center and ran her tongue around Gabrielle's opening.

"Oh...Xena...please!" The bard was panting hard. The warrior chuckled sending a wave of breath over a very deprived area. The bard groaned as the warrior started kissing her way down the other thigh. "You win...I can't take it...Xena...I need you...pleasse." She forced out.

Xena released her wrists and placed one hand on the bard's hip and the other on her silky mound. She massaged Gabrielle's swollen center with her thumb and plunged her tongue deep inside her lover. She increased the speed of her thumb as she sensed the impending climax. The bard had thrown her hands above her head and grasped the bed frame. When the orgasm over took her she yelled out, "Oh Gods...Xena!" She couldn't have stopped herself if her life depended on it.

The warrior moved up and propped on her elbows hovering over Gabrielle. The bard looked up into her lover's eyes. "You are very, very bad, my warrior with many skills." She pulled Xena down and kissed her, tasting herself on the warrior's tongue.

Lila overheard a few of the words her sister uttered. "That's it, if she's hurting Gabrielle I have to help her." She jumped out of bed and ran to her sister's defense. She burst into the room. "Leave her alone." She stopped halfway to the bed; her eyes wide and her mouth hanging open. She was staring at two intertwined naked bodies.

Xena was the first to recover from the surprise. "Damn." She muttered under her breath as she vaulted off the end of the bed and closed the door that Lila had left standing open. She stood in front of it in case the young woman tried to bolt from the room.

Gabrielle reacted next by jumping up and grabbing a robe. She threw it around her shoulders and maneuvered her sister, who seemed to be in shock to the bed and sat her down.

Lila looked at her sister and then at Xena and back to her sister. "Gabrielle, what's going on? I overheard you say torture and I can't take it and you were pleading with her. I thought she was hurting you." The poor girl seemed to be very confused.

"Lila, Xena wasn't hurting me. She would never do that. We're in love." Gabrielle had knelt down in front of her sister and was holding her hands in hers.

"You mean...the two of you...were," she stammered. "No Gabrielle...you couldn't...you wouldn't." She jerked her hands away and started moving back from her sister.

Xena had put on a robe and moved to stand by the bard. "Lila calm down and listen to your sister."

Lila jerked her head up to stare at the warrior. "No, get away from me." She kept moving back. "You forced her didn't you! She never would have done this unless you forced yourself on her!" She accused Xena.

"Lila I'm guilty of a lot of things, but forcing someone against their will is not one of them." Xena responded. Her voice was low and compelling, commanding the young woman to relax.

She looked back at her sister. "Why, Gabrielle?" Lila had stopped moving away from them.

The bard sat on the bed and moved close to her sister. "Because I love Xena with all my heart. When she died I wanted to hate her for leaving me, but the truth was I hated myself for not telling her how I felt when I had the chance. And when she came back, I wasn't going to make the same mistake twice."

"But we were taught that we grow up, fall in love, get married, have families..."

"Lila," the bard interrupted. "You fall in love with your heart not with your head. I never thought about another woman this way until Xena and I never knew that two women could be intimate until I met the Amazons."

The sincerity in her sister's voice made Lila look up at the warrior and ask, "Do you love my sister?"

Xena knelt down so she could look Lila in the eye. "I love her with all my heart and I'd die without her." Xena looked at her lover and caressed her cheek with her fingertips. Gabrielle placed her hand over Xena's and tenderly kissed the warrior's palm.

Lila was beginning to wonder if they had forgotten she was in the room. She cleared her throat. "So, what are you going to tell mother and father?" She relaxed a little more.

"I don't know if I'm going to tell them anything, I think they blame Xena for me leaving home."

"They do. And there's something else you need to know. They were talking tonight about taking you back home with them."

"What!" They both responded at the same time.

"They said it was time you quit running around the countryside. That it was too dangerous. And you just needed a good man to settle down with. Oh boy, are they in for a surprise." Lila decided that if Gabrielle and Xena loved each other, it wasn't up to her to say it was wrong. "If you do tell them, can I be there?"

"Lila." Gabrielle glared at her grinning sister. "What am I going to do?" She asked the warrior.

Xena moved to sit beside the bard. "Gabrielle you're an adult, tell them you don't want to go home."

"It's not that simple. When I'm around my parents, they make me feel like a little kid. I don't guess we could just kind of sneak off?" She looked at the expression on the warrior's face. "I guess that would be a no." She laid her head back against Xena shoulder.

"Maybe we're over reacting, maybe they'll understand." Xena commented but not really holding out much hope.

"Don't count on it, they really, really don't like you." Lila said to Xena.

"Yeah, I kind'a get that impression." Xena stated.

"Don't worry about it, I like you enough for all three of us." Gabrielle said as she pulled the warrior down for a short kiss.

Lila blushed a little at the open display of affection. "Can I ask a question?" She said tentatively.

They turned their attention back to her. "Sure." Her sister responded.

"How?"

"You mean how did we know we loved each other?" Gabrielle asked for clarification.

"No. I mean how do two women, you know?"

"Lila!" Gabrielle started blushing. "Go to bed." She added as an afterthought when she heard the warrior chuckling.

"She's as inquisitive as you are my little bard, must run in the family." Xena grinned at the bright red face of her lover. "Now, where were we?" She moved towards her lover when Lila closed the door behind her.

Xena woke before the bard, as usual. It was just after sunrise and she decided to let her sleep a while longer, since the wedding was not until mid-day. She untangled herself from Gabrielle and

got out of bed. She dressed in her leather tunic and decided to leave her armor and weapons in the room.

Lila was sitting with her parents eating breakfast when she saw Xena enter the main room. "Morning Xena. Didn't you sleep well? You look a little tired." She was turned away from her parents and had a wicked grin on her face.

"You know, I am a little tired and I just don't understand it. I should have slept like a baby since Gabrielle made sure I got plenty of exercise. Your sister always makes sure I stay in top condition." She turned toward the kitchen when she saw the girl's jaw drop. 'Serves her right, tease me will she. I wonder how upset Gabrielle would be if I decapitated her sister?' She fought the urge as she entered the kitchen. Behind her she heard the bard's father, "Lila don't encourage her, she might want to join us."

"Xena? We...we were told you were dead." Her brother gave his little sister a hug. "I'm very glad to see it's not true."

'Here we go again.' Xena thought as she returned the hug. "But Toris, it was true!" Xena was his little sister in age only. Their height was even. But he had never been able to match her in strength or beat her in their play fights when they were kids. His hair was shoulder length and not as dark as his sister's. But anyone could tell they were related simply by looking into their eyes.

"Well, I see you found Toris." Cyrene said as she walked in on the reunion.

"Why didn't you tell me he was here?" She asked her mother.

"I knew it had been over a year since you two had seen each other." Her mother answered. "He left yesterday morning to hunt, I wanted to be sure we had enough for the wedding feast, and I thought it would be a nice surprise for both of you."

He regained his composure. "Wait, back up. What do you mean it **was true**?"

Xena laughed. "Mother knows the story, she can fill you in."

"Mother, explain." He looked to Cyrene.

"Later Toris. It's enough for right now to see that your sister is alive and well."

"How long will you be here?" She asked her brother.

"I'm living here now. Have been here ever since we dethroned Cortese. I've been helping mother and I've got a little land outside the village. I've been clearing it, I thought I might stick around and try a little farming."

Xena and Toris walked out of the kitchen about the same time Gabrielle entered the main room. Toris saw her and his eyes got wide. Xena saw the expression on her brother's face. 'Last time he saw her, he called her a kid. I think kid is the last thing on his mind now. I'll have to warn her.'

"Toris." Gabrielle gave him a hug. "It's good to see you again."

"You too." He returned the hug with a dreamy look on his face.

This did not go unnoticed by his sister. 'Yep, definitely need to warn her.'

Cyrene brought breakfast for Xena, Toris and Gabrielle. The group joined Lila's table to eat. "Gabrielle tell us another story, please." Her sister begged.

"We don't have time, Lila. You need to start getting ready." Hecuba said before the bard could start. She didn't know if she could take anymore stories of her daughter in danger.

"We have plenty of time, mother." Lila protested. "Besides, it will help calm my nerves. You got any stories about Hercules?" She asked her sister hopefully.

"Let me see. Well there's the one about..." The bard started.

She was interrupted by the warrior. "If you tell the one about Prometheus again I'll..." She let the statement trail off.

"Ok, ok don't have a cow." The bard replied. "I'll tell the one about Hercules and the Golden Hind." She stated as she patted the warrior's hand, stopping the drumming of fingers on the tabletop.

A groan escaped the warrior's mouth. She got up from the table. "I forgot to feed Argo."

"You haven't finished your breakfast yet." Her mother said.

"Gabrielle will eat it." She said confidently and pushed the plate toward the bard and headed for the stables.

Salmoneus had entered as Xena was leaving. "Good morning everybody." He took the warrior's vacated spot. "Xena not eating? I'll finish this for her. Wouldn't want it to go to waste. Don't let me stop you Gabrielle, I haven't heard this one either."

The bard started the story between bites, taken from her own plate. "Well the first part is from Iolaus' point of view." Everyone held his or her comments and questions until the bard was done.

"What a sad story." Lila said. Their parents looked at each other with the same thought going through their minds. 'Our baby has to be rescued.'

"Xena ought to know better than to take on the God of War." Toris commented. He was irate that his sister would willingly provoke of the gods. "She must be out of her mind."

"He usually doesn't give her much choice, Toris." As soon as it came out of her mouth, the bard knew she had made a mistake.

"What do you mean Gabrielle?" Cyrene asked. "Has she had other encounters with him before?"

"Well, a few. But she has always been able to handle them." 'Xena is going to kill me. I guess I better warn her that her mother will want some answers.' "I need to ask Xena something, I'll be back in a minute." She quickly stood and hurried to the stables.

Xena was brushing Argo when the bard entered. She walked up behind her lover and put her arms around her waist. She never would have done this a few months ago for fear of having parts of her body broken from Xena's quick reflex to strike out at someone coming at her from behind. But now they were so connected to each other she knew the warrior would know who it was. "Morning, you should have woke me before you left the room."

Xena turned around and kissed the bard. "Morning to you, too. You needed the sleep, it's going to be a long day."

"Your mother's going to be asking you questions about Ares." The bard bit her lip at the raised eyebrow and explained her slip.

"Thanks, Gabrielle." Xena tilted her lover's face until the bard was looking the warrior in the eye. "Oh well, I guess she would have found out sooner or later." She couldn't stay mad, even-though explaining Ares to her mother wasn't high on her list of enjoyable actives. "By the way, I have something that should make your day interesting too."

"What?" The bard asked, wary of the mischievous look on Xena's face.

"I do believe, my little bard, that my brother has fallen for you." She chuckled at the bewilderment on Gabrielle's face.

"Please tell me you're joking. I don't need this. I have my parents to deal with." She pleaded. She turned and walked away a few steps running her hands through her hair. She turned back toward the warrior who had one arm around Argo's neck and was grinning from ear to ear. "You think this is funny don't you?"

"Mmmm, yep."

"I'll get you for this. It may take awhile, but I'll get you." Gabrielle replied with hands on hips.

"Hey, it's not my fault." She grabbed the bard around the waist. "Besides, he's got excellent taste. Just like his sister." She grinned at the rib-breaking hug she received.

As Gabrielle left the tavern, Hecuba noticed Toris watching her daughter. 'Interesting possibilities.'

Toris was grilling Lila about Gabrielle. And she was hard pressed not to start laughing. She knew he was interested in her sister. She decided that this might be a very good way to have some fun with her sibling.

Salmonius had left to go 'peddle his wares' by the time the warrior and bard returned. "Xena, kitchen." Her mother said. Xena gave Gabrielle a we'll see who gets even with who look as she followed her mother and brother.

The bard and her sister started back to their respective rooms with their parents following. "Gabrielle," her father stopped his daughter. "We want to talk with you." She followed them into their room.

Back in the kitchen. "Xena, I know Gabrielle told you what she said about Ares. I want to know what's going on and I want the truth." Cyrene leaned back against the table and folded her arms across her chest.

Xena remembered that look and that stance. It meant her mother was not in the mood to be put off. Xena wasn't about to tell her mother the whole truth, but she knew she would have to tell her enough of it to satisfy her. "It seems that Ares was a tad bit pissed off at me when I decided to start helping people instead of conquering them. So every once in a while he tries to trick me into, as he puts it, coming back to him. It hasn't worked."

"Let me get this straight, the God of War is a tad bit pissed off at you and you're not worried?" Her brother had raised his voice continuously with each word.

"There's not a damn thing I can do about it, why worry." She countered as she moved toward him, their faces just inches apart.

"Stop it both of you." Cyrene commanded. "Xena watch your language. Toris your sister is right. I'm sure that if she could stop him she would. But we're talking about a god and no one can make them do anything they don't want to do." She knew her daughter was not telling her everything and the more she thought about it, the surer she was that it was something she wouldn't want to hear.

Toris wasn't done. "What about Gabrielle, Xena? What if she gets caught in the middle?" He said accusingly.

Xena snapped. She grabbed her brother by his tunic and pushed him roughly against the wall. "If you are implying that I would let him hurt Gabrielle," her brother's feet were now dangling off the floor and he was trying to break his sister's hold, "you better think again. I would die to protect her from him or anyone else." Her mother had grabbed one of Xena's arms trying to pull her away from Toris. She held him a moment more, then dropped him to his feet. She turned and left the kitchen without another word.

The bard sat in a chair in the room her parents and sister shared. Her father paced from the door to the window and back. "We're taking you back home with us. You can't be chasing all over the place with **HER**! It's time you settled down and started thinking about a family."

Gabrielle was furious. She stood and waited for her father to pace back toward her. "If you think you can **make** me go home you better think again. I'm a grown woman father. And **her** name is Xena; I'll thank you to remember that. And furthermore, Xena is family, a **big part** of my family." She stormed back to her room. She was leaning against the door willing herself to calm down when she noticed Xena's armor and weapons were gone. She ran to the stables and found Argo gone. She headed to the kitchen and found Cyrene and Toris sitting at the table. "What happened?"

Cyrene explained what had happened. "By the gods, Toris, that was really stupid." The bard glared at him.

"I'm sorry, Gabrielle, but I was concerned about you." He tried to explain.

Gabrielle placed her hand on his shoulder. "Thank you for caring. But Toris, Xena has risked her life more times than I care to remember to save me. And it's usually been because of something I did to get into trouble. Not because of her."

"That's not entirely true Gabrielle. I've put you in danger plenty of times." Xena had ridden only a short distance outside the village when she realized two things. First, she needed to apologize to her brother. She had let her temper get the best of her. And second, she shouldn't have left without telling Gabrielle. She knew the bard would worry if she found her gone. "I'm sorry Toris, I...care about Gabrielle a great deal. And what you said mirrored my own fears."

"I'm sorry, too. I should have known you wouldn't let anything happen to her if there was any way to prevent it."

Cyrene grinned. "I've got food to finish preparing and I can't do it with you two under foot. Besides, Gabrielle needs to get ready for the wedding. Toris will you bring in more wood?" She chased them from the kitchen.

The bard filled the warrior in on what had happened with her father. "I'm proud of you for standing up for yourself and for me, too. Do you think that will be the end of it?" They entered their room, closing the door behind them.

"Don't bet on it, Xena." She looked at her lover. "I really need you to hold me for a little while."

Xena took the bard in her arms and held her tightly. "I love you, Gabrielle."

"I love you too, Xena, more than anything or anyone else. More than I could ever put into words."

They stayed in each other's arms for a while longer. "Gabrielle, you're going to be late if you don't start getting ready. And I promised mother I would help her prepare for the feast." She saw the look on the bard's face concerning the last part of her statement. "Not the cooking." She added as she left Gabrielle to dress.

Xena stopped before she entered the kitchen when she heard Hecuba and Toris talking. "Cyrene is very happy that you have come back home and settled down."

"Yes, it's about time I helped out around here. Xena and I never took an interest in this place when we were growing up." He explained.

"I wish some of your taking responsibility and settling down would rub off on my oldest. She seems to like you, Toris, maybe if the two of you spent some time together, oh but I wouldn't want to impose on you."

"It would be my pleasure, no imposition at all." He was pleased with the fact that Gabrielle's mother seemed to like him.

"Oh, she's good, very good." Xena said under her breath as she entered the kitchen. "Where's mother?"

"She went to the market. She was out of herbs or something." Toris answered.

"Well, I'll go check on my two girls and see if they're ready." The older woman excused herself.

"Gabrielle's family doesn't like you very much, do they?" Toris asked her.

"Astute observation brother dear. Did you ever consider becoming a profit? She asked sarcastically.

"Very funny." He continued chopping vegetables. "Why don't you give me a hand and take your aggressions out on those carrots."

"Mother, go help Lila, I've been dressing myself for quite a few years now." Gabrielle shooed her mother out. She had bought this dress because of the color, blue to match Xena's eyes. And because it was long enough to cover most of her boots, which was the only footwear she had. She would have preferred something not quite as tight, but it did show off her figure rather

nicely. And she liked the lace around the neck and wrists. She left the room and headed for the kitchen, she knew Xena's reaction would tell her if she had chosen correctly.

Xena stopped in mid chop. "Gabrielle, you look beautiful."

Toris turned at the mention of her name. "Ouch!"

"Toris, you've cut your hand. Let me take a look at it." Gabrielle offered.

"I'll do it Gabrielle, you'll get blood on your dress." Xena said placing a cloth on her brother's hand and pulling him away from the table. "It's not too deep." She said after examining the wound. "But I'll put a stitch or two in, so it will heal faster." She left to get her kit.

"Gabrielle, Xena's right, you look very beautiful." He sighed.

She noticed the affectionate way he was staring at her. "Thank you Toris, sorry about the hand. I, um, guess I must have startled you when I came in." The bard replied. 'Gods, does she always have to be right?'

Before Toris could tell the bard that her beauty was the reason for his lack of concentration, Xena came back with her supplies. "They're ready to start the procession to the temple, Gabrielle."

She hesitated briefly she had wanted to ask Xena to go with her, but she knew better. 'Xena probably wouldn't show up for her own wedding.' She thought as she turned to go. 'I might have to test that theory one of these days.'

Cyrene entered the kitchen. "What happened?"

"He cut himself chopping potatoes. It's a good thing he only had a knife, if it had been a sword he would have cut his hand off."

"You're full of it today aren't you sis." He replied.

To Toris she said. "Hold still." To her mother she said. "Why don't you go to the wedding, I know Gabrielle would like you to be there. And we can finish up here."

"Well if you're sure. I would like to go." She looked from daughter to son, trying to decide if the two of them could be trusted not to kill each other if left alone all afternoon.

"We're sure mother." They both replied.

Xena knew she had to talk to her brother about Gabrielle. But she didn't want to tell him about the two of them yet, since she wasn't sure what his reaction would be. They were about done in

the kitchen and she knew it wouldn't be long before the wedding ceremony would be over. "Toris can I ask you something?"

He came back to the table and sat down when he saw the serious expression on her face. "Sure, what?"

"How do you feel about Gabrielle?"

He took a deep breath and leaned back in his chair. "To be honest, I think I'm falling in love. I know that must surprise you, but that's how I feel."

'Surprise is an understatement.' Xena thought to herself. "Toris, you do know she was married to Perdicas and what happened, right?"

He broke in before she could continue. "Yes I know. I also know that you're going to say that she's not ready to make another commitment yet. But why don't we let Gabrielle decide for herself. Maybe she is ready if the right person comes along." He was tired of his sister always thinking she knew best.

Xena opened her mouth to reply when she heard people entering the tavern. Toris went out to meet them. The warrior crossed her arms on the table and laid her head down on them. "Damn, damn, damn! How do I tell him she has already decided I'm the right person."

Cyrene stuck her head in the doorway to ask her daughter if she was going to join the party. Instead she was confronted with a very grim expression and asked. "What's wrong?"

Xena told her mother what Toris had said. "Oops."

"Oops, that's all you've got to say." She stared at her mother.

"You and Gabrielle need to explain the situation to him before his feelings get any stronger. He deserves to know that he doesn't have a chance." Her mother explained.

"I'm beginning to think Gabrielle's idea about sneaking off in the middle of the night was a good one." The warrior mumbled.

"Xena." Cyrene scolded.

"I didn't say I was going to, I just said I thought it was a good idea." They left the kitchen to join the celebration.

Xena spotted the bard and her brother by the fireplace. She was holding his injured hand and seemed to be examining the bandage. 'He's playing on her sympathy.' She started walking towards them then changed her mind and sat down at a corner table. 'Xena old girl, jealousy is not a good thing.' She was still watching them when Manderon's mother walked up to the bard with a young man in tow. She chuckled to herself. 'This is going to be a very long day.'

Concluded in part two

The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

~ He's Back or Make Love, Not War ~

by Greek Warrior

Disclaimer: The characters from Xena: Warrior Princess belong to MCA and Renaissance. No copyright infringement is intended. The story belongs to me.

Warning #1: This story contains love and sexual acts between two consenting adult women. If this offends you don't read this. But I would suggest that you seek professional help. So, if you're under 18, or whatever the legal age is in your area, do not read any further, just covering my backside.

Warning #2: This story contains violence. If this offends you don't read this; it's pretty graphic.

Note: This story immediately follows my story 'Dream A Little Dream'. It's not necessary to read that one first, but it might make a few things a little clearer. I can be contacted at I can be contacted at XWPScribe@aol.com. Please be nice!

"Gabrielle this is my oldest son Thaddeus. You haven't had a chance to meet because he usually spends most of his time tending his sheep. He has quite a large flock now and is becoming very prosperous. I'll let the two of you get acquainted." She smiled and maneuvered them closer before leaving.

"Sorry about that. Sometimes mother can be a little pushy." Thaddeus explained.

"It's ok, after all we are family now." Gabrielle asked if the two men knew each other and introduced them when the reply was negative.

"You're Xena's brother." Thaddeus smiled. "What was she like growing up? Is she as good as they say? What kind of things does she like?" Thaddeus guided Toris away from Gabrielle so he could have his undivided attention.

The bard shook her head and joined the warrior. "Who was that?" Xena asked as she moved a chair next to hers, for Gabrielle to use.

"Thaddeus, Manderon's older brother."

"I take it his mother was trying to fix you up."

"I think that's exactly what she had in mind, but it backfired."

"You mean he's more interested in Toris?"

"No, I mean he's more interested in you. He's grilling Toris about you right now." The bard laughed at the expression on Xena's face.

"Don't laugh too hard my lovely little bard, I've got some news for you too." Gabrielle looked sideways at the warrior. "I had a talk with my brother today and he thinks he's falling in love with you."

She took a sip of port just as Xena finish her news and started choking as she swallowed. The warrior slapped her on the back until she could catch her breath. "What did you tell him?" She finally managed to get out.

She told Gabrielle what had been said between them and also what her mother had said. She thought for a minute then added. "It almost seemed like he was challenging me for you."

"Do you think he knows about us?"

"No. But when we were kids, he was always trying to find some challenge that he could win. If I beat him he would come up with another one, then another one until he finally won."

"So, I'm a prize in a contest?" The bard rolled her eyes and groaned. "Oh gods, can this get any worse."

"I wouldn't ask that if I were you, they just might answer you." Xena cringed at the thought of the gods getting involved in this mess.

"My two favorite people. May I join the two loveliest ladies here tonight?" Salmoneus inquired.

"Yes!" They both almost shouted as they saw Toris and Thaddeus headed their way.

Dinner was followed by music and dancing. It was also followed by Xena and Gabrielle trying to keep one step ahead of their ardent admirers. Every time they saw them heading their way they would escape through the crowd to the other side of the room. This went on throughout the evening. At one rendezvous back at the fireplace Xena commented. "Maybe I should put my armor and weapons on, that might discourage him."

"Fine for you, what about me?" As Gabrielle replied neither noticed the two men converging upon them.

"Gabrielle there you are." Toris said. "I've been trying to track you down all night. How about a dance?"

"Dance?" Gabrielle looked to Xena. "I'm not real big on dancing Toris, but thanks anyway."

"I'm not taking no for an answer, come on you'll have fun." And with that he whisked her away.

"Xena?" She turned at the sound of her name. "We haven't been introduced, I'm Thaddeus, Manderon's brother and it's a pleasure to meet you." He had taken her hand and begun to shake it.

"Yes, Gabrielle has told me about you. If you'll excuse me." She said as she tried to turn away, but was jerked back.

Thaddeus still had her hand and didn't seem to want to release it. "What's the hurry? I thought you might want to dance. Toris said you loved to dance."

She glared in the direction of the dance floor. 'He's going to die.' She looked back at Thaddeus, who had a puppy dog look on his face and resisted her normal response. 'Gabrielle's parents already don't like me and I don't imagine it would improve relations if I beat up the in-laws.' Instead she responded. "Thank you for asking Thaddeus, but I don't dance anymore, it bothers my leg. Old battle wound." She extracted her hand from his grip and vanished into the crowd.

As the music was ending the bard spied Xena sitting at a corner table. "Thanks but I'm tired, I think I'll rest awhile." Gabrielle responded to his request for another dance. They joined Xena at her table. "Toris, would you mind getting us something to drink?" Gabrielle asked as he sat down.

"No of course not, back in a minute."

He returned with port for all three. When Toris would turn his head away from the table, the bard would pour most of the contents of her mug into the empty ones that had been left on the table by previous occupants. Then she would have Toris get more. Xena figured out what she was trying to do and after the third trip by her brother to replenish the empty mug and said. "Gabrielle don't you think you've had enough?"

"It's a celebration, she can drink as much as she wants." Toris challenged his sister.

The bard had started to slide down in her chair little by little and had started to slur her words. "Yessss a ssselebraseion." She had one eye closed trying to focus on the warrior, while her head bobbed up and down and wobbled back and forth.

"Gabrielle you're drunk and it's time for bed. Say good night." She said as she stood, picked the bard up and slung her over her shoulder.

"Whoa, Xena!" She let the warrior carry her to their room.

Xena closed the door and deposited her bundle on the bed. Grinning she said. "You're bad, very bad."

Gabrielle reached up and tried to pull her lover down. "You aren't complaining are you?"

"Nope, no complaints." She said as she kissed the bard. "Patience love, I have a feeling my brother will be wanting to check in on you." She removed Gabrielle's boots and her own and sat back to wait.

It wasn't long before there was a knock at the door. She winked at the bard and opened the door. She placed a finger to her lips. "Shh, Toris what do you want?"

"I just want to make sure Gabrielle's ok." He tried to peek around his sister's shoulder.

"She'll be fine. She just needs to sleep it off." Xena's statement was punctuated by snores coming from the bed. She had to bite her tongue not to laugh at the outrageous sounds emitting from the bard.

"Ok, I'll say good night then." He reluctantly turned to go.

She closed the door and the bard opened her mouth but Xena held up her hand to stop her from saying anything. There was another knock. The warrior opened the door to the bard's mother this time. "Why did you let her drink so much." It was an accusation not a question.

"Hey, it wasn't me. Toris was the one who said she should be able to drink as much as she wants." Xena replied.

Hecuba walked over to the side of the bed and looked down at her daughter. "Maybe she should sleep in our room in case she wakes up in the night." She said as she brushed the hair back from her daughter's face.

"Uh." Xena was trying to think of a reply. "I don't think it would be a good idea to move her, she might wake up. And if she wakes up she might get sick. I'll make sure she's taken care of tonight."

"Well, that might be best. But if she wakes up sick I want you to come get me." As soon as Hecuba had returned to the main room of the tavern, Xena closed the door and placed a chair against it, placing the back under the latch to keep out any uninvited guests.

"Well."

"Well what?" Xena moved toward the bed.

"You can't break a promise. Come take care of me." Xena saw desire burning in the bard's eyes.

"Two things first. One, we talk to my brother tomorrow." The warrior stated.

"Ok. Do we tell him the truth?"

"Only if the partial truth doesn't work. If we or mostly you can convince him that you're not ready for a relationship with another man we won't have to tell him about us."

"Relationship with another man being the truth part. And you said I was bad." Gabrielle replied with a grin.

Xena shrugged. "Whatever works." She smiled, then turned serious. "The second thing you're not going to like."

The bard fell back on the bed. "Let me guess, we're going to talk to my parents."

"Yep."

"We're **not** going to tell them the truth." She stated as she propped up on her elbows.

"No way in Tartarus are we going to tell them about us. But I would like them to understand that you want this way of life. That you enjoy what you're doing, at least most of the time." Xena explained.

"I wouldn't hold my breath, but I guess it's worth a shot. Now if that's all, you've got a promise to keep!"

"And I never break a promise." She said as she moved just out of reach as the bard sat up on the side of the bed and reached for her. She grabbed Gabrielle's wrists and held them behind the bard's back as she knelt down in front of her. Holding Gabrielle's wrists in one of her hands she brought her other hand around and slowly untied the laces of the bard's top. Gabrielle's breathing had increased as her breasts were released. The warrior lightly ran her lips over the already hard nipples, alternating between the two.

The bard moaned. "Xena, I'm going to make you pay for this."

"Oh, I'm counting on it." She chuckled. She ran her tongue in circles around the bard's nipple, pausing every few revolutions to lightly take it between her teeth. The bard had closed her eyes and arched her back wanting her lover to take more of her. The warrior wasn't going to give in so easily. She further tormented her lover by running her hand up and down her inner thigh sending shivers through the bard's body as she barely touched her center.

Gabrielle had collapsed her head onto the warrior's shoulder and was moaning loudly. Xena could hear the music from the main room and knew no one would be able to hear the bard even if she cried out. Gabrielle placed her mouth against her lover's ear and whispered, "Xena if...I don't get...the rest...of these clothes off...I'm going to make...you wash...them tomorrow." She stated as she struggled for breath.

"Oh, ok." She released the bard's arms and stood up with her. She finished undressing her lover, leaned down and covered the bard's mouth with her own. Gabrielle's kiss took her breath away, gentle and demanding. Passionate and playful. Seductive and erotic. She suddenly couldn't wait any longer. She reached down to pull her tunic off but the bard stopped her.

"I want to undress you." Gabrielle stood on tiptoes and whispered in her ear, then spent a minute sucking on the earlobe. She proceeded to remove the warrior's clothing slowly. Payback had obviously started. She stood behind her lover and kissed her between her shoulder blades then ran the tip of her tongue down her spine and kissed the small of her back, sending shivers throughout the warrior's body. Still standing behind her lover she ran her hands up the warrior's hips and ribs. She then placed them on her lover's breasts and massaged gently. Xena leaned back into her lover. She reached her arms around Gabrielle's hips, grasped her buttocks and pulled her closer. "Xena, I'm on fire! I want you, I need you now!"

She turned around to face the bard. "Need you, too." She kissed her lover once more then led her to the bed. The warrior lay down on her back and instructed the bard to straddle her stomach. As the bard lowered herself, Xena almost lost control as she felt the incredible amount of moisture between her lover's legs. Gabrielle's hips slid up and down Xena's abdomen as if they had a life of their own. The warrior bent her knees so the bard could lean back against her legs. She placed her hand between her stomach and the bard. She inserted two fingers into her lover and used her thumb to massage her center.

Gabrielle leaned back against Xena's legs as she road up and down on the warrior's fingers. When the warrior felt the bard's body tense she pushed deep inside her lover. "Gods...Xena...yeesss!" Gabrielle cried out and collapsed onto her lover as the climax raged though her. Xena wrapped her arms around Gabrielle. She could still feel the bard's body pulsing. Still breathing hard Gabrielle turned on her side and pulled her lover with her. She placed her thigh between Xena's legs. As the warrior moved back and forth against her leg she placed her fingers on her swollen center and massaged.

That was all she needed to send her over the edge. She called out her lover's name as her body convulsed over and over again. When their breathing returned to normal, Xena tilted the bard's head up and kissed her once again. As they lay together, bodies entwined, a loan figure moved away from the window.

A short time later. "Xena are you asleep yet?"

"Yes, I am."

"Open your eyes. I've got something I want to ask you."

"I don't suppose it could wait until tomorrow?" She opened her eyes and look at the bard. The expression on her face was the answer to her question. "I guess that's a no."

Xena had turned on her back. Gabrielle was on her side propped up one elbow, looking down at her lover. She lightly brushed the back of her fingers across the warrior's cheek. "Xena, will you marry me?"

She looked up at the bard and shrugged her shoulders. "Sure. Can I go back to sleep now?"

"XENA!" The bard punched her in the arm.

The warrior laughed, pulled her lover down and hugged her. "Gabrielle, there is no one else I would rather spend the rest of my life with. But you need to be sure about this. An Amazon Joining is for life. That's why there are so few actual ceremonies."

"I'm completely positive." She kissed her lover. "Totally certain." Another kiss. "Indubitably sure."

Xena rolled over trapping the bard under her and covered her mouth with a long kiss before more words came forth. As they broke from the kiss the bard grinned. "I knew you'd do that to shut me up."

"The only problem with short term solutions, is they're short. Maybe I ought to work on completely speechless."

"I like speechless." The bard saw desire in the warrior's eyes. "Speechless is good. Really good." Xena had disappeared under the cover. "Oh...yes." Gabrielle closed her eyes and moaned.

By the time the sun started rising, Toris had worked himself into a rage. He had not meant to eavesdrop at the window but when he heard voices he thought Gabrielle might have been sick. But as he continued to listen he knew what he was overhearing. He convinced himself that his sister had taken advantage of Gabrielle while she had been drunk, so that he wouldn't have a chance with her. In his alcohol clouded mind it made perfect sense. He decided to confront his sister in the morning.

Xena found her mother in the kitchen. "Morning. Have you seen Toris?"

"Morning little one. No, are you going to talk to him?"

"Gabrielle and I both are."

"Are what?" Gabrielle asked as she joined them. "Morning Cyrene."

"Going to talk to Toris. Why don't you explain it to mother. You could also tell her our good news." Xena said as she left the kitchen.

"And where do you think you're going?" Gabrielle glared after the warrior.

"Stables." Xena yelled.

"One of these days, warrior." She turned back to Cyrene who was patiently waiting. "She always does this to me."

"Morning Argo." She ran her hand down the horse's neck. "You ready for breakfast girl?" Argo turned her head and bumped her nose against the warrior's chest. "How about a run this afternoon, would you like that?"

"Xena." Toris entered the barn.

"Morning. We need to talk." She told her brother.

"Yes we do. Well more to the point, I need to talk and you need to listen." Xena crossed her arms and waited for her brother to continue. "When I first joined up with the raiders to get to Cortese there were some men there who said that they had ridden in your army. They had some interesting stories to tell. Some about battles, you know the usual kind of stuff. But the ones that I found unbelievable, of course everyone else loved them, were the ones about your...appetite."

"My appetite?" He didn't seem to notice that his sister was not amused.

"You know, all the men and women you've supposedly had. I knew none if it could be true. Silly me."

"Toris is there a point to this little narrative or are you just trying to put me in a bad mood?" She asked him sarcastically.

He was alternating between pacing back and forth, gesturing wildly with his arms, and standing in front of his sister pointing an accusing finger at her. "There are several points to make." He started pacing again. Then stopped and pointed at her as he continued. "You made mother believe you had changed." More pacing. He pointed again. "I believed you had changed. And you obviously have fooled Gabrielle." Pacing again.

Xena wondered which would happen first, would he wear himself out or would he say something that would really piss her off.

Pointing again. "But what you've done this time is more than despicable, more than contemptible. I don't have any word to describe it." More pacing.

She could not for the life of her, figure out what he thought she had done. 'Maybe he thinks I did something to what's his name, Thaddeus. No he knows I took Gabrielle to...oh gods! He somehow found out about us.' She started to say something but her brother stopped her.

"Don't interrupt." He was pointing again. "For you to take advantage of someone as innocent as Gabrielle while she was drunk."

"Don't go there, Toris." For a second he was taken back by the venom in her voice.

But he continued anyway. "Just to take her away from me." He accused.

Gabrielle heard some of what had been said and came running into the barn. Toris stopped her by placing his hands on her shoulders. "Gabrielle, are you alright? Just remember it wasn't your fault. You don't have anything to feel ashamed of."

"GET YOUR HANDS OFF ME!" She knocked his arms down. He stood there with his mouth hanging open. "Let me make a few things perfectly clear. First, I am not yours to take away." She placed her hands on his chest and shoved him backwards a step. "Second, I was not drunk last night. I was pretending." She shoved him again. "Third, don't you ever try to hurt your sister like that again." Shove. "Fourth, I am not an innocent little girl. Gods, you sound like my father." Shove. "Fifth, you have a damn big ego to think that I'd fall in love with you just because you THINK you're in love with me." Shove. "Sixth, Xena and I have been lovers for almost a month." Shove. "Seventh," she calmed down and walked to her lover. "I love your sister with all my heart." She fell into Xena's arms and the warrior kissed the top of the bard's head.

He looked at his sister and the bard, then ran from the barn. "Toris." Xena called to him but he didn't stop.

"Let him go. Right now I doubt he would listen to you. I guess I was too hard on him."

"Gabrielle you probably saved both of us. I came very close to losing control. I could have hurt him badly."

"Then you would have beaten yourself up for what you had done to him. I only heard the last part, what else did he say?" Xena told her. "Now I don't feel like I was hard enough. I can't believe he would say those things." She thought for a minute. "Uh Xena, if we didn't tell him about us, then how did he know?"

"Mother would have said something this morning if she had told him. And I imagine Lila was a little preoccupied last night to say anything. He thought last night was the first time it happened, so I guess he overheard us in the room." She reasoned.

"Xena, we gotta get out of this place." They stayed in each other's arms a while longer. "Are you hungry?" Gabrielle asked changing the subject.

"No, not really."

"Too bad. You're eating anyway. I am not facing breakfast with my parents and Lila without you." She grabbed the warrior's arm and started dragging her toward the tavern.

'Great. This day is getting better and better.' She thought as she allowed the bard to lead her out of the stables and towards the tavern.

They joined Cyrene, Salmoneus, the bard's parents, and Lila and Manderon's mother. "Xena did you talk to Toris?" Her mother asked.

"Kind of, I'll explain later." She gave her mother a 'don't ask' look.

"Gabrielle tell another story, please." Her sister begged. Xena groaned.

"Ok but on one condition." She stared at the warrior. "You have to stay."

Xena stared back. "Ok, but I have a condition. I get to pick it."

The bard thought. Her sister pleaded. Gabrielle gave in. "Oh alright, which one?"

The warrior grinned. "Let's see." She wanted an 'embarrass the bard', story. "The one about the Titans."

"You mean the one where Zeus," she didn't get to finish.

"No I mean the one where 'Goddess Gabrielle' in her infinite wisdom, brought three Titans back to life."

"Goddess Gabrielle, this ought to be good." Salmoneus chuckled.

Her glare was enough to silence him. 'I'm getting better at this intimidation thing.' The bard took a bite of food as she thought about the story. "It all started with Xena chasing..." Xena listened closely to the story in case Gabrielle had inadvertently forgotten a part or two. "...then they turned back to stone." She finished. To the bard's credit she told the entire story no matter how embarrassing it was.

"Thanks Xena, that was a good one. Tell another." Her sister begged again.

Xena got up to leave. Before Gabrielle could protest she stopped her. "We agreed on one story, besides I promised Argo a run." She headed for their room to retrieve her armor and weapons.

It was lunchtime when Xena returned. She brushed Argo down and headed into the tavern though the back entrance. Gabrielle, her parents, Lila, Manderon, his parents and brother had started to eat. Cyrene was serving the other customers. "Mother do you need help?" 'Please. I really don't want to make nice with Thaddeus all through lunch.'

"No, it's not very busy right now." Her mother assured her.

'Great.' The warrior thought and headed toward the others.

Salmoneus hurried into the tavern. "Xena, thank the gods you're back." He was ringing his hands nervously. "There are about a dozen or so soldiers headed this way."

Gabrielle grabbed her staff and ran out behind the warrior with everyone following. Her parents caught up with her outside. "Where do you think you're going?" She ignored them and asked Xena, "Who are they with?"

"I don't know, they're not showing any marking." Most of the village had gathered, but were staying out of the way. The warrior's and the bard's families were standing behind them. Toris was watching from the kitchen window. "If a fight starts, try to keep them from getting hurt." She had indicated their family members with a nod of her head. She walked a few steps away from the bard. "Afternoon boys, looking for lunch or for trouble?"

Gabrielle had to stop Cyrene from moving toward her daughter. "She's going to get hurt, Gabrielle."

"You might get her hurt if you interfere Cyrene, now stay back. That goes for you too, Thaddeus." She warned him when he started moving forward.

"Neither, you see it's our commander's birthday and we thought we might find a present for him. And it looks like we did, doesn't it men." They all started laughing. "I'm sure he will be very pleased to have the head of the warrior princess as his gift. Get her!"

Two of the men attacked, one from each side. She jumped straight up in the air and kicked out to both sides. As her feet made contact with the men, she reached over her shoulder and landed on the ground with her sword in her hand. Four of the men that were standing about twenty feet away to her left were readying their bows. She heard Gabrielle yell archers and glanced that way. One of the men in front charged her as she grabbed her chakram in her left hand. She ducked his sword and smashed him in the face with the hilt of hers. She let the chakram fly and turned back to another man charging. The chakram deflected off a stone post and headed toward the archers. A roundhouse kick put the charging man on the ground. The chakram sliced into each man's cheek but the last one in line fired his arrow just before he was hit. She turned and caught the arrow that was flying toward her in her left hand.

Gabrielle heard a collective gasp from the crowd as Xena caught the arrow. She also noticed that the first two men Xena had rendered unconscious were beginning to revive.

Xena decided that these fools probably weren't going to give up until at least some of them were dead. She knew her chakram had deflected again and was headed back to her. Instead of catching it she ducked and let it fly into the chest of the man in front of her. He fell to the ground dead. She killed two more with one slice of her sword to their midsections. They had surprised looks on their faces as their watched various internal organs fall to the ground; they followed them and were dead before they hit.

Gabrielle moved forward so she would have room to swing her staff. The two men that had regained consciousness moved toward her thinking that she would be easier prey. The man on

her right came at her with his sword above his head. She greeted him with the end of her staff in his gut. As he doubled over she turned her attention to the one on her left. He landed on the ground hard when she connected with her staff to the side of his head. She went down on one knee and swung the staff back around to connect with the back of the other one's knees. He landed on his back and she brought her staff back down on his head. Both men were again unconscious. She stood up and returned to stand in front of the people she was protecting. They looked at her with dumbfounded expressions on their faces.

The only man left standing was the one who had wanted her head as a present. He eyed her warily, his sword drawn. She pierced the air with her war cry, jumped and twisted in the air to land behind him. He turned and brought his sword down in an overhead arc. She blocked with her sword and connected with her knee to his gut. As he bent over, she brought the hilt of her sword down to the back of his head. She looked around, at least three dead, she wasn't sure about the archers. She retrieved her chakram from the chest of the dead man and wiped the blood off on his shirt. She walked back to where Gabrielle was standing, "Thanks for the warning. You ok?"

"You're welcome and yes. Do you think this was an accident or were they looking for you?"

"Don't know. We'll have to see if the leader wants to talk when he wakes up."

Their families circled around them, all talking at once. "Xena you're alright." Cyrene grabbed her daughter's face and turned it toward her.

"Gabrielle, sweetheart." Her parents hugged her.

"You can actually fight." Lila stated shocked.

"You are incredible Xena." Thaddeus exclaimed.

From the kitchen window Toris commented under his breath. "She is amazing."

"Everybody get back." Xena said exasperated. "This isn't over yet."

The archers had tucked tail and run. The other men had started coming to their senses; Xena stood staring at the men struggling to their feet. The fear on their faces told her they wouldn't cause any more trouble. She made no move to stop them as they ran away. The man she wanted was just starting to come to. She moved to his side and knelt down. He sat up and leaned back propping himself with his arms. "You can save yourself a lot of discomfort by willingly answering some questions." The warrior explained.

He looked into ice cold blue eyes. "I'm not telling you nothin."

"Your choice." She made quick jabs with her fingers to both sides of his neck. He collapsed to the ground.

"What did you do to me?" The fear was showing on his face and in his voice. The crowd of people moved a little closer to get a better look and to hear what was being said.

"I cut off the flow of blood to your brain, assuming you have one that is. You'll be dead in 30 seconds unless I release you. Feel like talking now?" She asked smiling.

Toris looked at Gabrielle. "She's bluffing right?"

She hadn't noticed when he had joined them. "No."

The warrior didn't wait for the man to reply. "Who is your commander?"

"Kiril."

"Never heard of him."

"Neither had we until two days ago when he rode into camp and challenged Hesperos, defeated him and took over the army."

"Did he send you to look for me?"

"He knew you were here. He sent us to bring you back to him."

"Where are you camped?"

"The valley west of here."

The people watched, both fascinated and horrified at the same time. Xena had just touched him with her fingers, but the man couldn't move and blood was running from his nose and ears. They looked at her with more respect and a little more fear. The bard noticed this as she looked at the faces in the crowd. She also knew Xena felt it also. She released the man from 'the pinch'. "When the feeling returns you're free to go." She stood and turned to the sound of hoof beats. The man got to his hands and knees and crawled a few feet behind the warrior. The crowds scurried away as the horse was brought to a stop about where the archers had fallen.

The man sat atop a solid black war-horse. He was dressed in brown leather armor with a chain mail shirt. He carried his sword on his left hip. He had curly red shoulder length hair and a neatly trimmed red mustache and beard. Xena guessed that he was around her height. "Kiril, I presume!"

"I'm flattered that you've heard of me."

"Not until a few minutes ago." She replied.

He looked behind her to the man on the ground. "That's the problem I'm having, you see. Not many people have heard of me. I was hoping for your assistance in that matter."

"My assistance." Xena said laughing. "Well that's original, it's the first time I've heard it put that way."

Cyrene placed her hand on Gabrielle's arm. "What does he mean?"

The bard looked at the worry on Xena's mother's face. 'Gods I wish this weren't happening here.' "Cyrene," she paused. "He wants to kill her." Cyrene clutched the bard's arm tighter.

"If you wanted to challenge me why send your men?" The warrior asked.

"I had to make sure you had fully recovered after your vacation in the underworld. And it seems like you have, twelve men and not a scratch."

"Three men are..." The man behind her had grabbed a sword left lying in the dirt and risen to his feet. He stood at her back and raised the weapon. Xena unsheathed her sword reversed it in her hand and drove it underhanded into the man's stomach. She pushed down on the hilt causing a gaping wound and pulled the sword free. The man fell dead. She corrected her statement without skipping a beat. "Four men are dead just so you could see if I had recovered. You couldn't have just asked?"

"You know, I really hate to kill you my dear. But I'll get over it. To be known as the man who finally killed the warrior princess will have a great soothing effect on me I'm sure. Shall it be swords?"

"Suits me. You mind if I clean this first?" She said holding up her bloodied sword.

"Be my guest." He said as he dismounted.

She walked over to the bard who handed her a rag. "You really don't know anything about him do you?" The bard asked.

"No, I've never heard of him."

"Which means you don't know how good he is."

"He's very good if he killed Hesperos."

"Xena I don't like this." She looked worriedly at the warrior.

Her mother added. "Xena please, don't do this."

"Gabrielle, if he wins, get as many people out of here that will leave. I don't know if he'll bring his army to raid the village or if killing me is all he wants." Xena saw the desperate look in the bard eyes. She placed her mouth next to her lover's ear. "I love you." She straightens and looks at the bard. "It'll be ok, after all we have plans remember." She took her mother's hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze as she turned to go.

Gabrielle grabbed her arm. "Xena, please be careful."

They stood facing each other, at the same instant they jumped in the air. Both upside-down and at the top of their arcs the swords met. They both twisted and came down facing one another with their positions reversed. They circled one another for a moment before Kiril attacked. She blocked his high downward slash to her left with her blade. He pivoted around to bring his sword in low to her right. Instead of blocking his blade with hers, she jumped it. His momentum carried him around and put his back to her. She swung her sword overhand to connect with his skull. He held his hilt in both hands and brought it over his head to deflect her blade. They alternated between circling each other and attacking. Each time one would attack the other would counter with proficiency. This went on for quite some time.

Gabrielle knew Xena was starting to tire. She was not fully recovered. As soon as she had started breathing again, she had to deal with Callisto and Valasqua. She hadn't had enough time to rebuild her stamina.

Xena knew she had to end this soon or he would kill her by simply wearing her down. As she thought about this she was a little late in bringing her sword down to block his. Her leg felt like it was on fire as his blade connected with her right thigh. She didn't acknowledge the wound and kept fighting but she could feel the blood running down her leg. She had been studying Kiril all during the fight and knew he had not only been anticipating her moves but also countering them a split second before she made them. She knew it was now or never. She faked a forward flip and twist and knew he would counter with a back flip and twist so he would still be facing her. As he completed his flip she was now behind him. She kicked the back of his legs and he went to his knees. She placed the tip of her sword against the back of his neck before he could react.

"Looks like you win, finish it." He conceded.

"I wish I could but it would just be a waste of energy to run you through." She stated.

"And why is that, my dear?" Kiril inquired.

"Because you can't be killed." She removed the point of her sword from his neck. "Get up Ares." She said with disgust.

He threw back his head laughing and let his disguise fade and his true form appear. Some of the crowd moved back, some gasped while others fainted and some were frozen and unable to do anything but stare. Gabrielle's comment was a venomous. "Damn him!"

He stood and faced the warrior. "Beautiful and brilliant. How did you figure it out?"

"Four things. One, you couldn't have been good enough to kill Hesperos and have not been heard of. Two, you knew my moves almost before I did. Three, everyone thought my death was only a

rumor but you were one of the few who knew it to be true. And the fourth, and this is the most important reason, no one but you calls me 'my dear'."

"I'll have to remember that."

"What do you want this time, Ares?" Xena said with considerable annoyance.

"I want the same thing I always want, you. Back where you belong, fighting for me."

"I've told you it won't happen. Give it up."

"I almost did give up, of course that would have meant killing you. You have really been annoying me. Do you know how many of my warlords you have killed in the past two years?"

"I haven't been keeping count."

"Twenty in two years. Do you know how long it takes me to develop and mold a warlord to my liking? I can't keep up with you. For every one I craft you kill five." His was pacing in a circle gesturing with his hands. Xena was standing still letting him circle around her. She was trying to ignore the pain in her leg but now that the fighting was over it was demanding her attention. Ares continued. "And it's not just the warlords, each time I conceive a plan to get you back you turn it against me. Take the time I killed three villagers and you were tried and convicted for the murders, they were going to execute you. I offered you the greatest warriors; told you I would bring them back from Tartarus for you. All you had to do was call my name and you did. But did you want warriors brought back to protect you, no! You had me bring back the villagers I killed. So they had to let you go since no one was dead. I must say I was impressed at the way you manipulated me."

Gabrielle turned her head and whispered to Salmoneus who disappeared into the tavern. The warrior changed her stance to take some of the pressure off her injured leg. Ares continued. "Then I impersonated your father. Had you convinced I was Atreus and came close to separating you and your precious little bard. You were even ready to destroy the villagers when you thought they had killed dear old daddy." He stopped and pointed at Gabrielle. "But you had to interfere, I was really irritated by that." He started his circling again. "And I took that irritation out on you." He glared angrily at the warrior. "Do you know how close I came to killing you that day? But you didn't care; you stood there and would have let that sword plunge through your neck. You didn't move. You didn't even blink as it sailed toward you. I just can't understand mortals."

Salmoneus returned and handed two bandages to the bard. She passed him her staff and started toward Xena. She heard her parents whisper to her, "Are you crazy, get back here!" She ignored them and continued. She knelt down, folded one of the bandages and placed it against the wound. She ignored Ares who had stopped his dissertation and was glaring at them. "It needs stitches." She informed the warrior as she wrapped the other bandage around her leg to hold the first one in place.

"Excuse me, I was talking here."

"And talking and talking. I was beginning to wonder if my bleeding to death while you talked was your plan. Come to think of it, bleeding to death would be better than listening to you." Xena taunted him. They heard gasps and murmurs from the crowd.

"Now these people respect me, you don't." He informed her.

"They don't respect you Ares, they're scared of you." She corrected him.

"Respect, fear whatever. But I don't get either from you. Which is why I almost gave up on you. And to top it off, I had reduced Hercules to mere mortal. People thought he had murdered his wife until the two of you stepped in to help save him."

The warrior broke in. "You can blame Strife for that, he's the one that confessed."

"Yes and I did blame him, but he has redeemed himself. He brought me the one piece of information that gave me the perfect plan to get you back. It showed me that I had been going about this the wrong way."

Gabrielle and Xena looked at each other. "Oh no." The bard uttered just before Ares grabbed her and backed off from the warrior. The crowd took in a collective breath. Her mother's knees gave out and her father had to steady her.

The warrior drew her sword. "Let her go Ares."

"I will, if you make the right decision. You've already made the point that you can't kill me so don't try anything stupid. Now where was I, oh yes. I have always tried to put a wedge between the two of you and drive you apart. Now I see how wrong I was. And it's not easy for a god to admit that."

Xena was desperately trying to think of a way to get Gabrielle away from him. She was at a loss, if he wanted to hurt the bard he could easily do it before she could get to Gabrielle.

He was holding his left arm around the bard's throat and was holding a knife in his right hand. He was grinning like a little boy in a candy store. "So my dear, the way I see it is that you have two choices. One, you can willingly come back and serve me until you die. Or, and I know that you're not going to choose this option, you can watch as your lover dies."

"Xena, please don't do it. Don't go back to him." Gabrielle pleaded.

Xena knew if she made a move toward the bard, Ares would slit her throat. She was desperate. She couldn't let him hurt Gabrielle. And she wouldn't hurt Gabrielle by returning to him, she knew she couldn't even if it weren't for the bard. Her mind grasped one thing he had said, 'until you die'. She silently begged Artemis to protect the Amazon queen from Ares.

"Damn you Ares." The warrior expressed her feeling. She looked at her lover with sadness in her eyes. "Gabrielle, I'm sorry. Please forgive me." Ares was overjoyed he threw his head back laughing in victory.

Xena used the lapse in his concentration to carry out her plan. She reversed the hilt of the sword in her hand, placed the point against her mid-section and drove it through her body. She accomplished her task so quickly that the bard couldn't utter a sound before it was done. Ares jerked his attention back to the warrior as he heard a mournful cry from the bard.

"Nnnnoooo!" Gabrielle screamed. She pushed his arm away rather easily, if a god could be in shock Ares was, and ran to the warrior. She reached Xena's side as she was collapsing to her knees. She eased the warrior down to the ground. She knelt down and placed Xena's back against her legs in order to keep the sword from touching the ground and doing more damage. Tears were running down her face as she wrapped her arms around her lover and held on tightly. "Xena don't die on me. I can't lose you again." The bard pleaded.

The only two people who weren't paralyzed by shock were Salmoneus and Cyrene. They ran to the fallen warrior. Xena was still conscious. "Gabrielle, I couldn't...let him hurt you." She took a painful breath. "I'm sorry this...had to happen here, mother."

"Save your strength little one." Her mother replied as tears rolled down her cheeks.

Ares recovered from his shock and walked toward the warrior. "Leave her alone you bastard!" Gabrielle looked at the God of War with hate in her eyes.

Ares was about to reply when a commotion behind him made him turn around. A man dressed in a robe with a hood hiding his face emerged. He stopped an arm's length in front of the God of War and removed his hood. "Zeus!" Ares was surprised to see his father.

"This time you've gone too far Ares. I'll deal with you later." He waved his hand and the God of War vanished. He knelt down in front of the warrior.

"Can you help her?" The bard begged the god.

"Have faith Gabrielle." He replied. "Phoebus." Zeus called for his son the healer who materialized beside him.

He had a good idea why his father had called for him; he had been on Mt. Olympus when Ares suddenly appeared looking very dejected. He placed his hand on the hilt of the sword, as he did so the blade became red hot to cauterize the wound. The bard held the warrior as her body jerked in reaction to the intense pain. Xena clenched her teeth trying not to cry out. The group that surrounded the warrior were the only ones that ignored the smell of burning flesh. The people in the crowd covered their noses and mouths with their hands, but would not back away. Phoebus pulled the sword free and placed it on the ground.

"Will she live?" Zeus asked his son.

Instead of answering his father he leaned over to speak to the warrior. "I have stopped the bleeding and the wound is cleansed but you have lost a great deal of blood, that is something even I cannot heal. You have to find the strength within yourself to live long enough to let the blood replenish itself. If you can, you will recover." He stood and was gone.

The bard looked at Zeus. "Thank you." Was the only thing she could manage to say.

Xena was beginning to go into shock from the loss of blood, but she managed to ask Zeus why had he helped her. "Because you and Gabrielle helped Hercules prove his innocence, I owed you both a favor." He stood and moved back as Xena finally succumbed and mercifully passed out.

Gabrielle called for help in moving the warrior to their room. Toris, Thaddeus, Cyrene and Gabrielle carried her in and placed her on the bed. The bard's parents, Lila, Manderon and his parents stood grouped in the doorway. Gabrielle took charge; she needed to so she wouldn't fall apart. She asked Thaddeus to get cold water from the well. Salmoneus had brought the bard's staff and the warrior's sword with him and placed them in the corner of the room. Cyrene had broken down and Toris was holding her. "Salmoneus help me with her armor." Gabrielle called him over. They removed the armor, leather tunic and boots. Gabrielle knew she needed to clean and stitch the wound in the warrior's leg and she did that first. She enlarged the hole in the warrior's shift so she could stitch the wound in her abdomen. As she started the warrior groaned and became restless. She put her hand on Xena's forehead and noticed her fever was going up. The bard whispered in the warrior's ear, "Xena I'm sorry, I know it hurts but I have to close the wound. I'll do it as quickly as possible. Xena you will get better, you will live. I love you." She stroked the warrior's cheek and kissed her forehead.

At the Amazon village, Ephiny was relaxing in the bathing hut. She had just leaned back and closed her eyes enjoying the hot water when she saw a bright flash of light that penetrated her eyelids. She opened her eyes and sat up. She couldn't believe what she saw. "Artemis, goddess, I..."

She was interrupted. "Ephiny we don't have time for pleasantries. Gabrielle needs you now. Go to her." Then she was gone. The acting Amazon queen sat stunned. She knew where they had been headed when they rode out of the village. She guessed Artemis would have told her if they had left Amphipolis. She didn't mention Xena. Does Gabrielle need a friend or warriors? Should she go alone or take fighters with her? She decided she wasn't going to take any chances. She jumped up grabbed her clothes but didn't bother to put them on. She ran out of the hut shouting orders. "I need 20 of my best warriors with travel gear and trail rations for two days saddled and ready to go, 15 minutes ago. The Amazons that were in the area of the hut and those that came running at the sound of her voice looked at their regent who was standing there naked shouting orders like the hounds of Hades were after her. "NOW!" She added when no one moved.

As soon as Gabrielle started talking to her, the warrior calmed down. "Salmoneus hold her arms down. I don't want her moving around. Toris hold her legs so she doesn't pull the stitches lose I just put in." Gabrielle stitched the entrance wound on her abdomen and the exit wound on her back.

Thaddeus had brought the water back and placed it by the bed. "Is there anything else I can do?"

"No Thaddeus." The bard pulled Lila into the room and pushed everyone else but Cyrene out. "Cyrene are you ok? I need your help."

"Yes Gabrielle I'm just scared I'm going to lose her." She explained shakily. The three women removed the bloodstained shift and replaced it with a sleeping shirt.

Xena's fever had climbed higher and Cyrene and Gabrielle took turns bathing her in cool water. She was very restless and would cry out for Gabrielle. She would settle down only after the bard would sit beside her and talk soothingly to her. Lila had made tea for all three of them and made sure the two women drank theirs. "I'm going to make both of you something to eat." Lila said as she stood up to leave.

The two women said at the same time. "I'm not hungry."

"It's after sunset and neither of you have eaten since breakfast. You're not going to do Xena any good if you both pass out from lack of food. You two are taking care of her, so I'm going to take care of you two and you will eat." She said in a voice that stated she would not take no for an answer.

She entered the main room of the tavern to find Toris, her parents, Manderon, his parents and Thaddeus still sitting at the same table. It didn't look like they had moved since Gabrielle had chased them away and shut the room door. She walked that way. "Any change?" Toris asked.

"No, she still has a high fever. And before you ask," she spoke to her parents, "no I didn't tell Gabrielle you want to see her and I'm not going to."

"Lila we have to know if what he said about them is true." Her mother pleaded while her father looked furious.

"That's not important right now. Whether or not Xena lives is what matters now." Her tone of voice dared them to contradict her. When they said nothing, she explained to her husband that she was staying with Gabrielle and Cyrene tonight in case they needed anything.

He stood and hugged his new wife. "I'll be right here in case you need me." He told her.

The three women had passed the night keeping vigil. The sun was rising now and the women had gotten little sleep. Gabrielle had gotten none. She had become more distressed with each passing

hour. Xena's fever had not come down. "Cyrene I don't know what else to do. I've given her tea with herbs to reduce the fever but it hasn't helped." She was to the point of collapse.

"But it hasn't gone any higher, it must be helping some." Cyrene didn't know if she was trying to convince the bard or herself. She just knew that she couldn't lose Xena now that she had gotten her back. And she didn't want to think of what would happen to Gabrielle if she lost her.

Lila brought more hot tea for breakfast. Manderon carried fresh water in behind her. Cyrene stopped him as he was turning to go. "Is my son here?"

"Yes he's been here all night with the rest of us. Most of the village has already come by this morning also." He informed her. "Do you want me to send him in?"

"No thank you, Manderon I'll see him later." She wondered why he had not been in to see his sister since he helped carry her to the room. Salmoneus had come to see about her several times during the night.

The bard had a good idea of what Cyrene was thinking and explained. "It's probably my fault that he hasn't come to see her." She gave her a brief run down of what had happened in the stables yesterday morning. 'Had it only been one day since that incident, it seemed like a lifetime.'

"Don't blame yourself Gabrielle, my son can be just as thick headed as his sister. Sometimes more so. He's probably more ashamed at himself than angry at you."

Gabrielle stood up and opened the window. "If I wasn't so worried this might be amusing."

Cyrene joined her. "What is it?" Gabrielle pointed to Mt. Olympus. They could see bolts of lightning flying around the mountain.

"Zeus must really be upset with Ares this time. I wonder how long that's been going on?" The bard said.

"All night I think." Lila responded. "I walked outside before midnight to get some air and it was going on then."

"Good." The bard stated. "Not that it will deter him, but at least he's had a miserable night."

It was mid-morning when Manderon knocked on the door. Lila answered it. "Gabrielle I thought you might want to know, Amazons are riding into the village."

"They couldn't have heard about Xena this quickly." The bard wondered what else could be wrong.

"Go see, Gabrielle, I'll stay with Xena." Cyrene said. Lila went with her sister.

The bard entered the main room followed by her sister. Their parents stared at their oldest. Her eyes were red and swollen and she had dark circles under them. They started to go to her when a band of Amazons burst through the door. They stared in amazement as a group of women warrior's collectively went to one knee with their heads bowed. "Queen Gabrielle." They said respectfully.

"Get up, please." The bard needed friends now, not respect. As they stood Ephiny looked at her queen. She closed the gap between them and grabbed her in a fierce embrace. "How did you know to come?"

"Artemis sent us. What's happened?"

The bard broke down and started sobbing. She held on to Ephiny like she was the only person that could make things right again. "Gabrielle where's Xena? Is she..." She couldn't finish the question for fear it would make it true.

Lila stepped up. "She's alive but very badly hurt." She explained to Ephiny who she was. The bard had released her death grip on the Amazon. They sat down at the table with her parents.

Gabrielle explained to Ephiny and the rest of the Amazons who crowded around, what had happened. Ephiny kicked herself for not bringing their healer with them. "Why, Ephiny? Why did she do it?" The bard's voice begged for some sort of explanation.

The Amazon held her friend's hands tightly. "I don't presume to know Xena's mind when it comes to Ares, but I know how she feels about you. The two choices he gave her were ones she couldn't live with. She couldn't watch him kill you. And she wouldn't watch as you slowly died or grew to hate her if she went back to being what she was. Think about it Gabrielle, what would you have done in her place?"

Gabrielle looked into her friend's eyes, realization taking a firm hold in her mind. "The same thing."

"Can I see her?"

"Of course Ephiny." The bard started to push herself up from the table.

Her parents stopped her. "Gabrielle wait a minute please."

She fell back in the chair. "Lila would you take Ephiny back?"

She nodded her head. Before she turned to go she gave her parents an 'If you upset her anymore than she already is you'll have to deal with me' look. "She's back this way." She said to the Amazon.

The bard knew she was going to have to deal with them sooner or later but she didn't have the strength to do it now. "I know you have questions but I am too tired and too worried to answer them right now."

"Gabrielle we have to know if what he said is true. We need to know if you've thrown your life away." Her father said.

'If I wasn't so upset I would laugh at that.' She looked at the fearful expressions on her parent's faces. "No father I have not thrown my life away." She knew they would misunderstand but she didn't care. That was their problem. As far as she was concerned she had not thrown her life away and had answered truthfully. She went back to her lover.

She let Lila in on what had been said. "I'm sorry Gabrielle, I warned them to leave you alone."

"I know you did and I thank you for trying."

Xena was restless, tossing back and forth. She called out to her lover. Gabrielle leaned over her and stroked her cheek and whispered in her ear. She calmed down. Cyrene shook her head. "The connection and love these two share is amazing."

Ephiny looked at Xena's mother and then at the bard's sister. "You both know?" They nodded their heads in acknowledgement. "Good, that makes it easier on Gabrielle."

Gabrielle was applying a cool cloth to Xena's forehead. "She's been getting worse all morning. The fever won't go down and she is getting weaker by the minute. She's dying."

"No! As long as she takes her next breath she has a chance. She'll get better." Cyrene knew that if the bard gave up Xena would too.

"Ephiny I need you to do something for me and for the Amazons." She kept her eyes locked on Xena.

"Anything Gabrielle."

"I need you to take my rite of passage."

"Anything but that, my queen."

"Ephiny don't argue with me." She now directed her gaze toward her friend. "You know if anything happens to me without passing it along the problems it will cause. Do you want the Amazons to have to deal with a war for the throne?" Gabrielle tried to be logical about it.

Ephiny knew the bard was right but she didn't want to acknowledge what Gabrielle was really saying.

"What's rite of caste?" Lila asked.

The Amazon jumped in before her queen could down play the meaning. "It's what Amazon royalty pass down so in the event of their death the royal line to the throne will continue." 'Now, my queen, explain to your sister why it is all of the sudden so important.' She almost spoke the last part aloud.

"Ephiny you can refuse to accept it but it won't change anything. I'm trying to do the right thing for the Amazons." Gabrielle stared down her friend.

Gabrielle might hate her regent for what she was about to say but right now she didn't care. "Oh I see and killing yourself if Xena dies is the right thing."

"WHAT!" Lila jumped up and looked at her sister.

"I **can't** live without her and I **won't** suffer through her death again. I'm sorry but that's the way it is."

The two Amazons were holding a glaring contest. Ephiny slowly took in and let out a deep breath. "Alright but I hope you know that if, and I stress if, Xena doesn't pull through, I think she will, that if I let you take your own life she will find some way to return and kick my ass."

The bard let out a breath she didn't know she had been holding, "She probably will, after she kicks mine." She turned to face the other two women. Using her best imitation of Xena's warlord stare she stated. "This conversation will not leave this room."

The two women were stunned. All they could manage was a nod of their heads. She turned back to Ephiny. "Let's get this over with, I want to be with her when...I don't want her to..." She couldn't finish.

"I know." The Amazon stated. "We'll hold the ceremony in the main room. I'll be there in a minute." As Gabrielle left Ephiny walked to Cyrene's side. "Tell Xena what Gabrielle plans to do, repeat it out loud over and over again." Cyrene looked at the Amazon confused. "If Xena has any fight at all left in her, this will bring it out." Ephiny stared at the warrior for a minute, then leaned down, kissed her cheek and left the room.

As the bard entered the main room the Amazons stood, their expressions asking the unspeakable. "No change." She couldn't bring herself to tell them Xena was dying. Saying it in the room seemed different. She felt like saying it out here would make it true and in her heart she was still hoping. She was glad to see the table where her parents had been earlier was now empty.

Salmonesus had entered from the kitchen; he had been helping Toris in the tavern last night and this morning. "She's going to be ok, Gabrielle. I mean this is Xena were talking about, she can do

anything." He was trying to be as convincing as he could. But the bard saw the distress on their friend's face.

Cyrene leaned towards her daughter. "Xena, I don't know if you can hear me." She paused to wipe the tears from her eyes. Lila walked over and put her hand on the older woman's shoulder.

"Xena you have to listen. I love my sister very much and I don't want to lose her. She says she can't live with out you. She says she will...will end her life if she loses you. Please Xena! You have to live."

Xena had been retreating into the blackness around her. The more it enveloped her the less she hurt. For some reason she had been fighting for something, but she couldn't quite remember what. She just wanted to stop the pain and the darkness offered her relief. Then she heard a droning sound from far away. She couldn't make out words but a picture began to form at the edge of her fevered mind. It wasn't clear and she struggled to make it out. As she came closer to the clouded image the droning started to take the form of words.

Ephiny entered the tavern and motioned the Amazons forward. She turned to face her queen. She wanted to ask if she was certain but the look on the bard's face told her that there was no turning back. She went to one knee and waited. Gabrielle started. "I Gabrielle, queen of the Amazons willingly bestow upon Ephiny my rite of caste." There were a few sharp intakes of breath and a few wide eyes at this. "Do you accept?"

Ephiny took a deep breath and let it out uneasily. "I...willingly accept the rite of caste from our queen. To assume the throne in the event of her death."

The Amazons gathered behind their acting queen said as one. "Witnessed."

As the bard turned go, she noticed her parents and Toris had watched the ceremony from the kitchen doorway. She wished they hadn't been there to see. She wasn't about to explain it to them now she had spent enough time away from Xena.

The lack of sleep and constant worry had taken their toll on the three women. Some time around mid-day Lila and Cyrene had fallen asleep in their chairs. The bard tried hard to stay awake but had also succumbed and slept curled up on the bed next to Xena. Her fever had broken shortly after the bard had fallen asleep. The warrior woke a short time later to the sound of snoring. She didn't need to turn her head to find the source. The bard was lying on her side clutching the

warrior's left arm and her head was on the pillow next to Xena's which accounted for the extremely loud sounds echoing through her brain. "Gab...rielle?" She forced out weakly.

The bard jerked her head off the pillow hovering over the warrior. "Xena!" At the sound of Gabrielle's voice the two women flew out of their chairs expecting the worst. "Xena, you're awake." Tears of joy and relief came from each of the women.

"Gabrielle...I've told you...before...your snoring...could wake...the dead." The warrior managed a smile.

"Little one, I thought I had lost you." Her mother held her daughter's head up to help her drink some water.

Lila flung open the room door and headed for the tavern. As she ran into the main room everyone turned toward her and feared the worst when they saw the tears running down her face. "Xena's awake." She announced. The Amazons cheered, while the others headed for the bedroom.

The group arrived at the door to the room to hear. "Xena you don't need to explain, I understand why you did what you did." Xena's face was turned toward Gabrielle who was propped on one elbow looking down at what the bard thought was the most beautiful sight she had ever seen.

As the bard started to lean closer, the warrior cautioned. "Gabrielle, your parents are watching."

"I don't care." She responded as she continued to lean closer and captured her lover's mouth with her own.

As the group in the doorway looked on there was no doubt that what they were witness to, was not a friend kissing friend, but lover kissing lover. The bard's mother fainted.

Cyrene cleared her throat and they broke from the kiss. "Gabrielle, I believe your mother has fainted."

The bard saw her mother lying on the floor and her father bending over fanning her. "Oh boy." Lila and her father help her mother to their room. "I guess I ought to go explain things to them." She sighed heavily.

"They don't know? Didn't they hear Ares?" Xena asked puzzled.

"Yes, but." The bard started to explain but was interrupted by Cyrene.

"Xena, you need restful sleep right now. Gabrielle can explain later." To the bard she said, "Go talk to your parents, the longer you put it off the harder it will be."

The warrior looked at Ephiny. "Artemis?"

The Amazon nodded her head. "She told me Gabrielle needed us."

"She was listening." Xena mumbled, then exhaustion claimed her.

When the bard walked into the hallway, Salmoneus smiled at her showing his support for them. Manderon showed no emotion. Thaddeus and his parents backed away, their faces showing disapproval. Toris stopped her. "Gabrielle I want to say I'm sorry for what happened yesterday."

"Your sister is the one that you should be apologizing to, not me." She was still a little upset with him.

"I know and I will, but you deserved one too." She walked to the door of her parents room took a deep breath to brace herself and entered.

Her parents were sitting on the edge of the bed and her father had his arm around her mother's shoulders. Lila was facing them and leaning against the wall. "You lied to us." Herodotus accused his daughter. The bard couldn't tell if it was anger or hurt or both in his voice.

"You asked me if I had ruined my life, I don't think I have so I answered honestly." She defended her earlier answer.

"You're telling us that you love a murdering warlord." Her father said with malicious intent.

Lila saw her sister had reached the boiling point and was about to explode. "Father you promised you would discuss this calmly."

The bard clenched her fists and dug her nails into her palms trying to distract her mind from her anger. Instead of responding to her father she turned to her sister. "Lila you might want to leave, it seems Manderon's family have the same opinion as father about my relationship with Xena."

"You're my sister and I'm not leaving. I'll straighten it out with them later." She was not about to leave her alone against the two of them.

She shot her sister a quick 'thank you' then turned her attention back to her parents. "Now if you would like to continue this calmly as Lila suggested, we will. If not I'll leave now and this will be the end of it." She dared her father to continue with his previous opinion.

Instead her mother asked. "Gabrielle do the two of you...do you love each other...that way?"

"If by 'that way' you're asking if Xena and I are in love, then the answer is yes mother we are."

"You weren't raised to be **that way**!" Her father yelled.

"Answer this honestly father, are you upset because I'm in love with another woman or is it because that woman is Xena?"

"Both." He replied and Hecuba nodded.

"Ok, let's address the it's Xena problem first. That day she saved us, she told me not to follow her. I did anyway. She told me that she was sending me home. I told her that I would just run away again. I convinced her to let me stay. Yes, being around her is dangerous, but I would rather have lived the life I've had with her and die tomorrow than to live to be 200 and never have left the village. Now as for her love for me, the best testament was what she did yesterday. She was willing to kill herself in order to save me. As for my love for her, I can just say that I would do the same. As for your feelings about two women loving each other, I don't know how to change them." She collapsed into the nearest chair. She was suddenly exhausted.

Lila spoke up. "Tell them what you told me. That you fall in love with your heart not your head."

She smiled at her sister with gratitude. "Has anything that I've said made any difference?" She asked hopefully.

"Would it matter to you if it hasn't?" Her father replied in a surly tone.

"Yes. I'd like you to be happy for me, for us. But even if you still don't approve, I'll never leave her. I love her too much and I would die without her." She paused, then continued when they offered no response. "Think about what I've said. You can answer my question later." She stood to go. "There's one other thing I might as well tell you. I asked Xena to marry me and she accepted."

Lila hugged her sister. "I'm very happy for you. Can I come to the wedding?" Their parents were stunned to say the least.

"It's called an Amazon Joining Ceremony. And yes you're invited." She paused to see if her parents were going to say anything else. When they still said nothing she returned to her room.

"How did it go?" Cyrene asked her. The bard just shrugged her shoulders. "Give them time Gabrielle. I know they love you, I'm sure they'll come around."

"Tell us the story of how you and Xena met. Cyrene and I were talking and discovered that neither one of us knew. It will help pass the time until Xena wakes up, she's bound to get hungry before too much longer." Ephiny suggested.

The bard found herself smiling at the memory. "Cyrene, you know part of it because it ties in with Draco's attempt to discredit Xena and attack this village." Gabrielle told the long version of the story for Ephiny's benefit and also to let Cyrene hear parts that she had not witnessed. Xena woke up at the end of the story. Cyrene left to fix her daughter some broth to eat and Ephiny left so they could have some privacy.

"How are you feeling?" The bard asked as she moved to sit on the edge of the bed and hold her lover's hand.

"Tired, weak and lucky." The warrior responded trying to sit up.

The bard put another pillow behind her back. "I assume you mean lucky to be alive." They discussed several things, what the warrior had done and why. The reaction of the people in the doorway that had seen the kiss and what Gabrielle's parents had said.

There was a knock and the bard opened the door to Toris. "Mother said you were awake. Do you feel like talking?" His sister nodded her head and he took a seat by the bed. Gabrielle left them thinking it might be easier on Toris if she were not there. He took his time in beginning. "I'm glad you're going to be ok. I'm sorry about the other morning; I shouldn't have accused you. I just couldn't believe Gabrielle..." He faltered.

"Couldn't believe she could fall in love with me?" Xena asked him. She didn't have the energy for a fight.

"No! That's not what I mean. I can't understand how two women can fall in love." He finally admitted.

"We're not asking you to understand it just accept it and be happy for us." She explained.

"After what you did to save her I don't see how anyone couldn't accept it. It was the most selfless act I've ever seen." He said in awe.

"It was more selfish than selfless." He looked at his sister with his brows wrinkled awaiting an explanation. "I couldn't live without her and I wouldn't be able to live with myself if she died because of me."

"I don't see it that way." He opened the door for Cyrene. "You didn't say if you accepted my apology or not."

"Yes Toris." Was all she had the energy left to say.

During the next week the daily routine was the same, Xena healing and trying to build her strength. Gabrielle saw her parents and ate with them occasionally. They never brought up Xena or their daughter's feelings for her. The bard wasn't about to broach the subject, she knew they had to make the first move. By the end of that week Xena was up dressed and eating her meals in the tavern.

One day after Xena and Gabrielle had finished their meal; the bard's mother walked over to the table they shared. "Xena I'd like to talk to you, alone." She explained looking at her daughter.

The bard opened her mouth but was stopped as Xena said, "She has a right, Gabrielle." The two women went back to the room the two lovers shared leaving the bard feeling very anxious.

"Xena I know my daughter loves you and after what you did to save her you must care very much for her. I don't want to lose my girl, but I don't understand the relationship the two of you have. You should also know that in my heart I knew she would leave the village for a different way of life but it was easier to blame you."

"How could you have known she would leave?"

"I had a sister, younger sister, that did the same thing when she was about Gabrielle's age. And even when Gabrielle was little she reminded me so much of her. I've never told my daughter this." The warrior almost told her that she just did but held her tongue. She had heard the bard quietly move to the door right after they had entered. "We never saw or heard from her again and we never knew what happened to her."

"It's not the same, Gabrielle sends letters and she's been back home."

"I know." She moved to stand in front of the warrior. "This is very hard for me but as I said I won't lose my daughter. Her father cannot or will not accept the two of you and is leaving in the morning. I haven't told him yet but I am staying here and when the two of you leave for the Amazon village I want to go with you. I missed her first wedding but I won't miss this one." She stood there with her hands on her hips daring the warrior to tell her she couldn't go.

"Lila and my mother are going and it would make Gabrielle very happy if you were there." Xena heard the bard slip away from the door.

"Thank you." She paused looking very uncomfortable.

"Is there something else?"

"Uh yes, but I don't know how to ask." The warrior sat down on the bed thinking it might make the woman more at ease. "Gabrielle was not raised with the knowledge of...I mean she couldn't have known that...two women..." She gave up and collapsed into a chair.

"That two women can be intimate?" Xena supplied the phrase. The bard's mother nodded her head. "She had no idea until she spent time with the Amazons. And for someone as inquisitive as your daughter is, she noticed fairly quickly that there were 'couples' among the women."

"She has always been curious, sometimes too much for her own good." She started laughing, "I don't guess she ever told you the story about getting stuck in a tree?"

"No, but that might explain why she doesn't like heights."

"She won't speak to me for a week if she finds out I told you. She had just turned six years old and it was the first summer we had not let her swim with the boys her age, the kids always swim

with no clothes on. Well she couldn't understand why she wasn't allowed to go with them anymore. I told her that boys and girls were different. I wasn't about to explain to a six year old what that difference was, but she was determined to find out. One morning she crept out of the house before the sun came up went down to the lake and climbed a tree so she could watch the boys. When we found her missing we had half the village looking for her. About mid-morning we thought to look by the lake and there she was wrapped around a limb fast asleep. Her father called to her and woke her up, told her to come down but she was stuck. When we finally got her down I ask her if it had been worth all the trouble. She said she didn't know she slept through the whole thing."

The bard was pacing in the tavern and looking down the hallway to the rooms each time she passed, when Lila came in. "What's going on?"

"Mother wanted to talk to Xena, alone." She had thought about listening at the door again but kept thinking that they would be done any minute.

"Oh. How long have they been back there?"

"Too long. I can't take it any longer." Lila followed her sister back. They got to the door in time to hear the end of the story. She opened the door and glared. "Mother you didn't."

Xena chuckled at her lover whose face had turned a very nice shade of red. "You my dear bard have had unlimited access to my mother for many days now. It's about time the tables turned."

Cyrene had joined the party and the evening turned into a story telling contest between the two women, much to the dismay of their offspring. When they finally decided their children had probably had enough, Cyrene turned serious. "Xena will Ares leave you alone now?"

"No. He'll try again as soon as he thinks of another plan. But he won't use Gabrielle again because he knows what I'll do." There was a knock at the door and Ephiny entered.

"Xena there's no sign of any army within at least three days of here, so I guess they beat a hasty retreat when their 'commander' didn't return. We're going to leave in the morning unless you need us to stay longer."

"No Ephiny, we've kept you away too long as it is. And thanks for staying in case there was any trouble. Oh, it looks like there's going to be three guests at the ceremony if that's ok?" Xena said as she smiled at Hecuba. Xena and Gabrielle had told Ephiny of their plans earlier that day.

"The more the merrier. Kaylyn is going to stay and travel back with you. She knows the innkeepers in the towns you'll be stopping in east of here. I'm assuming you will be traveling on the roads and not cross-country since you'll have a wagon."

Gabrielle saw that Xena was about to protest the escort. "It was my idea. I get you back from the dead, then a building falls on you and then you almost die again, I will not take a chance on you getting hurt again."

"Yes dear." Xena replied grinning.

"And further more, I don't care what you say. It will take awhile before you're fully recovered." The bard finally realized what the warrior said. "Yes dear! I had an entire argument prepared. Spent all afternoon working on it and you just agree with me." Gabrielle sighed deeply. "Ok fine!"

The warrior told Ephiny that it would probably be at least another five days before they or she would be able to travel. The women all said goodnight and left. After Xena had cleaned up and donned her nightshirt she asked. "Gabrielle, I haven't seen Salmoneus around. Has he left?"

The bard took her turn at the washbasin. "He's been helping Toris run the tavern since Cyrene has been spending time with you. He's also volunteered to stay and help while she's gone." She finished washing up. "You know I think he really likes your mother. How would you feel about having Salmoneus as a step-father?" She turned her face away so Xena would see her grin.

Xena fell back on the bed. "If you're trying to get me back for a minute ago, it's working."

Gabrielle laughed. "Actually I was. But I really do think he likes her." She changed her clothes for a nightshirt and stretched out beside Xena looking down at her. "You look tired. You tried to do too much today." She observed. The warrior opened her eyes and looked up at her lover. She reached up and pulled her down for a kiss. The bard pulled away. "Xena don't start something you can't finish and besides, you need your rest."

"What I need is you." She pulled the bard down on top of her and kissed her again so passionately that it left no doubt in Gabrielle's mind as to what they both needed and wanted.

Xena and Gabrielle overslept and mercifully missed the exchange between the bard's parents. They emerged from their room by mid-morning. Gabrielle went to the kitchen to fix them something to eat. Xena saw Hecuba sitting in the corner and joined her. "How did he take it?"

"Not very well would be an understatement. He's left without even saying goodbye to his daughter. I don't know what to tell her."

"Give him time. Maybe he'll realize that his love for his daughter is stronger than his hate for me."

The bard brought food for herself and the warrior. "Has father left?"

"Yes. He uh, wanted to get an early start to make sure he made it back before sundown tomorrow." She decided a little white lie wouldn't hurt.

"Mother you don't lie very well. He's made his decision not to accept us and didn't want to see me." Xena placed her hand over Gabrielle's and gave it a sympathetic squeeze.

The next five days were spent with Xena and Gabrielle having sparring matches with staffs, starting slowly at first and gradually building in intensity. Xena also spent time riding Argo and working on simple fighting routines with her sword. Her strength and endurance returned quickly. Xena and Gabrielle told everyone that they decided that it was time to leave. They all agreed on the day after tomorrow.

A small celebration dinner was held the night before they left. Manderon accompanied Lila but his family wouldn't come. Cyrene and Hecuba spent most of the evening talking, both the warrior and the bard noticed that the two women seemed to be becoming good friends. Xena noticed that Toris was very nervous when she and Gabrielle were around him. The warrior also noticed that Kaylyn was constantly staring at them when she didn't think Xena was looking in her direction. When the warrior caught the Amazon in the act, she would redden and quickly turn away. Xena wondered if Kaylyn had a crush on her or if it might be the young Amazon Queen that had turned the Amazon warrior's head.

The warrior kept count of how much the bard was drinking. The thought of starting the trip with Gabrielle having a hangover was not a pleasant one. The bard saw she was being watched and walked over to her lover. "Don't worry I'm not going to get drunk. This will probably be our last chance to be alone for several nights and I'm not going to waste it." Xena looked down into eyes that were already turning dark with desire.

"It's a good thing my stamina returned as quickly as it did, otherwise I'd be spending all day in bed recovering from the nights." The warrior was also beginning to feel the passion stirring within her.

Gabrielle put her arm around Xena's waist. "I haven't heard you complaining."

The warrior placed her arm on her lover's shoulder and kissed the top of her head. "Nope, definitely no complaints."

Xena was up and dressed before she woke Gabrielle. She had to pick up the joining bracelet that she had commissioned from the silversmith before they left and didn't want the bard to know about it. She had completed her errand and was back at the tavern by the time Gabrielle came down for breakfast. After the wagon had been loaded with supplies and everyone had said their good-byes the six women were ready to leave. Kaylyn led the way with the warrior riding behind the wagon.

Gabrielle sat in the back of the wagon talking nonstop with Lila. Xena let Argo follow the wagon on her own; she was lost in thought. 'Gabrielle believed in me when I didn't believe in myself. She stayed by me no matter what I put her through. She kept me pointed toward the light when I faltered. She taught me that I could be loved and that I could love again. I don't know what I've done to deserve you, Gabrielle, but I'll spend the rest of my life trying to make you as happy as you've made me.' They both smiled as blue and green eyes locked together in understanding.

The End

End Note: Phoebus, a.k.a. Phoebus Apollo was also known as the healer, who first taught men the healing arts. (Taken from the book, 'Mythology; Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes' by Edith Hamilton.) Asclepius, referred to in the Xena episode 'Is There a Doctor in the House?' was the god of medicine and was Apollo's son. (Info taken from the book, 'Greek Mythology' by Sofia Souli, translation by Philip Ramp.)

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