

# ~ A New Year's Changes ~

by By Red Hope

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**Sex:** no sex in part one but you got your subtext, it's a love story.

**Violence:** violence free.

**Feedback:** any feedback or questions can be sent to me at [redhope@redhope.net](mailto:redhope@redhope.net)

**Dedication:** this is dedicated to *her*.

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Very slowly, Xena stepped forward to the throne in the middle of the village. She kept a straight face as she lowered her head while lowering down onto one knee. There was only one Queen she'd bow for in this world.

The Queen suddenly felt a smile steal away on her expression. "Xena." She hastily rose up from her seat and went down the three steps to hit the dirt ground.

The Warrior Princess finally revealed her happy smile and after standing up, she was fully drawn into a powerful hug.

"Gods I've missed you," whispered the Queen into Xena's ear.

Xena lightly kissed the side of the Queen's temple, whispering back, "I've missed you too, Gabrielle."

The Amazon Queen pulled back but still clung to her friend's arms. "How have you been?"

The warrior gave a faint nod. "I've been okay. How's the Amazons been treating you?" she lightly teased. She noticed how Gabrielle wore her Amazon Queen attire; she hadn't seen her friend in that uniform since she was brought back from death a few moons ago.

Gabrielle gave a half chuckle before answering, "Pretty good." Then without warning, she hugged her best friend again. "I really missed you, Xena."

The warrior closed her eyes, happy to not just see but also feel her friend in her arms again. "I know... I'm here as long as you need me."

The bard pulled back enough in the hug to be able to see Xena's face. "I know, thank you... I'm really glad you came so quickly."

"You know I would." The warrior then decided it was best to separate as she carefully released her friend and took a step back.

Gabrielle noted her regent and Solari finally joining her side.

"Its nice to see you, Xena." Ephiny quickly pulled the warrior into a warm hug.

Xena hadn't quite expected the hug but happily returned it and even received one from Solari.

"How about we go to my hut," suggested Ephiny.

Gabrielle nodded her agreement and the group winded their way through the village to the regent's hut. Once inside, they began discussing future plans for the next few days.

"Are you expecting them to be that hostile?" inquired the Warrior Princess as she took a chair near the fireplace.

"They very well could be," replied Ephiny. "But we're hoping they are not, we wouldn't think so."

"Especially if you are there, Xena," added in Gabrielle. She took another step back and leaned against the windowsill behind her. "I would have had Solari or Ephiny come with me but they need to stay here to take care of the village."

"What about Eponin?"

The Amazon Queen shook her head.

"She's too busy dealing with preparing the newest additions to the... troops," explained Solari.

"So we thought our best bet was having you go, Xena. You know that group of centaurs pretty well." Ephiny folded her arms against her chest.

"And why not send a few Amazons with Gabrielle?"

"I'm too worried that they'll see it less as a peaceful talk and more of response to a threat." Gabrielle let out a faint sigh. "I thought it'd be better for you to accompany me, Xena."

"I will," promised the warrior. "I was just a bit curious as to why I was chosen."

"Welllll... we'd like to send a legion for protection with Gabrielle but since we really can't, we thought we'd send an army." Solari smirked at the Warrior Princess.

"Funny," deadpanned Xena as she threw a mock glare at the Amazon.

Solari and Ephiny both chuckled between each other.

Gabrielle then straightened off the sill quickly. "Xena, are you sure about coming with me to the centaurs?"

Xena nodded before saying, "I'm positive."

That caused a small smile to reappear in the bard's worried expression. "Thank you." She then turned her attention to her Amazons. "Solari, we need to go check on Ep and a few other things if I remember right."

"Yes we do," agreed the Amazon.

"Eph, you think you can brief Xena for me on what's going on with the centaurs?" Gabrielle raised an eyebrow at her regent.

"Not a problem, Gabrielle."

"Thank you." The Queen then went to the door and signaled her second in command to follow her. The pair then left the hut silently.

The regent walked over to her desk and lifted her large desk chair. She carried it over towards Xena and set it a little off to Xena's left side. "Have you heard anything about what's been going on with them?"

"Afraid not," admitted Xena.

"Well..." The Amazon sat down and relaxed into her chair. "The centaurs are kinda of splitting into two groups now."

"They're quarreling?"

"Unfortunately yes," responded Ephiny. "We had a small problem with some young Amazons and a joke that did not go over so well."

The warrior raised an eyebrow at this. "What happened?"

"Well it seems that a few young Amazons several nights ago decided to play a small joke on the centaurs." She paused for a moment. "Do you recall that statue in the centaur village?"

"Yes, the one of the first centaur if I remember right," answered the warrior.

"That's the one." Ephiny took a deep breath before continuing with the story. "Well it seems these three Amazons thought it would be funny to..."

"Vandalize?"

"Uh huh," agreed Ephiny. "Now we're not sure how much truth there is to this but the kids said they accidentally broke the front leg that was free in mid air." She shrugged

briefly then added, "Now they thought the centaurs wouldn't be all that upset and it could easily be repaired."

"That's not the case huh?"

"No of course not." Ephiny sighed. "There is a strict law that if that statue is every vandalized, much less broken, that the guilty part is suppose to pay a penalty."

"What's that penalty?"

"Death," simply replied the regent.

Xena raised and eyebrow. "You are kidding." She huffed when her friend shook her head. "They are kids," she muttered.

"Exactly," agreed the regent. "And that's the problem. The centaurs see that statue as a symbol of everything they are. For it to be ruined is an absolutely sin and holds a high penalty. That's why it has survived for as long has it has." She paused for a moment. "Half of the centaurs agree that it was an accident but a small course of punishment should be taken for the vandalism. However, there are those few centaurs that are firm believers in upholding the laws of their forefathers."

"Cute... real cute." Xena shook her head. "Always a few stubborn ones."

"There are," agreed the regent. "But that's basically what's happened. Gabrielle wants to be there tomorrow and try to come to some kind of agreement. Instead of losing some more feathers around here."

"Mmmm," sympathized the warrior. She then lifted her eyes off from staring at the floor to Ephiny. "How has Gabrielle been?"

The Amazon pressed her lips together as she considered what to say and whatnot to say. "She's been better than this," she simply stated.

The warrior bit her lower lip faintly then asked, "Her and Cheala doing well?"

Ephiny reached behind and rubbed her neck while considering the question. When her hand rested back in her lap again, she finally said, "Gabrielle seems to think so, yeah."

"Hmmm." Xena lowered her gaze down to her intertwined hands in her lap. "I've been pretty worried about her," she admitted quietly, "ever since I left her here a month ago."

"She's been really worried about you too." Ephiny held her breath for a second, trying to control her urges but let it go anyway. "She's really needed to see you, Xena... honestly."

The warrior sat up straight and leaned back into her chair again. "They're doing that bad huh?"

"Mmmm... its not so much that really."

"Then?" pressed on the Warrior Princess.

Ephiny released a heavy sigh. "Cheala can be a demanding girlfriend, Xena. I know you don't know her that well but I certainly do. And what doesn't help is the fact that Gabrielle has the disease to please."

"Don't I know," agreed the warrior. "She sure did surprise me when she told me she wanted to stay in the Nation."

"Yes I know." The regent stood up finally and took her chair back to her desk. She slowly turned around and leaned against her chair. "One minute you were dead, Gabrielle brought you back, and then the entire thing with Velasca." She shook her head a few times. "Not even I saw that coming between her and Cheala."

"I never even knew of Cheala till Gabrielle said something," stated Xena. "It definitely... surprised me to say the least." She quietly stood up.

"Xena, will you please talk to Gabrielle about her and Cheala?"

"Why?" The warrior folded her arms with a corked eyebrow. "The one thing I've come to learn about Gabrielle is not to tell her what to do."

"I agree but... I just think she needs somebody to talk to right now." The regent closed her eyes briefly while saying, "She won't talk to me or Solari or Ep about what's going on between her and Cheala." She opened her eyes again. "We constantly see the two of them fighting now and about three out of five times I see Gabrielle with blood shot, red eyes."

"I'll try, Eph."

The regent nodded faintly. "Thank you, Xena. I know the three of us appreciate it."

"Hopefully Gabrielle will too," retorted the warrior. She opened the door and stepped out, closing it behind herself.

"I think she will," whispered the Amazon to nobody but herself.

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"Hey sit down and join us," offered Solari.

Xena smiled at her friend and decided to take the offer. She lowered her plate of food on the opposite side of the bench from Solari and Ephiny.

"Sorry I didn't get to talk to you that long," apologized Eponin, who sat to Solari's right. "Things have just been crazy this spring though."

Xena nodded. "I can relate."

The weapons master chuckled. "Yeah I bet." She poked a little at her food. "How have

you been?"

"Pretty busy."

"Yeah Gabrielle mentioned you just finished visiting with your mother...?"

Xena turned her attention to the second in command. "Yeah I stayed with her for two weeks." She licked her lips and quietly stated, "After everything I kinda needed some time away from..." She fell short when she noticed Gabrielle by her side. "Hey," she greeted and smiled.

"How was your afternoon?" asked the bard, she knelt down near her friend's side. A small plate of food was in her right hand.

"Relaxing," admitted the warrior. "Yours?"

"Pretty busy," grumbled the Queen.

"You sitting with us?" inquired Ephiny from across the bench.

Gabrielle stood up and shook her head in response. "Cheala wants me with her."

"Ah... okay," said the regent quietly.

"I'll catch you four later on," promised the Queen. She gave a tired smile and weaved her way through the *hall* to sit with Cheala and some other Amazons.

"Can you recall the last time she sat with us?" Solari huffed out angrily to Ephiny.

Ephiny didn't reply and simply continued eating her dinner.

Xena acted like she didn't hear their comments and continued eating her meal. She then decided to look up from her meal. "So when did she last sit with you?"

"I'd say the last time was the night after you left... about two months ago." Eponin glanced back to where Gabrielle was sitting with Cheala. "You see..." she turned back to Xena. "those are Cheala's friends, not really Gabrielle's."

"As a matter of fact," cut in Ephiny, "a lot of those Amazons are the same ones that followed Velasca."

Xena raised an eyebrow at that, a very high eyebrow. "And does..." Xena had to choke out the name, "Cheala ever talk to you three?"

"Only if she needs to find out where Gabrielle is." Solari slightly jabbed her chicken cutlet harder than she needed to. "But... they're in love right?" She gave a very fake smile. "We're happy for them."

Eponin grunted at that without any further comment and ate her dinner.

Gabrielle quietly listened to her girlfriend carry on a conversation with a few of their friends. She peered up at them and suddenly nodded at a question. "We probably could."

"We really should, hun," persisted Cheala.

The Queen licked her lips. "I'll look into it, baby but considering how busy we are might be hard."

"Gabrielle, Cheala could really use that extra equipment in the metal shop," persisted the one Amazon.

The bard felt her shoulder slouch a bit more than a second ago. "I'll try my best."

Cheala smiled happily and side hugged her girlfriend. "Thank you."

"Uh huh." Gabrielle forced a smile on her lips before she went back to eating her dinner. She stared down at her pile of *rice* and wanted to have some but at this moment she felt like she wasn't allowed to have any *rice*. Her stomach wasn't hungry and her mind was too busy worrying about her future.

"Baby, how long you think you and Xena will be at the centaurs for?"

Gabrielle shook her thoughts away and focused on her lover. "I really don't know."

Cheala frowned at the answer. "You think you'll be more than three days?"

"We could be, yes."

Cheala nodded a little and just turned her attention back to her friends.

The bard sighed quietly to herself but then stood up, taking her plate with her. She went first to the trashcan and disposed of the food she didn't even eat. Then she tossed her plate and utensils into the dirty plates bin, without any other care, she left the hut heading into the cool spring evening.

She silently walked through the village, making her way out of the gates of the village. Following the main pathway through the forest, she finally came to an opening in the forest. She found her favorite spot to sit in this secluded area. Gabrielle then sighed dramatically as her back pressed into the cool, large rock behind her. Her eyes drifted up to the star covered sky.

"Hey, what's going on?"

The bard looked up when she heard her lover's voice. "Didn't think you saw me leave."

"Mmmm... I did." Cheala stood on the edge of the clearing for a moment then made her way slowly to her partner's side. She knelt down beside her, her small hands resting on Gabrielle's thigh. "Why'd you leave?"

"Just needed some time alone, honestly." Gabrielle moved her left hand to rest on her girlfriend's own hand.

"What's wrong huh?"

The Queen shrugged before squeezing the Amazon's hand. "Just stressed."

"With?" persisted Cheala.

"Just with what's going on this spring."

Cheala nodded a few times. "Between the centaurs and spring preparations huh?"

"Yeah," whispered the bard. "Pretty much."

The Amazon studied her girlfriend's features momentarily then asked, "Anything else wrong?"

Gabrielle shook her head, never really saying the word no.

"You sure?" The Amazon raised a dark eyebrow as she took her friend hand and brushed back a long strand of wavy black hair.

"Yeah... I'm sure, baby." Gabrielle forced a smile as she tried to give a reassuring squeeze to her girlfriend's hand.

"Hmmm," was all the Amazon said. "Well, think you'll be here long?"

"Not much longer," promised the Queen.

"Alright." Cheala stood up suddenly. "I'll be in our hut." She turned and strolled off towards the village.

Gabrielle licked her lips and pulled her legs up to press against the rest of her body. She dropped her chin down on top of her knees as she stared ahead into the woods. Taking a deep breath, she said loudly, "You can come out, Xena." She watched as the slightly glowing brass armour began to emerge out of the dark trees.

The warrior grinned at how friend knew her so well. "You're good."

Gabrielle slightly chuckled. "I just know you after a couple of years."

"True," agreed the Warrior Princess. She approached her friend and asked, "May I sit?"

The bard unwrapped her right arm from her leg and patted the ground. "Would love it." She brought her arm back around her legs as she watched her best friend sit beside her.

Xena stretched her legs a little then took a very long breath, as she started relaxing.



"Sso..."

The Queen grinned a little. "So?"

"So..." The warrior faced the younger woman. "How are you?"

The bard seriously thought about that question but then finally replied, "I have been better than this."

"When were you better than this?"

"I'm not quite sure," she confessed to Xena. "Just been so busy... everything is hectic."

"Yeah I know they have been for you."

Gabrielle really did not say much else, her own silence taking her further from the grove than earlier.

Xena studied her friend, letting the silence go for a little while. She thought about what to say that didn't sound like she was prying into her and Cheala's relationship. That's when her mother finally came to mind. "Mother wanted me to tell you she said hi and that she misses you."

The bard came out of her thoughts at hearing about Cyrene. "How is mom?"

Xena smiled at the question. "She's doing well. She's been pretty busy."

"Has she? The tavern doing well?"

The Warrior Princess nodded a few times. "Business has picked up and she has three barmaids now working for her."

"Wow that's great." Gabrielle chuckled at that different thoughts about Cyrene. "I haven't seen mom in so long."

"Yeah I know," whispered the older woman.

Gabrielle shook her head a little then said, "You know what though?"

"What?"

"I really miss traveling with you," admitted the bard quietly. She peered up into sad blue eyes. "All those adventures with you could be... dangerous but at the same time it was a lot of fun and I felt free."

Xena nodded a few times. She then braced herself as she asked, "How have things been lately between you two?"

"They're okay," replied the bard quietly. "A bit tough but okay."

"Anything major going on?"

Gabrielle shrugged slightly. "No... not really, I guess."

Xena nodded while they went quiet for a minute or two. "Well... you know, I still have an opening for a sidekick if you're ever interested."

The bard raised an eyebrow at her friend; a tiny grin curled her lips.

"Well in your case I'm willing to let you be my partner since I like you," teased the Warrior Princess.

The Queen laughed quietly and leaned over to hug her friend by the arm. "Thanks."

Xena grinned herself; she bent her head down to kiss her friend's head lightly. "Well the offer is always open for you, Gabrielle."

The bard lifted her head, her hands still holding onto Xena's forearm. "I know, thank you."

"You're welcome." The warrior filled her chest with air until she couldn't anymore and after letting it all out, she asked, "Tired?"

"Yeah I am." Gabrielle smiled up at her friend. "Just one question."

"Hmmm?"

"How long do you think it'll take to travel to the centaur village?"

Xena waggled her right hand in mid-air while saying, "Two days roughly. Why?" She rested her hand back on the ground.

"Just kinda hoping this meeting with the centaurs will take awhile." She paused the continued with, "Wouldn't mind a break from everything."

"Wellll..." The Warrior Princess grinned at her friend. "There is a village on the way to the centaurs. We could always..."

"Sidetrack huh?" teased the bard.

"Mmmm," agreed Xena with a twinkle in her eyes. "It could be fun."

"It could be." Gabrielle squeezed her friend's arm that she still clung onto. "I'll think about it."

Xena laughed at her friend's sly voice. "Let me know what you decide, Queen Gabrielle." She then stood up from her spot. Her left arm slipped through her friend's hands until her own hand held onto both of the smaller hands. "Come on, you need your rest."

Gabrielle felt herself hauled up onto her feet as she stood up. "Thanks."

"Welcome." The warrior then began walking to the village with the Queen at her side. Together they walked quietly to the village. Finally making their way to the bard's hut, she turned to her smaller friend. "Gabrielle," she said quietly, "if there's anything you need to talk about to me, please do. Don't be scared to do it."

Gabrielle smiled sadly at Xena and suddenly hugged her. "Thank you."

"Go on." The warrior released her friend and started walking off to her own hut.

The Queen momentarily watched her disappear into the dark distance. With a heavy breath, she made her way inside of her hut.

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"So what village did you have in mind?"

Xena readjusted herself in the saddle before replying to her friend. "The town is Pyros."

Gabrielle nodded several times as she considered the little sidetrack. While she thought about it, she reached forward and ran her fingers through her horse's mane then patted him on the neck. "Pyros huh?"

"Uh huh."

"Huh." Gabrielle then looked at her best friend and shot her a big grin.

The warrior laughed and knew exactly what that look meant. "Let's go." She tugged lightly on Argo's left rein.

The Queen followed right behind on her own horse.

And after about two candlemarks of riding, they arrived in the village of Pyros. They both stopped at the entrance of the town and dismounted from their horses.

"Let's see if we can find a stable," suggested the Warrior Princess.

The pair weaved their way through the small town and finally found a stable at the other end. After paying the stable boy for one day, they then untacked their horses.

"So what you feel like for dinner?" inquired the warrior, she stepped out of Argo's stall.

"Not sure," answered the bard. "Any thoughts?" She left her horse's stall and walked out of the stable with Xena.

"Mmmm." The warrior shrugged. "We'll see what we can find first."

The smaller woman laughed quietly. "Sounds good to me."

And after about twenty minutes of hunting through the town and some debating, the pair came to decide on an inn that also served food. Once sitting at a table in the corner of the inn, they began ordering their dinners from the barmaid.

Xena watched the barmaid walk off and turned her attention back to her friend. "So you think this talk with the centaurs will be tough?"

The Amazon Queen leaned back into her chair and thought for a moment. "I hope not." She shook her head a bit. "I just can't believe some of those centaurs are being that extreme. I understand being upset somebody vandalized a sacred statue but to kill children...."

"I know. I'm sure the ones that want to uphold the law are the older centaurs."

"You're probably right," Gabrielle agreed.

Xena spotted the barmaid returning with their drinks. She briefly smiled at the server as she received her drink.

"Thank you," stated the bard to the barmaid. After she left, Gabrielle returned her eyes to Xena. "This spring has been tough."

"What has been going on?" inquired the warrior.

The Amazon Queen took a quick drink from her mug before replying. "Well Ephiny decided this year we should go through the entire! inventory in the armoury."

"Oh gods," muttered the Warrior Princess.

"Exactly and this includes all the different uniforms." Gabrielle folded her arms against her chest. "And too boot, she thought that whatever weapons or uniforms needs replacing we should replace."

"And who's the lucky person to do all that work?"

"Cheala is actually in the armoury."

The warrior didn't say anything about that as she soaked in the information. Before she could continue with the conversation, Gabrielle kept talking.

"Actually, that's how I ended up meeting Cheala." The bard pushed her chair back a little. "These," She lifted the necklace of bronze feathers from her neck to display them. "were made by Cheala. When... well while you were gone for that bit of time and I became the Queen, I'd received this. I'd asked Solari who made such beautiful work and she told me it was Cheala. Asked to meet her, and well that's how we met."

Xena considered what she heard before saying anything but after a moment, she asked, "Did you meet her before or after you knew I was coming back?"

"Before," simply replied the bard.

The older woman pressed her lips together briefly as a thought occurred to her. She then noted their food coming so she moved a little out of the way of the barmaid. After the server left, she began eating, as did Gabrielle.

"You haven't really met Cheala yet huh?" asked the Queen quietly.

Xena peered up from her dinner. "Not really." She waited for a second. "What's she like?"

"She's young," joked Gabrielle lightly as she ate a little of her chicken. "She's rather good with her armory work, I'll say that. Some of the jewelry she's done is pretty excellent."

The Warrior Princess nodded for a moment and after swallowing down some carrots, she asked, "But what is she like?"

The bard laughed slightly after the question was repeated. "Well Cheala is... well Cheala." She decided she needed a moment to think over that question, so she took a long gulp from her drink. After putting it back down, she finally replied, "She can be tough but gentle at times too. She's pretty out going... got a bit of a temper though." She chuckled.

"Figures," teased the warrior, "you like tempers."

"Yeah right," joked the bard. "Anyway, things aren't too bad." She glanced up from the food.

Xena caught the soft green eyes with hers. "That's good to hear... I've been worried."

Gabrielle suddenly lowered her eyes back to her meal. "Yeah I know," she quietly said.

From that point on, the pair were rather quiet during the rest of the dinner. Afterwards, they decided to skip dessert and head to their bedroom. Once in the room, they each separately went into the bathroom and changed into their sleepwear.

Xena came out of the bathroom once she was changed. She noted Gabrielle just lying on the double bed, eyes closed and slow breathing. Going around to the other side of the bed, she sat down on the edge next to her friend. Slowly green eyes stared up at her. "Hey."

"Hey."

The warrior grinned at her friend's word. "Tired?"

Gabrielle considered momentarily. "A little but I'm okay."

"Sure?"

The bard considered but then nodded with a silly grin. "Yeah." She then suddenly had a devilish grin. "How about a back scratch? I know how much you love those things."

Suddenly the warrior had a glare but a grin was shaping her lips. "I do not."

The Amazon Queen laughed and ordered, "On your back."

Xena then laughed and crawled over her friend and directly into the middle of the bed. She flopped down onto her stomach, her head turned to one side.

Gabrielle waited for her to settle in, she then scooted a little closer and sat beside Xena. Bringing her slightly long nails to soft skin, she started a very long process of scratching. And all she could hear after that was an occasional sigh or quiet moan from her friend.

After about ten minutes Xena finally said, "This is great."

The younger woman chuckled to herself. "Yeah I bet. When was the last time you had a back scratch?"

The warrior grumbled and muttered, "Since you left." She then closed her eyes as she realized how she put that answer.

Gabrielle sighed quietly to herself. "And uh..." She took a deep breath before continuing. "Mom didn't give you one?"

"No... for once," replied the warrior quietly. "She was really busy with the tavern."

The bard nodded a couple of times. "It sounds like it."

"Mmmm," agreed the Warrior Princess. She breathed in until her chest was full and slowly released it all. She could feel how warm her body was, especially the skin directly pressing against Gabrielle's own.

"You know... I've really missed travelling with you," mentioned the bard in a quiet voice.

Xena opened her eyes and lifted her head so that her chin rested on the pillow. "I've missed having you with me."

"You've just missed having somebody cook for you," teased the bard.

The older woman laughed. "That too."

"Figures," chided the Queen.

Xena half turned her head around to gaze up at her friend, just giving her a grin.

Gabrielle started laughing quietly at her then just smiled back.

The warrior rested her head back on the pillow and closed her eyes again. "So am I

allowed to ask you about you and Cheala?"

Gabrielle furrowed her eyebrows. "Why couldn't you?" She then decided to focus more on massaging her friend's back than just scratching it.

"Mmmm." The Warrior Princess shrugged a little. "Just seems like a big sacrilegious thing to do in the Nation."

"What?" The Queen laughed a little. "Everybody scared to ask me about how things are going between Cheala and I?"

"Pretty much," replied simply the warrior.

The smaller woman sighed at her friend's words and continued working the muscles on Xena's lower back. "I guess because of things lately."

"What are the things?"

"Well..." started the bard, "everybody probably has been noticing me upset more often than not." She finished with a shrug.

"Mmmm." Xena forced herself to refocus on what her friend was saying instead of on the back massage. "What has been upsetting you then?"

Gabrielle stopped the massage briefly and in that brief second she faintly heard her friend whimper. She just grinned to herself and continued the massage. "Cheala and I just get into a lot of fights anymore."

"Over what?"

"Some of the dumbest things that I can't even remember, honestly Xena." The Amazon Queen shook her head. "Like right now, she wants me to stop everything and have her armour hut remodelled."

"What'd you tell her?"

The bard huffed and replied, "Well what can I say? She's my girlfriend and I have to say yes."

"You say no to me just fine," teased the warrior.

Gabrielle let out a small laugh. "Xena, that's not the same thing."

"Welllll," started the warrior.

"Xena, no." The bard then tickled her friend's side a little for emphasis.

The Warrior Princess grumped a little then decided to move her hands up and place them under her head. "So things aren't too well between the two of you?"

"Mmmm," agreed the bard quietly. "Hopefully things will get better. I think it's just

the pressure of the spring, yah know."

"But this happens every year," reminded the warrior, "you would think she'd be accustom to this."

"I'm sure she is." Gabrielle shrugged a little. "But I'm not. The spring has been taking a lot of my time and I think she dislikes that a lot."

"Gabrielle, it's your duty to be the Queen... she has to understand that."

"She does," whispered the younger woman.

Xena turned her head slightly and peered up at the bard faintly. She noted the expression on her friend's face, which was a mix of frustration, upset, and stress. Lowering her head back down, she muttered, "I know I have."

"Well in either case, I think things will be okay."

The Warrior Princess suddenly rolled over onto her back and responded, "I hope so."

Gabrielle smiled sadly at her best friend.

"Come here."

The Amazon Queen lowered herself down and was pulled into a very strong hug. "Okay," coughed out the bard, "I can't breathe... Xena...." She coughed again right as she heard laughter from Xena.

The warrior suddenly released her hold and patted the younger woman's back.

"Gods you got a mean hug."

Xena grinned devilishly. "You said you always liked a good hug."

"Yeah a good one... not a deathly one." Gabrielle sat back up while shaking her head. "People don't know that one side of you."

"Oh? What side is that, Gabrielle?" She smiled amusingly at the bard.

"That side of you that's such a bratt."

Xena laughed and put her hands under her head. "I think people can tell I'm a smartass at times."

"No, I said bratt... you are a smartass too but few know you're a bratt."

"Yeah, I think you and mother are the only two."

The bard huffed. "Lucky me," teased the bard in a dry tone.

"Yes you are," chided the warrior. She then suddenly had a thought occur to her.



"Have you done much writing lately?"

Gabrielle returned her attention to her friend and after a second she started shaking her head. "I haven't written anything since... well, you died."

Xena's eyes lowered as she considered the bard's words. "Because of my death?"

Gabrielle shook her head some. "At first yes but when you came back, no. Everything was okay to write again then."

"Then why not...." Xena trailed off.

"Just been too busy," confessed the Amazon Queen. "All day I'm taking care of my village then by nightfall, well..." She shrugged. "I have to take care of Cheala."

"You need to get back into it."

"Mmmm." The bard shrugged and lightly patted her friend's stomach. "Maybe someday." She then stood up from the bed. "We need to get some sleep."

Xena nodded her agreement as she rolled out of the bed. She quickly pulled the sheets back while her friend was cleaning her face and hands in the washroom. After a few minutes, the pair climbed into bed together.

"Goodnight, Xena."

"Sleep well," replied the warrior. She'd turned her back to her friend, as did Gabrielle.

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By the morning, the pair had crawled out of bed, both in their normal morning grump mode as they had every morning. Neither saying a word, they went about cleaning up and preparing for their day. Once downstairs and eating breakfast did they finally begin to talk with one another.

"Not much longer till we get to the centaur village?" asked the bard quietly before she sipped on her orange juice.

"No... about three candlemarks of a ride," replied the warrior. "Have you figured out what to tell the centaurs?"

"No not quite." The bard sighed. "Spur of the moment."

Xena chuckled at her friend's words. "Always your style."

"Learned it from the best," taunted the Queen.

"Thank you," retorted the warrior with a smirk.

Gabrielle just huffed and continued eating her breakfast.

After their quick breakfast, they left the inn with their things and sought out their horses in the stable. Within a few minutes, they had their horses retacked and things tucked away. Together, they left the stable and continued on their journey to the centaur village. For most of the ride, the pair talked about various things. Gabrielle telling all about the different projects she has to do this spring. On the other hand, Xena spoke about some of things she'd done since she left Gabrielle in the Nation. The talking mostly lasted them a half a candlemark before their arrival at the centaur village.

Once at the gates of the village, they dismounted and waited for the guard to come to them.

"Queen Gabrielle," greeted the guard, he slightly bowed his head. "Welcome." He then glanced at the Warrior Princess. "Good to see you again, Xena."

Xena just nodded her response.

"Tyldus will be happy to see you two." The guard lead the two of them first to the stables.

A younger centaur came out of the stables and took the pair's horses. Then afterwards, the guard continued leading them to Tyldus's hut.

"Here you are." The guard pointed to the hut directly in front.

"Thank you." Gabrielle smiled then headed for the door.

Xena watched the guard go then joined her friend.

"Come in," called a male voice from inside the hut.

The Queen and warrior entered the leader's hut and both were greeted by Tyldus.

"Thank you for coming," started Tyldus. "We have much to figure out about what's happened."

"Yes I imagine we do," agreed the Queen. "I was hoping we could solve the problem today if possible."

The centaur nodded. "That's what I kind of thought. I have heard you are quite busy in the Amazon Nation. I and the council appreciate you coming all this way during the middle of things."

"Anything to help my allies," stated the Amazon Queen simply.

Tyldus nodded. "Let us go to the meeting room and I will request the council meet with us." He stepped past the two women carefully and left the hut.

Gabrielle and Xena followed behind him quietly.

Once inside the meeting building, Tyldus requested a guard to bring the council. He

then offered Gabrielle and Xena to sit together near the opposite end of the table. Within a few minutes, the other six council members arrived. Along with them, Phantes entered the building. Each centaur found a spot around the extremely long table except for Phantes, whom stood off to one side of Tyldus.

"Queen Gabrielle, along with Xena, have come to discuss the slight problem with our statue."

All the centaurs' eyes went onto the Amazon Queen.

Gabrielle felt herself shudder as everybody looked at her.

"Now then," started Tyldus, "we have a rather strict law about the desecration of our statue."

"Which is?" inquired Queen Gabrielle.

"That whoever so desecrates the statue must pay with their life," answered a council member.

The Amazon Queen sighed at this. "And why is there such a strict law as that? It was a pure accident on a count of these young Amazons."

"Well if there wasn't such a law as that then the statue would be ruined everyday of the year," hotly spoke one council member. "Why do you think that statue has stood as long has it has?"

The Queen sighed quietly to herself. "I understand that, yes. But to punish children by death... that's unthinkable. It was a mere children's prank."

"It does not matter," demanded a council member, "if we let this slide then it means anybody can get away with defacing the statue."

"I think Queen Gabrielle is right," suddenly spoke up Phantes. "We are not talking about a couple of adults that destroyed our statue to make us look like fools. This was a few kids that were trying to play a joke and accidentally broke the leg."

"Those young Amazons had no right to be pulling that prank to begin with much less break it," countered a council centaur.

"Let's put it this way," cut in Xena, she locked eyes with all of the centaurs around her. "If a couple of your centaur children came into the Amazon Nation with intent to desecrate the statue of Artemis and broke something on the statue. Then the Amazons get into an uproar saying such an action is punishable by death. What would you each say to that?"

The room fell silent after the warrior had spoken.

"Are any of you willing to hand over your child or grandchild willingly to uphold your allies law?" questioned Xena quietly.

"So your answers, gentlemen?" questioned Tyldus.

Each council member began to shake their head, now understanding what Queen Gabrielle was trying to stop and protect.

"Thank you," uttered Gabrielle quietly to her friend.

The warrior smiled softly, she reached under the table and squeezed the bard's leg to show her reassurance. "That is what family is for," she whispered.

That made a gentle smile etched across the Queen's expression; her stomach stopped turning.

"Now then, I think we need to find some kind of solution to repairing our statue. Correct?" inquired the centaur leader.

Again, the silent council members started nodding.

"Any suggestions, Queen Gabrielle?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact," replied the bard. "I thought that the Amazons could take your statue, along with the broken portion. My sculpture artist, with the help of the children that broke it, will first repair the statue. Then after they have repaired it and cleaned it, they will coat it in gold to protect it for the future as much as show our apologies for what has happened."

Tyldus nodded his head several times at the Queen's idea. "I like it. How about the rest of you?"

One by one, each council member voiced their approval.

"Wonderful," stated Tyldus, "I think that means we can adjourn now." He watched all of the council members trot out of the building. He then turned his focus onto Xena and Gabrielle. "Thank you two for coming here and resolving this."

Gabrielle stood from her chair and joined the centaur leader, her friend following behind quietly. "Thank you, Tyldus. I take it you were not in favour of the death penalty?"

"Not exactly," expressed the centaur. "I cannot quite understand something as significant as that and I think that law needs to be changed soon here."

The Queen chuckled at that, which made the centaur grin. "And thank you too for the help, Phantes."

"I'm sorry I wasn't much more help but I tried."

"Yes I know, I appreciate it," replied Gabrielle.

"In any case, nothing would have happened to those children," simply stated Tyldus. "I would have seen to that." He then held out his hand. "Thank you again, Gabrielle."

The Queen carefully shook the centaur's arm. "Thank you."

Tyldus smiled and turned to Phantes. "Why don't you show them to a hut for the evening and help them around with dinner tonight."

"Yes of course, Tyldus."

"Thank you." The centaur leader stepped past everybody and left the building.

"I'm sure you two want some rest before dinner...?"

Gabrielle nodded. "Yes, that'd be rather nice. When is dinner here?"

Phantes started for the door. "Always at sunset."

"Perfect." Gabrielle laughed quietly and followed the centaur out, as did Xena.

Phantes led the two women towards the guest hut as he spoke with them. "How has Ephiny been?"

"Rather well," replied Gabrielle. "Just as busy as me though."

"I can imagine. I have not seen her in quite awhile." Phantes sighed.

"Well... I can deliver her a message if you'd like, Phantes," offered the bard.

The centaur brightened up at this.

"As a matter of fact, I can have Eph come here and pick up the statue herself with a few Amazons. I'm sure she will not mind one bit."

Phantes laughed lightly and smiled. "That would be great, Gabrielle."

The Queen smiled back. "I'll make sure to do that."

"Thank you." Phantes then came to a stop and pointed to the hut to the right. "That is your hut, ladies. Your things are inside already."

"Thank you, Phantes," replied Gabrielle.

"Thank you too, Phantes," added in the warrior.

"You both are welcome." Phantes watched them head to the hut before he trotted off towards his own hut.

Gabrielle sighed in relief once her back hit the comfortable bed. "Gods... what a day."

Xena laughed as she stood over her friend. "It was that bad huh?" She kicked at the bard's boot.

The Queen groaned. "No guess it could have been worse."

"Yeah... they could have decided our lives on a pyre would have been better than the kids."

Gabrielle huffed at that idea. "Glad you didn't suggest it to them."

The Warrior Princess chuckled as she walked off and started taking her weapons off. "Well, I think this calls for a nap."

The bard instantly sat up. "Ooooooh are you feeling your old age, Xena?"

The warrior raised a dark eyebrow at her friend. "I have you know being thirty-seven years old has its advantages over your young age."

"How's that?" taunted Gabrielle. "You got more excuse to take more naps?"

Xena's lips were pressed tightly together. "Rrrright." Her head was bobbing up and down as she walked across the room to where her saddlebags rested on the floor.

Gabrielle suddenly then felt her stomach drop when she saw her friend coming back at her. "I really did mean that in a nice way, Xena." She put her hands up right when her friend stood towering high above her. "I mean think about it, I love to sleep and I never get naps in like you do." She smiled sheepishly. "My hole is getting deeper huh?"

The Warrior Princess bent down until her face was close to Gabrielle's. "Oh yeah... you are toast, bard."

"Hades!" screamed the bard. She quickly jumped forward right as Xena grabbed for her.

Gabrielle smashed into the floor but before she could scramble onto her feet, Xena had a handle on her feet.

"Xena! No no no! I hate this!" she screamed out.

The Warrior Princess laughed evilly as she lifted her best friend by her ankles into midair.

"Oh gods, Xena," moaned the Queen, "all the blood is rushing to my head. I'm gonna be sick."

"Amazon shit... you're fine," teased the warrior. "So am I really that old?"

"Xena," whined the bard.

"What'd you say?" asked the warrior teasingly.

The bard closed her eyes. "I'm gonna be sick in your boots."

"You better not or you'll be cleaning them," stated the warrior with a chuckle.

Gabrielle groaned. "Xena, I told you its okay being old. I mean at least you haven't gotten to that stage of your life where you fart all the time."

"Gabrielle, you're making this worse."

The Queen chuckled evilly. "Sorry, I can't help the fact you're so old. I mean even your warhorse is getting out of date like you." She then suddenly heard a loud growl. "Uh oh," she whispered in fear.

"Out of date huh?" growled an angry warrior.

"Oh no," whimpered the bard. She then suddenly found herself being swung upwards then thrown by her ankles towards the bed. She screamed loudly as she could until her back crashed into the middle of the huge bed. When she finally opened her eyes, all she saw were dark blue eyes staring back at her. "Hi," she muttered while pushing away a little. She then saw an extremely sly grin creep across the Warrior Princess's face and her eyes twinkled.

"Out of date huh?" she repeated to Gabrielle.

"Um well... yeah something like that... you know, like expired, Xena." She shrugged. "At least you don't have any grey hair... oh wait..." Gabrielle reached up as her eyes narrowed down to one patch of hair to the right of Xena's face.

Xena's eyes went to the right corners of her eyes as she watched Gabrielle grab a hair. She clamped her jaw down when she felt a ting of pain come from the top of her head.

"Um well... you seem to have grey hair now, Xena." The bard held up the long strand of grey hair in front of her friend's face. A very shy grin crossed her lips.

The warrior snarled at the hair and plucked it from Gabrielle's fingers. "It's gone now." She tossed it over the bedside.

Gabrielle just giggled in response.

"That's it, you're toast, bard." Xena suddenly attacked Gabrielle's sides with her fingers, tickling her to death.

"No, Xena! No ooooh gods, no!" The bard started laughing uncontrollably. "Oh gods please no!" She then started thrashing around in the bed trying to get away from her tickle attacker. "Xena, please! No!"

"You give, bard?" The warrior then suddenly felt her breath taken out of her when the bard kicked her in the stomach. She grunted at it and tried breathing again but didn't stop tickling her friend.

"No! You're... are... you are! sssso old!" screamed the bard. Now tears began creeping out from the sides of her eyes. "Stop... oh gods, Xena stop... you're gonna

kill me!"

"Not until you say I'm not old," growled Xena. She tried lowering her body more over Gabrielle's to keep her from kicking her anymore or pushing her away. "And take back what you said about Argo."

"No!" yelled the bard. "That horsssse... has even more... more grey hairs!"

"That horse I know better than you," reminded the warrior.

Gabrielle laughed even more at what her friend said, her stomach starting to hurt from all the laughter. "That poor horse!" she screamed.

The Warrior Princess just groaned at the latest insult she received from the bard. "I don't know why I keep you for a friend," she taunted.

The Queen suddenly rolled onto her side, still trying to get away from her tickle attacker. "Because... cause you love... me." Then the bombardment of tickles came to complete halt. Gabrielle cringed and kept her eyes tightly closed preparing for her friend to attack her unmercifully.

Xena grinned at her friend's reaction and just lowered her face close to the side of Gabrielle's. "You're right... I do love you... bratt."

The bard just chuckled evilly. "I know... I'm so lucky; otherwise I'd really be toast."

The Warrior Princess grinned at that. "Mom is right; I couldn't have gotten a better sister than you."

Gabrielle slowly opened her eyes. "Mom said that?"

"Uh huh," whispered the older woman. "Besides, if it wasn't for you.... I'd be wondering, babbling idiot across this country side."

The Amazon Queen giggled at that and rolled onto her back again. "Nah, you'd be fine without me these past couple of years."

"Gabrielle, the things I've shared with you these past two years... its more than anybody knows about me. Not even mother knows half of the things you know."

The bard's eyes lowered as she considered that. "Why you tell me so much then?"

"Because I trust you," whispered the warrior, "and you try very hard to understand me." She sighed quietly. "Plus the fact I know if I tell you what I have done in my past, I know you're going to forgive me without question... not hate me."

Gabrielle felt her chest fall with a sigh. "Xena, I know you've done a lot of things in your past... stuff I probably don't even know about and only find out in time. But its in the past, what matters is who you are now." She smiled softly. "You've come a long way and still have a ways to go but you're becoming a better person each passing day."



"I have been trying," admitted the warrior.

"I know, thank you." The bard smiled.

Xena studied her friend for several moments. "But remember, the only reason I have gotten as far as I have is because you've been at my side every step of the way. You've truly helped put my life together again."

"I've just been myself and tried being a friend."

"I know," whispered the warrior, "and keep going."

Gabrielle grinned. "Sssso, that means you are old then huh?"

"Gabrielle," growled the warrior. A devilish grin reappeared.

The small bard smiled sheepishly. "Well... maybe not that old."

"Gabrielle," warned the warrior.

The Queen sighed but was grinning. "Okay, you're not old... I'm just really young."

The warrior's eyebrow started arching up slowly.

"Okay okay!" The bard laughed. "You're so young." She rolled her eyes.

Xena chuckled. "Thank you." She patted her friend's side. "How about that nap?"

"Oh gods, sounds like an idea from the Elysian Fields."

Xena laughed at that as she got out of the bed. "Haven't had one for that long huh?"

"No, not really," admitted the bard.

"When was the last one?"

Gabrielle shook her head as she sat up. "I'm not sure really." She considered it while she untied her boots. "It had to be before you were...." She fell short as she peered across to the warrior.

The Warrior Princess glanced across the room while sitting in a chair. "Since I was injured huh?"

"Yeah," admitted the bard quietly. She shrugged as her eyes went back to her boots. "I just haven't been able to sleep that well ever since," she admitted.

"Nightmares?"

"Half the reason, yeah." Gabrielle pulled her boots off. "Going to sleep just means I watch you die again." She laughed bitterly. "I hate that one."

Xena had her boots off already and was just staring across to the bard. "Why else?"

The Queen looked up from the floor. "Just constantly stressed out between the Nation and...."

"Cheala?" whispered Xena.

"Yeah," simply replied Gabrielle.

The warrior chewed on the inside of her lip. "Well I'll be in the bed beside you, so you know I'm not dead," she tried to tease lightly.

Gabrielle smiled sadly. She then stood up and came over to help her friend get out of her armour. "I know."

"How did you sleep last night?" questioned Xena.

"Actually better," acclaimed the bard. "I don't know why but I always sleep better around you."

The warrior chuckled at that. "Call me the warrior of sleep."

The Queen chuckled quietly at that as she unhooked a few clasps. "Not sure... guess because I feel well protected."

Xena grinned at that. "Come on." She stood up and slipped off the loose armour.

Gabrielle felt a warm hand come to the centre of her back and push her towards the bed. "Beeeed," she whimpered.

Xena laughed and easily pushed her friend into it. She then climbed in afterwards.

Gabrielle rolled onto her side to face her friend.

Xena brought her hands under her head and closed her eyes.

"Xena?"

"Mmmm?"

"I have a real weird question for yah."

The warrior just grinned at that. "What's that, Gabrielle?"

"Have you found anybody?"

"What?" The warrior instantly opened her eyes and turned her head to Gabrielle. "Found anybody?"

"Yeah you know... to date. Well I know you don't like calling it dating but you know what I mean."

"Gabrielle, why are you asking this?"

The bard shrugged. "Just curious."

Xena sighed and just closed her eyes again.

"Well come on now." The bard could see a small grin creeping along her friend's lips.  
"Oh you have! Give, Xena."

The Warrior Princess laughed. "Gabrielle... she's more of physical interest and less of a mental one."

"Hey fuck friends work too, you know."

"Gabrielle," growled the warrior. "I don't do that." She kept her eyes closed but raised an eyebrow never the less.

Gabrielle laughed a little. "Oh nothing wrong with a fuck friend."

"Gabrielle," warned Xena.

"Well... at least tell me what she looks like, Xena. And where did you meet her?"

"I didn't really meet her, Gabrielle."

"Then how you know her?"

The warrior opened her eyes again. "That's it; I don't know her... while at mother's I just saw her in the tavern."

"You didn't talk to her or anything?"

"Gabrielle, that's not me."

The smaller woman huffed at that. "Yeah all gunho about kicking strangers' asses but when it comes to meeting somebody new you hide in a corner."

"And like you don't?" taunted the warrior.

"Ah well... that's not fair, this is about you, not me."

Xena just laughed deeply at her friend. "No, I did not talk to her, Gabrielle."

"Well that's alright... what'd she look like at least?"

The Warrior Princess sighed despite the fact she was grinning, she closed her eyes again. "She was a bit shorter than me. Had long blond hair... a bit like yours," she added. "Rather slender but not sure about muscles or anything."

"I know you prefer muscular."

Xena shrugged. "It depends... more concerned about who they are much less what they look like these days."

"I agree to that," retorted the bard. "What colour were her eyes?"

"I couldn't really tell... she was too far from me."

"Hmmm." Gabrielle nodded a bit. "Well... it's a start."

"Gabrielle, I'm not going back there just to meet this stranger."

"Oh come on, Xena," started the bard, "You could-"

"Go to sleep," cut off the warrior with a laugh. "I don't wanna hear this." She turned over onto her side.

The Queen just lay there with a big frown. "Absolutely no fun."

"Sleep well," teased the older woman.

Gabrielle huffed and just closed her eyes. "Sleep tight," she muttered.

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The Amazon Queen waved to Tyldus as her and Xena rode out of the centaur village. "Don't worry, Phantes. I'll deliver the message to Ephiny."

"Thank you," called back the centaur.

Gabrielle smiled and faced forward again.

"Glad everything worked out?"

The bard nodded to her friend. "I sure am." She sighed contently. "Feel a lot better about that."

"I know you do," stated the warrior. "Let's get you home huh?"

"Yeah... home," muttered the bard sadly.

Together the pair rode in silence towards the Amazon village, both knowing they'd be there about a candlemark before sunset. They also knew that once they arrived there they would have to go back to acting like friends that weren't as close as they real are. That also meant they would have to soon separate yet again and that made both of them want to turn in another direction away from the Amazon Nation.

"So uh... Argo has been well?"

Xena chuckled at the question that broke the silence. "Yes." She patted the side of her mare's neck.

"You give her plenty of apples?"

The warrior corked an eyebrow at her friend. "Gabrielle, I just got finished getting her to lose some weight after you."

"Xena, she enjoys those apples with the centre taken out." The bard grinned and added, "then putting the pieces of cheese in it."

"Gabrielle, that cheese is bad for her."

The Queen chuckled evilly. "Mustn't be all that bad if she constantly wants one."

"You taught her a bad habit," reminded the warrior.

"No, I praised her for putting up with you for as long as she has."

Xena's jaw dropped down. "She is my horse."

Gabrielle just giggled at the look she was getting from Xena. "Yeah well, you mistreat her... you don't give her the apple treats."

"She doesn't need them!"

"Okay let's ask Argo that."

Xena growled, "Let's not."

"Ooooh because you know what she'll say."

The warrior glared at her friend but she couldn't help the grin that was pulling at the corners of her lips. "She hates them."

"Okay." Gabrielle bent forward in her saddle and asked, "Argo, do you like those apple treats?"

Suddenly Argo threw up her head and whining in happiness at just the mention of apple treats.

"Well there you go, Xena."

"She said she hates them."

"Rrrrrright," teased the bard. "She sounded like she really didn't want one."

"I can't believe this," muttered the warrior.

Gabrielle grinned before questioning, "What's that?"

Xena shook her head then looked back at her friend. "I spent years training Argo to be what she is now. You do not realize just how hard it is to train a horse let alone her."

Gabrielle just giggled.

"Then you come along and completely destroy my entire system with her." Xena huffed as she turned her attention away.

"Funny how that works huh?"

Xena grunted for her response. "I couldn't believe you ruined it."

The Queen smirked. "I didn't ruin it, just made it more fun for her."

"Ha!" Xena turned some in her saddle to better face her friend. "You ruined it."

"Okay, Xena." Gabrielle held up one hand as a huge smirk took her expression over. "You are right, you're always right. I'm so wrong and you're always right."

The Warrior Princess glared at the other woman. "I hate when you do that," she muttered under her breath.

"Oh but I was just agreeing with you," taunted the small bard.

Xena grounded her teeth together. "Well its about time you realized I'm always right." She threw a smirk at her friend.

Gabrielle huffed and rolled her eyes.

"And can I ask where you got that from?"

"What? The 'you're right and I'm wrong' thing?"

"Hmmm," answered the warrior.

Gabrielle snickered and suddenly looked away from the older woman. "I can't tell, it's a secret."

"Okay I already know it has to do with mother. Give."

The bard furiously shook her head as she started laughing.

Xena just sighed while her friend was laughing about something.

"Oh gods, I love mom," whispered the bard between her laughter.

The warrior sighed again. "The things you two talk about, I can't imagine."

"You wouldn't want to," stated the Queen. She took a deep breath then said, "Mom always says you're wonderful, fun to be around, but the only problem you have is you think you're always right."

"Because I am," simply confirmed the 'always right' one.

"Yeah sure... so mom told me to just let you think you're always right even when you're wrong. Then you'll stay happy with me."

"I see."

Gabrielle started giggling after her explanation. "She's right though!" She then leaned to the right of her saddle and started laughing more.

Xena just shook her head as her friend laughed. "Done yet?"

The smaller woman straightened up in her saddle again and filled her chest with air. "Yeah... I think so." She then shifted in the saddle some more to get more comfortable. "Hades, you know what somebody should invent?"

"Hmmm?"

"Someway to heat saddles in the winter time." The bard raised an eyebrow. "I mean, in the winter time these things are so cold. You realize how nice it'd be if they just stayed warm all the time."

Xena grinned at the thought. "I'd buy one. I'd love that."

"I mean, the horse keeps the saddle fairly warm." Gabrielle pressed her lips together in thought. "But I mean a nice...."

"Low roast would be good."

"Yeah exactly," agreed the bard.

The Warrior Princess chuckled at that.

"Yup, I could see you be the first to get one of those."

"Why you say that?" inquired the warrior.

A grin streaked across the bard's features. "You love toys like that."

"I do not."

"Xena, come on now seriously." The bard pointed at the chakram dangling at Xena's side. "What you call that thing?"

Xena glanced down at it momentarily. "A weapon," she replied.

"It's a toy... to you. Maybe everybody else it's a weapon." Gabrielle laughed at that. "But to you, it's a toy."

The Warrior Princess snickered evilly. "It could be... but I'd never admit to that."

"Xena, you don't need any weapons to fight. You have them for show and for fun

because they're a toy to you."

Xena didn't reply but was grinning from ear to ear.

"Oh wait!" Suddenly Gabrielle's face brightened up, and she started talking rather fast. "Remember the time I bought that breast dagger!"

The Warrior Princess started laughing suddenly.

"You took that off me not because it was dangerous but because you wanted it for yourself!" roared the bard.

"I did not!" Xena tried giving a serious look. "I was concerned you'd nick your boob."

"Centaur shit!" The Queen laughed, her eyes watering around the edges. "You wanted that thing for yourself. That's a perfect example of a toy you wanted."

The warrior just chuckled evilly as her response.

"You still have that dagger?"

"Let me check..." The Warrior Princess freed her right hand from the reins and reached up. She pulled her breastplate out then peered down. "Oh yup, it's in there."

A few chuckles left the bard. "One day, you'll have to teach me that squeeze your boobs together and the dagger pops out trick."

"Nope." Xena grinned. "You're not experienced enough for that." She then paused and decided to torment her friend more. "Plus, you don't quite have the..." she held up her right hand to her breasts again. "The right size to just pop it out."

"Oh gee thanks, Xena," retorted Gabrielle. "At least mine don't hurt me."

The warrior grunted at that comment. "True."

Gabrielle then was silent for a little bit before looking at Xena again.

The warrior quickly noted the serious expression on the bard's face.

"Xena, can I ask you something and you answer honestly?"

Xena felt her stomach turn and her grip on the reins tightened. "I'll try my best, Gabrielle."

"Thank you."

"Go on," urged the warrior, she felt herself tremble briefly in nervousness.

"Okay, here goes...." The bard licked her lips as she put her question together correctly. "Would you ever... well would you ever date me?"



The warrior quickly felt herself trying to swallow that question down like a rock. "You mean... if you weren't dating as of right now?"

"Yeah exactly."

Xena chewed on her lower lip as she debated whether to tell the truth. She knew she couldn't lie to Gabrielle, she never had and tried not to hide anything from her either. "I think I would." She looked seriously at the bard. "If I had to honestly say what kind of person is my type, you would be it." She shrugged. "Plus I've known you for so long, I know who you are... I've always enjoyed being friends with you."

"Yeah... I've enjoyed our friendship for the past two years." Gabrielle smiled and added, "And I always wanted an older sister, that's what you've been to me too." She paused while in the middle of her thoughts. "I learned about life from you."

"I know you have," agreed the warrior. She then felt tempted to ask the same question of Gabrielle but yet that was all Gabrielle had told her. Looking away, she decided not to ask the question of the bard. "I think we'll be in the village soon here."

"Yeah I know." The Queen gazed over at the western sky. "What you think? About another fifteen minutes?"

"Around there."

"Xena, thanks for taking me to the centaur village."

Xena smiled at the thank you. "It was my pleasure. I was glad to catch up with you."

"Me too... I mean with you though."

The Warrior Princess gave a warm grin. "I know." She shrugged though after turning her attention away. "Don't forget though, I still have an opening for a... partner." She glanced back at Gabrielle. "If you're ever interested."

"I know," uttered the bard sadly. "You think you'll stay tonight?"

Xena slowly started shaking her head. "No, I think I need to keep moving."

Gabrielle nodded without saying much else.

Then within those fifteen minutes after, the pair arrived at the Amazon Nation. Xena decided to take a small break before she moved on and to make sure Gabrielle was settled. At the gates, Eponin had greeted them and Ephiny was soon to follow along with Solari. The regent was rather excited to receive the message from Phantes and the news that she'd lead the party to the centaur village.

The Amazon Queen, after getting her stuff from her horse, headed directly to her hut.

Xena on the other hand stay by the gates with the three Amazons.

"How was everything?" asked Ephiny.

"It went well." Xena leaned against the archway of the gates. "Gabrielle settled everything peacefully and everybody is happy."

"That's good to hear," stated Solari.

"Gabrielle enjoy her time away?" Ephiny had a rather worried expression.

The warrior considered the question for a moment then nodded. "I think so, she slept a lot."

"That's good," muttered the weapons master.

"She ate plenty and we had a good time."

Ephiny smiled at that and grasped the warrior's arm. "Thanks, Xena."

The Warrior Princess sighed sadly. "I wish I could do more."

"We do too," agreed the second in command.

"But... only so much any of us can do," reminded the regent as she released Xena's arm. "She has to decide what's best for her."

"Rather decide for her," muttered Solari.

Xena huffed her agreement at that. "Well let me know if things keep getting worse." She peered down at her friends. "I'll come back and... see if I can't settle things for good."

"You have to be careful about that, Xena." Ephiny paused. "We both know how Gabrielle is about people telling her what to do."

"Oh I know that... I was talking about Cheala." The warrior raised an eyebrow.

"I like her," joked the weapons master, she pointed a finger at Xena.

Xena chuckled at Eponin. She then saw Gabrielle coming towards them so she lifted herself off the gate. "Well I think this is my cue."

The Amazons looked and saw the Queen coming their way.

Gabrielle joined the group and smiled sadly at her best friend. "Well...."

Xena quickly saw Gabrielle's eyes were red from crying. "Hey...." She took a step forward, putting herself between the Amazons and Gabrielle. "What's going on?" She carefully reached and tilted Gabrielle's face up towards hers.

"It's nothing," whispered the bard. She gently wrapped her fingers into her friend's larger hand and pulled the hand away from her chin. "It just wasn't exactly a warm welcoming home."

Xena closed her eyes for a second, her temper flaring inside of her and she fought with it.

"Its okay," reassured Gabrielle.

The warrior bit her lower lip as her dark blue eyes opened again. "Yeah... right."

The Queen sighed and whispered, "Come here." Within a second, she had her arms tightly around her friend in a long hug.

Xena pulled Gabrielle in close, as she would dare. "Please take care of yourself, Gabrielle," she murmured into the bard's ear.

"I'll try if you do."

"I will," promised the warrior quietly.

Ephiny and Solari exchanged worried looks.

Eponin on the other hand shook her head faintly at the sad situation.

Finally the two friends broke apart. Xena then gave briefer hugs to the three Amazons. Climbing up onto Argo, Xena said goodbye to them but stopped when Gabrielle came beside her horse.

"I'll see you soon," promised the warrior.

Gabrielle smiled at that. "I'd like that." She grasped her friend's leg. "I'll miss you."

"I know." Xena then felt her smile go sadder. She then leaned down and whispered, "Remember, I always love you, Gabrielle." She placed a gentle kiss on her friend's forehead then afterwards uttered, "I didn't come back from the dead for myself." She straightened back up in her saddle and tapped Argo in the sides. She headed out of the gates.

Gabrielle turned a little and stood there, her arms against her chest and watched Xena ride towards the sunset. Slowly, tears began trickling down her cheeks.

Ephiny silently came up behind her Queen, her hands slipping onto her shoulders in reassurance. "Gabrielle... you lost her to death once." She squeezed the sore shoulders that rested under her hands. "Don't lose her again... not like this."

The Amazon Queen closed her eyes and dropped her head back; a very low whimper could be heard from her. "Oh gods...."

The regent gave one more squeeze then lowered her hands.

Gabrielle lowered her head back down and stared at Xena's distant figure. Then without another single thought, worry or fear; she made her final decision. She took off sprinting out of the Amazon village.

A huge smile took over Ephiny's expression.

"Xena!" yelled Gabrielle. "Wait, Xena!"

Xena heard Gabrielle calling for her and instantly halted her horse. She turned in her saddle right as Gabrielle came up beside Argo. "What's wrong?" she asked hastily and in worry. She saw all the tears coming from her best friend.

"Xena," rasped the bard in a fast and scared voice, "I can't keep going on like this. I'm not happy here and I can't stand being away from you. But I'm too scared to face Cheala about any of it. I don't know what to do, Xena." She started crying even more as she gripped Xena's leg tightly.

"Gabrielle, breathe... its okay." Xena reached down wiping away the tears. "I'm not going to leave you if you don't want me to."

"I know it's just... I don't know what to do, Xena." Gabrielle shook her head. "I don't know... what should I do, Xena? I trust you more than anybody else in the world. What should I do?" she begged.

Xena licked her lips slightly and brought her feet out of her stirrups. She swung her leg over the saddle, and dismounted her horse. She stood tall above her friend, her hands on Gabrielle's worn shoulders. "You want to know what I think you should do?" she uttered.

"Yes." The bard searched her friend's eyes for an answer.

Xena very gradually lowered her head and brought her lips against Gabrielle's own.

Gabrielle had closed her eyes then immediately clung to Xena for support.

Xena slid her arms around her friend's waist to help her and to pull her in more. She opened her mouth slightly, letting the tip of her tongue run across Gabrielle's lower lip.

The bard sighed and didn't refuse to open her own mouth. Her tongue running across Xena's own.

The warrior then pulled her tongue back, her lips starting to separate from Gabrielle's.

Gabrielle opened her eyes and stared into tender blue eyes. After a few moments, she then whispered, "Xena... really?"

Xena lowered her head again, her lips now going towards her friend's ear. "Yes... really," she whispered gently. "Two years ago, yes... today yes, and forever, yes."

Gabrielle whimpered and pulled the warrior in for a strong hug.

Xena smiled to herself as she hugged what she'd always claimed as her bard.

Ephiny just nodded at the scene of her two friends. "Finally... after two damn years."

The weapons master grinned at the regent's words. "I really like her," she commented about Xena.

Solari chuckled and added in, "Definitely... just kiss the girl. I like that myself."

The Amazon Queen pulled back from the hug. "Xena?"

"Yeah?"

"Can you wait here? Give me like at least five minutes, okay?"

The Warrior Princess laughed softly at the requests. "Of course."

"Thank you." Gabrielle released the warrior and did a quick turn around. She went racing back towards the village, headed for her hut to find her things.

Xena smiled at the sight and shifted closer to her horse. She folded her arms while leaning back against Argo.

Argo whined in question.

The Warrior Princess turned her head to the right towards Argo. "Yes, I guess that means you get apple treats again."

The mare threw her head up and whined in question again.

Xena sighed in annoyance but was smiling. "Yes, whiney... you get the cheese in the middle too."

Argo threw up her head and whined in happiness then stomped her feet on the ground in a little happy dance.

Xena grinned at her horse's happiness. "I know how you feel... but she's still mine."

Argo snickered with a nicker.

"Whiney," retorted the warrior, "Now I know why she calls you Whiney." She then straightened up off Argo's side as she saw her bard racing back towards her.

Gabrielle came right up to her partner and held out her satchel of scrolls to be placed in the saddlebags. "I have something to write about again." A happy smile formed across her lips.

Xena smiled too as her hand intertwined with Gabrielle's and they both held onto the satchel of stories together.

**The End**