

# ~ Changing Paths ~

by Red Hope

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**Disclaimers:** Violence ~ Definitely violence in this. This is something quite different. I normally try to keep violence low, but I really can't in this one.

Subtext ~ This starts out as subtext then it... well we'll see.

Copyright ~ Lets see, Universal and MCA both own Xena, Gabrielle, Argo, and Darphus. I though own Lux, Gelidus, Augeus, and Cacus. So don't take my characters or story line, I'm very protective of them.

Author's Note ~ This is a brand new series guys. It has nothing to do with my first series, The Binding of the Soulmates of Time. There may be some things similar to that one, otherwise it's a whole new series. I've also tried to make Xena more interesting then what she was in the episodes I'm taking her from. They showed her kinda of a like a little kid with a temper. I think she's better but that's up to you to decided. Enjoy this story and tell me what you think!

Started: April 1st 2000 on Sunday

Series Two-**Meeting in the Midst as One Story-One**

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## Part 1

### Section 1

~\*Part 1\*~

*"You haven't heard the last of me Hercules!"*

Xena's upper lip twitched at that as her own words rung through her mind. How she almost had that demigod. Almost. And almost isn't good enough. No, she'd try again. But at the right time and the right place.

The warlord sighed. She lifted herself off the post of her tent, her arms still crossed against her chest. She walked out of her tent and went into the warm day. She looked around for her second in command. Not finding him, she headed straight to his tent. Xena came in, ducking her head down some. "Darphus?"

Darphus turned around from his bed, his earrings sparkling for a moment. "Yes Xena?"

"I've changed my mind."

The man completely turned his body to face his commander. "What you mean?"

Xena narrowed her eyes. "We're not going to Parathion province." She shifted to the wood table in the center of the tent.

Darphus came up to the table, he looked down to the table. "Then where in Hades are

we going?"

The warlord looked up from the map on the table, her eyes still cold. "We're going here." She pointed down to the spot on the map.

The warrior looked down to where Xena pointed, he read the name. "Poteidaia?" He looked up to his commander. "What in Hades is in Poteidaia Xena?"

"Slaves."

Darphus furrowed his eyebrows. "We don't need slaves Xena. They'd only slow us down."

"Listen to me Darphus." Her voice was hard tone, it sent chills down the warrior's back. Xena continued. "I control this army, and we will go to Poteidaia. I want those women and children taken as slaves then sold."

Darphus grinned. "So that's the plan huh? Get more money?"

Xena straightened her back up and crossed her arms against her chest. "It is."

"I'm game then." The man now crossed his arms against her chest.

"Oh goody." Xena then shifted to the tent flap. "Make sure you let the rest know. We leave tomorrow morning." She walked through the tent and went outside.

~\*Part 2\*~

Xena took a deep breath. She watched as Darphus came galloping out of the gates of a village. She adjusted the reins in her hands. Beside her on another horse is her third in command, Gelidus. She'd never really liked the man. Then again she's never liked anybody. The only reason she kept Gelidus around is because he is scared of her. That's the only she liked about her third in command.

Darphus pulled his horse to halt beside the warlord's mare. "Xena?"

"What'd they say Darphus?"

"They said they refuse to come peacefully. I say we head down there now and kill every living thing."

The warlord kept her eyes down at the small village of Poteidaia. "No." She looked to Darphus. "We wait till tomorrow, give them time."

The second in command leaned to his left closer to Xena. "Don't give them the time Xena. We should-"

"No Darphus." Xena narrowed her eyes. "We fight with honor." She looked back to the small village, she grinned. "Besides, it'll give fear time to seep into their minds." She looked to her second and third in command. "Let's go back to camp."

~\*Part 3\*~

The warlord pulled back on her reins. It's the second day that they've come to Poteidaia. Behind her, she heard her men stop their horses then the footmen stopped walking behind. Darphus came up to Xena's right, Gelidus to her left. Xena looked to

Gelidus. "Go down there, see if they reconsidered."

Gelidus nodded. He kicked his stallion and went cantering towards the village.

"They'll be prepared."

The warlord narrowed her eyes as she looked to Darphus. "It won't change the outcome Darphus, only make it more interesting."

The second in command now narrowed his eyes. "Xena we should have taken the element of surprise yesterday."

"Don't tell me Darphus you are scared of villagers now?"

Darphus growled. "No."

"Good, then we wait till Gelidus comes back." She looked back to the village ahead. She spotted Gelidus coming back now.

The third in command came up to Xena's side. "They still refuse Xena and they're prepared."

Xena nodded. "I figured as much." Turning in her saddle she looked back to her men. "Take the women and children as prisoners! Spare any man who surrenders!" Turning forward, Xena unsheathed her sword. "Attack!" Her horse was sent into a gallop, her war cry escaped from her lips.

The air filled with the din of men screaming as they ran or rode their horses across the ground towards the village, their swords up. Within less than a candlemark, Xena the Warrior Princess will capture Poteidaia in Greece.

~\*~\*~\*~

Xena looked from her left to straight ahead, in her right hand was her sword, covered in blood. She reached behind to her cloak, she wiped the blood off. In front of her a ways is a cluster of women and children surrounded by her men. The warlord sheathed her sword. Her eyes narrowed as she watched Darphus.

Darphus grabbed the wrist of one young woman, he jerked her out of the group of women. "Don't ever try that again." He growled it out.

The young woman narrowed her eyes and spit in his face. "Like I'd listen to you."

Darphus wiped the spit off then reached down to his belt and removed a dagger, he lifted it near the girl's face. "Oh you will learn to listen to me." He lifted his arm a little more then began to bring it down quickly, but his arm was stopped. Darphus looked to his left into cold blue eyes.

"Don't even Darphus. We're warriors not butchers." Xena squeezed Darphus's wrist hard.

The man dropped his dagger. Darphus cursed under his breath and threw the young girl back into the group of women and children. He then left the group.

The warlord watched him go, she then looked back to the huddling women with their children, she grinned. "Well, I have to say today was a good day of fighting." She

crossed her arms against her chest. "I will be blunt with you all, each of you will be sold into slavery soon. So don't get comfortable."

"Wait."

Xena looked to her right. The girl Darphus had been harassing earlier was in front again, looking to Xena. The warlord narrowed her eyes. "And why?"

The young girl took a step closer to the warlord. "Don't sell us into slavery."

Xena grinned evilly, she leaned down some to the smaller younger woman. "Then what do you expect me to do? Shower you with happiness?" The warlord heard all her men start to laugh at her joke. She straightened back up.

"No I don't expect you to at all." The young girl took a deep breath, she felt her body shaking. She didn't know which was scarier. The stories she'd heard of the Warrior Princess or her beauty. Either way, she was breathless by both. "There's got to be another way."

Xena laughed sarcastically. "There is no other way girl. There is nothing here that Poteidaia can offer me." She grinned. "Other than slaves."

The young girl held her hands out in front of herself. "No wait, there's got to be another way. Maybe uh... how about a treaty? You know between you and Poteidaia?"

The Warrior Princess narrowed her eyes. "I have no use for Poteidaia. You're wasting my time."

"Think about it, if you have a treaty with Poteidaia then we could offer you food and supplies anytime you come through this area. You can't tell me that is less valuable than the money you'll receive from the slavers. Even more so when the money runs out."

"That wouldn't cut it." Xena then began to move.

The young girl ran her right hand through her hair. "I'll... I'll offer you personally... my... my services." She closed her eyes as she just realized what she said. Her services? What in Tartarus is that? But then again if she can be near Xena, she can get Xena dead. Paybacks, retribution, and death. How gods how these days in age revolved around these sort of things.

Xena turned back around to the girl. "Your services huh?" Xena grinned. "And what services would those be?"

The young woman grinned. "I have many skills."

The warlord arched an eyebrow at that. She felt as if that were a competition. Oh how she loved those. "Deal. I receive a treaty with Poteidaia for supplies and you. In return I will not take the women and children to be sold into slavery."

The young girl nodded. "It's a deal then."

"No!" An older woman pushed her way through the crowd and grasped the younger

woman.

The younger woman turned to the older woman. "It's okay Mom."

"No its not, I'm not letting that murdering harlot take my daughter!" She looked up to the Warrior Princess.

Xena grinned. "Sorry, the deal has been made." She turned her head to her left to Gelidus. "Take the girl and free these people."

Gelidus stepped into the group and grasped the young girl by the arms, pulling her from her mom's grasp.

"No don't take my daughter!" The woman struggled to keep her daughter. But she lost her grasp. "No! Gabrielle!" She began to cry.

The young girl looked back to her mother. She didn't know what to say as she was pushed out of the crowd of people. She just kept her eyes locked with her mother's.

Gelidus looked up from his hostage to his commander.

The warlord looked to him. "Take Gabrielle." She looked down to Gabrielle in his arms with an evil smirk. "My slave to my tent."

Gelidus nodded his head and hauled Gabrielle off and out of the village.

~\*~\*~\*~

Xena ducked her head down as she walked into her tent. As soon as she rose to her full height, she looked to the person in front of her, in the center of her tent. The warlord stood there staring at the young girl. She took in her clothes.

The girl dressed in a brown dress that reached to her ankles, then a regular peasant sky blue shirt and a blue cotton jacket with brown stripes on the arms. Her hair is a brilliant blond her body small and still young. And even from here, Xena could see her crystal green eyes.

Xena walked up to her with no expression. She looked down into those emerald eyes. Xena lowered her head closer to Gabrielle's. The smaller woman began to breathe heavy. The warlord's eyes narrowed and she straightened back up and quickly walked to her left, her cape flowing behind her. Gabrielle sighed in relief.

"Tomorrow, I'll return to your village to take care of the treaty." Xena turned away from her desk to Gabrielle. "I'm giving you the option to tell me if you want anything from your home."

Gabrielle turned to look to the warlord. "There's... nothing I need."

Xena nodded, she walked up to Gabrielle again. "Very well then." She looked down to the other woman again. "You will sleep in the tent with the cooks, they shouldn't bother you. Find the man that brought you here, Gelidus, he'll tell you where the tent is."

"Is that it Xena?"

The warlord's right hand shot out to grasp the smaller woman's left wrist. She raised

Gabrielle's arm as she squeezed tightly. "You will respect me. Do you understand me?"

The peasant girl had her teeth clench against the pain. "Yes."

"Good." Then she squeezed a little harder. "And don't call me Xena." She grinned. "I'm your mistress." Xena then tightened her hold enough to almost break Gabrielle's bones. But she didn't and roughly jerked the young woman's arm away.

Gabrielle stared up into Xena's eyes. "Yes Mistress." It was low and seeped with hatred.

"Now get out." Xena said that in a growl. "I'll call for you when I need your... *services.*"

"Yes my mistress." She still stared up and then walked out of the warlord's tent. When she left the tent to be in the early evening, she let out a breath she'd been holding. She looked down to her left wrist to see it red and starting to swell. Reaching with her right hand, she began to rub at it. Earlier Gabrielle had wanted to rub at it, but didn't want to show any sort of weakness towards the warlord.

Gabrielle sighed and kept walking. She kicked herself mentally for the pit she got herself into. *My services? What was I thinking? I'm never going to make it.* She then took a deep breath. *No, I'm going to get even with that murderer, I don't care what it takes.* Sighing, the young girl looked around for the third in command. She spotted the nasty man with a reddish hair and beard.

Night had come soon after Gabrielle went to the cooks' tent. There she'd set herself up a space in the tent. She'd found out there were three cooks total, she hadn't met them yet. But she knew she would later tonight. Right now though, she was walking to the dinner tent. Gabrielle just hoped these cooks could cook well, her stomach was growling.

She walked into the tent a little ways, what she found were filthy all male warriors sitting at benches eating. Her appetite dropped. The peasant girl was about to turn around and leave, but she felt a presence come in behind her.

"You're not leaving."

Gabrielle closed her eyes at the familiar voice. She turned around to look up into sapphire eyes. "Yes Mistress."

Xena looked down. "Get use to it slave, you're here for life." She then looked up. "Follow me." She walked past the girl and walked to the other side of the tent where there is a long table set up with food. At the far right end was where the wine and port was located with mugs. The warlord looked to her slave. "You're to come up here to get the food for me and drinks." Walking to the opposite end of the table, they came to where stacks of dirty dishes were starting to accumulate. "This is where the dishes go at the end. Got me?"

Gabrielle simply nodded her head.

The Warrior Princess smiled. "Good, now get the food and drinks together. I'll be waiting at one of the benches."

The peasant narrowed her eyes. "Sure." Gabrielle watched her mistress go to a bench and sit down. Turning back around she sighed and walked down to the food table and picked up a plate. This is going to be a long night and she knew it.

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Xena dropped her fork onto her empty plate. She looked across her table to Darphus. "I want you to come by my tent later tonight, bring your map. We need to discuss where we're going."

The second in command nodded. "Alright."

The warlord nodded her head. She sat on the end of the bench. To her right on the ground was Gabrielle, sitting.

Xena looked up from her with a grin.

"What you plan to do with her Xena?"

The warlord looked to the second in command. "Whatever I please, she is my slave."

"You can't be serious Xena."

The Warrior Princess narrowed her eyes. "I am Darphus. And don't get any ideas in your thick head to do something to her."

Gabrielle looked up at hearing that, her heart rate picked up. How could she forget how she'd punched Darphus back in Poteidaia? But deep inside she felt this small warmth spark from Xena's defense of her. She rammed that warmth deep down with her hatred for the warlord.

"Trust me Xena."

Xena made a growl response. "I don't Darphus." She stood up from her seat with her plate and fork. Xena went to the other side of the tent to rid herself of her dirty dishes.

Gabrielle was about to spring up, but she saw Darphus looking down at her. She looked to him and he gave her a knocked out tooth smile, his eyes glistening with trouble. The small woman felt a chill ripple through her body. Then to her left she saw Xena coming back.

The warlord held an apple and banana in her right hand, she looked down to Gabrielle. "Come slave." Xena then walked past Gabrielle to the tent flap.

The peasant girl got up and followed behind the Warrior Princess. The warlord reached her tent entrance, she stopped there and turned around the young girl. "Here." She tossed Gabrielle the fruit.

Gabrielle stared down at the fruit for a second a bit surprised. She looked up with cold eyes. "Thank you." It was a bitter thank you.

"Go to your tent till tomorrow." Xena then turned on her heels and walked into her tent.

The peasant stared at the tent flap for a moment, she then headed to the cooks' tent to

sleep there for the night.

~\*Part 4\*~

She felt somebody grasp her right shoulder and shake her. Gabrielle moaned and opened her eyes to see an older man looking down at her. She stiffened up quickly.

"It's okay little one."

The peasant girl took a deep breath and tried to remember where she is, it quickly came to her. It was no dream.

"You need to get up. You're helping me and the other two cooks get the food ready for today." The man stepped back.

"Where's Xena?"

"She went to Poteidaia to conduct the contract with the town."

The peasant nodded her head. Gabrielle swung her feet over the bed and stood up. "What's your name?"

The chef smiled. "My name's Lux. Yours is Gabrielle right?"

The young woman nodded. "Yeah, how'd you know?"

Lux grinned. "You're the talk of the camp."

"Really? Why?"

"Because Xena spared that village for you." He then turned to the tent flap. "Come on little one."

Gabrielle stood there still for a moment. *Because Xena spared that village for you.* The words repeated in her head. She blinked and shook her head, she followed behind Lux.

She met the other two cooks; Augeus and Cacus.

Augeus was originally a warrior for Xena but ended up getting physically ruined. But Xena had decided to keep him as a chef, Augeus never minded.

Cacus on the other hand was young, Gabrielle's age actually. He stumbled into Xena's camp about a month ago. They'd taken him and decided to make use of him knowing the cooks could use his help. Cacus though had been living on his own, never known who his family is.

But by late morning Xena had returned. She rode back in to the cleared camp with Darphus, and five other men behind her. Once she came into the camp, she dismounted from her mare, her other men doing the something. The warlord then went about making sure her army was in order.

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Gabrielle stood there and studied the warlord. She watched as Xena fought five of her own men for practice, just practice. The peasant would hate to see Xena fight in a regular situation. Thankfully she never saw the warlord kill her father and sister, but



she knew it had happened. Gabrielle knew Lila wasn't killed personally by Xena but her father. When she saw her father dying on the ground, she rushed over to him. He'd whispered that the Warrior Princess had stabbed him with her sword without a second thought.

Since then, Gabrielle has never been the same. She's never hated somebody more than now. She hated the warlord yet for some reason she was drawn to Xena. Although she fought the draw, she wouldn't follow through with it. She would just ignore it. Right now, she wanted to get close to the warlord, physically. So then she can kill Xena. Knowing how she was going to do that, she had yet to figure out. But either way she would kill the warlord in revenge for her father and sister.

One thing was for sure, it's going to be Hades hard to kill this warlord. Gabrielle just saw Xena do a back flip and back kick one man, twist around and punched another man. The warlord then just stood there shaking her head. All five men down on the ground, out cold.

She looked up to the crowd of her warriors watching to pick things up from their commander. "That was pathetic. I stopped all five of you with my bare hands. And you call yourselves warriors?" The warlord narrowed her eyes, she walked out of the open space. "Get cleaned up." Xena then walked up to her slave.

Gabrielle held a water skin for the warlord to drink from. The warlord took it and drank from it. She then handed it back to the smaller girl. Xena then looked down with hard eyes. "Go back and help the cooks."

The peasant narrowed her eyes. "Alright." She said it grudgingly.

Xena's teeth clench, she reached to her waist, she removed a dagger. She put it to the young woman's neck and held it tight there. "You will respect me." The dagger was pressed a little harder.

The slave stared up into the warlord's eyes, she tried to ignore the knife point. "I am doing as you wish."

"Don't play games with me. If you do not stop with this centaur shit, I have no problem going back to your home village." Xena grinned. "It is in our agreement."

Gabrielle closed her eyes then opened them again. "Yes my mistress."

"Good." The warlord removed the dagger.

The peasant then turned around and walked off, she headed through the camp. She had her head down low, not paying attention to anything. Then she felt herself hit somebody. Looking up, she found out whom.

"Nice to see you slave." Darphus reached down with his right hand to Gabrielle's shoulder. "I still owe you for last time." He grinned.

"Don't."

The warrior laughed. "Is this slave telling me what to do?" He pulled her roughly against his body. "I'll show you some manners."

"Darphus?"

The man looked up and soon found a fist in his face. He released the peasant and stepped back. Darphus looked to see whom punched him. "Xena?"

The warlord grinned, she stood behind Gabrielle. "You got it." She walked past Gabrielle to come near the warrior. "Don't touch *my* slave."

Darphus reached up to his upper lip, he wiped the blood away. "Very well then." He walked off.

Xena turned around to face Gabrielle. "You're lucky."

Gabrielle glared at the warlord. "About what? I'd rather have been raped by him then saved by you."

Xena grinned. "As you wish." The warlord then walked off.

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Gabrielle sighed, she flopped down on her bed and sighed. She was so tired from the long day. But yet she isn't ready to go to sleep. So she stood up and walked out of the tent again, she went to sit down on the ground at the far end of the tent.

She heard boots scuff on the ground, her body tensed. Looking up, she spotted Lux coming towards her.

"Hey little one."

She smiled a little. "Hey Lux."

He stepped up to her and then he slowly sat down. And slowly because of his worn body, his old age. Lux looked to Gabrielle with a smile. "Long day huh?"

The peasant sighed. "To say the least."

Lux nodded then looked a head, he stared down the torch lit camp and towards the woods. "How you been doing little one?"

"Okay."

"Yeah?" He took a deep breath. "I'm old but I know things. And I know you're angry."

"Why shouldn't I be Lux? I'm Xena's slave."

"But if I recall right little one you wanted to be."

Gabrielle sighed. "Yeah well I thought it would be better then having my town enslaved." *Not to mention maybe kill her.*

"And that is very brave of such a little one like you Gabrielle." He looked to Gabrielle. "But don't stay angry for so long."

"And why?"

"Because you'll be no better then Xena herself."

The young girl stared at Lux for a moment, she then looked away. "Maybe."

"You know it's the truth little one. Beat her at her own game Gabrielle."

Gabrielle looked to the cook with furrowed brows. "And what game is that?"

"Her game of control." He sighed. "You have to understand her little one."

"What's there to understand Lux?" She shook her head. "You can't tell me she's not some murdering bitch?"

"I can't argue with that." Lux locked his hands together and dropped them in his lap. "You see little one, I've known her for awhile, she hasn't always been like this."

"Oooh. What she use to kill every other day instead of every day?" Gabrielle bitterly laughed and looked away. "She'll get hers."

Lux sighed. "Gabrielle, stop the hate. It needs to end sometime and love needs to rule again."

Gabrielle whipped her head to stare at Lux, her eyes welded up with tears. "Are you asking me to forgive that murdering harlot? Forgive the person that has killed my father and sister then enslaved me? Is that what you are asking me?"

"Yes." He kept his eyes locked with Gabrielle's.

"Why?"

"Because this world needs somebody like you Gabrielle. Somebody with so much hope, love and light."

Gabrielle laughed bitterly again, she looked away. A few tears rolled down her cheeks. "Right, I have no hope, love or... light. Xena killed it all."

"Did she really?" Lux stood up from sitting beside Gabrielle. He looked down. "Remember Gabrielle, everything is a theater even Xena is. She's got a backstage." The cook then walked off going into his tent.

The small peasant still sat there, she stared up at the stars. Tears began to roll down her face. She kept thinking about her father and sister who were killed in the battle. That only made her cry more. The pain of losing her father and sister along with her memories of them. Finally though, she's released some of her pain, some of her hatred. But only some.

Gabrielle lifted her head to stare up at the stars. "I'll beat Xena... somehow."

~\*Part 5\*~

By the next morning, she was awoken by Lux again but way before dawn.

"Look little one. Xena wants us breaking camp early this morning. You need to get up."

Gabrielle nodded. "Alright."

Gabrielle and the three cooks prepared for breaking camp. They had to prepare quick and easy foods to eat on the road. Xena wanted to travel all day to the north. Gabrielle was more than busy, almost tired by the time she was done her chores.

The warlord was getting her own mare ready. She walked around a tent with Argo in tow. She quickly spotted Gelidus and walked up to him. "Are we ready to go?"

The third in command nodded. "We are."

Xena nodded. "Great, where's my slave?"

"I'm here my mistress." Gabrielle walked through some warriors and came up to Xena.

The warlord looked down to her, then she looked up to Gelidus. "Tell the men to get their horses saddle up and we're headed out of here right now."

The man nodded. "It'll be done." He then left to gather the men up.

Xena looked to her slave and then walked to the saddlebags of her mare. She reached in and pulled out a rope. "Come here."

The peasant girl walked over to Xena.

"Hold your wrists up together."

Gabrielle did as she was told and she watched as Xena began to wrap one end of the rope around her wrists. She looked up with cold eyes to the warlord. "Why?"

The Warrior Princess jerked the rope tight making Gabrielle flinch. She then began to tie a knot. "To make sure you don't run off."

"I won't."

Xena looked up to her. "You haven't earned my trust to let me believe that." She took the other end of the rope and turned to her horse. She tied that end of the rope to the saddle horn. Turning back around, she added on to her last statement. "Besides, you don't want to wonder around these men." Then the warlord climbed up onto her warhorse and looked in front to see her men all ready to move.

Gelidus came up to her on his horse. "The men are ready."

Xena nodded. "Good lets go." She turned her mare around and kicked her into a walk. Gabrielle walked beside the horse.

The third in command looked back to the men. "Let's move!" Xena's army started walking behind her.

The long trek north quickly wore on Gabrielle. She was tired by the late morning, she was never expecting to do walking all day to add. Not to mention she never had time to get something to eat. She hadn't eaten properly for a day. It was weighing on her.

Now though as they kept marching, the sun was sinking into the west, it was afternoon. Her legs ached, her body was hot from the sun baking her with no water. Then her wrists ached strongly from the tight bonds. She was about to give up any

second.

Xena looked down to her left at the girl. Her eyes narrowed as she noticed how pale the girl looked. The warlord pulled on the left rein to bring Argo off the rode and to the side. She hopped off the mare's back while her men kept walking past.

Gabrielle felt relief in stopping, she looked to her mistress.

The Warrior Princess shifted close to her. "Get up on the horse, I'll help."

The small woman didn't move, she just stared in the warlord's eyes. She was amazed by what is happening. She nodded her head and shifted close to the horse, she realized just how high the horse was.

"Put your left foot in that stirrup and grab the saddle horn as best as possible."

Again the peasant girl nodded. She slipped her left foot in the stirrup and grabbed the horn between her bonded hands. She then began to lift herself. She felt warm hands grasp her sides and help push her up. Once she got up into the saddle, she noticed Xena's left hand lingered on her side for a second more then needed.

Xena then reached forward of Gabrielle and gathered the reins. Looking up, she noticed her slave was using her legs mostly to hold herself still in the saddle. She sighed and reached down to her right boot. She retrieved her dagger and looked up to Gabrielle. "Let me see your hands."

Gabrielle looked down and then turned a little to hold her roped hands down. The knife went to her bonds.

"Can I trust you?"

The slave looked down to lock eyes with Xena. "Yes." She thought she'd just lied, but she knew she hadn't.

The warlord nodded and cut the bonds. She removed the rope and noticed how red the girl's wrists were, she didn't know she'd tied them that tight. Turned to her saddlebags she shoved the rope into the bag. Her dagger went back into its home and she started to walk, Argo in tow.

Now they were walking behind the army instead at the front. It was a different scenery then what Xena was use to. She sighed and tightened her hold on the reins some. "Did you get something to eat this morning?"

Gabrielle shook her head. "No."

Xena nodded. "Reach into my right saddlebag, there's some trail bars in there and a water skin."

The slave nodded. "Thank you." It was low but more sincere compared to last night's thank you.

For a while there was silence as Gabrielle ate. The pair listened to the clip clop of the horses' hooves and the warriors' armor clanking from the army.

The peasant girl took one last sip from the water skin and placed it into the saddlebag

again. Her wrists still ached while her shoulders hurt from being forward so much. She sighed and shifted in the saddle a little.

"Don't get to comfortable."

Gabrielle looked down. "Why Mistress?"

Xena kept her eyes pinned ahead. "Because you're going to be walking a lot, get used to it."

Gabrielle's upper lip twitched. "Yes Mistress." She looked back ahead. "Where... where we going?"

The warlord looked up. "We're headed north to Cirra."

"Cirra?"

Xena nodded as she looked back ahead. "It's a fair size village. Have an old score to settle with them."

Gabrielle felt her body go cold, she didn't like the sound of it. "What happened Mistress?"

"It's none of your concern slave."

The slave closed her eyes to fight the anger. "Yes Mistress."

The day kept moving, so did the army. Surprisingly, Gabrielle was allowed to still ride Argo till they made camp. The army going off the rode and into a large grass field. There they began to unpack some of the things and camp for the night. Xena wanted to get moving early the next morning, she had plans to make it to Cirra in two more days.

Once though they came to the open grass field, Gabrielle got off the mare. The warlord telling her to go help Lux and the others to prepare for dinner. The peasant girl had nodded at that and went to find them. By night, the chefs and Gabrielle had the dinner prepare.

~\*Part 6\*~

The following day found Xena and her army traveling again. They'd broke camp early in the morning.

Gabrielle had her hands tied again. She'd walked far behind the warlord's mare, she was walking just in front of a number of warrior's horses. Snickers and low talking filled the air around Gabrielle. She knew they were talking about her.

They weren't just talking about her but also about Xena not enslaving Poteidaia. Xena's warriors thought her weak of this. And when they talk of this, their voices seeped with hatred and anger. That in turn made her grin, she like their anger towards Xena and maybe she could use it. But as they kept talking and Gabrielle heard them getting on the topic of Darphus, she was no longer agreeing. She didn't like Darphus and they all sided with him over Xena.

She actually rather side with Xena over Darphus.

But the day kept moving. By the time Xena decided to stop marching it was late afternoon. Gabrielle's legs ached but the warlord told her to go with Lux again. She was starting to figure out her job at nights, being a slave chef.

Gabrielle though for some reason persuaded Lux about trying a new dinner. Believing it would put Xena and her men in a better mood. And so they had, the slave actually nervous that it wouldn't settle well with the warlord. But she would take full responsibility to it. And if it made her relation with the warlord worse then she wouldn't care.

Gabrielle lifted the plate in one hand, in her other was a mug with a fork and knife. She carried it through the food tent to where Xena sat. She came up to the Warrior Princess and placed the plate of food down then the mug with the utensils.

"Sit down slave."

The peasant girl nodded her head, she sat down on the ground again. Things were the same all over again, she sat on the ground while Xena ate and talked to Darphus.

Darphus slammed his mug down and spoke to Xena in a low but angry tone. "That's stupid Xena."

Immediately the warlord's head went up, her eyes ice cold. "Darphus, the only reason it's stupid to you is because you are stupid." Xena then went back to eating her meal. She was actually liking it, honey marinated chicken with broccoli and white rice.

The man snarled. "Xena why do you want to take Cirra over? They'll be waiting for you."

"Because I said so Darphus."

Gabrielle wasn't liking this conversation. She was actually siding with Xena while her anger shifting from Xena to Darphus. She couldn't stand the man nor the sight of him.

"Because you said so? What is that Xena? Cirra has you on their hit list after last time. You think I'm stupid, you're the stupid one for returning."

Xena looked up again, her eyes narrow.

That's when Gabrielle stood up from the ground, she reached forward to Xena's mug. "I'll fill your mug up Mistress." As she began to lift the warlord's mug, she hit Darphus's mug with her arm, rather hard. The half-filled mug fell into Darphus's lap.

"Why you bitch." The second in command reached down into his lap to get the mug.

The slave looked to Xena, the warlord already looking up to her. Xena arched an eyebrow at her in question, Gabrielle just winked back. "I'll be back with your mug my mistress." She walked off with Xena's mug. All the way to the table with the drinks, she could hear Darphus cursing.

She filled the mug and returned to the table, Xena was still eating. She carefully placed the mug down on the table again. Once the base of the mug met the table, Darphus's hand shot out to grasp Gabrielle's wrist. The young woman looked down to him.

"Want to make sure you don't... accidentally spill your mistress's mug. We wouldn't want that would we?" He squeezed tighter.

"Darphus, leave her alone." Xena pinned the man with her eyes.

Darphus looked to his commander, his upper lip twitched. He then released Gabrielle's hand. "I can't quite understand why the rest of the men can't use the slave."

Gabrielle removed her hand as Xena responded to Darphus. "Because she is *mine*. Get it in your head before I do it for you." She then looked up to her slave. "Go help out Lux with the dishes. Once you're done come by my tent."

The small girl nodded. "Yes Mistress." Gabrielle then quickly left to go help the other cooks. She'd felt a sort of satisfaction in angering Darphus. Though right now she wasn't sure whether siding with Xena was in her best interest or not.

~\*~\*~\*~

"Mistress?" Gabrielle straightened up from ducking into Xena's tent.

The warlord turned around from her bed. Xena only stood in her armor and leathers, the cape and boots gone. "Come over here."

Slowly the young woman walked over to Xena. She looked up to Xena.

"Sit down."

Gabrielle did as she was told, she sat on the bed and adjust her skirt some then crossed her legs at the ankle.

"Care to explain why you knocked Darphus's mug over?"

The slave shrugged her shoulders. "He was being rude to you."

Xena nodded her head. She walked over to her trunk and opened it. "So that was the only reason?"

The young woman looked to Xena. "Well, I said I'd offer you my services. I guess... well it's part of my services."

The warlord took off her armor now, placing it in the trunk. All she had on was her leather and some jewels in her hair. She walked back to face the other woman.

"Interesting." A pause as she studied Gabrielle's eyes. "You do realize you are the first person to ever defend my honor?"

"No Mistress." Gabrielle took a deep breath. "Nobody has ever before?"

Xena's eyes went to slits, she bent her head down close to Gabrielle's. "For a slave, you ask to many things."

The slave kept her head high. "That's just me."

The warlord rose back up. "Mmm." Xena grinned. "Just don't do it too often."

Gabrielle blinked, she was stunned but nodded her head. "Yes mistress."



Xena walked over to the other side to sit down in a chair, she faced Gabrielle. "You got something to eat I assume?"

"Yes I did."

"Good, I don't need you fainting on the road tomorrow."

The peasant narrowed her eyes but just a little. For her anger wasn't as strong now. "I won't."

Xena grinned. "Good."

The young woman calmed back down. She asked a question with hard tone. "Can I ask you something Mistress?"

"Yesss."

"Why do you keep Darphus around?"

Xena nodded a few times. "Keep your friends close but keep your enemies closer."

Gabrielle furrowed her eyebrows. "You mean he's like a friendly enemy?"

"Something like that." Xena then crossed her arms against her chest. "So you cook huh?"

"Yes, how'd you know?"

The warlord grinned. "Because I'm use to having the same old centaur shit for dinner but tonight was different."

The slave crossed her arms against her check. "Bad change?"

"No I liked it, keep at it."

Gabrielle smiled a little at that. The smile seemed to reflect on Xena, because she smiled just the same. The warlord then wiped away the smile quickly, her eyes harden again. That only made the slave drop her smile as well.

There was an awkward silence for awhile then Xena broke it. "You better get to bed. We have a long trek up to Cirra." Xena stood up.

Gabrielle stood up. "Yes Mistress." She padded over to the tent flap.

"Slave?"

The peasant stopped at the tent and turned around to look to the tall warlord. "Yes?"

"Truce between us?"

Gabrielle stared at the other woman. She couldn't believe what she was just asked. Why would this warlord want a truce. Maybe Lux is right? But about which part? The control game or the backstage? The peasant decided to go with it so she could find out this warlord's game. "Truce then." She paused. "But it doesn't mean I like you."

The warlord nodded. "Reasonable."

The slave nodded and turned back around and walked out of the tent, she went to the cooks' tent. She then found herself in bed.

~\*Part 7\*~

Gabrielle found herself woken up early. She had to help get the camp ready to leave. She'd heard that Xena wanted to get near the outskirts of Cirra by late afternoon. But she hadn't heard what would happen once they got to Cirra. She just assumed that they'd conquered the village.

By late afternoon the army was almost ready to move. Gabrielle stood by the warlord's mare, holding the reins waiting for Xena to return. And she did.

She came up to Gabrielle and took the reins. Xena then locked eyes with Gabrielle. "I'm giving you a chance. I'm trusting you not to run off."

The peasant girl nodded. "I won't Mistress."

Xena nodded. She then hopped up into the saddle on Argo and looked to her men. "Let's move! We have a lot of ground to cover!" The warlord then squeezed Argo's side, the mare started walking.

The entire day the army walked, none stop. Gabrielle walked beside the warlord's horse. She was constantly looking around, never really paying attention to her surroundings. Off to her right she saw Darphus come up to Xena's right flank.

"Xena, we'll be near Cirra soon."

The warlord nodded. "Good."

"Where should we make camp? Close to Cirra?"

"No farther from Cirra."

Darphus narrowed his eyes. "Why? We should be near the village to scare them."

"Um excuse me?"

Xena and the second in command both looked to Gabrielle who walked to the left of Xena's horse.

Gabrielle took a deep breath. "Sorry, but if you camp near Cirra won't that warn them and only make them prepare for the attack? Then you'll lose the element of surprise."

The warlord grinned and looked to Darphus. "You see Darphus, even a slave would know the stupidity of camping near the town." She then went serious. "No I want us to camp far away."

Darphus gritted his teeth. "Yes Xena." He then slowed his horse's walk. He kept his eyes pinned on Gabrielle.

Xena's army trekked for another candlemark. Gabrielle was feeling the wear of it on her legs and feet. She sighed and crossed her arms against her chest.

The warlord looked down to her then back up. She talked low to Gabrielle. "How you

feel?"

The small woman looked up to Xena and noticed the warlord wasn't looking to her. She studied the warlord's profile trying to figure out the warlord's purpose by that question. So she looked back ahead and decided to respond. "I feel tired Mistress."

Xena nodded. "That's what I figured." She took a deep breath. "Don't worry, we're almost there."

And the Warrior Princess was right. They came around two bends and off to their right was an open field of grass with quite a view of rolling grass hills. Then a large woods off to the side. Gabrielle stood there just memorized.

Xena got off her warhorse next to the slave.

The peasant looked to the warlord. "That's beautiful." Gabrielle had just let her shell fall.

The older woman grinned. "I know." She then went serious. "Go help."

Gabrielle's walls came flying back up, her eyes hollow. "Yes Mistress."

~\*~\*~\*~

The night went by fast for Gabrielle. She'd helped make dinner with something that was actually good again. She tried to not antagonize Darphus again like she had the night before. Fortunately she hadn't. Now though she just finished cleaning the dishes from the dinner.

But there was one thing bugging her. Where was Xena? The warlord had not been at dinner. And for some reason it actually made Gabrielle concerned. A warlord without dinner? Oh gods she didn't want to know what that is like.

So she decided to be a true slave. She'd stacked up a plate with tonight's dinner and walked through the camp, she came to the warlords tent and went inside. "Mistress?"

The warlord sat at her desk and turned around. "Yes?" The warlord had the room fairly dark this time only four candles lit and on her desk. She'd turned around in her seat to see Gabrielle. "I'd figured to be going to sleep by now."

The young woman nodded. "I was going to but you weren't at dinner."

Xena nodded her head. "Is that why you're here? Concerned about my diet?"

Gabrielle sighed. Why'd she come anyway? But she came up with a response. "Normally I get rather grouchy without dinner, especially before bed."

The warlord grinned. "Sso you are concerned about my diet."

The slave narrowed her eyes. "Maybe." She then took a big step with the relation she has with the warlord. "So do you want this food or not?"

The Warrior Princess crossed her arms against her chest, she kept her grin amazingly. "Since you cooked it, yes."

"If I hadn't?"

"I wouldn't want it. The other cooks' food are getting old."

Gabrielle nodded, she walked over to the warlord's desk. She carefully placed the plate of food down. "Anything else?"

"No." Xena looked back to her desk. "And thank you."

The peasant looked away, her hands went to her hips and she looked back to Xena. She couldn't believe she was about to say this. "I'm not just concern about your diet but about something else."

"Really?" Xena turned to look up to Gabrielle. "You're developing a lot of concerns towards me for a slave."

"Yeah well somebody needs to around here." The slave crossed her arms against her chest.

"Interesting." Xena now crossed her arms. "And what is this other... *concern* of yours?"

"Your men keep talking about Darphus."

Xena looked back to her desk. "You think I haven't heard the rumors slave? I know what goes on."

"He's stirring up the men."

The older woman looked back to the peasant. "And where do you fall into this slave? It is none of your concern."

"No it is."

The warlord narrowed her eyes. "How?"

"Because I'm a part of this army too." Gabrielle took a deep breath and calmed herself. "Look, I'm just telling you what I see and hear. Sorry I bothered to be... concerned." The slave then began to walk to the tent flap.

"Did I say you could leave slave?" The warlord then stood up, her eyes pinned on the other woman.

The peasant stopped and turned around to look at the warlord. "No."

Xena nodded, she walked up to Gabrielle. "So tell me slave since you seem to know everything. Tell me what to do about Darphus."

Gabrielle sighed. "Forget it. Sorry I mentioned anything."

The warlord took another step closer, her body almost pressing against Gabrielle's. She lowered her head to look down into Gabrielle's eyes. "Finish it." Her eyes narrowed.

The slave stared up into ice eyes. She reached deep down inside herself and replied without letting her voice shake. "Stop him."

"There is little I can do."

Gabrielle's eyes widen. "What? Why?"

The warlord smiled to Gabrielle. "Because by my code he has not broken anything. I can not do anything till he's broken one of my codes." She took a step back from Gabrielle.

"Wait... so you're going to wait till he does something then you'll do something?"

"That's about right." Xena walked over to her desk.

"That's crazy."

Xena quickly looked to Gabrielle, her eyes narrowing. "It is my way slave."

She'd crossed a line. "Well... that's not my problem then."

The warlord grinned. "I thought you just said it is?"

Gabrielle narrowed her eyes. "No, my concern not my problem. He wants to kill you and not me."

"If I'm not mistaken slave, you were the one who spit in his face, punched him, spilled his mug then made him look stupid. I'd say he is your problem."

The peasant sighed, she looked down to the floor. "He is." She looked up. "But there is nothing I can do."

"And why?" Xena crossed her arms against her chest.

Now Gabrielle let walls fall, her eyes lifted to Xena. A sort of plead were in them. "Because I can't protect myself."

Xena locked eyes with this younger woman. This younger woman that is a peasant and had just stood up to her all the while defending her honor against Darphus. Now there was this pull she felt, from somewhere from somehow. Xena had no idea though why. And the scary part for her is she can't push it away as she stood here with her eyes locked with this other woman.

The warlord turned around to face her desk. "I protect my army, you're apart of my army."

Gabrielle stared at the older woman's back. She didn't know what to say so she just turned around and grabbed the tent flap.

"Gabrielle?"

The small woman stopped and released the tent flap. Xena hadn't call her that since Poteidaia. Turning around she looked to Xena. "Yes Mistress?"

The warlord turned around to face Gabrielle. "New rules." Xena grinned. "You've earned my respect and trust. For now on you may address me as Xena and question me only in this tent. Understand?"

The slave nodded seriously. "Understood." She began to move again.

"Oh, two more things."

Gabrielle stopped and looked to the warlord.

"I recommend you stay away from Darphus. You've jarred him one to many times."

The young woman snorted. "Not like he didn't deserve it."

Xena grinned. "I won't argue. But his pride has been hurt and by a female slave no less. Be careful."

Gabrielle nodded. "I'll try."

The Warrior Princess smiled some. "Good." She paused. "And thank you Gabrielle."

The peasant girl smiled to Xena, she knew what the warlord meant. "You're welcome... Xena. Goodnight."

The warlord smiled back warmly, her smile bright as a sunrise. "Goodnight."

Gabrielle headed to the cooks' tent. She wasn't pay attention to anything, in her mind all she had locked in her head was the image of Xena's warm smile. It seemed to battle her anger for the woman.

As soon as she came near the tent, she felt a presence come up behind her. The next thing to happen was a hand over her mouth and a knife at her throat.

"Don't move bitch."

Gabrielle closed her eyes at hearing Darphus's voice as she was dragged away.

~\*Part 8\*~

Gabrielle never went to sleep that night. How could she? By morning she left the cooks' tent. She needed to feel safe. She didn't know where. There are only two people she could possibly think of.

Lux, well he's to old. Nor did she want to get him caught in the middle of something like this. There was only one other place.

Gabrielle crossed her arms against her chest and quickly walked to the warlord's tent. She ducked inside.

Xena had one foot propped up on her bed, tying her last boot when the slave came in. "What you doing here so early?"

The peasant's mind raced to come up with an explanation. "Just... wanted to see if you needed anything this morning."

The warlord narrowed her eyes. It sounded to fake. Besides that the young woman's voice was shaking. "What's wrong?" It was blunt. She dropped her foot the ground and rose to her full height.

Gabrielle shook her head. "Nothing."

Xena studied Gabrielle, it was obvious she hadn't slept. Her eyes told that. Then something on the woman's body jumped out in front of Xena. She took a step closer and reached up to Gabrielle's right shoulder. Her large hands pushed the peasant shirt off her right shoulder. There she found bruises and small marks scabbed over. "Who did this?"

The slave took a step back pulling the shirt back over her shoulder. "Nobody."

The warlord then reached down to grasp Gabrielle's hands, she pushed back the arms of the blue shirt up. There on the small woman's wrists and up the length of her arms were more bruises and cuts. Her eyes narrowed, her word came out in growl. "Darphus." Her anger took control. "I'll kill him."

Gabrielle shook her head. "No don't Xena."

Xena still held the slave's arms lightly. "Why?"

"He'll only kill me Xena."

The older woman shook her head. "He won't, trust me." Her eyes were cold and almost primal.

"No!" The peasant pulled her arms roughly from Xena's grasp. "Don't, I can take care of myself. Leave it alone Xena."

The warlord grasped the other woman by the shoulders. She stared down into Gabrielle's eyes. "Listen to me Gabrielle. He's broken a code of mine and I'll punish him for it."

"Is that what really matters to you Xena? That he broke a code of yours?" The small woman jerked her shoulders away and took a step back. She shook her head. "I knew I was right, you are just a murdering bitch. Gods how stupid I was to think different." Her eyes began to water, a few tears escaping.

Xena was stunned in place, she stared in those green eyes. She could actually see the trust in them. Had this person she'd enslaved and killed part of her family trust her? How could she have been so stupid to break her trust with Gabrielle? And why was she standing here thinking about trust with another? She hadn't for ten years now. The last time she'd trusted somebody she found herself up on a cross.

But this is different. Why? Xena felt a need now to have this woman's trust. She also felt a deep need to protect her. So much so that she took a step towards Gabrielle. Then she did something she thought she'd never do, she pulled the smaller woman in for a hug.

Gabrielle just fell into her arms and started to cry hard, her face burying into Xena's breasts. Her legs then began to weaken from the lack of sleep, physical abuse, and emotions. The warlord in turn had lifted the peasant into her arms and carried her over to her own bed. Carefully Gabrielle was placed in the bed.

"Gabrielle?" The warlord's voice was gently, she reached forward to place her hand

gently on the peasant's arm.

Gabrielle opened her eyes, she rolled to her right to face Xena. "Don't Xena."

The Warrior Princess bent down to one knee to be eye level with the smaller woman. "He's not going to hurt you Gabrielle, I promise." She brought hand up to wipe away the tears on Gabrielle's face. "I can't... I can't let him get away with this Gabrielle." She paused. "Not to you." Xena closed her eyes, she just took a huge leap. She had to close her eyes to be able to understand her own words. Her own meaning by that. When she did open her eyes again, she found the other woman smiling just a little.

"Thank you."

Xena nodded. "Have you slept at all?"

Gabrielle shook her head. "I can't, I'm too scared."

The warlord nodded. "Stay in my bed and try to get some sleep."

The small woman nodded. "I'll try."

Xena smiled a little then went serious again. "I want you to stay in my tent till I take care of Darphus. Got me?"

The slave nodded. "Yeah."

Xena smiled a little then left. As soon as she left, Gabrielle heard the warlord yell for two guards. She then heard Xena tell them to keep the tent guarded and nobody but her was allowed in or out. After that, Gabrielle began to cry but only for so long. For soon sleep took her from being exhausted but her dreams soon came to her.

~\*~\*~\*~

"Gelidus?"

The man looked up as his commander came in his tent with feral blue eyes. "Yes?"

"Where's Darphus?"

"He left with some men about a candlemark ago."

"Where'd he go?"

Gelidus shrugged his shoulders. "I have no idea. He didn't say when he'd be back either."

Xena's eyes narrowed. "Hades. Tell me when he gets back."

"I will."

The warlord left quickly then. She went through the camp, talking to her men about Darphus.

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Xena sighed as she walked into her tent. None of her men knew where Darphus went or wouldn't tell. As soon as the warlord came into her tent, she found her slave



mumbling. Slowly Xena walked up to her to listen to the words.

"Please no Darphus."

The warlord reached to Gabrielle's shoulders. "Come on Gabrielle, wake up."

Immediately the younger woman shot up from the bed. "Oh gods." She closed her eyes as a few tears came down her cheeks.

Xena pulled the other woman into her arms. "Hey it's okay." Gabrielle stayed in her arms till her crying settled down. She then pulled back. "Gabrielle... if you need to talk about what happen. I know... I know what you're going through." She took a deep breath. "I was raped when I was younger."

Gabrielle stared up into this other woman's eyes. Somebody she'd been told that's killed hundreds of people with Ares on her side. For some reason, Gabrielle just couldn't... couldn't see it anymore. For some reason her anger and hatred was gone. "Thanks Xena."

The Warrior Princess smiled. "Sure." She then released Gabrielle and stood up. Xena walked over to her desk and pulled out her chair, she sat down and faced the slave. "Darphus left."

The peasant furrowed her brows and rolled to her right to look to the other woman. "Where?"

"I don't know."

"Nobody knows?"

Xena shook her head. "No." But she knew the truth. All her men knew where Darphus went. It was only a matter of time before he returned to challenge her. She just hoped she could stop him. Stop him for Gabrielle's sake. "It doesn't matter, I'll take care of him when he returns."

Gabrielle nodded. "I know." She ran her right hand through her hair. Looking back to Xena she furrowed her brows. "Xena, why... why are you protecting me?"

The warlord looked away. "Normally I'd lie and tell you you're my property so I have to." She looked back to Gabrielle. "But I can't seem to."

The peasant nodded, she looked away. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

The younger woman bitterly laughed. "I think since I've came I've totally screwed up your system."

Xena nodded. "Well I won't lie and say you haven't." The warlord stood. "It was bound to happen by somebody." She walked over to the bed and sat down on it to face Gabrielle. "But enough of that. So what do you feel like eating?"

Gabrielle arched an eyebrow. "You're kidding right?"

The warlord grinned. "No. I know you're hungry."

"How you know that?"

"I just do Gabrielle." The warlord stood up. "What you want? I can't promise it'll be good."

"Anything I guess."

"You think you can hold it down?"

Gabrielle sighed. "I'll try."

"Good." Xena walked over to the tent flap and left.

Within a quarter of a candlemark, Xena returned. She'd brought a tray of food. The chefs had specially made it for Gabrielle, knowing what she liked. The three cooks had heard one too many times of her favorite foods.

"I'm going to put a limit on how much you're allowed to talk to those cooks."

The small woman chuckled as she munched on a sandwich. "Sorry, its just... I love cooking."

"So I've noticed. My dinners have gone from being okay to excellent."

The peasant smiled. "Really?"

"Really." Xena reached forward and lifted a red apple, she started to eat it. She sat back in her chair.

"Xena?"

"Mmm?"

"What's going to happen to Darphus?"

The warlord took a bite from her apple, chewed it then swallowed. "I told you."

Gabrielle stopped eating for a moment. "You're not going to kill him."

"Well maybe I'll beat him to near death first then kill him."

The small woman stared into Xena's eyes. "Xena-"

"Don't even question me Gabrielle."

Gabrielle dropped her eyes. "I won't." She sighed and tried to continue eating.

"Gabrielle?"

The peasant looked up. "Why you so contended to stop me from killing him anyway?"

"I don't know." Gabrielle looked down to the floor then back up to Xena. "Maybe because I felt as if I deserved it."

Silence.

Xena stood up from her chair at her desk, apple forgotten about. She walked over to

Gabrielle and bent down to one knee. She'd heard those some words before but they'd came from her own lips so long ago. "You didn't okay?"

"Xena-

"No Gabrielle, listen to me alright?" The peasant nodded a little and she went on. "I said the same gods' be damned thing. But I learned quickly that nobody deserves to be raped. Something like that... it destroys people, good people." She paused. "I just pray it doesn't do it to you."

The small female closed her eyes and found herself crying hard. Xena then got up into the bed and pulled the other woman in. She had to protect her for some reason. There is a reason and she'd find out, Xena knew that.

Gabrielle stayed huddled in the warlord's arms, the only place she'd ever felt protected. She cried for numerous reasons. She cried over yes, the rape. She cried about her father's death and her sister's, Lila's death. As the tears escaped so did her anger and bitterness. She had to let go and let love in again. Let love protect her and guide her again. Gabrielle had missed that. The darkness just wasn't her, just didn't satisfy her soul.

She cried over those things but also because she knows she just fell in-love with this warlord. Gabrielle couldn't hate her any longer nor fight the love for this woman. But then she cried more so because she knew that Xena, this warlord, doesn't feel the same. She just figured Xena was protecting her as if the warlord was holding herself responsible for Gabrielle.

But the pair stayed like that, Gabrielle protected in the warlord's embrace for the afternoon. By nightfall they both felt tired from the emotions. Yes, Xena was tired from emotions. Her own past from her rape bubbled to the surface. She'd never confronted it till now and that had made her cry as well. She also thought she felt this young woman's emotions with the rape and cried with her.

The warlord looked down to see the smaller woman asleep. She carefully then placed Gabrielle into the bed and under the covers. Xena moved out of the bed and undressed out of her armor, boots, and jewelry. She stayed in her leathers and placed her weapons near the bed within a quick turn's grasp.

She then crawled into the bed beside Gabrielle. Placing her hands under her head, her eyes stared up at the tent's top. Her thoughts took her to every corner of her mind. As she kept thinking, her thoughts went faster and then it tired her out. She felt asleep next to the smaller woman.

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She woke up at feeling the other woman toss and turn beside her. A scream of pain then erupted from Gabrielle's lips. Xena sat up and reached for the other woman's shoulders. "Wake up Gabrielle, it's a dream. Come on."

The small woman woke up and stared up at Xena. She was breathing heavy. "Xena?"

"Yeah."

Gabrielle closed her eyes and tried to calm down. She then began to cry. "I can't even

sleep."

The warlord released the peasant's shoulders. Laying back down on the bed, she sighed. She couldn't believe she was about to do this. "Come here." Xena reached to Gabrielle's sides and pulled her in.

The younger woman went with it and snuggled her back into Xena's body. She then felt the warlord wrap her arms around her chest. Gabrielle felt protected and safe again. "Thanks Xena."

"Mmm. Go to sleep." The Warrior Princess's walls back up.

Gabrielle chuckled. "Right." She closed her eyes, they still stung. But she felt safe, which's all she needed. And she quickly found out no nightmares came to her as she went back to sleep in the warlord's arms.

~\*Part 9\*~

The following morning came. Xena had gotten out of bed first, the smaller woman still slept. The warlord had quickly dressed and was just clipping her sword and sheath on when Gabrielle stirred.

"You leaving?"

The Warrior Princess turned around to look at the other woman. "Yes."

Gabrielle nodded she got up from the bed. "I think I better get up."

Xena nodded. "I want you to stay with me today. You need to be careful alright?"

Gabrielle looked up. "Yeah I know." She then smiled a little. "Thanks for everything Xena."

The warlord snorted. "The least I could do after I got you into this mess."

The peasant dropped her head, she knew she'd been right.

Xena stared at the smaller woman, that's the first she'd ever seen Gabrielle lower her head. She stepped up to Gabrielle. Her right hand went under the smaller female's chin. She lifted Gabrielle's face. "I didn't mean that as it sounded."

Gabrielle closed her eyes as she felt the warm hand come to her cheek. Her eyes opened again. "Thank you."

The older woman smiled warmly. They both have their eyes locked. Gabrielle knew something was about to happen. But what? She wasn't totally sure of that yet.

And well Xena never felt such a stronger pull then ever. Instead of stopping that pull or ignoring it, she followed it. She felt a deep need to follow it. Leaning down, she saw Gabrielle close her eyes and so she finished the distance. Their lips met and a blaze of warmth went shooting through both of the women.

The kiss started light. Xena giving the other woman a chance to pull away but she never did. Gabrielle actually reached up with her right hand to the back of the warlord's head. She forced the kiss to go stronger. They both then slowly pulled away

from the kiss and opened their eyes slowly.

Xena just stared at this younger woman for a moment. She shook her head and stepped back.

"Xena?" Gabrielle took a step closer to the warlord.

"Don't Gabrielle. Just don't alright?"

"Xena?"

The warlord straightened her back out. "I'm a warlord and that's all there is to it Gabrielle." She then walked pass the peasant to the tent flap. "Follow me."

Gabrielle closed her eyes. *Didn't that feel so right to you Xena?* For a second she decided whether to yell or cry. But no, she opened her eyes again and they were deathly cold. She walked up to Xena. "Then move."

The Warrior Princess saw how hollow and cold those emerald eyes are. They weren't even emerald, more like a deep forest green. She just turned around and walked out of the tent and Gabrielle followed.

They walked out into the morning. Gabrielle walked behind and Xena ahead. Oh such a bad positioning.

For Gabrielle felt somebody come up behind her. Before she could react, a sword was at her neck while an arm wrapped around her waist.

"Xena?"

The warlord whirled around with her hands up and her body tense. Her eyes were wide at the scene before her.

"So nice of you to decided to join the army today Xena."

Xena glared at the warrior. "Darphus, so nice of you to return to my army."

Darphus laughed. "Your army?" He grinned and nodded his head. Warriors all came around the corners and circled around Darphus and Xena. Gelidus came up to Darphus side. "This is my army. Yes my army Xena. You're the one who's stepping down, and you'll leave the only way a warrior can Xena."

The warlord narrowed her eyes. "The gauntlet?" She grinned. "Fine."

Darphus smirk. "Glad you agree. And I don't think you'll mind if..." He looked down at Gabrielle. "If she becomes *my slave* now." He looked back up and laughed.

Xena felt her anger go to height that it hadn't been in years. But she saved it for right time and the right place.

Darphus grinned and looked to his warriors. "Take her."

Five warriors grabbed Xena and took her weapons. They then began to strip the armor off her, then the leathers. The only thing Xena stood in was her black tunic and her arm bracelet on her right arm. The five warriors held her while the rest of Darphus's

warriors all lined up into two different lines.

Then there was the sound of drums beating. Xena looked to Darphus and narrowed her eyes.

Darphus laughed. "Good luck, you'll need it."

The warlord smirked. "I make my own luck." Her blue eyes then lower to Gabrielle in his arms.

The peasant looked to Xena with worried eyes. Xena winked and smiled reassuringly to her.

That's when Gabrielle jerked against Darphus, struggling. "No!"

"Don't bitch." Darphus pressed the blade against Gabrielle's neck. "I will kill you."

The young woman stopped struggling and closed her eyes. She opened them again to looked at Xena, her eyes warm.

Gelidus was next to Xena, he pushed her towards the start of the middle of the two lines. Xena took a deep breath and started walking down the between the two lines. No warrior at first shifted. Then she came to the fifth warriors, they struck out on her.

The warlord went down with the blow but she kept moving. Her body felt blow after blow. She gritted her teeth and kept going. She had to, she had a reason to live. Xena then felt a strong blow to her back and she fell to the ground.

Reaching deep inside, she sprung up and fought back. Some warriors went to the ground others back off. She kept moving, her reserves fading. She could see the end, almost there. Xena kept moving as more warriors struck at her. She couldn't fight back and fell to the ground again, her right hand stretched out to the end of the gauntlet path.

A hard blow came down over her head. She sucked in a breath as she closed her eyes. Her head spun as her body went limp. The warriors all began to walk away, mumbling to themselves. But it wasn't finished. Xena opened her eyes again and sucked in a deep breath. She stood up slowly and looked to her left at Darphus and his warriors. "I'm not that easy."

All the warrior's spun around, wide eye.

Darphus growled. "Kill her!"

One warrior called out. "But, she made it through."

Darphus glared at Xena. "Good for her. Now, finish it!"

"She fought by the rules. I won't cross that line." All the warriors nodded in agreement.

Darphus looked to Xena with a grin "Enjoy your exile."

The warlord spit at the ground and looked up to Darphus. "I'll see you soon." She smirked. Then her eyes lowered to Gabrielle. They locked eyes and the warlord tried

her hardest to look strong for Gabrielle. She then turned on her heels and began to walk out of the camp.

Darphus laughed as he looked down at Gabrielle.

~\*~\*~\*~

Xena took another step quietly, she bent down and peered through the brush, her eyes narrowed. Looking into the dark camp, she saw Darphus's tent straight ahead. There were two warriors walking through the camp. She grinned as she saw Darphus come out of his tent and towards two of his warriors. She then heard Darphus talk to them.

"Keep an eye out you two. Xena won't stray too far." Darphus then walked pass his warriors and headed to the dinner hut.

The warlord grinned, she then stood up and carefully went through the woods towards Darphus's tent. She came to the back of her tent, her right hand went up to her breast. "Glad they didn't check everywhere." Xena removed her breast dagger and began to cut the tent open. As soon as she had it cut enough, she bent down and went in.

Gabrielle had heard the sound of somebody cutting the tent. She couldn't see who it was nor ask for that matter. She had her back to the where the sound came from, her mouth gagged and she was bound to the post in the center of the tent. Yet she knew who it was by that special warmth that filled her.

The warlord saw the peasant sitting on the ground, bound and gagged. Her eyes narrowed and she bent down to Gabrielle's hands. She cut the ropes and came around to the front, bending down to one knee.

Gabrielle brought her hands forward to rub her wrists. Xena removed the gag and then smiled. "You okay?"

The small woman nodded. "Yes." She then quickly leaned forward to hug Xena. "Gods."

Xena chuckled. "No, I'm not a god."

The younger woman pulled back and grinned. "Funny." She then heard somebody come near the tent, she tensed.

The warlord had heard it earlier. Xena sprung up to her feet and whirled around.

An old man stepped into the tent and saw what was going on, he raised his hands.

Gabrielle smiled. "Lux." She sprung to her feet and jumped into the cook's arms.

He hugged her back tightly. "Be quiet little one." They released each other and Lux to the warlord. He saw all the cuts and bruises on her body. "I heard what they did Xena."

The peasant took a step back to stand beside Xena. "Why'd you come Lux? If Darphus found you here."

The cook grinned. "Relax little one. Darphus won't be here for awhile, he's eating something that won't... quite agree with his stomach."

Gabrielle chuckled, she then saw Xena moving to Darphus's table. Xena grabbed the map off the table and began to roll it up.

Lux looked to the warlord. "Xena?" She looked up to Lux. "Argo is just outside in the woods. She's saddled up, stock with food and your weapons are on her. I couldn't get your armor or leathers though."

The warlord smiled. "Thank you Lux."

He nodded. "Anytime." He then looked to Xena and Gabrielle. "You both better get out of here though."

Gabrielle smiled. "Thanks Lux. Be careful."

The cook nodded. "You too little one." He looked up to Xena. "Good luck Xena."

Xena grinned. "No worries." She then looked down to Gabrielle. "We need to go."

Gabrielle looked up and nodded, she looked back to the cook "Bye Lux."

"Bye little one." He stepped back to the tent flap and watched Gabrielle go through the cut in the tent.

Xena then was about to step through, she looked back to Lux. "Thanks again Lux, watch your back." She then left.

Once outside of the tent, Xena looked to Gabrielle. "Stay low and in the dark spots. Most important, stay close to me. Got me?"

Gabrielle nodded. "Right."

The warlord nodded and started to walk through the woods, Gabrielle followed behind. They weaved through the woods away and the warlord soon found her mare close by. The reins were tied to a tree, her sword and chakram hanging off the saddle.

Xena grinned and came up to her mare. "Hey girl."

The horse nickered.

"Its good to see you too." She patted the horse's neck then untied the reins. Looking ahead she spotted a road, she lead Argo up to the road. Gabrielle walked beside.

Xena then lifted her sword and placed it in her saddle along with her map. Her chakram she placed around her saddle horn incase she needed it. She then sprung up into the saddle and looked down the Gabrielle with smile. "Come here." She held her hand down.

Gabrielle took the offer hand and felt herself hauled up into the saddle behind Xena.

"Wrap your arms around my waist."

"Right." The peasant did as she was told, arms tightly wrapped around the warlord.

"But not so tight that I can't breath."



Gabrielle chuckled and loosened her hold. "Sorry."

"It's okay." Xena then kicked her mare in the sides and they began to go at a canter down the road in the early night.

"Xena?"

"Yeah?"

"Where we going?"

Xena grinned. "I need a new outfit and some planning time." She tightened her hands on the reins. "We're only going to ride for a candlemark to get some distance from the army. Then we'll stop."

The smaller woman nodded her head. She held on tight as she dropped her head against the warlord's back.

And they only did ride for a candlemark. Xena had pulled Argo off the rode and into an open area. She hopped off the mare then helped Gabrielle down.

"I'm never riding that horse again." The small female stretched her legs. "That was horrible."

Xena chuckled. "You're just saddle sore."

"To say the least."

The warlord began to untack her mare. "You'll be fine tomorrow." She carried the saddlebags over to a log, propping it up against there. "Stay here. I'm going to get some firewood."

Gabrielle nodded and watched the warlord disappear into the dark woods. Within a minute or two Xena came back with an arm load of wood, she dropped it on the ground and began to make a fire. It came to life quickly. The peasant had watched the entire time, she shifted to sit on the log.

Xena though went to the saddlebags, she began to look through it. She pulled out some food then the map again. Then she took the furs and bedrolls off the saddlebag, she tossed them near the fire. The warlord lifted up the food and handed it to Gabrielle. "You need to eat."

The young woman arched an eyebrow. "Is that an order?"

The warlord looked up with a grin. "Yeah." She then moved to sit down on the log, she still wore only her black tunic. The map was unrolled and Xena looked at it.

Gabrielle lifted up a trail bar to hand to Xena. "You need to eat too."

The warlord looked to the other woman with an arched eyebrow. "Is that a concern?"

"Yeah."

Xena grinned and took the trail bar. She ate it as she studied the map.

"Xena?"

"Mmm?"

"Where are we going anyway?"

The warlord lifted the map and placed it closer to Gabrielle. "Okay we're right about here." Xena pointed to a spot south of Cirra. "We need to get here." Her finger traveled south and stopped in a place in the middle of nowhere but the closest town is Poteidaia.

"Why are we going near Poteidaia?"

Xena looked up. "There's a cave near there. I keep extra supplies there. I need leathers and armor."

Gabrielle looked up from the spot. "Is that it?"

The warlord nodded. "Pretty much." She sighed. "Look, when we get there I'll take you to Poteidaia."

"No." Gabrielle had her eyes locked with Xena's. "I don't belong there Xena."

"Gabrielle you don't belong with me."

"Hold on." The peasant took a deep breath. "Are you saying I'm free?"

The warlord thought, she then nodded. "Yes."

"Then I can decide for myself where I want to go." Gabrielle stared hard into the warlord's eyes.

"Gabrielle-

"Don't Xena... I know the speech you're going to give me."

The warlord sighed, she looked away. "You'd rather stay with somebody who killed your father and sister then go home?" She looked back to Gabrielle. She'd hoped those harsh words would jar Gabrielle enough to make her want to leave.

"I'm not staying with the person that killed my father and sister." The peasant paused. "Because you're no longer the same Xena."

Xena narrowed her eyes some. "How can you be sure Gabrielle?"

"Because I wouldn't be here right now." She took a deep breath. "You know I'm right Xena." She looked away then back to the warlord. "Xena... the cycle of hatred has to end and the only way to end it is through love and forgiveness."

Xena closed her eyes and looked away. "I can't do something like that."

"Xena, yes you can. I know you can."

The warlord looked back to Gabrielle quickly. "No because I am darkness Gabrielle."

*"Because this world needs somebody like you Gabrielle. Somebody with so much*

*hope, love and light.*" Lux's words came back to Gabrielle's mind. "If you look at it that way Xena, then I'm your counterpart." Gabrielle took a deep breath as she took a huge step. "I am light and I've just touched you."

Xena stood up quickly, the map rolling up into her hands. She walked to the other side of the fire and stared into the woods.

The peasant stared at the warlord. She sighed and stood up. She need to give Xena space now. Slowly she walked up to Xena, her right hand falling to the taller woman's closes shoulder. "Xena?"

The warlord turned around to face Gabrielle. "Please don't Gabrielle." Her blue eyes showed few walls then normal, her vulnerable side showing.

Gabrielle nodded. "I won't." She paused. "Let me take care of your wounds."

Xena just stared for a moment. Which wounds? Then she realized which one's Gabrielle was referring to. "Yeah."

The small woman smiled. "Thank you." She then walked back over to the log with the older woman.

They both sat down and Gabrielle looked through the saddlebag, she pulled out a medical kit. Gabrielle then looked back up with the salve in one hand. She then began to carefully apply it to the warlord's wounds.

Once she'd done that, the pair decided to go to bed. They'd have to get up early. So Xena rolled the bedrolls out and the furs. Gabrielle crawled into one and Xena went into the other after placing her weapons near herself.

The younger woman looked to the warlord. "Xena?"

"Mmm?"

"Goodnight."

Xena smiled. "Night Gabrielle."

Gabrielle smiled and stayed on her back staring up at the stars. She badly wanted to roll to her right into the other woman's arms. But she knew best not to.

"Gabrielle?"

"Yeah?" She turned her head to look at the warlord.

Xena grinned. "Come here."

Gabrielle smiled warmly. "You're good." She rolled to her right and placed her head under the other woman's chin.

Xena kept her arms tightly wrapped around Gabrielle. "I know, I have many skills." A response to earlier.

The peasant chuckled and lifted her head. "That's my line."

"Not really." The warlord then closed her eyes. "Go to sleep huh?"

"Right, goodnight." Gabrielle dug her head back under Xena's chin and closed her eyes.

"Sleep well Gabrielle."

They both soon found themselves asleep with no nightmares. The next day would come fast with nothing but traveling.

## **Part 2**

### **Section 2**

~\*Part 10\*~

They'd been riding for candlemarks on end. Oh gods how Gabrielle was hating riding. She never thought it was possible to get her legs this sore. But then again she never thought it would be so nice to be able to have her arms wrapped around this warlord for practically all day. That just perfectly made up for it.

The pair had risen early in the morning, well Xena did anyway. The warlord had prepared to leave then woke up Gabrielle, the small peasant grumbling about it. For the first candlemark, maybe less, Gabrielle walked. Xena wanted her to let the stiffness leave and make sure Gabrielle's leg muscles loosened up. Once that had happened, Gabrielle was up on the high mare. Arms tightly wrapped around Xena and the warhorse going at a full gallop heading south.

As they flew down the south road, so did their thoughts. Xena had never thought so much about her emotions nor her future. She'd never thought so much about somebody else other than herself. Her thoughts spinning around Gabrielle and her relationship with this young woman.

Gabrielle though, she was trying to figure out what she'd do with herself. She knew she didn't want to go back to Poteidaia. Yet traveling with a warlord was a bit... different. Though she couldn't turn her back on the way she felt for Xena. And she knew the warlord actually felt the same thing and didn't care to admit to that. Gabrielle could easily understand that.

Xena, a warlord for some fifteen odd years, no family, no close relationships, no love, and a life revolving around nothing but conquering, being alone, blood, and revenge. Yeah, Gabrielle knew why it would be a little hard for Xena to totally shift from one aspect of life to another. It doesn't happen over night.

At the same time, Gabrielle knew she could get the warlord to shift to another side. Well maybe not shift but... at least meet her halfway. That is the answer. Gabrielle needed to walk towards Xena and Xena towards Gabrielle. Meet in the midst and become one. Only thing is.

How is she going to do it?

By late afternoon they slowed down, much to Gabrielle's relief. Xena pulled Argo off the road and into the woods. She began to search the area, looking for something.

Then she tried to stand in the stirrups. "I need to stand Gabrielle."

"Right." Gabrielle released the other woman's waist.

Xena stood up in the stirrups and searched around. Then she spotted something familiar, rather familiar. She saw a tree with a huge knot in its trunk that she'd made a mental note of from so long ago. So she sat back down in the saddle. "We're almost there."

The peasant nodded. "Thank the gods."

The warlord chuckled. "Let's get on the ground." She hopped off the mare then turned around with her hands up. She easily helped the smaller woman down.

The pair then walked through the woods and went through brush. Then directly ahead a dark mouth appeared before them.

Xena grinned. "Bingo." She turned to the smaller woman. "Stay here with Argo."

Gabrielle huffed. "I've been minimize to a horse watcher."

The warlord laughed. "Funny." She then walked into the cave and closed her eyes. She let her memory take control as she mentally pictured the way she left the cave last time. It came to her quickly. Xena walked over to the cavern wall and felt around and found a torch. She bent down to one-knee and felt two flint stones on the ground. Xena cracked them together over the torch and it came to life. Lifting the torch out of its home, the warlord lit all the other torches.

Xena then came out of the cave and walked to Gabrielle. "Help me get Argo's tack off."

Gabrielle grumbled. "And a tack holder."

The warlord arched an eyebrow as she started to untack her mare.

Argo though, well she looked back to Gabrielle and nickered.

"No I don't like horses. Well at least tall ones."

The mare snorted at Gabrielle and turned her head back forward.

Xena lifted her saddlebags and gave them to Gabrielle. She then walked to Argo's front to remove the face tack. "You have to be patient with things that annoy you."

"Xena, I never said she annoyed me. Argo and I just aren't getting along."

The warlord looked back to Gabrielle. "I wasn't talking to you."

Gabrielle's eyes narrowed. "Oh that is so funny Xena."

"Wasn't trying to be." The warlord shrugged her shoulders and handed the face tack to Gabrielle. Xena then lifted the saddle off the mare's back. She then patted Argo on the rump. "There you go girl."

The two women then began to walk to the cave.

"Maybe she just doesn't like the way I talk about her... like she's a person."

The Warrior Princess chuckled at Gabrielle's words. "Maybe that's it."

In the background both woman heard Argo nicker loudly and stamp her feet.

"Guess so." Gabrielle walked first into the cave and carefully placed the stuff down.

Xena also put the saddle down beside the saddlebags and face tack. She then looked to Gabrielle. "Come on."

The older woman grabbed a lit torch and walked back into the cave with Gabrielle following. They came to the end of the cave and there on the ground were three locked chests. Xena turned to Gabrielle. "Hold this."

The peasant nodded and took the torch. "You have a key for those chests?"

The warlord grinned. "Yeah, a special one." She reached up between her breasts to pull out her dagger.

"Xena, like your breasts aren't dangerous enough."

The Warrior Princess arched an eyebrow.

"It was joke Xena, you can laugh."

Xena sighed and turned to the chests. "Is this what I get for making you ride Argo all day?" She placed the dagger's tip into the center chest's padlock

The smaller woman chuckled. "Yup. Be glad it's that and not my temper."

The warlord looked up as the padlock fell to the ground. "You have a bad temper?" Xena then shifted to the chest to her right.

"Definitely."

"You don't strike me to be the one with a temper." Xena jerk at the works in the padlock and it fell to the ground. She moved to the last chest.

"Well..." Gabrielle paused, she mined as well go with it. "You don't strike me as the one with a soft side."

The Warrior Princess stopped picking at the lock. She looked up to Gabrielle. "Good point." She went back to the padlock and crack it open. "Come here." Xena began to lift the chest's top as she slipped the dagger back between her breasts.

The smaller woman stepped up beside Xena and peered in. The warlord lifted a white cloth from the top and brown leathers appeared underneath. Xena reached down inside and pulled out the top set. They definitely were meant for a female.

"Let me see the torch."

Gabrielle nodded and handed the torch.

Xena took it and turned around to the cave wall to jam it up in between two rocks. She turned back around with the leathers still in arm. "Look in that middle chest, there

should be armor in there."

The peasant nodded as she went into the chest while Xena began to put the leathers on. "There's a lot of armor Xena."

"Look for brass breastplates, armbands, and gauntlets." She pulled the leather straps over her shoulders as she spoke. Her left hand coming up to her right arm to remove the silver arm bracelet.

"Got them." Gabrielle lifted out first the breastplates and handed that to Xena.

The warlord took it and began to hook the brass breastplates on. Gabrielle took note of the leathers, there is no gold trim on the skirt part like the warlord uniform had. And right at Xena's waist was a small brass swirl design. The breastplate was made of brass as well and was also in a swirl design with shoulder covers. Gabrielle turned back to the chest and pulled out the gauntlets and armbands, she gave them to the warlord. And Xena put them on quickly.

"I'm missing something." The tall woman stepped up to the chest and looked in. She removed a set of brass kneepads. She moved to a rock and began to attach them to her boots. Turning to Gabrielle, Xena stood in waiting judgement.

"I like it." Gabrielle took a step back. "Its different." She stared at the warlord in the brass armor with the firelight from the torch reflecting off the armor.

"Good or bad?"

"Definitely good." Gabrielle looked up with a smile. "But it gives you a different... air."

"Like what?"

A shrug of the shoulders. "I don't know Xena." She paused. "You don't look like a warlord without all the flashy gold and jewels in your hair."

The warlord crossed her arms against her chest. "What I look like then?"

"Uh... a warrior more then a warlord." The small woman smiled. "You look real good." Then a grin. "And still intimidating."

Xena grinned. "Good."

"What about your sword Xena?" Gabrielle had her brows furrowed.

"I need a new one." She turned to the far right chest with the weapons. She lifted out a sword in a leather sheath. "This one was hand crafted, had it special made."

Gabrielle took a step closer and look at it. "I like that blue gem at the hilt. Matches your eyes."

The warlord huffed. She then clipped the sword on her back at an angle, the hilt at her right shoulder.

"What we do now Xena?"

Xena looked down to the entrance of the cave, it was getting gray out. "We stay here."

It's going to rain."

Gabrielle looked in the same direction and saw how dark it was getting, "Great. I hate rain." She looked to the other woman, but Xena didn't look to her. That's when she knew something was wrong, Xena hadn't looked her in the eye all day.

"Come on." The warlord started walking and Gabrielle followed behind. They came near the mouth and Xena looked to the smaller woman. "Stay here, I'm going to go get some firewood."

Gabrielle nodded, watched her go, and then she sat down with her back against the cave wall. She could feel her reserves slipping away. She'd been on the move since she'd left Poteidaia.

Xena though came back with two armloads of wood. She'd made the fire and then looked up to Gabrielle across the way. She saw how tired Gabrielle was and so she walked to the saddlebags and lifted up a bedroll and fur. She laid them out on the ground and looked to the peasant. "Lay down huh?"

The younger woman smiled. "Thanks." She came over and laid down on the bedroll while Xena put the fur over her for warmth.

"I'll wake you up for dinner." The warlord was about to shift.

"Hold it." Xena stopped with a raised eyebrow. "I have a sneaky suspicion you might burn the food."

Xena grinned. "Good suspicion. I'll wake you up when it's half cooked."

"Good. Thanks Xena."

"Uh huh." The warlord left the cave in search of food. She'd return in a half of a candlemark with four skewered quails. They were placed over the fire to be cooked. Xena then sat on the cave floor resting her back against a rock. She stared at the sleeping woman.

Xena didn't know what to do. It was that bad and simple. She felt two sided right now. One side wanted to go back to Cirra, kill Darphus, take the army again, and continue with her conquering. The other side wanted to spend eternity with Gabrielle.

In the end she felt like spending eternity with Gabrielle was out of the question. One because she's a warlord, two Gabrielle is young, and three she's hurt Gabrielle and only do it more. So that left her to go after her army and take them again. But why does that seem not appealing at all? It sure used to.

The biggest thing that stuck out is the fact she can hurt Gabrielle physically and emotionally. She didn't like that nor could she deal with the fact that she might be attached to this younger woman. Xena had survived on her own for years on end now. The idea of living because of one person didn't settle. Yet at the same time it felt right to her.

It was just a bunch of confusion for the warlord. So she went with what she knows best fighting, blood, and vengeance. She doesn't know love, can't handle it. Or does she, can she? Xena would stay as the warlord, she'd just have to forget about



Gabrielle, block her out. Remember only the anger and hatred, the darkness. That's who she is. Right?

She'd have to take Gabrielle home and then go after her army. She had to forget these past days. She had to but she didn't want to. She didn't want to get rid of Gabrielle either. Xena sat here and deep down had the largest hope that Gabrielle would convince her otherwise. If she doesn't, well...

Xena shook her head to rid the musing, she looked to the quail. She leaned forward and turned them to cook the other side. Standing up, the warlord walked over to Gabrielle and bent down. "Gabrielle?" She shook the small woman carefully.

Gabrielle groaned and rolled to her right to stare up into sky blue eyes. "Hey."

"Sleep well?"

"Mmm, a little." She then sat up. "What you'd find for dinner?"

"Quail."

"Really?" Gabrielle looked to her left at the fire, there were four quail cooking. "Haven't had quail in ages." She looked back to Xena and stood up. "I'll put some herb on them." Gabrielle walked over to the saddlebag and found a pouch of basil, her favorite. She went to the quail to sprinkle it over them. As she did, she looked up to the warlord to see her sitting and thinking.

After putting the herb on, Gabrielle placed it back in the saddlebags. As she thought about it, she'd never seen Xena think like that before. That's when she knew Xena was in a turmoil even more so since she felt her stomach churning for no reason.

She needed to relax the warlord, so she walked over to Xena and sat down. "You think Argo will be alright out there if it rains?"

Xena looked to the small female. "Yeah, she likes the rain."

Ironically, that's when it started to rain.

"Gods, you talk about the rain and it starts to happen." Gabrielle chuckled as she looked out the mouth of the cave. She then looked to Xena. "You like the rain?"

The warlord grinned. "Some."

Gabrielle arched an eyebrow. "I can see it now. You were little stomping in the puddles?"

Xena bit back a grin as she tried to look away.

"Uh huh." Gabrielle grinned. "Don't worry I use to do it."

"Really?" Xena looked to Gabrielle.

"Oh yeah, mom would get so angry at me too."

The warlord tried to do a mental image of a young Gabrielle playing around in the rain and mud puddles. She chuckled. "Mother would get angry with me too."

"Oh Xena that wasn't the half of it."

The older woman grinned. "Let me guess. You got into mud fights with your sister?"

"Oh gods yes." Gabrielle started to laugh. "Lila and I always had a lot of fun."

Xena looked away as she just remembered that it was her army that killed Gabrielle's sister and her personal who killed her father.

Gabrielle had caught that. "Xena?"

"I'm sorry Gabrielle... about Lila and your father."

The peasant carefully reached to the warlord's arm. "Xena, its over with. I've forgiven you for it."

"I know." Xena looked to Gabrielle again.

The smaller woman looked away, she lifted her legs and dropped her chin on her knees. "You want to know what's real horrible? Part of me is glad you killed my father."

"Why?" Xena was wide eye.

Gabrielle looked to the warlord then back to the fire. "I think when I was about five, Lila was... three. Dad got heavy into drinking and had been since then." She took a deep breath. "Ever since then he's never been the same."

"That's the reason why?"

Gabrielle shook her head and looked to Xena. "No... I get my temper from dad. When he drank his temper took control and he had to take it out on somebody."

The warlord narrowed her eyes. "He didn't?"

"He did." Gabrielle closed her eyes then opened them again. "He'd try to take it out on mom or Lila. But I'd always jump in to try and get him to take it out on me. I didn't want to see them get hurt."

"I'm sorry Gabrielle."

The small woman shrugged her shoulders. "It happens." She sighed. "At least I don't have to worry about him abusing mom." She smiled sadly at that. Gabrielle then stood and walked over to the fire. She pulled the quail off and the pair went about the dinner.

The dinner went by fast, they'd eaten both quail. For the most part they were quiet as they ate. Gabrielle was wondering what was going to happen tomorrow. To her and with her relationship with the warlord. She'd find out in due time.

Xena stood up and walked over to the saddlebags, she pulled out a whetstone and sat back down. She went about sharpening her older sword and it also gave her time to think. Gabrielle though stood at the entrance of the cave and watched the rain fall, her body leaning against the cave's mouth. She could smell the rain and the grass. It filled her lungs and she liked it. Part of her wanted to stand here with a scroll and quill and

write about it, but Hades if she could.

Gabrielle closed her eyes and just listened to the rain. It was so calming to listen to. Then she picked up on the sound of Xena's sword being sharpened. Her mind combined them and it was so rhythmic that she was about to fall asleep.

"Gabrielle?" The Warrior Princess got no response so she tried again as she stopped sharpening. "Gabrielle?"

The peasant opened her eyes and looked to Xena. "Yeah?"

"Get some sleep huh?"

Gabrielle nodded. "Yeah, I'm still tired." She lifted herself off the wall and walked over to her bedroll, she crawled in and soon fell to sleep.

Xena went back to sharpening her sword for a quarter of a candlemark. She then stopped and looked out the cave, she watched the rainfall. Her eyes then drifted to Gabrielle who slept quietly. Looking down to her old sword, she ran her thumb down each side to find the blade sharpened. She laid it down on the ground with the sharpening stone.

The warlord then walked to the mouth of the cave, she stared at the rain. She then took a deep breath and walked out into the rain. The cool rain slipped down her body and it felt calming to Xena. She walked a ways in the rain till she found a large rock, she stopped and sat on it. Ahead of her is a cliff about a hundred paces, she believed she was over gazing over rolling hills. But wasn't sure with the darkness or rain.

Her mind soon took control of everything. Her musing running crazy. She'd never felt so frustrated with a situation before. She'd always had the answers and knew what she wanted. But now things weren't that simple. And Gabrielle hadn't mentioned anything so that in turn only made Xena want to head to her army.

She also is becoming angry with herself. She'd never had this problem before or any others that she couldn't handle. Xena is becoming angry about the fact she can't decide. Then there was always that little voice that told her to be strong and powerful. It was nagging at her telling her she's weak now for letting everything happen like it has. It just came down to Xena is being driven up a wall of confusion, anger, and madness.

A twig snapped and the warlord quickly turned around to see Gabrielle. She sighed and relaxed. "I thought you went to sleep."

"Me too." Gabrielle walked up to Xena's side, she sat on the rock with the warlord. "But I woke up." She took a deep breath. "So is this your idea of liking the rain 'some'?"

Xena looked to the younger woman with a grin. "Yeah." She then went serious. "Needed alone time."

The peasant looked away. "Sorry."

Xena smiled a little. "It's alright." She then went serious. "Don't get sick out here."

Gabrielle grinned. "I'll be fine, I'm use to the rain remember?"

"Yeah." Xena glanced away.

"Xena?"

"Mmm?"

"Why haven't you looked me in the eyes today?" Gabrielle took a deep breath.

The warlord dropped her head. "Because."

"Because you're still thinking about taking me to Poteidaia right?" The small woman turned her gaze to Xena.

Xena looked up to Gabrielle and finally locked eyes with her. "Yeah."

"Xena please don't send me back." She closed her eyes then opened them again. "I don't belong there. You have to know what I'm talking about."

"I do Gabrielle. I do." Xena turned her head away. "Why be with me Gabrielle? I'm a warlord."

The younger woman stood up from the rock. She then moved to bend down to her knees in front of Xena, her warm hands in the warlord's lap. "Xena listen to me." Xena looked to her and the peasant went on. "I don't care who you are okay? You could be... be a slave or the Queen of Egypt. I don't care Xena. What I care about is you and us. I know I need to be with you."

Xena nodded a few times. "It isn't that easy for me Gabrielle."

"I know Xena, trust me I know." The rain slid down her face as she thought. "That's why you give it a chance and try."

"Give what a chance Gabrielle? Us? A warlord running around with a girl? It wouldn't work."

"How would you even know Xena?" Gabrielle's eyes started to burn. "Xena what's more important to you? Filling in the huge gap in your soul or fighting for the rest of your life?"

Xena looked away. "I don't know."

Gabrielle squeezed Xena's knee for a moment. "What you so scared of Xena?" It was a whisper.

"I'm scared of hurting you." A pause. "I'm scared of being vulnerable Gabrielle." That's when Xena stood up and walked over to a tree, she leaned against it. She ran her right hand through her wet hair and leaned against the tree.

Gabrielle stood up and slowly walked up to Xena. She stood beside her for a moment then quietly whispered. "And you don't think I'm scared of the same things?"

Xena turned her head to look at the other woman. She stared into Gabrielle's eyes.

Gabrielle so badly wanted to whisper three words, which would change everything. But she knew she couldn't be the one to utter them, it had to be Xena. It had to be the person most afraid of being attached to another, needing another. Admitting that another could control you in ways you never thought possible.

"Gabrielle?"

"Yeah?"

"Just why?"

"Why Xena?" Gabrielle crossed her arms against her chest. "There are so many why's Xena, so many. But there is one that covers them all and you know what it is."

Xena stared into the Gabrielle's eyes. She could see the love in them, see the respect, the confidence, the past pain, the forgiveness, the light, she could see Gabrielle. And as she looked harder, Xena saw that Gabrielle is only half there.

*"No because I am darkness Gabrielle."*

*"If you look at it that way Xena, then I'm your counterpart." Gabrielle took a deep breath as she took a huge step. "I am light and I've just touched you."*

The scene flashed back for Xena as she stood here staring into emerald eyes. *I'm your counterpart.* It came back to Xena's mind again. Counterpart? Counterpart? Xena's heart raced as everything hit her and she smiled so warmly to Gabrielle.

Gabrielle knew. She smiled back just as warmly as she started to cry some.

Xena took a step to Gabrielle, her body pressing against Gabrielle's. She lowered her head close to Gabrielle's as she brought her right hand up to gently caress the other woman's cheek. "You're my soulmate."

Gabrielle closed her eyes as the words washed over her. It seemed to lift a weight from her shoulders. Such a large weight that she felt like she was flying. Her eyes opened again and she stared up into her soulmate's electric blue eyes.

Xena bent down the rest of the way and gently kissed her soulmate.

The rain kept falling and washed over them in the darkness. Rain always has a way of obscuring things, making people see things that they normally don't. Not to mention rain like this always seems to bring a new life and wash away past history of damage to the earth.

Slowly Xena brought her head back up.

Gabrielle wrapped her arms tightly around Xena and Xena did the same to Gabrielle. Gabrielle dropped her head against her soulmate's chest. "Gods, I love you Xena."

Xena dropped her head on top of Gabrielle's head. "I love you too." She closed her eyes after saying those words. She'd never said them before and she had to close her eyes so she could remember. Remember the moment everything changed for her.

The soulmates stayed like that for a time. They had to know this was really and that they found each other. That they found their other half. It was something they could

not take lightly too.

After a time the warlord opened her eyes. "We should go inside Gabrielle."

"Yeah your right." The small woman pulled away from her partner. "Xena?"

"Yeah?" The warlord still had her hands on the younger woman's sides.

"Take your time with this. I'll help you."

The warlord smiled. "I know, thank you." She leaned forward and placed a kiss to Gabrielle's forehead. "Come on."

The pair walked back to the cave and found the fire almost dying out. The Warrior Princess had stoked it with wood again. It quickly came back to life.

"This can't be good."

Xena looked up to her partner. "What's that?"

Gabrielle held out her arms. "The fact that my cloths are wet."

"So are my leathers." The warlord grinned. "We'll just have to figure something out."

The smaller woman arched an eyebrow. "Like what?"

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"Mmm, this is nice."

Xena chuckled. "I thought you might like the idea."

"Like it? Love it, we'll have to do it again sometime."

"Oh?" The warlord tightened her arms more around Gabrielle's waist.

"Definitely." Gabrielle dropped her head back against her soulmate's shoulder.

The pair are sitting on the cavern floor. Xena leaning against that rock again. But now she had Gabrielle in her arms while having a fur over them to keep warm. Near the fire are their clothes drying for the night. So that left the soulmates completely nude.

"Xena?"

"Mmm?"

"How'd this happen again?" Gabrielle sighed. "I can't remember."

The warlord chuckled. "I don't know, it just did."

"Yeah, that's the best way to put it." She smiled and closed her eyes. "What we going to do now?"

"I don't know... any thoughts?"

"I'm not sure myself. I'm still trying to grasp everything that happened tonight."

Xena nodded. "Same here." She sighed. "Maybe we should forget about my army."

Gabrielle opened her eyes. "Xena we can't leave Darphus, of all people, in charge of an army."

The warlord sighed. "You're right." She shifted little against the rock. "Maybe we'll stop him then disperse the army." She chuckled as a thought came to her.

"What?"

Xena grinned. "We could do the whole hero bit."

The smaller woman arched an eyebrow, she lifted her head to looked to her soulmate. "Nnno." She shook her head.

"So you saying traveling Greece together fighting evil wouldn't be... fun? Just you and I? Do a... Hercules thing." She almost laughed at her own words.

"Welllll...." Gabrielle took a deep breath. "No... everybody does that." She chuckled.

"I'm running out of options here Gabrielle."

"No no, wait." The small female dropped her head back against her partner's shoulder. "Let's do something different."

"Oh gods, I feel like your writing a story."

The younger woman chuckled. "Does it really matter Xena?"

The warlord thought. "No." She paused. "I just need to have you."

"I know, that's the same for me." She took a deep breath as her facial expression brightened. "Oh I got an idea."

Xena groaned. "What's that?"

Gabrielle lifted her head and looked to Xena. "We could still do the whole conquering bit thing but differently." The warlord arched an eyebrow. "Wait, it's crazy Xena. I admit but it might just work."

"You're still not telling me the whole plan Gabrielle."

"Right." She chuckled. "Okay so we stick with the conquering thing right? But make your army... like an army of... good. You know, fight for the greater good. An army of the greater good."

"Gabrielle?" Xena sighed. "Armies don't fight for good."

Gabrielle grinned. "There's always a first Xena."

"Gabrielle that's crazy."

"I know, I know Xena." She took a deep breath. "But seriously, no joking." She paused again. "We both know how much depression, fighting, revenge, poverty, and hatred are in this world. If we could conqueror it then we could get rid of all those things. Bring happiness to people."

"The world Gabrielle?"

"Welll, maybe Greece at least." The small woman sighed. "Xena, we both know that Rome is going to come here soon and try to conquer us. And we both know when Rome conquerors a new land they enslave the people for a time. Greece doesn't belong to Rome, doesn't belong to somebody like Caesar."

The warlord's eyes narrowed at that name. "I know he will come too."

Gabrielle arched an eyebrow. "You've met him."

"Yes." Xena looked from the fire to Gabrielle. "Long time ago... I'll tell you someday." The younger woman nodded to Xena and the warlord grinned a little. "Conquer Greece huh? That's a wild idea."

"Come on Xena, we both know you could do it." She grinned now. "And want too."

The warlord chuckled. "Always have. The last time I truly tried I almost died."

"How?"

Xena shrugged her shoulders. "I was at Cornith and my ambitions and power lust got a little to high and made me stupid. I lost the battle against Cornith. If I'd conquered them then all the other major city states would have fallen quickly."

"You could do it again. You're more experienced since then."

The Warrior Princess nodded a few times. "Yes and I would have the most important thing with me." She reached up with her right hand to brush Gabrielle's bangs away. "You." She leaned in to lightly kiss Gabrielle's lips.

"Can we try it Xena?"

The warlord sighed. "We can. It'll be hard and my men all won't agree."

"I know Xena we'll have to sift through your men. Figure out the loyal ones from the bad ones."

Xena nodded. "We will." She then grinned. "So how do you propose we fight for good anyway?"

Gabrielle sighed. "Treaties. And if say we did have to take a town we do it without killing, its possible. Then we could fight any warlords we run into."

The warlord nodded again. "Interesting."

"I seem to be."

Xena chuckled. "You are." She smiled.

Gabrielle now leaned in to kiss her soulmate.

"Gabrielle?"

Slowly the small woman pulled back. "What's wrong?"



"Nothing." Xena smiled sadly. "I just don't want you jumping into anything. Especially with what happened with Darphus."

The younger woman looked away then back to her soulmate. "Since that's happened Xena... I just feel... filthy and unsanitary."

Xena nodded. "I know, I felt like that all my life. Never slept with anybody that I've truly loved." Xena sighed. "Yeah I know."

Gabrielle smiled sadly then. "Then you'll know that being with you would make me feel pure again. It just all feels right."

The warlord smiled. "I do know that too." She kissed Gabrielle lovingly. "Just tell me if you need to stop."

"Don't count on me saying that." Gabrielle sucked in a breath as the other woman's warm lips went to her neck. "Xena aren't I'm suppose to give you some cheesy line?"

Xena came back up to kiss her again, her hands under the blanket were coming up her stomach. "Gabrielle don't." She said it between the kiss.

"That would be... no fun.... Xena." She felt warm hands come to her breasts. She only moaned and felt Xena capture her lips again. "I got one." Gabrielle started to chuckle in the middle of the kiss. "Oh you turn me on sexy babe."

Xena stopped kissing her soulmate and started to laugh, her head falling against Gabrielle's neck. "You had too."

"Yup." She grinned then rubbed her cheek against Xena's. "Need a good laugh before everything gets serious."

The warlord lifted her head and grinned. "Glad you got your laugh."

"Me too." Gabrielle kissed her soulmate. "'Cause Hades if I know what I'm doing."

"Don't worry." Xena then lowered her head to her soulmate's neck.

Gabrielle moaned again. "I'm not." She closed her eyes. Soon she'd know what to do. And then the soulmates would curl up into each other's arms and let sleep take them.

~\*Part 11\*~

Xena slowly opened her eyes, she saw her small soulmate sleeping on top of her, the furs covering them. She smiled and lifted her head to place a gentle kiss to the small woman's forehead.

Gabrielle lifted her head and smiled. "Morning."

"Hey." The warlord took a deep breath. "How'd you sleep?"

"Really good. You must have."

Xena chuckled. "Definitely." Her right hand under the fur idly ran up and down Gabrielle's bare back. "We need to get up. We have a lot of traveling."

The younger woman dropped her head back down on the older woman's chest. "Not yet. Give it five minutes."

"Mmm, I can go along with that." Xena closed her eyes again, Gabrielle did the same.

They lay like that for a few minutes or more, still having yet grasped everything. In eleven days Xena went from being a warlord to a lovesick puppy. Gabrielle went from being a peasant to a slave then gaining knowledge from experience to discover her soulmate and become a lovesick puppy as well. They both liked the end result.

"Okay, that was five minutes we could have been closer to Cirra."

Gabrielle chuckled. "You're just not the one to take in things are you?"

"Not when my army is in some stupid warrior's hands."

The smaller woman huffed. "Stupid isn't even the right description for Darphus." She sighed. "I hate him."

Xena opened her eyes. "I'm glad I'm not Darphus."

The peasant lifted her head. "Got that right." She grinned. "He needs to be set straight."

"And he will as soon as I get there."

"Right." Gabrielle chuckled and rolled off her soulmate.

They both stood up and got dressed in their now dried clothes. They ate breakfast then Xena went outside of the cave, the rain had stopped sometime last night. She'd found Argo and tacked her up. Gabrielle followed out soon and was watching her soulmate tack the mare up.

"Xena?"

"Mmm?" The warlord turned around from hooking the saddlebags on.

"Last night, why were we able to sit there and talk about our future like we were debating on a card game? I mean earlier we both were so worried about our futures."

Xena nodded, stood there thinking, her eyes fixed on the ground. "Maybe because we found each other." She looked up to her partner. "That's our destiny, each other. The future doesn't matter as much."

Gabrielle nodded a few times. "Yeah, you're right. I don't care what happens in our future. Well some but just as long as I'm by your side."

The warlord grinned. "The path doesn't matter Gabrielle. Either way we'll both end up together."

"And last night we just crossed roads." The young woman smiled. "We met halfway."

Xena shrugged. "Guess so." She smiled. "But let's go get our future together huh? I'm in the mood for some conquering."

Gabrielle laughed. "This is going to be an adventure."

"Oh yeah, wouldn't have it any other way Gabrielle." The warlord then hopped up onto her mare and looked down to Gabrielle, holding her hand down.

"I'm going to have to write about this one." She took her soulmate's hand and was pulled up onto the warhorse. Gabrielle wrapped her arms tightly around the warlord's waist.

Xena grinned and walked Argo up to the road, she then kick the mare into a gallop heading north. She grinned for a lot of reasons. She'll stop Darphus, have her army again, conquering, and all the while her soulmate will be there right beside her. Right there beside her accepting the dark side of herself. Xena might just get her other dream.

Greece.

But she knew she could only do it with Gabrielle beside her. She only wants to do it with her soulmate beside her. Xena would protect Gabrielle with everything. She knew she'd die then if she doesn't protect her other half. Xena had exactly every intentions of protecting this one younger woman with anything and everything, right down to her own soul.

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The soulmates rode north to Cirra for most of the day, but by afternoon they stopped. Xena decided she wanted time to think about her plans once she returned to her army. Not only that, but she wanted to figure Gabrielle into the army. Let Gabrielle figure herself into the army as well. So that lead them to stop not too far south of Cirra, about three candelmarks away.

"I'll admit, I'm starting to get use to it." Gabrielle walked back into the center of the camp with an armload of wood.

Xena grinned and bent down to one knee as her partner also bent down beside her with the wood. The warlord took the wood and began to build the fire. "Good."

"Now if I can just get use to the high part."

The older woman looked to her right at Gabrielle with a grin. "Argo isn't that high."

"Yes she is Xena. She isn't to you 'cause you're tall." The small woman grinned then stood up.

The warlord shook her head and finished up making the fire pit, now she began to light it.

"Xena I think I'm going to go down to the lake."

The Warrior Princess looked up to her soulmate and nodded. "Be there in a minute."

Gabrielle smiled with a nod. She then walked down to the lake, coming to the edge of the water. With a sigh, she brought her arms to cross over her stomach. Her emerald eyes stared out into the lake, watching the sun glisten and sparkle off the curves and rolls of the water. The gentle wind carefully caressing the clear water.

Gabrielle's thoughts were light as the wind itself. Her body relaxed like the water with few ripples. Slowly she took a deep breath and let the air slowly release back out. Then she felt it, that special warmth fill her body and make her tingle. A very tall familiar form came up behind her, which made Gabrielle grin.

Xena came right behind the other woman, her body pressing against Gabrielle's. Xena gradually brought her hands forward to sensually slide down her small soulmate's arms to her hands, their fingers interlacing. The warlord then pulling Gabrielle closer as she lower her chin down on top of the younger woman's head.

"What were you thinking about?"

The peasant sighed. "Just taking in the scenery."

"Peaceful."

"It really is." Gabrielle smiled and dropped her head back against the warlord's throat. Her emerald eyes then closed leisurely.

"Tired?"

The younger woman sighed. "A little." A brief silence. "Xena?"

"Mmm?"

"Can you teach me how to fight?"

Xena's first response was her body stiffening up. "Why?"

Gabrielle opened her eyes again. "Xena I need to learn how to defend myself." A sigh. "And I'm not going to have you constantly on the look out for me."

The warlord took a deep breath. "I don't like the idea of you killing."

"Xena I'm talking about fighting, not killing."

The older woman didn't respond right away instead she took another deep breath and slowly released it. "You see Gabrielle, when you have a weapon in your hands you're more libel to get attacked then if you didn't have one."

"Okay. But what happens if it were you and I fighting three men? I don't know how to fight, two go after you and the third after me. There's nothing I can do. Either that third person would hurt me, make me a hostage, or kill me. Xena I don't want to be a liability to you especially in an army." She closed her eyes then opened the again. "Besides Xena, I feel like I need to protect myself after... after Darphus."

Xena quickly tighten her arms around the other female. Her sapphire eyes closed as she tried to make a decision. She weighed things mentally, looked at the pro's and con's. She sighed and opened her eyes again. "Alright but I'll teach you the staff. No sword."

The peasant smiled sadly. "Thank you. I'd feel useless in an army otherwise." She chuckled then.

"You wouldn't be." The words came out seriously.

"I know." Gabrielle smiled a little. "Where am I going to stand in your army?"

Xena grinned. "I've been thinking about that part."

"And?"

"How's partner?"

The peasant blinked for a second, she repeated the warlord's question in her head.

"Partner? You mean as in accomplice? Working together?"

The taller female chuckled. "Accomplice, you make it sound like we're about to rob a tavern." A grin formed on her lips. "But yes, working together."

"Xena I don't know the first thing about running an army."

The Warrior Princess still had her grin. "You will soon."

Gabrielle groaned. "I have a feeling I have my work cut out for myself."

Xena chuckled. "You'll be fine."

Now the only thing that could be heard was nature's voices. The soulmates just relaxing and letting time move without them.

"Xena?" It was a low whisper.

"Yeah?"

Gabrielle closed her eyes as she took in a shaky breath. "When... when did it happen to you?" Her eyes opened again slowly.

Xena didn't answer at first, still figuring the question. Then it hit her what the it meant. "I was young... I was around thirteen."

The smaller woman tightened her hold over the warlord's hands. "Who was it?"

Xena closed her eyes, she thought she'd never be talking about her past. Nor did she think she'd ever talk to anybody about the time she'd been raped at a young age. Wouldn't talk about it so much so that she thought she'd buried it deep down. But then again, she never really had. Her eyes slowly opened again as she answered. "He was a friend of mine. Trusted him a lot before it happened." Xena took a deep breath. "His name was Brian and was also close to my oldest brother."

"How'd it happen?" Gabrielle's voice was low. Talking as if all of this was a secret that need not be heard to the world.

The warlord closed her eyes as she spoke, the memories came floating back. "His parents weren't around one day, I can't remember why. So he asked me to come over to his house. Went up to his room..." Another deep breath. "Brian locked the door and just went from there."

Gabrielle kept her eyes locked on the lake. She then replied still in a whisper.

"Darphus came up behind me before I went into the cooks' tent. Put a dagger to my throat and dragged me off to his tent." She sighed then and turned around in the older

woman's arms. She looked up to Xena. "I'm sorry Xena."

Xena smiled sadly. "It happens."

The younger woman nodded. "Yeah." She looked down then back up. "Did your family know?"

The warlord nodded. "They found out after it had happened. My younger brother, Lyceus, swore to protect me with his life from then on." Those words stung for Xena to hear in truth. "Toris though, he was angry and he beat up Brain for it. After that Toris and I were never really competitive towards each other." Xena looked up to stare out to the lake, she kept talking in a mysterious voice. "Toris seemed to respect me more for surviving through it." Her eyes slowly drifted back down to her soulmate.

Gabrielle studied her soulmate. She'd could just imagine the way the rape effect Xena. So much so that she could understand how it created the warlord it had today. "That's when you began to learn how to fight." Pure statement of truth.

Xena nodded. "Fight and protect myself."

The small woman dropped her gaze. Everything seemed to make sense to her now. That one event changed everything for Xena. The past event created the warlord. Gabrielle knew that. From then on it was destined for Xena to become a warlord because of just one event that was never spoke of or healed from. An event that made Xena lose her trust in people, feel as if she needed to protect herself, control others so they wouldn't control her, and ultimately stand alone. Protect herself in so many ways possible with her emotions and body. Everything fell into place for Gabrielle now. She had to admire Xena for taking on such an incredible feat. Many people would crumble under such a thing.

Gabrielle looked back up. "Thank you... for telling me."

Xena smiled sadly. "Thanks for asking. Nobody ever has." She paused, trying to control her emotions. "It feels good to finally tell somebody."

The peasant smiled. "I know what you mean." She then pulled her tall soulmate in for a long hug.

The warlord dropped her head down against Gabrielle's as she closed her eyes. She'd never felt so vulnerable since she had been raped. But this was a vulnerability she liked, a vulnerability she felt safe to have in her soulmate's arms. She could actually feel a little of herself let go of the past. Xena could actually see some of the darkness fade away and things become a little brighter. And in that brightness she saw herself and her soulmate. Xena would make it there someday, to that light.

Slowly the pair pulled away but still in each other's arms. Gabrielle smiled up to her soulmate.

"Thanks Gabrielle."

The peasant nodded. "Hey that's apart of my services." She grinned. There needed to be a joke now.

Xena chuckled. "Uh huh. Good services, I think I'll keep you."

The smaller narrowed her eyes with a grin as she spoke. "Ahh funny."

The warlord grinned. "Wasn't trying to be." Then she lowered her head to kiss her partner gently on the lips. Rising back to her full height after the kiss, the tall woman smiled. "Let me go catch some dinner huh?"

Gabrielle chuckled as she released her friend. "Right."

Xena still had her grin as she sidestepped her soulmate. She then went about taking her boots off and putting her hair up. After that she walked into the water till it just came up over her knees. Looking up to Gabrielle, Xena grinned. "What you feel like?"

The small woman crossed her arms against her chest. "Salmon."

The warlord's grin dropped. "Wrong season, wrong water, wrong-"

"Fine, fine." Gabrielle grinned. "Trout. Is that okay?"

Xena chuckled. "Yup." She looked back to the water and leaned forward, her hands going down into the water. She began to carefully search for her prey.

"Xena?"

"Mmm?"

"What are you doing?"

The warlord felt something-smooth pass through her fingers, she quickly closed her hands over the swimming object. Xena then brought up her hands from the water in a flash, throwing the fish to her soulmate. "Fishing."

The small woman's eyes widen at seeing the flying fish coming at her. She held her hands forward and closed her eyes. The fish plopped into her hands, her small fingers tightly grasping the fish. Gabrielle opened her eyes slowly and stared at the trout, it looking at her already.

The trout wiggled in her hands, trying to jump out. But the trout's predator only tightened her hold, he kept struggling in protest.

Gabrielle chuckled and turned around, tossing the fish onto the green grass.

"Gabrielle?"

"What?" The peasant turned back around to Xena. Once she did, she only found another flying fish. She quickly went about catching it. After tossing the second fish by the first, she turned back around. Yet again came a third fish at her. Now well experience with catching flying fish, Gabrielle snatched it out of midair and threw it with the other two.

"Here comes the last one Gabrielle." The thing about the warlord's voice that time was it held so much devilishness to it.

Gabrielle turned around to her soulmate. "Well you going to throw it to me?" She grinned.

Xena grinned devilishly. "Okay." She lifted her hands out of the water and threw something that looked nothing like a fish. Rather it was long and black with a slimness to it.

The peasant went about catching it not noticing anything fishy about it. She easily caught it but this fish was a bit different. Gabrielle's eyes widen. "Ah!" She dropped the fishy object to the ground and jumped back. "Oh gods." She looked up to her grinning soulmate. "I hate eels. Xena?"

The warlord laughed and grinned. "Yes?"

"That was not funny!" Gabrielle looked down at the eel by the water's edge. It was wiggling back and forth frantically. "Yuck." She shivered.

The warlord chuckled, shook her head, and walked out of the water. She came up to the eel and leaned down. She lifted up the wriggle black eel and tossed him into the water. Xena then looked back to her partner. "Just an eel."

The younger woman narrowed her eyes. "Uh huh." She grinned. "I'll get you back."

"Oh please do Gabrielle."

Gabrielle's grin only went more into a cat grin. "I promise." She then turned around and bent down to pick up the fish while Xena went about putting her boots back on.

The soulmates then walked back to the camp. The dusk came to the region and Gabrielle was on the cooking of the trout. Xena had cleaned them and Gabrielle had cooked them, nice little arrangement. The nominated cook added her herb of thyme to the trout to add some extra taste. Once the fish were cooked, the pair ate.

Gabrielle got down to the last bit of her fish, she stopped and stared at the fish for a moment. Her lips constructed into a grin. Turning her head slowly to look at the warlord, she only grinned more. Xena was done eating. Gabrielle stood up from her seat on the ground and walked over to her soulmate on the log.

Coming up to the older woman, Gabrielle lifted the warlord's plate off her lap and placed it on the ground. Xena looked up to her with an arched eyebrow. The peasant chuckled and sat down in the other woman's lap, straddling. The small woman then placed her plate in her own lap and looked up to Xena. "Hi Xena."

"Gabrielle." It was low.

"Yes?" The younger woman grinned then reach down with her right hand to the fish, she pulled a little of the meat off. Shifting her eyes back up, Gabrielle lifted her right hand up with the bit of meat. She gradually brought it up to the warlord's lips.

Xena narrowed her eyes a little but went with it. She let the flavored trout slip between her lips and into her mouth. She could feel Gabrielle's fingers caress her lips. Xena only let her tongue come forward to brush across her soulmate's fingertips.

Gabrielle grinned, she then decided to add some more heat to everything. She shifted closer against Xena, hardly any space between their faces. She repeated the same process again. Then even she couldn't take much more, so the small woman brought her right hand under the warlord's chin. She slowly leaned in to kiss her partner



deeply. Their tongues intertwining with the pleasant taste of the thyme and trout mixing in it all.

Slowly they pulled back. Gabrielle chuckled. "Well gotta clean the dishes." Without any other warning, she abruptly stood up with her plate and snagged Xena's. She quickly began to walk in the direction of the lake but she only made it to the fire.

For Xena had leaped out of her seat and grabbed her soulmate by the arm carefully. Gabrielle had stopped walking and the warlord still held the smaller woman's arm carefully. Xena slowly walked around to face Gabrielle. She then reached down to take the plates from the peasant's hand, she dropped them to the ground. Her deep sky filled eyes stared deep into electric sparkling green eyes. "Later." A response to the dishes from earlier.

Gabrielle smiled warmly. Xena smiled back and brought her hands to Gabrielle's sides. She leaned down and captured her soulmate's lips. The smaller woman's hands slipped up to Xena's arms, she could feel the cool brass on the armbands.

As the kiss kept going, Gabrielle leaned more into her soulmate. A moan escaped from her lips as Xena slowly pulled away. Gabrielle looked up with dark forest green eyes. "Xena?" A low need filled voice.

Xena grinned. She leaned back down to kiss her soulmate all over again. But none of it ended just there with a kiss.

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The dishes, well they did get cleaned later on in the night. But right now, our soulmates are on the ground. Xena lay on her back, Gabrielle right beside her with her head resting on the warlord's shoulder. The pair stared up into the twinkling and sparkling night sky. It was such magic.

"Xena?"

"Mmm?"

Gabrielle didn't respond quickly, instead she thought for a moment. She took a deep breath and retorted. "Why... Why do you think we're soulmates? I mean... not that I'm saying its bad or-"

"Gabrielle?" Xena had cut her off.

"Yeah?"

"It's okay. I understand what you're asking."

The peasant chuckled and turned her head to look at her partner. "Good." She smiled and looked back up to the stars.

The warlord grinned and then went serious. "I really don't know. It does seem odd in a way."

"Yeah." Gabrielle sighed. "We both seem so... opposite." She then shrugged her shoulders. "But in away we seem alike. You know?" She turned her head again to her soulmate.

Xena smiled and looked to Gabrielle. "Yeah." They both looked back to the night sky and Xena went on talking. "Maybe that's soulmates. Different and alike."

The small woman's eyebrows furrow together as she considered that. "Soulmates... they're opposites yet the same."

The warlord smiled some. "That sounds right."

Gabrielle also smiled. "Sort of like overall we have our extreme opposite side but then we have some things alike that intertwine us deeply."

The older woman slowly took in air then released it, her soulmate's words being considered. "Yeah but I think the opposite sides intertwine us too. The opposite sides are what balance both of us and makes us whole."

"So then if we don't have each other then we're sort of screwed huh?" Gabrielle chuckled. "In a lot of ways. But then either of us would fall." She paused. "Double-edge sword, gods."

Xena grinned. "That's life."

The peasant also grinned. "I like this double-edge sword though." She smiled. "You know I always thought soulmates were suppose to be exactly alike. If they weren't then they couldn't get along."

The warlord smiled. "Well looks like we just redefined soulmates."

Gabrielle sighed happily. "Definitely." Gabrielle then shook her head some. "But now that I think about it. If soulmates were the exact same then it would be sort of boring."

The older woman chuckled. "How you figure that?"

"Xena, serious it would be boring." Gabrielle then rolled to her right on top of the warlord. She sensed her soulmate's large arms wrapping around her waist. She looked down into Xena's eyes. "Think about it. Say if I was a warlord you know. Knew all this fighting, making war, controlling, with some big ass army, and you know I was tall. Wouldn't that be boring to you? Then we couldn't compare lives really or learn different things from each other. It would be boring as centaur shit."

Now the warlord started to laugh. She calmed down and responded. "Yes very boring."

"Seriously Xena. Wouldn't it?"

Xena sighed and reflected on it. Yeah she had to admit. It would come down to the smallest things, even to Gabrielle's height. She wouldn't even have the enjoyment of being able to slowly lean down and kiss her soulmate like she does. "You're right Gabrielle. Wouldn't be much fun."

Gabrielle smiled. "It really wouldn't be." She then dropped her head down onto her soulmate's chest and closed her eyes. "This is perfect."

The older woman smiled and brought her right hand up to run her hand through Gabrielle's hair. "Yeah." She'd said that sadly.

The peasant lifted her head with her brow furrowed. "Why'd you say that like that?"

Xena looked away then back to Gabrielle. "Because it's not going to be like this when we're back with my army."

Gabrielle stared into her partner's eyes. "You'll be in warlord mode huh?"

The tall woman sighed. "Yes, unfortunately. I have to, for me to run that army. I can't be relaxed or showing emotion around my men. But when it's just you and I, it'll be different."

"But even then you'll be tense won't you?"

"I will be, I can't risk not being and ended up something happening to you Gabrielle."

"I know Xena." She then released her breath slowly. "But I'll probably be the same way."

Xena stared up into her soulmate's eyes for a time. "Gabrielle... if this gets too hard for us. Then I don't want to hang around my army. I am not going to endanger us for this conquering. Okay?"

Gabrielle nodded. "Yeah, I don't want to risk our relationship either. Couldn't." She then smiled some. "We'll just have to take vacations at certain points."

The warlord chuckled. "Sounds good." She then pushed Gabrielle's head back down on her chest.

Gabrielle closed her eyes. Her right hand went to her left side, Gabrielle grabbed the fur. She then raised it to bring it over her and Xena's bodies. "Xena?"

"Mmm?"

"I love you."

Xena smiled. "I love you too." She was enjoying the way those sweet words perfectly floated from her lips to caress Gabrielle's heart and soul. Then she feeling such a rare warmth fill her each time Gabrielle whispered those words to her. She never ever thought she'd reach that point in her life with somebody. Xena wouldn't, couldn't let Gabrielle leave her life, her soul would die otherwise.

"Night Xena."

"Goodnight love."

Gabrielle brought her head up and stared into Xena's eyes. Goodnight love. It repeated in Gabrielle's mind. Love, oh gods how... how intense that sounded. How much just that one word filled her. How that one word meant and held so much behind it.

Gabrielle smiled very warmly and leaned down to capture Xena's lips gently. She poured all her love into the kiss and let her soul speak through her kiss. Slowly pulling back, she carefully rubbed her cheek against Xena's. Gabrielle lowered her head back down onto her soulmate's chest.

Xena smiled to herself at her partner's reaction. She then closed her eyes. Nothing else

needed to be said that night, only dreamt.

~\*Part 12\*~

Another day came to the soulmates with the morning finding them riding early towards Cirra. Xena had her plans in her head, she was all to prepared for this. As they rode closer and closer to her army more and more of her dark side began to take control. Only causing a deathly cat grin to cross her lips. The only thing different then normal now, is deep in her eyes there is love. A love that the warlord's new strength will be coming from, fueled from. An ultimate love that could mean only death to one who may try to tamper with such a love.

The pair arrived near the army by midday. They came into the woods, off the road after dismounting from Argo. They walked through the woods towards the army.

"Xena?"

"Mmm?"

"How can you be sure Darphus will still be here?"

Xena grinned. "He will be. He won't get far without the map."

The peasant grinned also. "What about Cirra?"

"Knowing Darphus he probably didn't do anything. He thinks we're still here after him." The warlord now stopped walking in the woods and turned to her mare. "We're leaving Argo here." Xena shifted to a tree and tied the horse's reins to the tree. She then walked to the saddlebags and pulled out her older sword, she hooked it to her side, now she has two swords. Xena then looked to her soulmate. "I want you to be very careful."

Gabrielle nodded, she was serious. "I will. You too huh?"

The warlord smiled. "Always." Now her smile dropped, her expression serious. "You sure about this? We can turn back from all of this."

The smaller woman sighed. "I wanna do this Xena. But only if you want to."

Xena nodded. "I do." She then turned towards the direction of the army. "Okay, here's the plan."

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The soulmates knelt down behind the bushes. Xena reached forward with her right hand to push the brush out of the way. She looked through the vines to the camp of the army. Her eyes narrowed as she watch Gelidus walk by. Looking to her left she then saw Darphus, she grinned. The warlord looked to Gabrielle. "You see him?" A low whisper.

Gabrielle leaned to her left some, there she spotted Darphus. "Yeah. You think he'll head into his tent?"

"Should." Xena kept her eyes pinned on Darphus.

Both soulmates watched the man walk through the camp. He yelled at a few warriors

then laughed and kept walking towards his tent. Darphus made it to his tent and walked in.

"Ready?"

Gabrielle looked to her soulmate and nodded. "Yeah. Don't take long Xena."

The warlord smiled some. "I won't promise." Xena then leaned in to her partner. They gently kissed and when they pulled back, Xena watched Gabrielle stand up. "Be careful."

"I will." The peasant walked through the brush and quickly ran towards Darphus's tent, she went inside. Xena then backed up and went sprinting through the woods in the direction of Gelidus's tent.

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Gabrielle ducked into Darphus's tent, she rose back up to see Darphus's back. She took a deep breath and spoke aloud. "How are you Darphus?"

The warrior whirled around with a surprised look. "Look who it is, the slave." He grinned. "Miss me?"

The peasant took a step in more, she grinned back. "Oh no why would I? There's nothing to miss about you." She could feel some of her anger from the rape come back.

Darphus laughed. "That's why you came back huh? So where's Xena? She didn't like your services?"

"Oh Xena... well she's given up." Gabrielle stepped to her right. "But I love armies, thought I'd come back."

Darphus took a step towards the small woman. "So Xena chickened out huh?" He grinned. "Why don't I believe that?"

"I don't know. Why don't you tell me Darphus." The peasant took another step to her right, the tent flap now to her left.

"Maybe because you're her little harlot." The warrior then shifted to his left.

"Maybe I'm not Darphus. Maybe I have you fooled." Gabrielle grinned and took another step to her right.

Darphus stepped closer to the peasant. "Won't matter anyway."

"And why?" Gabrielle took another step to her right, she was almost facing the tent flap. "You don't have anything Darphus." Yet again a right step, now she completely faced the tent flap.

"I have Xena's army." Darphus came right up to Gabrielle, his back to the tent flap. "I have her power and now I'll have her slave... again." He quickly grasped Gabrielle by the arms to tightly hold her in place.

Gabrielle could feel herself shaking some but she reached down inside to the part of herself that is Xena. "I don't think so."

"So do I."

Darphus quickly spun around at hearing an all too familiar voice. His eyes widen but only in the time it took for a fist to connect with his face. He stumbled backwards, Gabrielle had moved out of the way. He landed square back on his bed, staring up.

"Miss me Darphus? I missed you." Xena grinned and stepped forward towards Darphus. She brought her hands down to the man's armor, grabbing it. Xena in a flash lifted the warrior off his bed and swung him around. "You need to take charge of your army. Don't you think so?" The warlord grinned and did a roundhouse kick.

Darphus went flying through the tent flap and outside. He fell flat on his back on the ground, he slowly got up coughing as he saw Xena coming out of the tent.

Xena walked up to Darphus and stared down at him with a grin, her hands on her hips. "It's such a lovely day for a fight." Xena looked up to see all the warriors of the army come towards them, all shocked at the scene.

Gabrielle had come out of Darphus's tent. Her arms crossed against her chest with a grin.

Darphus stood up, he wiped away blood from under his nose. He looked around at his warriors. "Kill her! Kill them both!"

None of the warrior's shifted from where they stood, instead they stood there watching.

The warlord grinned and looked around at the warriors, she looked back to Darphus. "Well I'd say they aren't listening Darphus. You need to show them your fighting abilities to be a qualified leader." Her eyes narrowed. "If you have any."

Darphus growled and unsheathed his sword from his side. "I will kill you."

"Don't talk the talk when you don't have the walk Darphus." Xena crossed her arms against her chest.

Darphus sprung forward with his sword.

Xena easily sidestepped him, her arms still crossed against her chest. "Is that all you have?"

Darphus spun his sword and raised it to bring it down at Xena.

The warlord quickly uncrossed her arms and raised her left arm up. The blade connected with her gauntlet, as she held the blade up she reached behind unsheathing her own sword. Xena jumped back with a laugh. "Come on Darphus, show you're a leader."

The man came at Xena with his sword. Xena stopped his sword. The two went at it for awhile with the sword clashing. Xena stopped a swing that came at her side. She then punched at Darphus in the face and he stumbled backwards.

Darphus growled and quickly reached to his belt, in a split second a dagger was in the air heading towards the warlord.

Xena stepped to her right and lifted her left hand to catch the dagger in midair. She looked at it then back to Darphus. "Play nice." She then flipped the dagger in her hand and threw it back but faster.

Darphus couldn't see it but then he felt it in his left arm. Reaching up, he removed it and threw the dagger to the ground. He then attacked again.

The warlord stayed on defense with the swings Darphus gave her, parrying them away. She then decided to do some offense. Xena stepped back and did a high kick to Darphus's sword hand. His sword went flying sky high. Xena grinned at the surprised warrior and she kicked him at his chest, he went reeling onto his back.

Darphus opened his eyes looking up to see his sword coming down at him, blade first. His eyes widen and he rolled to his right out of the sword's target. Slowly Darphus got to his knees.

Xena grinned and bent down, her face right in his but with her sword pressing against his throat. "I never knew you were this bad at fighting." She grinned. "Glad I know now."

Darphus narrowed his eyes. "So what do you plan to do now with me?"

The warlord grinned. "Kill you." She then slowly stood up with Darphus, her blade still against his throat.

Then there was the sound of somebody running towards the group of people.

"Darphus, Xena is here!"

Xena turned her head to her right to see Gelidus running while pulling a gag from over his mouth, her eyes narrowed. She then saw out of the corner of her eye a quick movement, she knew it was Darphus. Looking back towards Darphus, she found the man with Gabrielle in front of his body, a dagger to the peasant's throat. Deja-vu.

Xena's eyes were still narrow and she heard Gelidus still running. She then grinned at Darphus. Reaching down to her right she retrieved her chakram held it up and threw it at Darphus but it went over his head and hit the tent behind. Bounced off and went spinning in the direction of Gelidus, it hit him in the neck instantly killing him, and then it came back to Xena.

The warlord caught it and she saw Darphus staring at the dead Gelidus, which gave her time. So she stepped forward in a blur of motion, her fingers coming up to the warrior's elbows. Xena quickly did pressure points on Darphus.

Darphus gritted his teeth against the pain, he couldn't move. He watched as Gabrielle slipped out from under his arms and backed away. His eyes then averted to the warlord.

Xena just grinned. "See you in Tartarus Darphus." She spun her sword and stepped forward. Her sword went up into his chest and out his back.

The warrior's eyes widen a little and then they closed as the sword went through his heart. His body fell against the sword and went limp.

Xena jerked her sword out of his body and pushed the lifeless body to the ground. The dead warrior fell on his back. She stared down at the dead Darphus. She then smiled and whirled around to face the army. "Anybody else around here think they're a leader?" Xena turned her head left and right at the warriors. "Good." Lifting her sword she let the blade with blood lean against her right shoulder. She stepped more into the center of the circle. "Well then whose army is this?" A grin.

One warrior raised his hand and yelled. "Xena!"

Another followed. "Xena!"

"Xena! Xena! Xena! Xena!" It was a continuous chant.

The warlord spun around in a full circle looking at all her warriors praising her, she was evilly smiling. She then stopped turning and looked to her soulmate. Xena nodded faintly.

Gabrielle nodded back and stepped up beside her partner.

"Silence!" Xena then sheathed her sword as her warriors quiet. "Now then, there are some new rules for this army." She smiled as she looked around and continued talking. "This army is no longer about pillaging, revenge, and death. This army, my army, is now about conquering in the most peaceful way. And we will fight other warlords. My army is now an army of good. This is the army of the greater good." Xena paused and looked around at her warriors for reactions. None of them seemed to go into disgust or anger, most nodding. "To add on to that, you have two commanders. Gabrielle..." Xena looked to Gabrielle and next to her army. "Is also your commander. She is my partner. You all will treat her with the same respect and regard as you treat me. If you do not, then consider your life forfeited." She then paused. "Through our conquering, Gabrielle's leadership, and mine this army will conquer Greece!"

All the warrior's then cheered loudly in agreement. Raising arms up in salute and continued yelling loudly.

Xena grinned and looked down to her soulmate. Gabrielle looked up with a smile. The warlord smiled back and winked to her.

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Xena smiled down at her soulmate.

Gabrielle smiled right back and brought her hands up to the warlord's sides. "This is going to work Xena."

The warlord grinned. "We'll try." They stood in the center of *their* tent.

The peasant chuckled. "It will work." She then leaned up to her soulmate.

Xena herself leaned down and the soulmates' lips met for a deep kiss. Once they broke apart Xena walked over to their bed, there on the bed are her regular warlord attire. She stared down at the uniform for a moment.

The younger woman shifted to Xena's side and stared at the attire as well. She looked



up to Xena. "It's another mind set huh?"

The warlord nodded a few times. "It is." She then looked down to Gabrielle. "Here it goes."

Gabrielle grinned and watched as her partner slowly took off her sword and chakram placing them on the bed. Then the brass armor, armbands, gauntlets, and the boots were taken off.

Xena then took her leathers off and stood in her black tunic, slowly she reached down to lifted her older leathers with the gold and put them on. They felt different then her other one's even though she's worn these for longer. They were just different. After that the warlord began to put on the wire armor then the chain across her chest. Next to follow were the leather armbands and gauntlets with chain mail.

The peasant took a deep breath at this scene, she took a step back, still watching. Xena then reached down to put on her older boots, which stop at her knees instead of covering them. The last touch, her cape. She lifted it and began to attach it to her shoulders. Once Xena did, she lifted her older sword and clipped it to her back. Her chakram the last weapon, she was clipping it as she was turning around to face Gabrielle again. The chakram hooked to her side, Xena slowly raised her head back up to look to Gabrielle with the side of herself that is the warlord. The side that is the darkness.

Gabrielle looked up and down the length of Xena's length. Why did it matter so much this time? She'd seen Xena dressed in her warlord uniform before. But this time it's different, another story to be told. She looked back up to Xena and her lips slowly creased up into a smile. Gabrielle then looked deep into her soulmate's eyes. Yes she could see that warlord, that darkness. This time though, she wasn't scared of it nor hated it. No, now she felt protected by it. Protected because she knew that darkness in Xena is there for her now. A bit of an odd way to see it but it was the truth. Not only did she feel protected by it, but she loved it. For some reason, Gabrielle felt electrify with that darkness that made her stomach jump in excitement and her heart pound with thrill. That's when Gabrielle knew that in due time she would take on some of Xena's darkness. There was no stopping that. That is soulmates.

Gabrielle took a step to Xena, her eyes still locked with those deep rich blue twinkling eyes. "Perfect." That's all that need to be heard.

Xena grinned with warmness. She leaned down to her soulmate as she closed her eyes.

Their lips locked in a loving kiss. One of those kisses that held promise and love. A kiss that meant the future is about to change for them both. The soulmates will continue to walk down this different path to a future with different story then what they could have been walking down. Nothing can stop them either for they have *love* behind them. Love, the strongest force in the everything.

The End

Author's Notes ~ That is my first story for this new series y'all. I hope everybody liked it. I tried to make things different for Xena and Gabrielle, they certainly are. I plan to write another story for this series so y'all can get a feel of what this series would be

like. I do not know whether I'd continue with it, I'd love to. I have wide-open space to do so many things with these two. But I will not continue with this series unless I hear from a lot of readers that I should. It could be a real fun series. Let me know everybody what you think. Love to hear. Thanks!

-Red Hope