

~ Cross Winds ~

by Red Hope

Violence: Of course there is in this, its Xena Warrior Princess. *L Just some sword flinging, and staff whacking action and maybe some daggers being tossed around.

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Subtext: For sure! There is love between two couples, women. If this offends you then don't read this story. But there is no sex contained in this story.

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If anybody has comments about my story please let me know at:

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Part 1

Section 1

~*Part 1*~

With startle a tall form woke up in the wide bed, feeling another form in her arms begin to shake, uncontrollably. The woman looked down at the other figure to see them shaking, tears streaming down their cheeks and they continued to scream the tall woman's name out in agony. The tall woman quickly realized what was happening to the small form. Briskly, she grasped the smaller woman's shoulders and gently shook them while calling their name.

"Gabrielle...Gabrielle wake up" The bard shook her head still crying as her hands were tightly clenched to the bed sheets. She continued to cry while shaking her head and screaming out.

"Xena! No Xena, come back! I love you! Gods no, Xena!" The warrior could feel tears weld up into her eyes as she tried to waken her soulmate. Xena continued to shake Gabrielle as she spoke but now in a more demanding tone.

"Come on Gabrielle, wake up!" The bard's breathing continued heavily as she fought her fears from within. Within the nightmare, the small blond rested her head on top of Xena's lifeless body, back in Niklio's hut. She kept crying the pain within her heart and soul, too much for her to control. Gabrielle continued to yell out to Xena's soul as it left her body, demanding her to come back to life. As the Amazon Princess laid her head on the still warm body, she whispered words of pain. Now within the dream the blond could hear Xena's voice calling out to her, clear and strong.

All of a sudden Gabrielle shot up from the bed, to be met by a pair of strong worried blue eyes. The bard's eyes were wide open and contain only pain and fear. Finally the blond realized that it was only a nightmare and that Xena was still alive before her. Xena continued to grasp her soulmate's shoulders tightly, letting the bard come around, let reality sink in. With a shaky hand the younger woman caressed the warrior's cheek, making sure she was real. She knew her lover was real and began to

cry again from the pain she went through and almost had to live with for life. Reaching out Gabrielle wrapped her small arms around the tall woman's body tightly. Xena immediately enveloped her arms around the bard, hugging her tightly, hoping to drive away the younger woman's nightmares. Gabrielle buried her face into Xena's breasts, smelling the strong leather as she cried her body still shaking and her breathing still heavy. The warrior whispered words of love and protection to her bard, letting her know it wasn't real.

"Hey its okay Gabrielle, I've got ya, it was just a dream" After a few heartbeats of crying, the bard finally started to calm down. Slowly the ex-warlord pulled away, but still kept her arms tightly around the bard. Gabrielle's eyes were pure red, her cheeks still wet from the crying. Her breathing had calmed and she had better control of her body and emotions. Reaching up, the warrior wiped away the tears still slightly trickling down the flushed cheeks, the bard faintly smiling. "You okay now?" The Amazon Queen lightly nodded as she noticed her lover had been crying some as well. Xena leaned forward and placed a kiss to her soulmate's forehead and began to lay back down on the bed. Once the tall form was lying back down, the bard was quick to follow. She turned to her stoic lover and felt protective arms pull her in. Gabrielle easily rested her head on top of Xena's shoulder as she buried her head into the warrior's neck. The Warrior Princess rested her chin on top of the strawberry-blond, while taking a deep breath to calm her nerves. The bard herself took a few deep breaths, finally feeling control once more. The warrior moved her one arm up more and began to run a hand through the other woman's hair slowly and lovingly as she spoke quietly.

"Go back to sleep Gabrielle" The blond nodded as her eyes began to feel heavy once more, but before she let herself drift off, she spoke to Xena in a low voice.

"Thank you Xena, I love you" Xena let a small smile ease onto her lips as she let the words warm her heart. She continued to run her hands lightly through the bard's hair, knowing it would send her to sleep faster.

"I am always here for you, now go to sleep" Now a smile etched on the bard's lips, then she heard the warrior whisper into her ear. "I love you my bard" Those were the last words the young woman heard as sleep over took her. Xena for her part lay awake for awhile longer; wondering what she could do to rid her soulmate of her nightmares. There were just too many, one's between Xena's death, Poteidaia's destruction, and her family's death. They all plagued her and Xena knew it even though she hadn't sat down and talked to Gabrielle about them. The warrior then decided when she got the first chance, she would sit down with her lover and get her to talk about the nightmares. The ex-warlord knew that would be the first step to begin the healing process and rid the nightmares. Slowly the warrior fell back into a light sleep, knowing dawn would come soon.

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Green eyes casually opened up, staring up at a wood ceiling with small rays of light filtering through, dawn. The bard could feel a strong form beside her that had protective arms wrapped around her snug. Now the bard began to grin to herself as she turned her head to her right to gaze at the older woman. Gabrielle couldn't believe that she was awake before her lover, defiantly rare. Now that grin enlarged as the realization came over her, she continued to gaze at the beautiful and peaceful face. As she watched slowly a grin began to form on the taller woman's lips and the bard's eyes

widen. Now the ex-warlord began to deeply chuckle and felt her soulmate reach over and grasp her ribs, trying to tickle her. Xena tried to hold back her laughs between her trick and the tickling, but she couldn't help them when her bard spoke to her.

"I can't believe you were awake the whole time. You are so mean Xena" Finally the Warrior Princess opened her blue eyes and quickly grasped small wrists. She then rolled on top of the small woman, straddling her knees on the bed as she pinned the Amazon Queen's hands behind her head. Gabrielle quickly stopped struggling knowing it was no use against the large and stronger woman. Instead she gazed up into loving blue eyes that she adored so much. Xena melted to the look and eyes and she slowly leaned in, lightly kissing her soulmate. After the warrior brought her head back up, the bard could still feel the heat on her lips from the gentle kiss and the tingling through her body. Slowly Xena moved her hands to the bard's sides, grasping them tightly. With ease the tall woman rolled back into her spot, bringing the bard with her. Now Gabrielle laid on top of Xena's leather clad stomach while Xena brought her arms around, resting on top of the other woman's back. The blond smiled to her soulmate and then rested her head on top of Xena's chest, listening to the slow rhythm of the heartbeat.

"So how did you sleep Gabrielle?" The bard's body tingled over the deep voice as she spoke back in a more soothing voice.

"After the nightmare, really well" Gabrielle then brought her head up, resting her chin on top of the warrior's chest, now she stared into blue eyes. "How did you sleep?" The tall woman faintly shrugged her shoulders as she let a small smile creep onto her lips. The warrior's eyes contained a small twinkle to them as she began to run her fingers up down the bard's tunic covered back, Gabrielle moaning in response.

"Not to bad" The bard just slightly nodded as her emerald eyes drifted shut, taking in her soulmate's touch on her back. Gabrielle just responded with a purr.

"Mmmm good" Xena grinned to herself as she watched her bard drown into the feelings coursing through her body. Now the warrior's mind slowly began to come up with a plan of attack, Gabrielle waiting for it. As the perfect idea came the older woman, a knock came at the door, making Xena growl in response. The warrior stopped her assault while Gabrielle opened her eyes once more and listened as another knock came to the door. The bard then called out in aloud, commanding, and some what angered tone to the person at the entrance of the hut.

"Come in" Slowly the door creaked open, and a curly blond peaked her head into the room. Quickly she spotted her two friends, one lying on top of the other, Xena wearing her leathers and the Queen in her white tunic. The Amazon sighed in relief at the site, she didn't bother them too much. Carefully the curly blond made her way to the table close by the bed on the two lover's side of the bed. She then sat down, resting her right arm on the table that contained the Warrior Princess's sword, chakram and brass armor. Looking up, she caught a pair of blue and green eyes gazing back at her, the bard smiling. "What is up Ephiny?" The Regent sighed as she brushed some hair out of her face and leaned back in the chair.

"It seems we have a small problem with Lysia" The bard raised an eyebrow at that, while Xena only kept her stoic form on.

"You mean the Amazon that just came from a northern village...looks just like

Xena?" The warrior grunted at the end remark, making the bard turn her head to look down at her lover. "Well she did Xena you have to admit. She was a bit shorter, brown hair, and had hazel eyes" The warrior grinned and then slightly nodded her head in agreement as the Amazon Queen looked back at the woman in the chair. "So what is she doing?"

"Lysia has been stirring up a little trouble, going around saying you are weak and aren't worthy to be Queen" Again the Regent sighed as she lower her eyes to the floor momentarily then looked back up. "A few of the newer Amazons seem to be agreeing with her" The bard could feel her soulmate's body automatically tense up in response, Xena didn't like this as much as the bard didn't. Does this mean another civil war? Gabrielle sighed as she thought about that, she could feel the comforting large hand rubbing her small back. Xena had a plan, but she rather give her bard a chance to settle it herself, knowing it was her soulmate's responsibility. Slowly a plan came to the blond's mind letting a small grin settle onto her lips.

"What is she schedule to do today?" Ephiny looked up at the ceiling as she thought about it and finally it came to the woman, she looked back to green eyes.

"She is suppose to be doing sparing practice" Now the blond's grin increased as it dawned on the Regent what she was planning to do. "Gabrielle, I don't think its safe. She is a very skilled warrior" Before the small woman could respond the silent warrior spoke up in a deep rich tone.

"I think its perfect Ephiny, Gabrielle is skilled with her staff, Lysia will never expect it" Gabrielle felt herself go warm over the compliment and that her soulmate defended her. The Regent then looked to the dark-haired warrior with a serious face.

"What if she challenges Gabrielle?" The blond bard grinned devilishly as did her warrior. Gabrielle was the one to speak what was mentally shared between her and her warrior.

"Well we all know who is my champion" The curly blond slightly chuckled at that as she let a small smile ease on her face.

"Okay, its your decision my Queen" The bard smiled sweetly to Ephiny as she watched her gather herself up from the seat and head out the door. Gabrielle then called out to her friend before she headed out the door.

"Thanks Ephiny" The Amazon's smile increased some at the thank you and called back.

"You're welcome my Queen" Now the door quietly closed as two pairs of intense eyes met once more. Quickly a large hand reaches behind strawberry-blond hair, pulling the bard's head down, to passionately kiss the younger woman.

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Carefully the short bard crawled off her lover's nude body and stood up on the wood floor. Gabrielle stretched her own nude body as she gazed out the window, seeing the sun was still fairly low in the eastern sky. She then turned around to face a grinning warrior, making the bard chuckle deeply. Slowly the bard began to lean down, capturing her warrior's eyes with her own intense green eyes. Gentle the Amazon Queen kissed the taller woman's stomach to feel the muscles ripple underneath in

reaction. Gabrielle straightens back up and devilishly grinned down at her soulmate as she spoke in a low husky voice.

"I love it that I can do that to you with the smallest of touches" Briefly Xena closed her eyes to the words and tone and opened once more to show nothing but pure love contained in them. The bard's heart melt at the site as she smiled to her lover. She then padded over to where she left her cloths last night, first picking up her green halter-top. As she gazed at it, a tall warm presence came up behind the young woman followed by strong arms wrapping around her muscular stomach. The bard sighed as she felt the warrior's breath comes down to her neck and the tall woman's voice came out low and rich, bare skin against bare warm skin.

"Wear your Amazon cloths" The small blond grinned at that, she would do anything to please Xena, even the smallest of things. Slowly she placed the green top down, feeling her warrior release her and move to the saddlebags. Quickly the ex-warlord found the Amazon garb and padded back over to the blond handing them to her. Gabrielle gratefully accepted them and began to put them on as she saw her partner head over to her leathers. Second to last to putting on her garbs, she began to place her single earring into her ear. The small woman reached for the feather necklace to see a large hand pick it up before her. The bard smiled inwardly and reached back, lifting her hair up. Carefully she felt cold metal fall onto her chest and warm hands touch the back of her neck as they tied the bronze necklace on. Dropping her hair back down, Gabrielle grasped the second necklace that was silver and on it contained the charm of Xena's chakram, her staff and a deep sapphire in the center. Lifting it up, the blond placed the charm on top of the bronze feathers, letting all know that her soulmate was first. Xena had watched with intent, smiling at the site, her heart warming at it. Smiling, the Amazon Queen turned around to completely face the warrior, standing tall for her soulmate. The tall woman took one step back and took in the full view of her companion. Xena then realized this was the first true time she had a good look at her soulmate in her Amazon garb, she never taken the time before to closely look at it.

The Warrior Princess gazed at Gabrielle with curious face as she looked at the bard with the sun from the window cascading over her. Strawberry-blond hair glowing, green eyes sparkling with her tan heighten her body's beauty. The tight leather brought out the bard's muscles more and reflected her blond hair more strongly. To Xena her soulmate looked like a goddess as well as a strong warrior, perfection to the warrior's eyes. Looking back up, the warrior met emerald eyes that showed love, confidence, loyalty, strength, and power, it made a shiver rush down the tall woman's back. She finally truly realized her bard had grown dramatically since they first met in that grove with Draco's men. The ex-warlord knew this wasn't just a young naive girl following her in hero worship, but a strong woman that has seen death and life and has gain much power in her time. Xena felt a sense of pride fill her over her soulmate's accomplishments through the short almost two years now.

The bard could see respect consume her lover's eyes, warming the young woman's very soul. Slowly Gabrielle closed in the distance and stood up tall, and two pair of warm lips met, expressing the love they held for one another. Reluctantly they broke the kiss, knowing they had to get on with the day's plans. The bard knowing she was the talker decided to break the comforting silence between them.

"Come on lets go get something to eat, I am a bit on the hungry side" The tall warrior followed the Amazon Queen out of the door while chuckling to herself over the bard's

words.

"Yeah I am rather hungry too, think it was all that working out this morning" The bard felt herself go a tint of red at the statement as she headed towards the food hut. Gabrielle then realized that Xena wasn't walking right beside her, making her frown in response. She then stopped walking and waited for the tall woman to step up beside her, whom did and she continued to walk with her warrior beside her.

"That's better" Xena's face turned a bit confused by the words and looked to her soulmate, Gabrielle knowing what the look was about. "Don't like you walking behind me, I like you by my side" The Warrior Princess then understood what Gabrielle meant by that, Xena made a mental note of that to herself. She then looked down at Gabrielle with a bit of a small grin but serious blue eyes that spoke volumes.

"I always stay by your side" The bard looked up into warm eyes and became lost into them as she heard the noise of the food hut.

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The red head Amazon looked up into confident brown eyes that bored into her making her feel rather nervous. Now she felt the rough cold tip of the Amazon staff move away from her neck, calming the red head's mind. She then reached up to accept a hand that the small red headed Amazon quickly accepted and was hauled to her feet. The other Amazon then handed the small one her staff back, talking to her with a proud voice.

"You have improved much since last" The red head smiled to the weapons master as she heard the words.

"Thank you Eponin" The mentor Amazon smiled in return and suggested her advice to the young woman.

"Keep practicing your parries and you should get it rather fast" The red head nodded then stepped out of the sparring circle. Eponin then looked around at her students just outside the practicing circle. "Who is next?" Now a rather tall brown haired Amazon stepped into the circle walking over to the weapons master. As she stepped up to Eponin, the Amazon grinned to the tall new comer to the village. "Ah Lysia, I don't think we have sparred yet" The tall Amazon shook her head in a no response as she noticed a smaller woman with a staff walking up behind Eponin.

"And I am afraid you won't get the chance to this time Eponin" The weapons master turned her head to her right to look into green eyes that were serious. She then bowed her head to the bard and looked back to her with a smile.

"My Queen, you wish to spar with Lysia?" The Amazon Queen nodded her answer and watched as Eponin walked off the practice area over to where Solari stood. The Amazon looked to Solari with a questioning face, but the brown haired Amazon just shrugged her shoulders in response. Then both Solari and Eponin noticed that a rather large crowd of other Amazons began to circle around the sparring circle, realizing who was practicing against whom. Solari crossed her arms against her chest and looked behind herself briefly to catch a rather tall dark haired woman dressed in brown leathers standing with the Queen Regent.

She then looked back to the center of the circle to watch Gabrielle and Lysia begin to

circle one another, in fighting stance with their staffs.

"I am honored to be practicing with the Queen" The bard's upper lips twitched at the remark from the Xena look alike. For a second the blond had forgotten this wasn't Xena, thinking she was practicing with her warrior.

"Are you going to stand here and praise or fight?" The tall Amazon's anger shot up at the comment and she quickly lunged forward, bring her staff down hard and fast. Gabrielle easily saw this, she quickly brought her staff above her parrying it with ease. She then quickly brought her staff back down and swung one end making contact with the brown haired Amazon's staff. Lysia then shot her staff end out making contact with the bard's left side, Gabrielle grimace in pain as she brought herself together. The Amazon Queen looked up into dangerous hazel eyes and an evil smile as they circled one another once more. The bard shook her head for a second, letting herself realize that she wasn't fighting Xena. Now the bard grinned, worrying the tall Amazon. With grace, the blond swung her staff low, Lysia jumping just in time, but then she felt pain come to her left shoulder as the end of Gabrielle's staff hit her. Stepping back Lysia came at the bard's side again, the small blond stopping it quickly, not letting the Amazon get the best of her again. As the bard stopped it she used a new move that her lover taught her, bringing her right leg up to hit Lysia's stomach hard. The brown hair Amazon bent over in pain, anger surging through her, as she brought her staff over head, stopping the bard's staff from hitting her. Standing tall once more, Lysia used her height to her advantage, but Gabrielle all to prepared for it. The Amazon swung, just missing the bard's head as she brought the top end into the tall Amazon's stomach using all her strength, hitting her hard. Lysia felt her stomach ache in pain as she fell to the ground, with a wood staff coming to her neck hard. Now it was Lysia's turn to look up into strong, confident, and dangerous pair of emerald eyes glowering down at her. Gabrielle's breathing was heavy, but she kept herself tall and proud as she stared down the Amazon. Now she removed the staff from the brown hair woman's throat letting her stand back up once more with staff in hand. Gabrielle stepped back her staff by her side as she took deep breaths to calm her senses. Lysia though was rather anger with herself, still confident that she could beat this little Queen, but on her terms.

"My Queen is rather good with her staff. But I am afraid I am not much good with the staff" Lysia then began to grin to the smaller woman as she took a step closer and spoke in a loud tone silencing the crowd with her words. "I challenge the Queen to a dual, I select weapons. Do you accept Queen Gabrielle?" Expecting this the Amazon Queen nodded her agreement then voice it in a loud commanding tone to all.

"Yes I accept the challenge" The tall Amazon's eyes glinted as she continued to evilly grinned. Within the crowd, a tall leather clad dark woman pushed her way through the people with a curly blond behind her. Xena stared into the ring with Ephiny beside her, as they stood at the edge of the circle, the warrior prepared to fight.

"I select the sword as my weapon, my Queen, you have the choice between the staff or sword" The bard's eyes slightly widen to this, she hadn't expected this. Gabrielle was sure Lysia would challenge her with only being able to use the sword, knowing she couldn't use it what so ever. Now the bard felt confidence wash over her, she wanted to fight now, a chance. Knowing it wasn't fully her decision, Gabrielle looked behind Lysia spotting her soulmate.

Xena sighed, knowing what her lover was asking through her eyes and their connection. The warrior was rather confident that her bard could handle this challenge and if she couldn't, Xena would take care of it. The ex-warlord continued to stare straight at her bard with answering eyes as she nodded her agreement. The Amazon Queen tore her gaze from her partner and grinned wickedly at the brown hair Amazon.

"The staff" The tall Amazon nodded as she threw her staff into the crowd knowing somebody would easily catch it. Reaching behind the only sound that was heard was the unsheathing of Lysia's sword. Once more the two women circled each other, knowing the high stakes of losing. The on lookers watched with intent to see their Queen in action, learning of her abilities. Xena stood tense, her sense at their peak, ready to move with in a heartbeat at the sign of danger. Ephiny just stared, not believing Gabrielle had decided to fight against Lysia herself and not Xena. Looking to her left the curly blond spotted Solari and Eponin making their way to Xena's side and stood beside them. Solari was the only one to say anything.

"That's one dangerous and confident Queen out there" The tall warrior looked down at the brown haired Amazon and smiled then turned her eyes back to her soulmate.

The bard was the first to make her move bring her staff down low to the brown hair Amazon's knees. Lysia easily stepped back out of the way, and then thrust her sword forward at the bard. Gabrielle easily deflected it and stepped back, with Lysia advancing on her as she grinned at the blond. Quickly the tall Amazon brought her sword down on Gabrielle, the bard stopping it. Again Lysia brought it down in a fast rapid movement, stroke after stroke above the bard's head. Gabrielle continued to hold the staff above her head blocking the sword as she took single steps backwards. Xena watched, biting her lower lip, knowing this was trapping her bard and meant to distract and tire her down. Lysia took her opening and continued to bring her sword down, and then once more this time she did a high kick, slamming the bard hard in her stomach. The bard bent over, but managed to keep her staff above to stop the sword coming down. She then quickly brought the end of her staff around, hitting Lysia on the side of her ribs.

The tall Amazon stepped back and flicked her wrist making her sword spin around. She then slashed her sword out at the Amazon Queen, Gabrielle bring her staff vertical to stop the sword. The bard then took a step back, giving herself a quick second to come up with a plan. The Amazon shook her head at the blond and grimace stepping up to the bard, not expecting anything. Once close enough, Gabrielle dropped herself to the ground holding her staff out and swiped it in front of her at the Amazon's feet. Lysia's feet were taken out from under her, she landed hard on her butt and she quickly recoiled herself, jumping back up on her feet. The brown-haired Amazon growled in frustration, and quickly lunged forward with her sword bring it down over the bard. Gabrielle brought her staff up quickly but the Amazon didn't release and used her height to pressure down on the blond.

The Amazon Queen used her strength against the other woman pressing down on her. She then decided to pay back to Lysia from earlier and kicked high up, hitting the Amazon in the chest. The woman released her sword's hold taking a step back to breathe as she glared at the bard. Gabrielle smirked as she stood in front of her with her staff in fighting stance, angering the Amazon. Lysia then ran up to the bard, jumping up into the air and then kicking, doing a perfect scissor kick. The brown hair

Amazon managed to knock the bard's staff out of her hands, flying high into the air landing off to left of the bard. Lysia evilly grinned and kicking hard at Gabrielle in the stomach, knocking the bard to the ground on her back.

Xena's eyes widen at the site, she quickly moved her hand down to her chakram as she watched Lysia's bring her sword up to strike down at the bard's chest. The warrior then saw Gabrielle bring her right elbow up on the ground, knowing what the bard planned. As the tall Amazon brought her sword down, the bard rolled off to her left towards her staff, while the sword crashed into the ground. Lysia stared for a second shocked, then realized as to what happened and looked to her right, but was too late. Gabrielle was on her knees with her staff making contact with Lysia's face, then brought her staff around to hit the Amazon's feet. The tall Amazon hit the ground, while Gabrielle spun in 180-degree circle coming back around standing tall then kicking the Amazon's sword across the sparring circle. The bard glared down as she jabbed her staff into Lysia's throat once more, anger and power coursing through her. Then the Queen of the Amazons said in a loud, intimidating voice she learned to use from her soulmate.

"Do you yield?" The Amazon tried to speak, but couldn't with the staff pressed so hard against her throat, so she just nodded in answer. The bard then removed her staff and watched as the Amazon began to stand. But instead Lysia stayed on her knees before Gabrielle, her head hung down as she spoke in her best voice.

"I bow and yield before Queen Gabrielle. I surrender my life to her, my life is no longer to be commanded by Queen Hippolyte, but by my new Queen Gabrielle" The bard looked down a bit stunned at the words. Queen Hippolyte, the strongest and mightiest Amazon Queen ever? Gabrielle felt herself go a somewhat weak, not believe she just had one of Hippolyte's mighty warriors hand their life over to her to command, let alone fight them. Now Lysia stood back up, with a small smile on her lips and a new found respect in her eyes for the young Queen. The bard raked a hand through her hair, watching the Amazon warrior make her way through the crowd in the sparring circle. Now Gabrielle felt the presence of her soulmate coming up behind her, powerful hands clasping the blond's shoulders. The small woman smiled to herself and turned around to face her tall lover, whom smiled down to her with pride held in sky blue eyes. Gabrielle then could feel herself begin to slightly shake at the realization she had almost lost her life. Xena caught this and quickly wrapped her arms around her partner pulling her in tight. The bard trembled a few times letting the little fear run its small course. The warrior had then lowered her head to the bard's ear, whispering to her.

"You okay love?" The blond nodded against the tall woman's chest and listened as her soulmate spoke to her again in a quiet voice. "Let's go back to the hut so you can catch your breath" Gabrielle nodded once more and felt the ex-warlord drop her arms, then reaching to her leather clad side. Xena easily unhooked a water skin from her left side and handed it to her partner, who took it gratefully. The bard hadn't realized till now just how dry her mouth was from all the fighting. Taking a few gulps, the small woman let herself be led through the Amazons towards their hut. The warrior opened the door and let her soulmate walk through, closing it behind herself. Xena leaned against the door as she watched her lover walk over to the bed dropping her staff and water skin on top. She then sighed and sat down on the bed as well, raking her small hands through her hair once more. Gabrielle fell back, legs hanging off the bedside as she let her body slowly relax from earlier. The tall woman grinned at the site as she

padded over, sitting on the bed beside her companion. The bard had her hands resting over her eyes as she tried to mentally calm her senses that were still jumping. Xena reach down and grasped the small hands and moved them, placing the bard's hands on her stomach, the warrior leaving her hand on top of Gabrielle's. "That was impressive Gabrielle" The blond didn't respond right away, but stared up at the warrior as she let the words soak in. Now a smile formed on the bard's lips as she spoke in normal tone.

"Thanks Xena" The warrior grinned as she leaned down and kissed the bard gentle, still leaving the bard faintly breathless. Once Xena brought her head back up, the small woman dropped her gaze sighing, then she felt the warm hand tighten on her's in response. The Amazon Queen looked back up into blue eyes, making her smile. "Xena you think we could possibly get out of here this afternoon?" The warrior gazed down into serious eyes as she considered the idea and shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't see why not. Did you have a certain place you wanted to head for?" The bard then let a smirk form on her warm lips, a small sparkle coming to her eyes.

"Well I thought we could kind of stick to our original plans, head to Amphipolis. I wouldn't mind taking some time off, just you and I. What you think?" A pause as Gabrielle shrugged her shoulders. "Been a few since we have had a vacation" The older woman smiled warmly at the small woman.

"Sounds like a great idea" The warrior then paused as she thought for a moment. "I do want to stop at a village once we get through the mountains. I need to get a new sharpening stone" The bard nodded and then rose her head up for a moment to look across the room to her satchel with her scrolls. She dropped her head back down on the bed and looked back to her soulmate.

"I need to get some more scrolls while we are there. So you think we'll make it to Amphipolis by tomorrow afternoon?" The tall woman nodded her answer as she chewed on that question.

"Yeah we should, no later then dusk. Come on lets go get something to eat, find Ephiny, and get out of here. I am kind of ready to get back on the road" The bard chuckled to herself as she sat back up and grabbed her staff and heading out of her quarters with her soulmate. Gabrielle was more then ready to leave the village, find time to rest her mind. The bard knew things would be calm for awhile, the Nation was well on its way to being repaired from Velasca's attack.

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Xena pulled the leather strap taut as she listened to her lover and friend talk back and forth gossipy. The warrior shook her head as she finished up saddling Argo and then turning back around to her partner and the Regent.

"We are ready" Gabrielle stopped talking looked to her soulmate as she stepped up beside her, the warhorse's reins in hand. The bard turned back to the curly-blond and leaned in, hugging her tightly. Ephiny hugged her friend back in equal force, pulling back while smiling. She then looked to the tall leather-clad woman, who grinned back and handed the reins to Gabrielle. Xena took a step forward and hugged the Regent tightly, Ephiny almost getting the wind knocked out of her. Releasing the smaller woman, the warrior stepped back as the Amazon coughed for a moment and looked back to the two females.

"You two be careful, was great seeing you. And for once, please visit under better circumstances next time" The blond chuckled while the stoic warrior grinned to the other woman. The bard was the one to respond in a sweet voice, happy to be off traveling again.

"You take care of yourself too Ephiny. Keep Solari out of trouble will you" The Regent nodded as she chuckled at the request and watched as the two women began to head out of the barn towards the gates. Ephiny then yelled to the small bard before she couldn't hear her.

"Great staff work today Queen Gabrielle" The bard looked back and smiled as she waved and yelled back.

"Thanks Ephiny, see you soon" The Regent grinned to herself as she waved to her friends, both women waving back before going through the gates. The Amazon smiled as she watched her friends disappear behind the gate into the world.

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A small figure stood at the top of the hill as they looked down at the village far below. Beside the small form was a large war-horse, a strong dark figure sat up high in the saddle, gazing down at the town. Now the tall female on the war-horse brought her feet out of the stirrups and neatly landed onto the ground beside the small blond. The tall warrior then looked up into the sky to see the sun just beginning it's decent, more then half of the day had gone by. She then looked back to her smaller partner who continued to gaze down at the village, wind brushing her bangs back.

"Looks pretty busy Xena" The Warrior Princess nodded as the bard looked up to her soulmate with a serious face. Sky blue eyes then looked down to meet a pair of loving emerald eyes, making Xena grin.

"Come on, lets get down there before it gets any busier" A small smile twitched on the bard's lips as the two women began to make their way down the hill side into town. Once the pair made their way into the village they quickly caught sight of a barn to leave Argo within. The two females easily made their way to the barn through the rather large crowd. Ducking under the over hang the warrior straighten back up to see a small boy looking back up at her.

Xena looked directly at him, using her height and strength to intimidate him as she talked in a stern voice. "You taking care of the stables?" The small boy nodded his head as he gazed into strong intense blue eyes. "Can you take care of my horse for a candle marks or two?" Once again the small boy nodded his head as the warrior handed him Argo's reins. Then the tall woman moved back to her saddlebag's to retrieve a small pouch along with the bard's scroll satchel. She withdrew two dinars handing them to the small boy, whom nodded with a small smile and led Argo back into the building. The leather-clad woman then walked back out with her lover right beside her. Xena walked over to the side of the stables and turned to her smaller companion, handing the bard her satchel.

"Why don't we split up. I think we'll get out of here quicker, this crowd is getting thicker" The bard nodded as she watched the warrior dig through the pouch and pulled out ten dinars, giving them to Gabrielle. She then looked back up to the dark warrior with a small smile.

"Where do you want to meet up?" Xena began to grin at the question as she looked into serious eyes.

"Let's meet here within a candlemark. You think that is enough time to find some scrolls?" The bard nodded in answer as she felt the warrior step closer. Xena then leaned down and placed a gentle kiss on the bard's lips and straightened back up with a stern face. "Be careful love, and if you are not back here on the dot, I'll tear up this town looking for you" The Amazon Queen chuckled as she reached up, squeezing the warrior's arm briefly.

"Don't worry I will be, don't start up any fights...without me" The tall woman rolled her eyes as she turned to head off into the crowd. Gabrielle followed the tall woman with her eyes, watching her slowly disappear within the people. Turning around, Gabrielle took a deep breath and began her own journey within the town. Slowly she weaved in and out of the people, making her way to the market she had spotted earlier while on top of the hill. After taking a few more paces, the bard came across the market and spotted the stands in front of her. She quickly padded over to them, searching them with her eyes looking for a scroll stand. Passing five stands, the blond spotted the one she had been hoping for. Gabrielle walked over to the left through the crowd and stepped up to the stand. She gazed down at the table containing different items of writing products. There were variety of things; scrolls, quills, ink, ink wells, stamps with wax, tubes for the scrolls, leather casing, everything a bard could want or need. The small woman sighed wishing she could have one of everything on the table, but knew she couldn't with the small amount of money between her and Xena. Reaching down, the bard picked up a scroll feeling its familiar texture.

"Ah yes the parchments are rather popular, especially with the bard's around here" Green eyes looked up to meet a pair of amber eyes gazing back at her.

"Well I need to get about five scrolls, do you have enough?" The merchant grinned slightly and nodded his large head.

"I believe I might just have enough, but there is a heavy price on this merchandise" The bard began to grin to herself, feeling her negotiation side coming to life, a good haggle.

"Well...it's pricey huh? Hmmm I saw another stand a little ways back with lower prices" The man's brown eye brows shot up at that statement and he began to hassle talk.

"Um, well maybe I can make a deal with you young one" Then there was a pause as he gazed at his own products on the stand table. "I'll give you the five scrolls for ten dinars" The blond's eyes slightly widen at that price, she then sighed dramatically.

"I don't know I think that other stand was selling five parchments for five dinars. Maybe I'll head down to that one, thanks any way" As Gabrielle turned around, a large hand grasped her wrist quickly.

"Wait little one, I'll give you the five parchments for...eight dinars" The Amazon Queen turned around to face the man with a skeptical look as he released her wrist.

"Hmmm how about five dinars?" The brown haired man frowned at that price and

looked down at the scroll on the wood table.

"Seven dinars?" Gabrielle looked at the amber eyes then back at the table, her eyes going to the ink in the small bottle. Slowly a grin formed on her lips.

"I'll pay six dinars for the five scrolls and bottle of ink" The large man sighed as he brought up his right hand, rubbing his chin as he thought about it. He then looked to the blond and smiled some.

"All right deal" Gabrielle smiled sweetly as she collected six dinars from a small pouch she had placed there in earlier. Handing them to the merchant, Gabrielle retrieved the five scrolls and ink from the man's hands then placed them within her satchel with the pouch of four dinars. The bard nodded to the man as he smiled to her, she quickly turned around and made her way through market to gaze at other stands. Spotting a piece of something gold, the blond strolled over to the item across the market place. Gazing down at the small item that had caught her eye, a medium size pure gold band. The bard grinned to herself realizing what the ring was meant for. Looking back up from the jewelry stand, Gabrielle turned around to face the direction she had come from. After completely turning around, two tall men stepped up in front of the young woman. Gabrielle stared up at them as she leaned against her staff, her satchel hanging on her other side. The two men began to slightly grin at the bard as they took notice to her. The bard studied them for a second, warriors, leather clad, and swords hanging from their right side. The one to her right looked stronger as well as older, his brown hair short and hazel eyes gleaming. The second one was no more than a few years old than Gabrielle, with his blond hair oily and hands covered in grime and brown eyes undressing the bard. The blond sighed realizing the situation, time to talk her way out of this one then fight last.

"So where you headed to little one?" Gabrielle turned her head a little to her right to stare at the old warrior. His smirk more evident on his face as he talked with a sarcastic voice.

Gabrielle grinned as she spoke in a mocking tone.

"Not any where with you boys" The younger warrior's lip twitched a little and then let a grin form on his lips. Next he reached out, grasping the small woman's mid left arm tightly. Gabrielle looked at his hand briefly then shrugged it off, only making the two men laugh in amusement. The bard tried her best to act calm and stoic, but she couldn't deny her pounding heart with in her chest and her sweating palms. "Look boys I am not in the mood to deal with you" Again the two men laughed at the small woman, enjoying her feistiness. Now it was the older warrior that reach out grasping the bard's shoulders tightly and then pulling her in close to him. The blond growled some in annoyance and brought her staff down on his hands, making him release her. Gabrielle then stepped back away from them, her staff at the ready. The older warrior rubbed his arms as he glared at the bard, hazel eyes flashing with anger. He then reached to his side unsheathing his sword waiting for his friend to do the same. The bard's heart had picked up it's pace as she mentally prepared to fight two warriors larger than her.

As they stepped up close to her, Gabrielle could feel something calm her sense all of a sudden. Warmth spread through her and her heart immediately answered the question her mind asked to why her senses relaxed. The two men glared at her as the younger

one stepped more to her left the other her right. The bard dropped her fighting stance and just smirked at the warriors, causing them to stop and look at each other in question.

Then both men looked back to the bard and saw as to why the young woman had relaxed. Gabrielle leaned back some into something strong and warm, while still grinning to the men. Now a strong threatening voice rang through the air, sending chills down the two warrior's spines.

"You mess with the bard, you mess with me" The young warrior and older warrior looked up into cold blue eyes that held an unspeakable amount of strength and anger. Both men straightened up and easily sheathed their swords taking steps backwards as they began to turn around and disappeared into the crowd. Steel cold blue eyes watched them as they went into the crowd, losing them after awhile. Gabrielle sighed a shaky breath in reaction to them leaving and the close call again. Then she felt to warm hands clasp onto her shoulders, squeaking briefly then relaxing once more. The bard dropped her head back into cold bronze metal and looked up into clear eyes that warmed to her. She smiled some.

"Thanks, how did you find me?" A small grinned formed on the tall woman's lips as she looked down.

"I followed my heart" The bard continued to stare up with a confused look masking her features, the warrior understanding it. "I knew you were in trouble and I followed my heart to bring me to you" The bard's eyes went unfocused as she looked beyond the tall woman as she took in the words. Looking back, the blond smiled to her soulmate her understanding.

"I think I know what you mean. Like a connection between us?" A slight grin etched onto the warrior's lips as she nodded.

"Yeah exactly" Gabrielle's smile broadens as she straightens back up then reached into her satchel, extracting her four leftover dinars. Turning around, the bard handed the coins to the older female. Now the Amazon Queen finally took notice to the small leather bag hanging from her lover's left side. As Xena took the dinars from her soulmate, she lifted an eyebrow in question over the other woman's expression. Following the bard's gaze, the warrior chuckled as she looked at the bag to her side then back to Gabrielle. The smaller woman then looked back up to an amused face.

"What do you have stashed away in there?" Now the warrior began to grin down at her friend as she tried to hide her secret.

"Nothing you won't find out about soon" The woman paused as she looked up to see that the amount of people had picked up within the town. "Come on we need to get out of this place before we get stuck here" Gabrielle broke her gaze from the tall woman to see the people flooding into the village. She shook her head at the site, not believing the small town could hold this many people. The warrior reached into her brown bag to her side opening it then dropping the four coins within. She then grasped the smaller woman's shoulders directing her into the main part of the street. As they made their way into the swarm of people, the raven-haired beauty kept her hands on top of the blond's shoulders to keep better control of the situation.

The warrior continually was bumped into, firing her anger up. Her soulmate was

having a worse time, getting knocked off to the side or out of the way, angering the warrior even more. Xena a number of times stood up tall as she could to better see where she was headed through the people, but even she was having a hard time looking over. Feeling the frustration consume her, the warrior took a deep breath as she led her soulmate off to the side of the street.

"Xena, we are going to never make it to the stables with all these people" The Warrior Princess looked from the rush of humanity to her lover.

"Yeah I know" Xena began to look around at her surroundings as an idea came to mind, looking beyond the bard. The warrior grinned as she found what she needed and walked over to it with Gabrielle behind her. Standing in front of the wooden fence that held a few horses within, the older woman turned back to her lover with a small grin. "Give me your staff and satchel Gabrielle" The bard arched an eyebrow at the request as she moved closer to the fence and handed the warrior her wooden staff. Then she pulled the strap of the satchel over her head, also handing it to her soulmate. She watched as the warrior hooked the bard's staff to her right side. Looking back to the smaller woman, Xena took the leather bag and brought it over her head, letting it hang below the small bag on her left side. "Now climb to the top of the fence" Now the blond's eyes widen as she realized what her soulmate planned to do.

"Xena you know I hate heights" The warrior sighed as she stepped up closer to her lover with blue eyes going serious.

"Trust me Gabrielle, I won't let anything happen" The bard grinned some as she turned around to climb the wooden fence, up three poles. As she climbed, the small woman whispered something back to the warrior.

"With my life" Xena grinned at the statement as she saw Gabrielle reach the final wooden horizontal pole and walked up to the bard. Turning around the leather-clad woman felt small warm hands fall onto her shoulders, pushing down lightly. Following the physical command, the tall woman bent her legs and came down to the ground on her one knee. Now she felt weight come down on both shoulders, warm soft legs draping over her shoulders and chest. Gabrielle's small hands began to wrap around Xena's neck as the bard leaned forward, while strong hands reached up to grasped the blond's leather cover ankles. Slowly the tall woman rose back up to her full height, the bard taking a deep breath in response. Then the warrior spoke up to her lover in a soothing yet concern manner.

"You okay Gabrielle?" The bard nodded as she spoke in small voice.

"Yeah, can see everything from up here though" The warrior chuckled as she began to walk into the crowd with stoic and strong expression covering her appearance.

"Yup, do you see the stables? You're the navigator" The bard didn't respond right away, but began to look around. She saw small houses, taverns, and a number of people's heads. Continuing to scan the town, the Amazon Queen finally spotted a small dark brown stable where Argo was patiently waiting.

"Found it" The tall woman nodded some as she continued to weave in and out of the people. Xena kept a steady pace, glaring at the occasion persons who looked at the dual with odd or disgusted looks. She then responded to her small friend resting on her shoulders.

"Tell me when we start getting close" The small woman nodded as she continued to scan the crowd, catching sight of all the different kinds of people. The bard took a deep breath and slowly released it, then she felt a squeeze at her ankles then the warm hands loosen on her ankles. "Why do you think all these people are here?" Xena stepped to her right, dodging two running children as they made their way through the mass of people.

"They're having a festival in honor of Dionysus, heard a two men talking about it when I went to buy my whet stone" Now the small blond chuckled, the warrior wondering as to why.

"Then we better get out of here...for your sake" The tall warrior chuckled as she kept an eye on the people around her. Slowly she let a grin tug at her lips, remembering her and her soulmate's last encounter at a Dionysus festival. Xena had thought she'd seen ever side to her lover until that night on the festival. She began to lose herself in the memory as she sidestepped extensive amounts of people and continued to make her way down the overran main street to the stables. "Xena?" The Warrior Princess slightly shook her head, Gabrielle feeling the movement.

"Yeah?" The bard faintly grinned to herself.

"So you bought a whet stone? Funny, the last time I checked the saddle bags there were two whet stones inside" The dark-haired woman bit her lower lip as she walked, angered with herself for not remembering that she already had plenty of sharpening stones and that her bard would have checked. The warrior's mind worked quickly to try to think of an easy way around the conversation at hand.

"Well I wanted to get a third spare" A skeptical look covered the bard's features as she realized her soulmate was trying to hide something.

"Uh huh" The tall female felt the back of her mouth to her molars as she came up with a response. A small smirk formed at the warrior's lips as she talked to her partner in a playful tone.

"So its okay for you to have three quills and seven blank scrolls at a time, but not all right for me to have three sharpening stones at a time?" The Amazon Queen chuckled as she gazed around at the town, spotting the barn once more. She mentally began to calculate how much longer it would take for them to make it the stalls while she replied to her soulmate.

"Hmmm yes actually" Xena chuckled some at her soulmate's words, then she felt the intake of breath, knowing her bard was going to continue. "But I suppose I can understand what you are saying"

"Thanks" The younger woman grinned to herself as she spotted two people she recognized within the crowd, she then leaned down to closer to her companion's right ear. She then quietly whispered something to lover.

"There's our two favorite boys over there to the left by the entrance to that tavern" The warrior nodded her understanding, spotting the two male warriors earlier. They leaned against a post to the entranceway, watching people come and go by the tavern and in and out. Xena kept her stoic mask on, watching them from the corner of her eyes. Gabrielle by then had straightened back up and took one last glance at the two men

the looked back to the stables. "We're almost to the stables" Xena looked around, starting to quickly recognize the area and buildings around her. She began to swiftly recall her way back to the barn from here.

"You know Gabrielle, you did a beautiful job today with handling Lysia" The bard's face turned a bit stunned by the random comment from her normally stoic warrior. Now she wondered as to why her partner just brought that up out of the blue. The bard fidgeted for a second by readjusting her hands around the tall woman's neck, then replied.

"Thanks" A pause. "What did Eph say about it?" Suddenly the warrior chuckled as she commemorated what had happened after the challenge between the bard and Amazon warrior.

"Its more like what she didn't say" Now the warrior paused for a second as she stopped herself from running into three chattering women. Watching them pass by, the tall woman began to amble back towards the stables. "Ephiny was rather stunned as well as dumb founded that her Queen had so much talent. She hasn't seen you really work with your staff since you first became the Amazon Princess" The blond chuckled as she remembered the entire challenge and how much her heart pounded from the intensity and thrill of the fight.

"Hmm that should keep those Amazons talking for awhile" A ping of pride coursed through the warrior as she thought of the Amazons talking about her soulmate's amazing staff work.

"I am sure they will be. Ep said she hasn't seen that brilliant amount of staff work in a long time since she has been weapons master. Solari just stared at you and kept a large smirk on her face" The bard chuckled again as she saw the stables become large then retorted back to her partner.

"Good, that should keep them all from wondering in the future" The older woman grinned while she spotted the stables about nine hundred paces away from her.

"I think you got their leathers all wadded up" Now the bard bursts into a fit of giggles as she mentally imagined the picture. The warrior as well laughed some while keeping a tight grip on her soulmate's ankles, supporting her. Taking a few more large steps the warrior made her way next to the barn as she felt Gabrielle finally settle down and control her laughter. The bard coughed, clearing her throat and took notice to finally being at the stable. The warrior stepped closer to the over hang of the stable, then the bard felt the warrior's hands leave her ankles.

"Hold on" Without anymore notice to Gabrielle, Xena reached up, grasping the bard's sides and lifted her up over her head, the younger woman squealing for a moment in reaction. Gently the tall female settled the Amazon Queen back down on the ground, with the blond's small back to her. Gabrielle turned around and watched her partner remove her satchel from her leather-clad side then handed it to the bard. The small woman gratefully took it, settling it over her left shoulder and watching the warrior unhook the bard's staff. Xena handed her friend the Amazon staff then instinctively adjusted the sword on her back. The warrior then nodded her head to her right, directing for the bard to head into the stables. The smaller woman stepped inside first, with the warrior right behind, who walked upped beside her. The warrior's eyes scanned the inside looking for the small boy, seeing him quickly make his way out of

a stall at the far end. The young boy closed the stall door, then jogged up to the pair. He looked up into blue eyes, not saying anything and blinked twice. "I'd like my horse back now" The child faintly nodded then scurried off into the back of the barn once more. Soon to follow was the sound of hoof beats as the young man reappeared, reins in hand and a large mare in tow. The warrior was handed the reins whom took them with ease as she smiled to the boy while she slipped him an extra two dinars. The young boy smiled back up at her then quickly vanished back into the stalls. With grace the warrior stepped outside with Argo behind, the bard walking next to her. Once they made their way back out into the busy streets Xena headed directly for the way they entered the village earlier. Argo made it easier for the bard and Warrior Princess to get through the people, considering the mare took up a lot of space. Xena stopped as she reached the outskirts of the busy village and turned to the bard.

"Here let me put that back up" Gabrielle knew what she meant and removed her scroll bag from her side, handing it to the tall female. Xena slung it on the back of the saddlebag, stowed away safely. Giving the satchel one last pat, the warrior walked in front of the mare, reins in hand, the bard right beside her, staff in hand.

"I saw that" The warrior looked to her soulmate with a raised eyebrow and spoke with a deep tone.

"Saw what?" The bard chuckled as she placed her free hand on Xena's upper arm then dropped it.

"Saw you give the boy two extra dinars" Slowly a grin creased the tall form's lips as she gazed down at the bard.

"Yeah well...you know how it is" Gabrielle looked back ahead as they neared the dirt path from earlier. She figured that they would end up sleeping on the road tonight and reach Amphipolis by tomorrow afternoon.

"I think I do" A pause. "You think we'll make Amphipolis by tomorrow?" Xena caught the direction the conversation was headed while she climbed the remainder of the small hillside.

"Yesss, we should be there by then. Why?" The bard pushed herself up onto the dirt path, hearing Argo do the same by the clank of the hoofs. The blond took a deep breath and raised her free hand up making a jester towards the road.

"Oh just wondering, no reason" Her arm fell back by her side as she walked with a quick gait to match her soulmates. The tall warrior nodded her head then for a moment, suspicion still evident in her blue eyes. Xena then turned her eyes to the war-horse beside her, she slowed her pace down. Argo moved a little head of it's keeper, then she felt weight come onto her back. The dark haired warrior had jumped up onto the mare's back, reins in hand, back straight, sitting tall. The bard looked up briefly and grinned to see the warrior's stoic form masking her features. She looked back down the road as she posed a question for her tall partner.

"Xena?" Xena kept her sights ahead, watching all her surroundings in normal habit.

"Yesss?" A small smirk crept onto the blond's lips at her lover's tone, she loved it. Then Gabrielle retorted, but hastily, her words jumbled together.

"I was kinda wondering if we should consider, well this is if you only want, 'cause I know how you are and..." The Amazon Queen was cut off by the impatient warrior whom talked in a low hard tone, but kept a grin playing on her lips.

"Gggabrieelle, just spit it out" Gabrielle chuckled for a second, took a deep breath as she brought her free hand up to rub the back of her neck. She looked up to meet blue eyes, then she turned her head to look at the road again, dropping her hand and finally responding.

"I just wanted to see if you've considered whether you wanted to show...affection in public or not" Xena smiled to herself as she kept herself still in the saddle, considering the statement. Slowly the warrior's smile dropped over the realization of something. Xena didn't like the fact Gabrielle thought the warrior was in charge of the relationship. The Warrior Princess then felt guilt wash over her, knowing it had always been her that made the final dissuasions in the partnership. The warrior mentally cursed herself and made her last dissuasion on her own to make sure that her bard had as much control over their relationship as she did.

For awhile the bard thought her soulmate wouldn't answer. Then she saw the mare stop walking, so Gabrielle did and looked to her soulmate. Blue and green eyes locked for a brief moment, the bard knew what she said had triggered something deep inside of her soulmate.

"Gabrielle..." The warrior didn't know how to phrase it all, her words confused. She closed her mouth briefly to organize her thoughts, then was about ready to say something when she heard the sounds of somebody walking down the road towards them. The warrior cursed under her breath in another language the bard didn't catch. They both looked to the person walking down the road with a noisy and loud gate. The two soulmates felt their happiness drop over the person coming down the road.

Joxer

Gabrielle sighed, it had to be him. Xena looked from the skinny man to her bard with serious blue eyes. "We'll talk about this later, promise" Gabrielle smiled up at the warrior and nodded as she heard her name, well rather her nickname called out to her.

"Gabby!" The warrior wannabe quickly jogged the rest of the distance and came up to the pair, he patted the bard on the shoulder and smiled to her. Gabrielle smiled back, still a bit angry over his timing. He then looked up to lock eyes with the stoic warrior, he slightly smiled up to her, still not use to her strength.

"Hi Joxer" The man's smile turned a bit brighter at the acknowledgment, he then looked back to Gabrielle with the same smile.

"So exactly where are my two chums headed too?" Gabrielle huffed for a moment and made Xena grin to herself, the bard answered the question with a light voice.

"We are headed towards Amphipolis" Joxer's eyes widen in happiness.

"Really? Well great I'll come with you guys, was headed in that direction any way" The warrior raised an eyebrow behind his back, the bard voiced what Xena was thinking.

"Joxer, you were coming *from* the direction of Amphipolis" The wannabe warrior's eyebrow's lifted up a little ways, then he smiled to the blond.

"Oh I know Gabby, but I saw you and Xena and thought I should escort you two there" The Amazon Queen shook her head and then looked down to the ground, turning her head some to look up to her partner. The warrior smirked to her soulmate and shrugged her shoulders, then Gabrielle looked back to her friend.

"Come on"

All three friends set out on their journey south towards Amphipolis. The bard was more than excited to have a break soon, she mentally needed one. After her third bad encounter with Velasca she wasn't sure she could handle much more fighting. Gabrielle knew her soulmate knew this as well, she never up forward expressed it to Xena. The warrior could see right threw the Amazon Queen, it always astounded Gabrielle. But Gabrielle could always see right through her soulmate as well, it was equal. The bard knew her soulmate was itching to sit down with her privately and talk to her about what's been going through Gabrielle's mind.

Xena had taken notice to the fact the bard wasn't writing any scrolls ever since she died. She was happy though with the fact that her soulmate had bought scrolls in the market, but wasn't completely content. The warrior knew the dreams as well haunted her soulmate every night. She hoped that the well-earned time in Amphipolis with relaxation will help the bard heal. Xena had two burning questions to ask her soulmate that were inside her that could greatly affect everything that she had. But she had to wait, wait for the right place, the right time, for the right reasons.

The group at first didn't talk much, everybody lost in their own thoughts. Then the smaller female struck up a conversation with Joxer about his recent travels. Then the man asked the bard about her recent adventures. That's when Gabrielle had lost her smile and grim facial expression took over, Joxer immediately regretting it and apologized. The blond had brushed off the apology then went into bardic mode, telling the earliest stories Joxer hadn't heard. She easily left out the more recent tales, this not going unnoticed.

By late afternoon Xena had announced that she was going to ride ahead some and give Argo a workout. Gabrielle had looked up into the warrior's eyes with a smile. The bard's mind was sent into wonderment over the fact her soulmate had that certain twinkle to her blue eyes. *What is that warrior up to now?* Gabrielle mentally huffed to herself as she watched the warrior and mare disappear ahead into a gallop. For a half of a candlemark Joxer and the young female didn't say anything as the walked along the dusty road. No sight of the warrior either. Eventually the bard's pace had slowed up some, Joxer walking ahead of Gabrielle, the day was wearing on the bard quickly. The small female raked her hands through bangs as she looked around, hoping Xena would just show up any heartbeat. Having no luck, the bard kept trudging on, Joxer moving a little more ahead and not taking much notice to things around him.

Then there was a small rustled in the woods that lined the road, rather close to the bard. Gabrielle looked to where she heard the sound, not seeing anything, she dismissed it as an animal. With no warning, a form came out of the woods, wrapped an arm around her waist and a hand over her mouth. The bard couldn't move, her staff pinned against her body along with her arms. Gabrielle was towed into the woods

with hardly any sounds made, a very faint muffled sound was made by the bard's mouth and was heard. Joxer turned around to where he figured his friend to be.

"Gabby?" Getting no response, he shrugged his shoulders and mumbled to himself. "Musta gone to relieve herself or something" Joxer started walking again down the long road, not taking much thought of what happened.

The bard stayed very still as she felt the large form stop moving and wait for Joxer to keep moving. Gabrielle then began to take realization physically of this person. They were tall, strong, had leather on, very warm, soft skin, and smelled just like her soulmate. A large grin formed on the bard's lips, the tall person knew the bard had taken notice by feeling her lips form into a grin. Slowly the large hand over Gabrielle's mouth dropped and moved to her waist, the bard leaned back into the tall form, her staff resting against her right shoulder. They waited till Joxer was far enough so they could talk. The blond straightened back up and turned in the warrior's embrace and grinned up at the twinkling blue eyes.

"Sneaky" Xena chuckled as she let a grin form on her lips as well, she turned her head to left to look over at the road, not spotting anybody. She looked back to the bard as she brought one hand up, idly running her large hand up and down the bard's back. "Where's Argo?" The tall female nodded her head to her right, behind the bard. Gabrielle turned in the warrior's arms to her left. Right beside them stood Argo, head down on the forest floor, nuzzling through leaves looking for grass. The bard giggled at herself and brought her hand up to cover her own mouth. She dropped it and turned back to the warrior. "Okay I am not with it, I am very tired" Again the warrior chuckled at the bard's words as she dropped her head down some and placed a kiss on her partner's forehead.

"Kind of thought you were tired of walking...and Joxer" The blond rolled her eyes briefly and brought her free hand up to rest on the warrior's hips.

"He's a nice guy and all, just bad timing" The warrior snorted in agreement then she stopped her back rubbing to bring her hand up to the bard's face. Xena brushed back a small piece of stray strawberry-blond hair behind Gabrielle's ear as she smiled. The Amazon Queen leaned into the touch, then sighed in contentment, glad to have her soulmate around again.

"I found a great camping spot for the night. I wouldn't mind getting there a candle mark or so ahead of Joxer. Want to teach you a new move" The younger woman arched a brown eyebrow at her soulmate at the last bit of information.

"A new move?" The ex-warlord grinned as she rested both of her large hands on the small form's waist.

"Well a move we both can do" The bard grinned as well as she stood up on tiptoe, placing a light kiss to her warrior's lips.

"This sounds like fun" Xena chuckled deeply as she dropped her hands from the bard's body. Both soulmates made their way over to Argo, hopping up onto the mare and galloping along distance ahead of Joxer.

~*Part 2*~

The golden war-horse nickered some as she dropped her head back down into the patch of thick green grass. She ripped some grass from the ground and chopped down on the food. The horse listened to sounds of two women talking back and forth, one voice a bit skeptical the other had certainty.

"Gabrielle this will work I promise" The bard huffed out a large amount of air. Beside the two women laid the warrior's chakram and the bard's staff. Gabrielle looked skeptically into her soulmate's eyes.

"You sure?" The warrior's shoulders slouched for a moment then went up again.

"Yes, you just have to hold on tight" A pause. "Have I ever failed you before?" The Amazon Queen chuckled and smiled to her soulmate.

"Okay okay, what do I have to do?" Xena grinned as she worked out the idea in her head from memory.

"First you run a little in the circle, then you leap up as best as possible. With your momentum I'll be able to spin us around in a circle" Gabrielle nodded as she reached out, Xena clasped the bard's small forearm, the blond tightly holding the warrior's forearm. The warrior had found the perfect spot for this move, they were centered in the middle of a plethora of trees. Gabrielle took a deep breath and looked up into protective blue eyes, she knew she was in the safest spot in the world. Her nervousness calmed completely down, butterflies disappearing just from a set of strong blue eyes. "Okay ready?" The bard nodded. "On the count of three, One, Two Three!" The small female began to sprint in a circle, building up speed, then Xena nodded to her as the warrior stayed in one place turning with the blond. Gabrielle leaped up, body sprawling then everything began to go faster. The ex-warlord kept a tight hold on her partner as she spun the bard around in a circle, Gabrielle perfect for this. "Now keep your eyes lock with mine, unless you want to become really dizzy" The Amazon Queen grinned some as her emerald green eyes met sapphire ones, not leaving them. Both the women could feel the strain begin in their arms from all the energy being used in the spin. "Can you feel your feet walking on the trees?" Gabrielle just faintly nodded. "Pretend their people's heads, give them a kick" The small female then used her imagination and began to picture the trees as people and began to kick at them a certain way. They went into two more complete circles, the warrior letting the bard practice with the spin more and the kicking. By the end of the second Xena slowed up the circling and then the bard dropped to her feet neatly. Neither female dropped their hold on each other's arms, Gabrielle letting her body settle down for a moment. She then smiled and looked up to her partner.

"So how many guys can we take out with that move?" Xena shrugged her shoulders for a moment then responded.

"Well to make the spin worth our while, at least five people close by us" The bard nodded and dropped her gaze, both women releasing their hold on each other. Gabrielle then looked back up, no expression.

"Think we should head back into the camp?" The warrior sighed as she moved to her chakram and the bard's staff still on the ground.

"Yup, I am sure Joxer will be showing up soon" Xena handed her soulmate her wooden staff, both woman slowly turned towards where their camp lay. They both

walked in silence for a couple of paces, the bard then let a grin form on her lips.

"Xena?" The warrior responded in her deep tone that the bard loved so much.

"Yesss?"

"I love you" The Warrior Princess's heart stopped, her body still moving but no sense of direction. The next thing to happen to the warrior was feeling herself slam into a hard rough tree. Xena stumbled back two steps and brought her right hand up to rub her forehead for a moment, completely caught by surprise. She had her head down some as she rubbed her brow, hearing a few muffled giggles close by. The tall female dropped her hand and looked over to Gabrielle a small grin playing on her lips. The bard had the tips of her fingers covered over her mouth, a grin somewhat noticeable. She dropped her hand from her mouth, her expression taking on a pleading look. "Sorry" Xena kept her grin and walked closer to her soulmate, very little spaced left between them.

"Nothin to be sorry about, I just didn't expect that" The Amazon Queen stood on tiptoe and kissed the warrior's slightly red forehead. She then fell back down on her heels and smiled up at her tall partner

"By the way, how are we going to work things with Joxer around?" Xena didn't say anything at first thinking. Her blue eyes refocused as she crossed her arms against her chest.

"Well what would you like to do?" One of the blond's brown eyebrows went up in suspicion. The warrior uncrossed her arms and placed her hands on her lover's upper arms. "Really Gabrielle, what do you feel comfortable with?" Gabrielle's eyes dropped to the ground, her eyes studying a green leaf on the forest floor. Her mind sped in different directions on how to handle everything, it wore her mind out all to fast. Right now the bard knew she had too much on her plate and didn't think she could handle another problem to sort out, explain. The small woman took a deep breath and very slowly released it, the warrior never relinquished her hold. She looked back up into patient blue eyes, waiting for her response.

"I really...don't want him to know right now. Keep things simple right now" Xena nodded as she kept her face serious.

"I agree, you've been through enough right now, don't need this hanging over your head as well" The bard smiled up at her soulmate, feeling the warrior tighten her grip briefly then drop her arms back against her side.

"Thank you Xena" A small smile crossed the ex-warlord's lips as she brought one hand up to Gabrielle's back as they continued their short trek the camp.

"That's what friends do" The bard chuckled, remembering her own words from what seemed like so long ago. Gabrielle wrapped one arm around Xena's waist and hugged her tightly, the warrior returning the hug across the bard's shoulders. They released their hold on each other as they stepped into the set up camp, the warrior wannabe already there sitting on a log off to one side. He looked up as the pair walked in, his face brightened up.

"There you two are" He hopped up off the log and stalked over to the two women. The

dusk sun reflected off his metal across his chest and helmet. "I was wondering what happened to you Gabby back on the road. I kind of thought Xena found you" The bard just smiled to the man as she wrapped her free arm around her middle.

"Yeah Xena found me and gave me a ride" Joxer smiled at that.

"I figured and I knew I'd find your guy's camp without any problem, you know me" Xena sighed making the bard grin inwardly knowing as to why. Then the skinny man reached out, grasping the short necklace on the blond's neck. "Wow that's a really cute necklace. Its got Xena's chakram and your staff" He released it and looked up to the warrior to see one just like it around Xena's neck. "You both have one, but different stones in them. Ha that's really cute, friendship thing huh" Now the leather-clad female began to smirk, Gabrielle's free hand moved from her stomach to scratch under her chin for a moment. She dropped her hand back to her side while a humored smile crossed her lips towards the wannabe warrior.

"Yup friendship thing" He nodded his stupid smile still plastered on his lips.

"That's really great, you two keep getting closer as friends" Gabrielle nodded and Joxer turned around and padded back over to the log, sitting down on it. He looked across to the two women. "What is for dinner tonight?" The blond arched an eyebrow and turned around to face her tall partner, sapphire eyes moving down to look at her. The warrior answered the question that is on her bard's mind.

"I'll go hunt something down" Gabrielle smiled as she made her way over to Joxer, sitting beside him and placing her staff on the ground beside her. Xena on the other hand walked with a strong gate relatively close to where Argo is munching on grass. The warrior unhooked the small pouch from her side that she from earlier today, she dropped it in a saddle bag on the ground that lay beside the horse's tack. The tall female stood back up and took one last glance at her partner, Gabrielle looking at her. Xena winked at her, then turned to disappear into the woods in search of food.

The blond gave Joxer a pat on his leg and stood up, and started walking towards the woods as well, opposite direction as the warrior. The man looked up with a curious face.

"I'm going to go find some fire wood, be back soon Joxer" The man nodded as the small female became lost in the woods during the early night. The bard was the first to return, an armload of logs as she trekked into the center of the camp. Gabrielle dropped the wood to one side of herself and bent down on her knees and began to organize the wood accordingly, just able to see with very little day light left. She efficiently placed all the woods as she needed and then she brought a small piece of wood and twig just under the wood then placed a few dried leaves beside the wood. She began to rub the twig in her palm on top of the small piece of wood. Within a few moments a small amount of smoke began to rise from the heat being produced, but no sparks coming. Frustration began to build as she continued to rub the twig in her palm, faster and faster she went, getting no fire but plenty of smoke. Gabrielle growled lowly and dropped the twig from her hands and sat down on the ground, calming her mood. She glared at the wood, and took deep breaths.

Then out of no where a large form bent down beside her, Gabrielle looked to them and smiled. Xena handed her partner three long sturdy branches that each has two skinned quail skewered on each branch. The bard held them as the warrior's large

hands went to pick up the twig, rubbing the twig in her palm vigorously. Again smoke built up and then small sparks began to jump and onto the dried leaves catching them on fire. Quickly the wood began to burn as soon as the leaves caught on fire. The two women stood up and back away, watching the fire slowly begin to burn, bring a source of light to the camp. Gabrielle looked up to her tall partner. "How do you do that?" The tall warrior smirked down at her companion.

"I have many skills" The blond rolled her eyes then chuckled at her soulmate. The dark haired warrior then looked to her partner in the dark a small twinkle to her blue eyes. "Um hold on to those for a second, be right back" The bard raised an eyebrow as Xena briskly walked over to the saddlebags. She scrounged around inside of the bag, looking for something and found it, pulling it out. Joxer had been watching the whole transition, thinking he saw something a bit different about the two women, but he just brushed it off. He watched as the tall female crossed the camp again to stand beside the short blond. "Here I'll trade you" The warrior took the quail as Gabrielle took the item from large hands, her lips forming into a smile. The bard stared at it in the firelight, a dark leather bound book. She tilted the book some better to see an impression made on the leather, a quill was impressed into the leather cover. She opened it up to see numerous blank pages, her smile grew brighter at the realization of the article, a diary. Emerald eyes looked up to meet loving sky blue eyes, Gabrielle threw her arms around Xena's neck as the warrior held her one hand out of the way with the quail.

"Thank you Xena" They both hugged tightly, wishing they didn't have to release but knew to keep things low key. Releasing their hold, the bard rocked back onto her heels as she continued to smile up at the warrior.

"I know you don't have a diary and thought you could use one" The younger woman looked down at the book, running a small hand over the leather bound book.

"Yeah I've been meaning to get one" She looked up. "I write stories, but I wanted to have something personal to get my feelings out on and other moments" Xena kept her loving smile as she responded.

"That's what I thought too" Gabrielle turned her head to her right as Joxer walked up beside her to look at the book. The warrior turned towards the fire, moving rather close to it and sat down on the ground. Xena propped the three branches up over the fire to let the quail cook, a small smile still on her lips.

The warrior wannabe look at the book, and took it from the bard's hands carefully to study it, he then handed it back to the Amazon Queen.

"That's really neat" The blond nodded with a smile, she then walked over to the saddlebags and where her scroll satchel rested. Joxer though made his way over to the dark haired warrior, sitting down on the ground beside her. Xena looked to him, smiling lightly and mirrored back the smile and looked to the fire. Within a few heartbeats the blond sat on the other side of Xena after placing the dark leather diary into her satchel. Once she sat down, Gabrielle placed her staff beside her on the ground, she then reached for one of the sticks. Xena grasped the other two as both females turned the skewers, switching the top of the quail with the bottom.

~*~*~*~

Gabrielle sat on the log, right beside her was the leather-clad warrior on the ground,

her back against a large random rock. The bard chewed on her quill as she tried to organize her thoughts before writing them in the leather bound book. She listened to the sound of a whetstone being stroked down the ex-warlord's sword. Her green eyes looked up from the diary towards the fire, in front of it lay the wannabe warrior. His chest was rising and falling slowly, his eyes closed and body well relaxed and covered. The Amazon Queen stopped sucking on the tip of her quill and continued on with her thoughts.

It was getting late now, everybody's stomachs were full from the small birds. The blond took a deep breath very slowly releasing it, in reaction a set of blue eyes looked up to her. Gabrielle looked to her soulmate with a loving smile.

Xena's idea had worked in more than one way. The warrior's top idea to getting her bard the diary was to mostly make her happy. But another main reason was for a way to get her lover to get some of her recent emotions out, it was working. The Warrior Princess didn't know if the bard knew she planned that or not, it didn't matter in the end. Xena did know it was important to her soulmate to get her emotions out, and she knew that she wasn't always the best person to tell emotions too. But the tall warrior was working at it, for herself, for her soulmate.

The tall female dropped the sharpening stone onto her lap as she gazed up at her lover. The bard closed the diary up and stood, raking her small hands through dark hair then took the whet stone from large hands and slowly walked over to her satchel. She slipped her book into the satchel and then swayed to her right to place the stone into the saddlebag pocket. The small woman walked back to where her partner sat, the warrior's sword sheathed, her long legs propped up but slightly opened. The bard looked to Joxer to see him sleeping hard. She then looked back to Xena, she walked closer to her soulmate's legs in front of her. Gabrielle then bent down onto her knees, her body going between the warrior's legs. Small hands fell onto the warrior's large thighs, Xena smiled to the younger woman. The Amazon Queen leaned in lightly kissing her warrior on the lips, the kiss became more intense than they should have dared it. Gabrielle found Xena's hands grasping her side, pulling her in, the bard's own hands gliding down strong thighs. They both quickly realized as to where this was going and backed off, both breathing breathlessly. Gabrielle let her head rest against the warrior's forehead as she let her body calm down, both their bodies calm. The smaller woman then brought her head back up to peer into Xena's eyes.

"We better get to sleep huh" The warrior grin as she kept her hands on Gabrielle's side, but a much lighter touch.

"Yeah before we devour each other" The bard chuckled as she stood up, grabbed her staff off the ground by the log and held her hand down to the warrior. Xena took a hold of the small hand and was helped being hauled to her feet, they kept their hands together as they walked the short distance to the bedrolls. Their bedrolls weren't together, there was about a shoulders length apart, both soulmates finding even that to far away. Gabrielle settled her staff beside her bedroll once she was sitting on the furs. Xena unhooked her sword and chakram placing them close by her bedroll as well, chakram on top of her sword. She then undid her buckles to her armor and placed them down beside her weapons. The warrior laid down on the bedroll, pulling her furs over herself. She gazed over to her partner, green eyes already looked her way, Xena smiled and received one back. "Good night" The smaller woman kept her smile as she

replied back.

"Sleep well Xena" The warrior nodded, her blue eyes closing, Gabrielle rolling onto her back to peer up at the sky. She watched what little amount of stars she could through the thin clouds.

~*Part 3*~

The young woman tossed and turned under her furs, her body feeling tired, but her mind filled with thoughts. She stared into the dying fire hoping it would make her sleepy, but having no luck. She took deep breaths to relax herself, finding it increasingly hard to sleep. Gabrielle couldn't figure out why she couldn't sleep, unless she was afraid of what nightmares would come to her. She then rolled over to now face her soulmate, she stared at her lover's soft high cheek plane. Inside she was dying to go cuddle up beside the taller female, but knew with her luck, Joxer would wake up.

The bard continued to gaze across to her partner, then slowly blue eyes opened up to look back at her. A very small smile formed on Xena's lips, trying to comfort her bard. Gabrielle dropped her eye contact for a moment, her eyes were becoming a little darker underneath each day. The blond looked back to the warrior, Xena seeing the sadness in them and deep in them a hidden fear. That's when the Warrior Princess didn't care any more. She lift up her part of the fur blanket, Gabrielle smiled and looked to Joxer, seeing him sleeping hard as normally and some snoring. The blond came out from under her covers and crawled a little and slipped under the inviting furs.

The bard's head rested in the crook of Xena's shoulder, her back against the tall warrior's leather clad stomach. The warrior wrapped one arm around the blond's muscular stomach, Gabrielle's stomach tingling from the closeness.

That's when Joxer's snoring stopped and he rolled over to now to face in the direction of the soulmates, his eyes still closed. His breathing had picked up a little, worrying the bard. Gabrielle turned her head to look to her friend with concern evident in her eyse. She quietly then whispered up to her warrior.

"Can we go for a walk or something?" Xena's eyes drifted to the man across from them, she then looked to her lover and nodded. The warrior released Gabrielle and they both stood up quietly. They slowly made their way out of the camp without making any noise. They walked for a ways in silence till they came to a large patch of trees. Xena leaned up against one of the smoother trees, Gabrielle paced back and forth in front of her, her small hand in blond hair. The bard stopped her pacing and looked to her serious soulmate, her eyes filled with sadness.

"Xena I don't know how to deal with all this" The warrior's eyes dropped to the ground, her arms crossing against her chest, knowing this was coming. She looked back up to her soulmate, locking eyes with her.

"Tell me what you're thinking, feeling. Please get those emotions out Gabrielle" The bard dropped her own eye contact and started pacing again, her hands on her hips now. She brought one hand up to go into her blond hair again. Tears started to slowly trickle down her cheeks.

"I just never imagined that my family would be taking away from me all at once, so soon" The small woman stopped pacing and turned to her warrior, her head down staring at the ground. Xena listened, her body wanting to hold the bard, but knew not to...yet. "I just feel so much hatred towards Velasca" The small female paused for a moment then quietly whispered, even Xena had to strain to hear "Hate myself" Gabrielle looked up into blue eyes, pain evident in her emerald eyes. Xena uncrossed her arms and then quietly replied with a question.

"Why?" Now it was the younger female whom crossed her arms against her chest.

"I hate myself for leaving them, if I never had it wouldn't have ever happened" The warrior felt a lump come to her throat as she nodded. Those words stung the warrior like a million arrows, her guilt coming to life.

"How can you be sure of that Gabrielle? For all you know a warlord could have came along and wiped out your village and you would have been there too" The bard's eyes dropped to the ground again, she briefly close her eyes, her body starting to quiver from the strong emotions.

"At least I wouldn't have all this anger and hatred inside of me" The tall females fingers began to curl up into a fist, her knuckles going white over her own anger towards Velasca for doing this to her soulmate. Xena had that same burning desire inside herself to try and kill Velasca as her bard did.

"Gabrielle there was nothing that you could have done about it, don't play what ifs games with yourself. It'll never help you in the long run" Slowly tears began to fall down the bard's flushed cheeks, Xena's own eyes filling with unshed tears.

"I want to kill her so bad Xena, so badly. I still see her in my dreams, hear her cynical laugh, her voice calling my name, see her cold white glossed eyes. Gods I want to kill the murdering bitch" The warrior kept her eyes lock with the sea green ones before her, she replied but her voice was becoming shaky.

"I know you Gabrielle, you can make it through this. I remember once a wise friend told me that the cycle of hatred has to end and the only way to do that is through love and forgiveness. Please don't give up that fight" The bard nodded some, a very faint smile to her lips.

"Only if you're beside me Xena. I can't do it without my soulmate" The tall warrior let her tears begin to trickle down her cheeks. Gabrielle threw herself into Xena's arms, the ex-warlords arms immediately wrapping around her tightly.

"I'll never leave your side my bard" That's when Gabrielle of Poteidaia let all her emotions surge to the top. She began to cry so hard that her body was racked with strong sobs. Xena feeling her own emotions over the situation come crashing out, her soul link to the bard's feeling the pain, they shared the pain. Both women cried as they hugged one another tightly, the younger female's legs began to buckle, no longer able to stand up. Xena slid down the side of the tree with her soulmate till they both were sitting on the ground. The warrior rocked back and forth some as they both cried, letting the emotions run their course. After a good quarter of a candlemark or longer the smaller female began to slow up some. She still could feel some of the pain inside, but had no more tears to shed, her body convulsed a few more times. Xena never relinquished her hold on her bard, her own tears stopping, she continued to rock

Gabrielle and herself back in forth in a soothing rhythm. Being able to speak again the warrior whispered soothing sounds to her soulmate to calm her.

After a half a candlemark completely passed, Gabrielle was calmer, just sniffing. Her eyes were pure red, face tear stricken as she took some deep breaths. The Warrior Princess loosened her hold some, the blond sat back some to look into red blue eyes of the warrior. Xena just smiled and in heartbeat Gabrielle smiled back faintly, the tall female leaned in to kiss the bard on the forehead. She then freed her right hand from the bard's back and placed it behind Gabrielle's head. She pushed the Amazon Queen's head, the bard following the physical command and nuzzled her face between Xena's breasts. The leather-clad female rocked for a few more heartbeats while raking a hand through strawberry-blond hair, letting Gabrielle mentally pull herself together. Again the tall female loosened her hold and the bard stared into her lover's red eyes. "You okay?" The blond nodded as she released one arm from around the stronger woman, she wiped at her eyes clearing them better.

"Thanks Xena" The Warrior Princess smiled a little and kissed her bard on the forehead again then responded.

"I love you" A bright smile formed on Gabrielle's face as she hugged the older woman one last time and then they broke their hold on each other. They both stood up and stretched their legs out.

The bard then saw her soulmate stiffen, her blue eyes going cold. Gabrielle froze as well and looked around and listened to figure out what her soulmate was hearing, seeing and or sensing.

There, a twig being broken.

To their right.

Thirty or more paces into the woods.

Gabrielle kept her attention on that, little attention to everything else around her. Then a whistle sound was heard as an arrow came flying through the air towards the bard. Before it could find it's target it was pluck out of the mid-air by the warrior's fast moving hand. Then a second whistle as another arrow made it's way to Xena's side, her other hand just stopping it. Before she could rid the arrows in her hand another came from the side, it sunk deep into the bard's left shoulder. Gabrielle grimaced and brought her hand up quickly regretting the action by the pain it caused. The next thing to happen was the blond's world spinning then she blacked out, her body crashing to the ground. The ex-warlord frantically looked around for the attackers, not seeing them in the darkness. Xena saw what happened to her soulmate, poisoned arrows, she shifted to stand over the bard's body in protection. She felt literally nude without her armor or weapons, she cursed herself mentally for leaving them back in the camp. Xena yelled out in a strong tone.

"Show yourselves cowards!" To her right the one man reappeared from the woods, a sword in hand, he twirled it as he grinned to the warrior. Then in a blink of an eye another fighter appeared out of no where from above. The large man came crashing done on to Xena, taking her down to the ground. The Warrior Princess and thug rolled on the ground a few times, farther away from the bard. The thug from earlier had briskly ran over to the lying bard, picking her up and hoisting her up onto his

shoulders. Then he whistled and a horse galloped in, the thug jogged over to the horse and threw the bard up into the front of the saddle. He looked back to the fight, his best fighter was standing between him and the Warrior Princess. The lead thug then turned back to his horse and hopped up and caught sight of his man getting kicked around by Xena. The leader looked up to the trees then back to the fight.

The expert archer perched in the trees high above as he began to line up his three arrows all at once at the female warrior, waiting for the perfect moment. The large fighter was hit in the knee then in the stomach, Xena's anger flying high. She kicked up high sending the large man sprawling to the ground, blue eyes watched then felt confident he wouldn't move. The leader looked back at the female warrior across the horse's rump. His eyes locked with the most dangerous ice-cold blue eyes ever, his skin crawled. Then she was sprinting towards him, he waited counting his luck. Xena closed in and leaped into mid-air, which is when three arrows came hurdling through the air at her. They all made their mark, one into her left shoulder, another in her hip and the third just making it into her upper leg. It faltered her, her flip went chaotic and she landed on the ground on her side with no arrows. Her vision began to spin as she rolled onto her stomach to look up at the horse with rider. He stared back down at her, a small grin formed on his lips at her vulnerability. The rider then kicked his black horse, turned around and galloped off into the woods. Xena's world was still spinning out of control her resistance slowly giving up, she watched the horse disappear into the darkness with her soulmate. Then her body went limp, everything was black.

Part 2

Section 2

~*Part 4*~

Slowly consciousness hit the small female, her shoulder aching with intense pain, her eyes were closed daring herself to look around. The female kept them closed then began to take in her surroundings by physical means.

Touch, she is on a soft bed.

Smell, she is surrounded by the scent of balsam, a strong salve.

Sound, she heard two men, their voices in an argument.

The two men bickered and complained about how to fix the young woman's arm. One suggested to take a hot poker to the wound, the female squirmed when she heard that idea. The two men took to the notice of her being awake. One quickly reached for something and before she knew what happened next, her right arm felt something sharp prick her. The woman's world went dark again, her body relaxed and her breathing slowed up as she fell into a long slumber.

~*~*~*~

A large hand moved from the tall woman's side to rest on her forehead, her brow hot, a fever. Her entire left side was in immense pain, it didn't matter. The warrior then let her memories sink in for a few moments, the last events coming back. She quickly remembered and sat up swiftly her hands behind her, propping her up as she called

out.

"Gabrielle?" She gazed around to see a fire about twenty paces away, Joxer kneeling in front of it with a stick, poking at it. He turned around to spot Xena sitting up, he dropped the stick and briskly walked over to the tall female, bending down beside her.

"Xena you feel alright?" Xena's confused eyes turned on him, she stared at him briefly, her mind still swimming some. She then leaned forward, one hand in her lap the other rubbing her forehead.

"Yeah I think so" She pause, dropped her hand and looked to the man. "Where's Gabrielle?" Joxer dropped his eyes to ground for a moment then looked back to the leather-clad female.

"I don't know, I thought you might have known where Gabby is" The warrior closed her eyes, it all did happen, no dream. She opened them again and brought her hands to the ground and began to try and stand up. Pain quickly shot through her body, she felt weak, whatever was left in her stomach was about to come back up, and she still fought it all. Xena then felt a warm gently hand fall on her right shoulder and press her down, she looked to her friend. "Xena you can't move in this condition. You have wounds on your sides and a fever to boot" The ex-warlord gritted her teeth and let her body sink back down on top of the bedroll, for now. "I may not be good at fighting, but I do know how to treat some injuries" He was right, Xena looked to where the arrows had made their mark from the attack that night. Two were wrapped up, the third that had hit her waist and torn through her leathers was nicely stitched with a scab producing over it. The warrior looked from her wounds to the skinny man.

"Thanks Joxer, but I have to find Gabrielle" Joxer still had his hand on her shoulder, he squeezed for a moment then released her shoulder.

"Xena, you're not going to help Gabrielle at all with your body being in a bad state" The warrior shook her head and then began to stand up, ignoring her body's protest. Once on her feet she felt a wave of dizziness take over, she stood still closing her eyes feeling it pass with in a heartbeat or two. Blue eyes opened again and looked around at everything. She was still in the patch of trees, the sun was directly above her, and she'd slept to late. To her right was the mare, munching on grass, tack and saddlebags on the ground beside the golden horse. Then directly beside the bags are Xena's sword, chakram, and brass armor along with the bard's staff. Joxer had stood back up and was moving to the saddlebags, forgetting his argument with the stubborn warrior. The man picked up the saddlebag and walked back to Xena, dropping the bag to the ground, his face serious. "Well if you're going to be so stubborn, at least take care of your waist wound"

One of the Warrior Princess dark eye brows went up as she watched the man leave, squatting in front of the fire to poke at it again. She couldn't believe the change of attitude in the younger man, he'd never acted this serious nor like he knew what he was doing. Xena then bent down on her knees to open the saddlebag, sifting through it she found her medical supplies quickly. She removed some salve, another wrap and some wine with a clean rag. Quickly large hands worked to take care of the wounds. First, she unwrapped the two wounds, dabbing wine over them to use the alcohol to clean out any dirt, it stung incredible. She sucked in her breath at the sharp pain then re-wrapped it and unwrapping her shoulder wound. The wine-covered rag was placed

over the stitched wound, pain coming again. After re-wrapping the shoulder wound she investigated her waist wound, cleaning it as well, then placed some ointment to keep it clean, finally she wrapped the injury to protect it.

Xena then bent down, tossing all the supplies back into the bag and dug out a needle and strong thread she used to make repairs on her leathers. She efficiently sewed her rip in her leathers, dropping her head she tore the thread between her teeth and then placed her sewing kit into the saddlebag. The last thing the warrior looked for was some powder, she spotted the dull yellow powder a strong-grounded herb in a small leather bag. She grabbed a small cup and water skin, filling the cup with the water then put two pinches of the pale yellow powder in the mug. The warrior stirred it in with her index finger then drank the herbed water, her body almost convulsed over the foul taste. Xena closed her eyes for a few brief moments feeling the medicine begin to take affect, the pain in her body becoming forgotten about.

She looked to her horse, picked up the saddlebag and briskly walked over to her mare. She tossed the saddlebag on the horse's rump, followed by the saddle on the back and the tightening of the girdle. Then she placed the bit into Argo's mouth, tightens the crown and nosepieces and threw the reins over the mare's head. She grabbed the stirrups and pulled them down from the saddle, she then turned around to grab her soulmate's scroll satchel and staff, hooking them to the rucksacks. Xena then looked to where she believed the warrior had rode off towards, she spotted the horse's hooves and two pairs of foot tracks. Her jaw tightened, they wanted her to follow them, follow them towards the northwest. The Warrior Princess's eyes narrowed in suspicion, she looked back to ground and retrieved her brass armor, swiftly putting it on and tightening the straps. She then turned to her soulmate's satchel and removed a quill and a scroll.

"I owe you a new scroll love" Xena turned around and walked towards the wannabe warrior. He looked up as the tall form neared him. Xena sat down on the ground beside him her face cold and eyes serious. "Joxer I need you to do me a favor. Can you?" The small man nodded his head, while a very small smile crossed Xena's lips. The warrior looked down at the scroll as she began to write something out with in a minute, she then signed it and rolled the parchment back up. She handed it to Joxer while he looked to the female warrior. "Take that to the Amazons, I know you haven't been there, but tell them you wish to speak to regent Ephiny. Make sure you tell them you're a friend of Gabrielle's and I sent you" The tall female then raised her hands over her head in an almost seeming "A" symbol and then dropped her arms. "Make sure you do that symbol over your head, it represents peace. Stay with the Amazons till you hear from Gabrielle and or I. You got that?" Joxer nodded and then furrowed his brows together.

"What are you going to do?" The tall woman stood back up and stared down at the smaller man her face still stoic.

"I am going to get Gabrielle. You know how to get to the Amazon Nation?" Joxer didn't respond right away and thought about it then looked up to the warrior.

"Yeah, head northeast and then there will be the Amazonian mountains and beyond them is the Nation" Xena nodded and reached down to squeeze his shoulder.

"Thanks Joxer, be careful, I think there is a lot more trouble brewing then we think"

The small man nodded his head as he watched the older woman jog over to her mare, placing the quill back into the bard's satchel. She hefted herself up onto Argo, grasping the reins in her hands and looked to the wannabe warrior.

"Take care Xena, find Gabrielle" Xena nodded her head once more and kicked the war-horse, sending Argo into a gallop and disappeared into the woods, heading northwest following the tracks.

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The warrior shut her eyes, feeling the pain starting to seep back into her body, the one problem with anesthetics, they wear off too fast. She kept a tight handle on the reins, staring down at the ground, catching sight of the horse hooves she is following. She looked up again to watch where the mare went through the trees, not in the way of anything, she trusted Argo. Xena looked to the sky briefly seeing the sun was sinking low, it would be half a candlemark till sunset. She was beginning to wonder if she'd ever make it to the end of the trail. Her mind was working in numerous directions and possibilities as to why the three warriors kidnapped her soulmate. But she knew that they wanted her to follow them into some sort of trap that she would willingly take if it meant getting to her soulmate. The warrior would deal with the other problems as soon as she found Gabrielle.

The Warrior Princess continued at a fast gallop, never stopping since she first left the camp during noon. She dropped one hand from the reins, her large hand gripping the saddle horn. Shots of pain ripped through her side, it was getting worse, her knuckles white. Xena pulled back on the reins and Argo slowed up and then took a few more paces and stopped. The warrior released the reins and saddle horn, pulled her feet out of the stirrups. She then swung one leg over the saddle and fell to ground literally, her body weak from the ride, wounds, lack of food and sleep, and pain. The tall female rose up from her knees with a grimace, she bit down on her lower lip. Lifting her right hand she felt her forehead, she was burning up. Xena knew her body is reacting to the wounds and poison still in her system, but she had no time to attend to that.

She decided to break for awhile, she kept one hand on the mare's rump as she took some deep breaths, her body catching up. Xena turned to the mare and pulled off the saddlebag and walked over to a nearby log, dropping the bag beside the log. She straightened up and took a moment to decide on her options. She struggled with her emotions and her logic, she had to get to her bard. There was no stopping that. She also knew her body needed rest, but knew she wouldn't sleep without knowing if Gabrielle was safe. So sleep was out of the question. But the warrior knew she could take a break, she gazed around in the dusk sun light. The tall female straightened up and began collecting firewood and piling it on the ground close by the log. She quickly lit it and had water warming over it while she sat on the log.

Her body was hot from the fever considering the cool temperature setting in for the night to come. Her body was a bit shaky from lack of food mostly. Large hands pulled the saddlebag in front of her, she pulled out some trail bars and a fresh orange originally from the Amazons. Xena peeled the fruit, her eyes watching the water being heated. Her thoughts consisted of her soulmate and as to what was happening, a variety of ideas coming to mind. After eating the juicy orange she took the boiling water and poured it into a mug then dug out some tea, mixing the two in the mug. She then shifted some on the log, her body screaming out in pain over the wrong movement. The warrior winced and reached into her medicines and extracted her

small pouch of Coca, anesthetic, to help stop the pain. She put two pinches into the brew of tea and began to sip on it, losing the taste of the medicine.

Within a candlemark the warrior's body felt somewhat in better condition. Her fever was a little more under control due to the snakeroot she added into her second mug of tea. She hated the idea of letting her body become dependent on the medicines, but it had to do for now. After sunset, Xena doused the fire and put the saddlebag back onto Argo, she hopped back up on the mare. She could only hope that the trail was only headed northwest, she assumed it. Her body was too weak to walk on the ground, so she decided to go at a trot, thankful for the quarter moon illuminating the forest. The Warrior Princess could only pray that her body had enough reserves to get her through this and that her body is at its peak at being able to heal.

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By late sunrise Xena had gone the whole night non-stop, some where around sunrise she had hopped off Argo and walked beside the mare. She stopped by the time it was light enough, she knelt down beside the hoof prints and footprints. She lightly touched them, the back hoof marks were made deep into the ground compared to the front ones. It was defiantly the horse that carried her soulmate, one pair of foot prints were pressed deeply then the other were, a smaller set, the archer. The warrior stood back up, her side shoots with pain from the movement, and she just ignored it. The tall female also noticed that the prints were more recent, less worn by nature, she is close. Not only did that tell her she was getting close, but something deep within her began to grow stronger, the part of her that is her soulmate.

A strong hand reached into the saddlebag and pulled out an apple, she munched on it as she kept moving, taking notice to the area for future reference. Her body ached from the long riding, the pain in her left side and shoulder had returned but she didn't have time to put together more medicine, nor did she want to risk to becoming addicted to the anesthetic.

After a half of a candlemark of walking Xena began to see the beginning of a large gray wall, her eyes narrowed. From her guess she figured it to be a large city, as to what one, she couldn't be sure. The tall female knew that Thessaloniki was about two days ride southwest. The only town she could think of that was in this region was Cirra. That memory sent a shiver down the normally stoic warrior's back, she forced the memories out of her mind and kept her thoughts in the present. Xena neared the large city, so she stopped walking and hopped back up onto Argo's back, her back straight.

She went at a trot towards the gray walls, she knew that they were waiting for her. There was no need for her to come rampaging in there only to get herself killed along with Gabrielle. Once close enough, she spotted sentries on top of the walls keeping watch, then three guards at the entrance. Xena knew then that there was an army located within, she didn't like this one bit. The warrior squared her shoulders, her back straight as she let her emotions disappear, her eyes cold with anger hidden behind them. Xena carried herself as if she were back in her warlord days, the possibilities of wounds never seeming to affect her, only her soulmate would have been able to notice the pain she was in. Now she slowed down to a walk and coming to stop once in earshot of the three guards at the entrance. The one in the middle kept a stern face on, he look a little older then Xena, not by much, he stepped up to the war-horse.

"You are Xena I presume?" Xena's ice cold eyes drifted down to him, as if to regard him for the first time, her voice came out cold.

"I am Xena, I am here to speak to whom ever is in charge" The tall older man nodded his head as his brought up one hand, the two guards behind moved to the side of the entrance.

"We've been expecting you to arrive sooner or later" He then stepped out of the way. The warrior took to notice to how well dressed the guards were as well as the sentries on the wall. She then lightly kicked the mare and they made their way through the gate and into the center of the city, defiantly an army. Xena took to notice of the large armory to her left, two guards in front of it. The wall completely encircled the city reminding her of Troy. The lead guard from the gate had walked inside, behind her and watched as the tall female dropped to the ground on her feet. Her posture never flinched, only power incased her. The only thing that made her look possible mortal were to two wounds noticeable, one on her left arm and the other on her left upper leg. The lead guard had been reminded of the warrior's fighting skills and her dangerous mind, nothing to toy with. He took a deep breath and stepped up beside her followed by two other soldiers behind him that are at his command. "Your horse will be attended to while we'll take your weapons" Steel cobalt eyes turned to him and stared at him. He held his ground while he saw the mare being led to the stables by one of the young stable men. Xena then brought her hand up slowly to unclip her sword and sheath, one soldier stepping up to take it, followed by the round chakram. "Follow me" The female nodded and stepped into pace behind the older man, the other guard had fallen into step behind the Warrior Princess.

The three-some walked through the center of town and to the far wall of the city where there is a building attached to that part of the wall. They came to a set of steps and began to climb them and once they reached the top, they took a right. Xena gazed across the balcony walkway to gaze across the small fortress of a city, mostly built to be a fortress. It completely remind her of Troy, that burned deep in her mind, Troy was of Rome, that idea didn't settle well in her mind. The group walked for a few more paces and came to an entrance to their left, they walked in, an office.

In the center of the room laid a desk, a blond haired man in his mid thirties sat behind it. His eyes gazed down at some map or another. Behind him was a tapestry, a symbol Xena didn't recognize, but took it as his symbol. The walls along the sides were lined with different types of swords, small ones, long ones, thick and thin, some old others newer, all used. Once all three people stepped up closer to the desk did the man's eyes lift up from the map to take in the new comers. A small grin crossed his full lips as he distinguished the female warrior.

"Welcome Xena to my fortress" The two guards had moved to lean against the wall sides, ready to move any second. The ex-warlord crossed her arms against her chest as she stared down at the man with hostile eyes.

"Who are you?" The man let an evil smile play on his lips as he sat back in his seat and folded his hands over his lap.

"I am the warlord Okeanos. I highly doubt you have heard of me, I am new to the game of being a warlord" Xena smiled down at him, her own smile showed only that of strength.

"That's great" The man kept a smile on his face as he sat back up in his seat, resting his hands on his desk.

" Yes it is as a matter of fact" Blue eyes narrowed at him, the warrior uncrossed her arms and placed them on the desk as well.

"So where do I come in?" Now Okeanos smile turned more into a grin as he crossed his arms on top of the desk.

"You come into the part of training my troops. They're pretty green, only have a few good soldiers here and there, the rest need help. You have a great reputation for training good warriors" The tall female grinned down at the man as she leaned down closer to the warlord and replied in the coldest and deepest voice ever.

"No" The warlord stared into the warrior's eyes, seeing the darkness that was her lurking behind strong walls, he was amazed. He sat back in his chair once more and moved his hands to the arms of the large wooden chair.

"You will or your friend will be dead. And I hear you are shall we say...attached to your little blond" Xena's jaw tightened at the words and commands. She then leaned in closer, locking eyes with the blond haired warlord, only inches from his face.

"What makes you think I won't take over your army?" Okeanos kept his annoying smile as he heard the snarled question.

"Because I offer them something you can't, money and plenty of it" Slowly the ex-warlord straightened back up her arms crossing against her chest again. Now the warlord stood, his height stopped at Xena's shoulders, she liked that small factor. "Now then, I am sure you would like to see your friend. She has been attended to for the past two days, her arrow wound taken care of efficiently" The blond man walked around the desk, the two guards moving next to the warrior. He stepped in front of Xena, signaling for them to all follow the warlord and they did. Xena directly behind him followed by the two guards at either side of her. "Xena, you will have between seven days to nine to prepare my men. You have a day to rest, recover from those arrow wounds and any poison still in your system as I am sure there is some from three arrows" They walked in silence for a few more paces as they made their way down the balcony walkway after having taken a left from the office room. Okeanos then went on with his orders. "Tomorrow, my captain who is to your right will come to retrieve you from your quarters in the morning. You will refer to him as Captain Mene. You and Captain Mene will then work from sun up to sun down on training my troops" They began to near the end of the high walkway and wooden door to the left of them guarded by three other soldiers. The warlord stopped and opened the door, he walked through followed by the tall warrior and the two escorting guards stay relatively close by the entrance to the room.

Once Xena stepped in, she took to notice of a small blond sleeping on her back in a large bed to her right against the wall, a wall that had a window with thick bars. Xena could also hear the faint sound of fire crackling, she look to the opposite wall to see a fire burning in a large fireplace. The tall female looked to Okeanos with stoic eyes.

"Is that all?" Okeanos brought his hands up to rest on his hips, his face now serious.

"Not quite everything Xena. That one single window over there is not only has the

bars, but there will always be two archers on guard to make sure neither of you try to escape. Finally, I heard your friend is rather good with the staff, she too will help out in the training. She will help train the new fighters in the basics of staff work and then will assist you and Captain Mene in any way possible. When she isn't needed she'll be up here, the both of you as a matter of fact. This room will be guarded at all times by three guards" He paused and let a smile form on his lips. "I hope you enjoy your time here" He then walked out of the dark room and the door was closed behind him by a guard then the sound of the door being locked could be hear, a bolt.

Xena turned to look at her soulmate on the bed, the bard's chest rose up and fell slowly. Gabrielle still wore her green halter-top and brown skirt, her boots removed. The warrior smiled as she let her guard finally fall down, she quickly crossed the floor over to the bed. She slowly sat down on the edge of the bed, close to Gabrielle's stomach. A strong hand moved to carefully brush blond bangs from the Amazon Queen's face, slowly green eyes began to open, her eyes unfocussed. Gabrielle's eyes were half-open as she stared up at the other person, their touch familiar to her. Slowly a smile creased the bard's lips as her eyes focussed on the person, Xena still lightly stroking the side of her face.

"Xena?" The tall warrior smiled down at her soulmate.

"Yeah its me" The bard's smile brightened as she sat up quickly, she flinched for a moment from the pain in her left shoulder. She wrapped her arms around the tall woman, Xena doing the same, pulling the bard close to her own body. They held each other tightly for a long time, happy to feel the other's touch, feeling the small darkness inside themselves disappear. They then released their hold, Xena moving her hands to the bard's small waist, Gabrielle's own hands rested on the warrior's left thigh. The blond crossed her legs together as she sat in the bed, the warrior still on the edge.

"How did you get here?" The tall female shrugged her shoulders for a moment, then moved her hands from the bard's waist to rest on small ankles.

"They left a nice trail behind for me to follow" The bard nodded her head in understanding and her small hands crept over to rest on top of Xena's.

"So exactly what's going on? Obviously they took me to get you to come here" The warrior took a deep breath as she stared at the stone floor for a moment then met green eyes again.

"They want us to train the troops here, you're their liability to keeping me here" Gabrielle furrowed her brow at that.

"There's got to be more to this then just training troops for some warlord" Xena's eyes widen as she bobbed her head up and down in agreement. "So what's this guys name?"

" Okeanos, never heard of the warlord either, I think he is new at this, he's to cocky as well" Gabrielle's gaze dropped to study the bed's detailed design on the blanket. She kept her eyes down as she replied.

"There is no easy way out of this is there?" After asking the blond looked up to her soulmate, Xena sighed.

"No, we're in the middle of an army and we're well guarded and I have no idea how large this army is. Besides I am not sure I want to leave right away. There's more here going on then Okeanos is telling" Gabrielle nodded her head again and then she looked close at Xena's face, she quickly took to notice of certain things.

First, the warrior was tired by the way she slouched, dark circles under her eyes.

Second, she hadn't eaten much considering her leathers look a tint loose on her.

Third, Xena is defiantly wounded by the wraps on her left shoulder and across her left thigh.

Fourth, the tall woman looked sick, her forehead showed small trickles of sweat considering it was cool in the room.

Gabrielle brought one of her hands up to move on top of the warrior's forehead, she could feel the heat radiating off her head before even touching Xena's brow. Xena closed her eyes to her soulmate's touch and opened them again as Gabrielle dropped her hand.

"Xena you didn't?" That was the tall woman's cue, she stood up from the bed and was about to retort when the bolt of the door was undone. A guard stepped in with two saddlebags and a satchel on his shoulder, he kept an eye on the two women, two sets of eyes were on him. He placed the saddlebags on the ground beside a desk, then brought the satchel over his head and placed it beside he bags. The guard then left, no words passed, only looks. The door bolted closed and the two soulmates looked back to each other. "Xena?" The warrior kept a stubborn look directed at her soulmate.

"Gabrielle I had to, I wouldn't have been able to rest without knowing if you were safe" The bard sighed and stood up from the bed and walked over to her lover, her bare feet feeling the coolness of the stone floor.

"Okay" They stood only a breath away, eyes locked. "But promise me next time if there ever is, gods for bid, that you take better care of yourself...for me" Xena sighed as her gaze went over to the door, she hated fighting with her soulmate, she couldn't win. The tall female looked back to the small woman.

"Only for you" The bard smiled and she closed in the distance, wrapping small hands around a leather waist, larger hands encircling her.

"Thank you" The warrior smiled and leaned down, two pairs of lips meeting half way. They kept the kiss light but long, enjoying the feeling. They broke the kiss after a few heartbeats, the blond resting her head against the tall woman's chest feeling the protection. Xena rested her chin on top of the bard's head, smelling the honey sent that was of her lover. She closed her sky blue eyes, Gabrielle then took to note how the warrior seemed to favor leaning on her right side, the pain was bad, that much was evident. The bard pulled away and looked up to the warrior. "Go sit down on the bed and I'll take care of your wounds, my guess is you haven't changed the wraps since you first put them on" Xena grinned down at her soulmate's words, Gabrielle knew she was right then. The older woman released the blond and moved near the bed and sat down, unlacing her boots. Gabrielle then made her way over to the fireplace, hooking a filled pot of water over the fire in the fireplace. She ambled over to the saddlebags, carefully rooting through the medicines and foods. She removed some tea,

honey, two mugs, spoons and some bleach white powder contained in a small leather pouch. The bard placed them all beside the fireplace as she went back to the medicine bag, she then removed some wraps and salve. Gabrielle turned around and caught sight of her soulmate sitting on the bed, only in her white shift, the bard smiled and got one in return. She slowly walked over and sat on the bed, one leg hanging off the bed while Xena sat crossed legged on the large soft bed, her left side to the bard as she looked out the barred window. Gabrielle carefully unwrapped the upper shoulder, finding the wound somewhat red, but well stitched. "You stitched this?" Xena looked at it for a moment in question as well then looked to her soulmate.

"No actually Joxer did" The bard's eyes widen for a moment then she replied.

"Really? That's pretty amazing" Xena nodded, not saying much as her gaze went back to the window. Gabrielle quickly became aware of this. *She's more tired than I thought.* The bard bit down on her lower lip as she began to apply the salve gently, Xena never flinching. After attending to the shoulder wound, Gabrielle patted the warrior's left leg, Xena understanding the physical command. The tall woman lay down on her right side, giving her soulmate easier access to the leg wound. "So where's Joxer now?" The Warrior Princess had her eyes closed as she responded, Gabrielle undoing the wrap.

"I sent him to the Amazon's with a note" The bard nodded in approval over the idea.

"It'll be interesting to see how Joxer handles all those women. What did you write in the note?"

"It was for Ephiny mainly to let her know what was going on. I have my suspicions that this warlord might be headed towards the Amazons. So I told Ephiny that she should wait for word from either you or I about the situation and for them to take care of Joxer till then" Gabrielle nodded again as she began to place a new wrap over the leg wound.

"Why you think Okeanos might be headed for the Amazons?" The older woman shrugged her shoulders for a moment then responded.

"Not sure yet, instincts tell me right now" The bard grinned as she finished the wrapped and squeezed the strong thigh.

"And your instincts are always right" Xena grinned as she sat back up, Gabrielle hopping off the bed to check the water. "Take your shift off while I get our tea" The older woman chuckled to herself over her lover's control, she watched the bard for a few seconds. Gabrielle pulled the pot over from the fire and placed it on the floor beside the fireplace. She filled the two mugs up with hot water and brewed the tea in, then added in some honey stirring it in. Finally the Amazon Queen put two pinches of the white powder in one mug then two in the other, knowing the Opium Poppy will take the pain away from Xena's side and the bard's own shoulder that still immensely ached. She also knew it would calm the warrior's fever and make them both sleep so their bodies could repair the wounds. She gave the two mugs one last stir and then stood up carrying them over to her soulmate. The warrior sat on the bed crossed legged again, her shift removed leaving her completely naked. Gabrielle handed Xena her mug with the double thing of morphine, the older woman took the mug from small hands and began to sip on it.

"Thanks" The bard smiled at the word and got up on the bed to Xena's left side and placed her mug carefully on the bed then picked up the salve again. She looked at the waist wound, the wrapped remove by Xena earlier, the wound a bit irritated from being cleaned a little to late. The blond sighed and applied the salve. "I love how you add the honey to the tea" Green eyes lifted up from the wound to look into loving blue eyes.

"Well you do have a sweet tooth even if you don't care to admit to it" The dark-haired female chuckled at that and took a sip, feeling the warm fluid go down her throat and warm her insides.

"Yeah, it's my weakness" Blue eye twinkled as they looked to green ones. Then Gabrielle looked back to the waist injury and began to wrap it. "Course we know what yours is" The bard chuckled at that.

"And I could really go for some nutbread too" Xena grinned at that and brought the mug to her lips again.

"We'll both sleep well with this Opium Poppy you added to the tea" The bard nodded as she finished the last of her wrapping.

"Yeah" The bard looked up. "We both could use the rest, especially you" The warrior let a half grin, half smirk crease her lips. She then let the smirk go into a smile as she leaned over to kiss the bard on the forehead. Gabrielle smiled back and placed the container of salve in front of her and retrieved her mug and began drinking it. The bard then raised a brown eyebrow at her soulmate. "You going to just stay like that?" Xena looked to her partner with a confused expression then she realized what she meant.

"Actually I was thinking about it, I am still burning up" Gabrielle reached over, feeling Xena's forehead still hot.

"You're still defiantly running a high fever" The warrior nodded her head in agreement as the small hand dropped from her head. The small hand then moved to touch the warrior's forearm, finding it cold, Gabrielle looked to her soulmate and one of her brown eyebrows went up. Xena grinned for a moment and handed her partner the mug of tea then reached to her right retrieving her white shift and slipped it on. Xena then pushed herself to the head of the bed, and let her back rest on the headboard. The Amazon Queen caught the intentions immediately and hopped off the bed and placed the two mugs of warm tea on the nightstand beside the bed. The bard then grabbed the container of salve and used wraps, placing them on the small table as well, out of the way. She then got back on the bed and sat on her tall soulmate's lap, her legs becoming tangle with larger ones. Xena then wrapped her left arm around the small form and her other hand went to the small table retrieving the bard's mug and handing it to her. She then retrieved her own mug of honey tea, taking a sip and feeling it travel through her system. "Xena?" The warrior placed her mug on top of her own thigh as she responded.

"Hmmm?"

"Exactly how I am going to be training these men?" The older woman tightened her left arm that was around the small waist then answered.

"Okeanos wants you to train the new one's in the basics of using a staff and then help me if I need any" By the way Xena said it, Gabrielle knew her soulmate didn't like the idea what so ever. The blond's free hand moved up from her own lap to gently caress the large arm wrapped around her mid-section.

"I can handle that" The ex-warlord took a deep breath, her jaw tightening for a brief moment then loosening.

"I know you can, but..." The bard's hand stopped moving for a moment as she thought of it. The positives came to mind instantly.

"You know it'll be good for me"

"Gabrielle..."

"No seriously Xena, hear me out" The bard paused as she took a deep breath, organizing her thoughts. "I haven't been getting much staff work in lately, so this will give me the chance. Also I haven't had a chance to train anybody before and I think I need to learn considering the fact I am the Queen of the Amazons. And I won't have to worry about really holding back, give them all a few good bloody noses" The tall warrior chuckled at the last reason, actually liking it. But she had to agree with the bard in she could use the practice and training skills. She just didn't like the small factor her bard would be training future killers. The tall female sighed, and let her fingers move up and down the bard's bare torso. Her mug of tea rested on the edge of the bed in her hands. She then figured it be safer for her partner to be closer to her, keep a close eye on her smaller soulmate.

"Yeah I suppose you're right"

"You just don't like me being involved in creating killers huh?" Xena blinked twice, did the bard just read her mind or was it her? She faintly shook her head then replied.

"No I don't like you being apart of this at all" Gabrielle nodded as she took a swallow of some tea then placing the mug back down to the bed, Xena now taking a drink.

"Well we're partners right?" The tall female grinned to herself.

"You know it"

"Then I am staying beside you even if it means teaching a bunch of half wits on how to use a staff. I'm not staying cooped up here for Zeus knows how long, I'd rather be down there with you" The warrior's stoic features slowly went turned into a loving expression, she leaned down and quietly whispered back.

"Thank you, that means a lot" Gabrielle smiled inwardly and looked into her mug seeing it empty and knew her soulmate's to be empty as well. She placed her mug on the nightstand and turned in her warrior's arms, then encircled the large waist with her arms. Xena wrapped her left arm around the bard's back as she leaned down kissing strawberry-blond hair. She then placed her own mug on the stand beside her and wrapped her other arm around the bard. Xena then sunk down onto the bed bring the blond with her then she felt the smaller form adjusts comfortable into her strong arms. They two women began to feel the affects of the light morphine taking over their bodies, the pain in Xena's side disappearing, the bard's shoulder relaxing. They both

then fell into a deep sleep giving their bodies' ample time and conditions to repair the wounds and stop the warrior's fever.

~*Part 5*~

Blue eyes stared into the slowly dying fire. Her mind wondering off, becoming lost in ideas. Casually cobalt eyes looked down to see the small form tightly nestled in her arms, a grin formed on the warrior's lips. It was dusk almost, Xena still felt somewhat groggy from the morphine, she knew her soulmate was still feeling the effects by the way she slept soundly. She turned her gaze back to the fire, thinking about their situation that they are stuck in. She didn't like any of these, not the city, not the warlord, not the way her skin crawled and her every instincts told her to get her soulmate out of here. The Warrior Princess though knew she couldn't leave, her bard wouldn't allow her to leave no matter the size of problem nor the consequences. Xena sighed, at least her fever was gone and the pain in her left side is dissipating now. She figured by tomorrow it would be gone and only healing wounds would be left behind. The tall female then looked back down at her soulmate, releasing one hand and brings it up to lightly caress smooth skin. Emerald eyes fluttered open and tiredly stared up to the warrior, Xena smiled down at the blond.

"Hey" The bard smiled as she sat up more in Xena's arms.

"Hey to you too. What time is it Xena?"

"It's around dusk right now. Figured Okeanos will want us up and about for dinner" The bard nodded for a moment then buried her head into Xena's breasts. Then she muffled back something.

"Idon'twanttuhgo" A dark eyebrow went up.

"Neither do I" A muffled reply back.

"Thenwewontgo"

"We have too"

"Nowedon't, youcanjustkicktheirbutts" Xena laughed some, wishing she could just do that.

"Come on love" The warrior began to move, but small arms tightened around her waist, Xena grinned. It was tempting to just stay in bed with her soulmate, but she had to move before any of the guards entered. She didn't need Okeanos finding out that they are lovers, would make things even worse. The warrior then reached down with her right hand, bring up the bard's face. Emerald eyes locked with brilliant sky blue eyes. Xena lowered her head and two pairs of lips met, the kiss strong and consuming. The bard loosened her hold on Xena some, both becoming lost in the kiss. Slowly the older female pulled away, green eyes slowly opening back up to peer at her tall soulmate. Xena then felt the smaller woman begin to sit up, the tall female getting off the bed with Gabrielle following her. They both dressed quickly, Gabrielle only having to put her boots on, Xena though had to put her leathers, boots and armor on. Xena sat on the bed, as small fingers worked her buckles from behind. She felt one strap go taut on her right side, then the other on her left side. The warrior then stood up, Gabrielle hopping off the bed as Xena made her way over to the desk slipping on

her two armbands then reached for her wrist guards. That's when a knock came at the door, Xena turned her head, as did the bard whom stood beside the bed. Two guards entered and then Mene came in, his eyes went first to the bard then to the taller woman. Xena slipped her two wrist guards on and then stepped up to the Captain.

"Okeanos requests both of your presence at dinner" Xena nodded her head, her partner stepping up beside her. Mene turned around and walked out, followed by the two females, then the guards. Once walking through the door was shut and they all followed behind Mene. They were lead off the balcony and down to the ground and then headed towards the left quadrant of the fortress. The Amazon Queen took in the city-fortress, finding it interesting. She hadn't been out of the room since she first got here, never seeing the fortress let alone the men that were walking around. They finally arrived at the other side of the fortress, the sound of some talking could be heard, then bellowing laughs. Mene stepped through the large entrance into a huge high room, a large wooden long table center in the room. Okeanos sat at the head of it, his sites turn from the man at his right to see who had entered the dinning hall. He grin slipped onto his lips as he stood up.

"Glad you could join us Xena and Queen Gabrielle" The bard looked to her soulmate for a moment, Xena didn't look back, her ice blue eyes on the warlord. "I keep up on my news Queen Gabrielle, I've heard you recently became the Queen of the Amazons after Melosa" Green eyes stared at him, Gabrielle didn't know to take that as a good thing or bad, overall to her it was bad news. She could tell Xena didn't like it either by the way the warrior had one hand fisted up. "Any way, please both of you join us and sit" Mene stood beside the female warrior, he looked to Xena, she then began to move towards the table followed by the bard. The ex-warlord sat at the second to last seat of the end of the table, Gabrielle to her right at the end. They were as far away from Okeanos as possible, beside Xena on her left was seated Mene. The two guards from earlier now stood at the entranceway of the dinning hall, leaning against the wall. There was a plethora of food contained on the long wooden table. Chicken then dates, some vegetables, goblets of wine with olives near by, and a little Chinese white rice. The ex-warlord was rather impressed by the extent of food, she knew Okeanos had a plentiful amount of money, but how is what she'd like to know. Behind the warrior and bard two young small servant girls came up with plates, utensils, and goblets. Gabrielle looked to the two young girls, her eyes narrowed for a moment, they are about the bard's age. Xena knew her soulmate had noticed it too, but held her tongue from saying anything right now. She knew that to be the way of the world for slaves, the younger the better.

The remainder of the dinner was quiet, little talk, mostly Okeanos boasting about his future plans and some of his head commanders laughing with him. Neither Xena nor the bard said anything, the warrior collecting as much information about the warlord as possible. Once the servants began to collect the dirty plates did a guard from outside come in, two scrolls contained in his hands. The tall guard briskly walked over to the warlord handing them to him. Okeanos took the two scrolls and nodded to the guard, the guard saluted him then quickly walked back out of the dinning hall. Everybody was silent as Okeanos unrolled one scroll and began to read it, after doing so he looked up to everybody at the table.

"Seems like we'll have a chance in eight days to test out your training techniques Xena" Cold blue eyes stared back at him as did his five other commanders. "One of my scouts reports that an old friend of mine is headed this way" A pause as a grin

slipped on the warlord's lips. "He still carries a bit of a grudge from me killing his lover not to long ago, the damn pervert" The warlord reached out in front of himself to grasp his goblet of wine, he took a long sip, then placed it back on the table.

"Exactly where is he heading from Lord Okeanos?" The blond haired warlord looked up to Mene, he looked back down at the scroll then back to Mene.

"He's heading right for us from the south out of Pydmon area" Mene nodded his head as he thought about that.

"Did the scout report how large his men are?" Okeanos took another gulp of his wine then placed the mug back on the table and stood up, his cape following underneath him.

"No he didn't, but it won't matter, I know Lykus thinks" He then looked to the warrior and the small blond. "Well perhaps you and Queen Gabrielle should be escorted back up to your room for the night, the next seven days will be busy" On cue the two guards walked over to the table, Xena slowly rose up from the seat then the bard did. The leather-clad female didn't move from around the chair like the bard did, she stared hard at Okeanos, and then she looked to the second scroll in his hand that had a distinguishable seal to it. Blue eyes slowly rose up from the scroll to meet amber ones that stared hard back at her. Xena turned her back on him and moved next to her smaller partner who had a confused look. The two women were accompanied out of the dinning hall and up to their room, it was dark out, the walls lined with torches all lit.

~*~*~*~

Gabrielle turned around from the barred window and leaned against it as she looked to her tall soulmate. Xena was tossing in a few logs from where a pile of wood sat on one side of the fireplace. She stood back up and looked to the bard.

"I recognized that seal on the second parchment" One of Amazon Queen's eyebrows went up at that, she had to wonder.

"From where?" Xena shook her head as she brought up one hand to her temple, she dropped her hand on her side again. She then moved over to the side of the bed, sitting on the edge.

"I can't completely remember, its on the tip of my tongue" Blue eyes looked up to meet emerald ones.

"Another warlord?"

"No, it's a seal not an emblem"

"There's a difference?" Xena grinned some at her soulmate.

"In the world of politics yeah. Seals represent more power, normally a country" A pause. "Emblems are a symbol for a small army or warlord, they're not as detailed as seals nor widely known" The small bard nodded a few times as she had to agree with that theory.

"So you recognized that one, but can't remember who's seal it is?"

"No, I didn't get a close enough look at it, if I could just get a hold..." Xena looked up to her bard from the floor, her train of thought was stopped while a certain twinkle entered the warrior's eyes and a dark eyebrow was up. Gabrielle's eyes widen for a moment as she began to wonder what her partner had in mind.

"What do you have in mind Xena?" The tall female chuckled for a moment then let a devilish grin slip onto her lips.

"How do you feel about getting drunk tomorrow night?"

"What?!"

~*~*~*~

Slowly the tall female padded out of the washroom, linen in her hands drying off her face, she still wore her leathers but had removed her armor and boots earlier. Gabrielle looked up as she tossed her second boot beside the other one at the foot of the bed on the floor. Xena dropped the linen towel onto a chair relatively close to the small entrance way to the washroom.

"So did they take all your weapons?" The warrior looked from the linen to her lover, a small grin playing on her red lips.

"Nope"

"Really?"

"Really" That's when Xena reached between her breasts and pulled out a small dagger, holding it in the palm of her right hand. "One spot they didn't check" The bard giggled some, between the memory and her soulmate's words.

"I knew that thing would be handy...some day" Both the warrior's eyebrows went up briefly, as she retorted.

"If I remember correctly you couldn't quite keep it that...handy in place" The bard rolled her eyes as Xena stepped up to the foot of the bed, sapphire eyes gazed down at her.

"Ha ha, I was young then, what did you expect?" Xena still held the breast dagger in hand, but her hands were down beside her.

"Hmmm, I wasn't expecting a breast dagger of all things" The warrior kept her eyes locked with the small woman's as she leaned down, her free hand resting on the wood frame to support her. "And I wasn't expecting to fall in-love with you at the time" The bard smiled and got one in return, but much more sexier, Gabrielle could feel her heart racing. They could still always manage to do that to each other with the littlest of touches, looks, and words.

"Well yeah I never...um expected to fall in love with some warrior" Xena chuckled some as she leaned in even more, noses touching.

"Some warrior huh?"

"Some sexy hot warrior" A sly grin slipped into place on the warrior's lips at those words.

"Some sexy hot warrior eh?"

"Well more like some sexy hot exquisite leather-clad powerful warrior" Xena chuckled some as she leaned down to let her lips brush against the bard's own.

"Hmm is that it?" The warrior could hear a small moan escape the bard's mouth.

"A warrior that likes to drive me insane" That's when the older woman sealed her lips with the Amazon Queen's. The kiss was strong, devouring. Xena broke the kiss first, her blue eyes were dark and deep, Gabrielle felt a shiver ripple down her back. The warrior turned her head towards the chair by the washroom and lifted the dagger up and threw it hard. It flew through the air and sunk deep into the arm of the chair. She then turned back around to face her small partner, claiming her lips again. As they kissed, the tall woman pushed down on the bard, Gabrielle soon found herself lying down on the foot of the bed, legs still hanging on the side of the bed. Xena was on top of her, her weight shifted comfortable not to bother the bard. Xena's hands then began to move down to the blond's sides, at first they were moving along her stomach and sides sensually. Then a fit of giggles erupted in the bard, as large hands began to tickle her with no merci. Small hands tried to grab a hold of large wrists with no luck, the kissed had ended as soon as the giggling began. Gabrielle rolled on to her side trying to protect much of her body as she could from her attacker. She eventually rolled onto her back, only protecting her stomach, then a plan came to mind to stop the attack. The small female quickly flipped back onto her back and she leaned up, her lips locked with another pair. Xena's hands stopped tickling and just held the bard around the waist, Gabrielle's hands went to the warrior's shoulders. Small hands began to move the leather straps down off broad shoulders as they kissed. The bard's hands then moved down to leather sides, Gabrielle pulling at the waist. Xena followed the command as they moved more into the center of the bed. They broke the long kiss, the blond lying back down on the bed, Xena's lips moving to a soft neck, her hands to the green halter-top.

~*~*~*~

Emerald eyes moved from the window where the moon's light cascaded into the room. They moved to look at the fire that warmed the large room. The bard was tightly snuggled into a warm body, Xena leaning against the headboard once again. Neither really talked as they soaked in the closes and their every last part of their bodies touching. The bed covers had been pulled up over the bard to keep her warm, while strong hands rested on her stomach. Both had been careful earlier to keep things quiet as possible, considering it would be extremely hard, but they managed. One of the bard's hands caressed a strong thigh, while the other rested on top of the two strong hands on her stomach. Gabrielle squeezed the warrior's hands for a moment while Xena hugged her then loosened her hold.

"You know I always did want a warrior" Xena's chin lifted up off the bard's shoulder as she retorted.

"Yeah?"

"Uh huh, I use to lay in bed when I was young, dreaming about a warrior to come and save me"

"From what?" The small blond shrugged her shoulders as she replied.

"Just from my family, from my set future" A pause. "Always believed that if I kept wishing hard enough, someday it would happen" Another pause as the bard took a deep breath. "Then as I got older I just fell out of that dream, never expecting it to come true. You know just one of those silly ideas kind of thing. Then one day a warrior came in the grove to stop the slavers. My entire child hood dreams came back and I desperately had to make them come true" The tall female grinned to herself.

"Yeah I know what you mean"

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, I remember when I was young I'd always wished for somebody to save me from my village life"

"But you ended up saving yourself" The warrior shrugged her shoulders some.

"Yes and no, I lean more to no" A pause. "Either way, I wouldn't have fit in with the village" The bard chuckled at that.

"Yeah I know what you mean. I was constantly getting into trouble when I was young, always trying to rebel in my quiet ways. Eventually I was shunned so much that I stopped and just tried to act like all the other girls in the village, normal"

"What were you rebelling about?"

"Anything really, I mostly tried to tell stories, always to my friends. But they talked about me telling my stories then eventually my father found out, he forced me to stop" One of the warrior's dark eyebrows went up.

"Forced you, how?"

"Dad had his ways, wasn't anybody's place to say no"

"Gabrielle?" The small blond sighed as she dropped her head against Xena's chest.

"He occasionally beat me, wasn't bad, doesn't matter now"

"Why?"

"Well you know how I have my bad temper, got it from him. My father would once in a while become very frustrated with life and take it out on me. Once in a while he'd try to on Lila or mother, but I'd always get in the middle and get him to take it out on me" The bard could feel her soulmate was stiff behind her, Gabrielle knew her partner would find out about this sooner or later, and knew it wouldn't go over well. The blond turned her head some to gaze side long at her soulmate. "Xena, times were hard then you know that better than any one. It can change people or force them to do things they normal don't. My father was a good man till depression hit and he became a bit of an alcoholic. I know he never meant any of it" Cobalt eyes slowly softened some.

"Still no excuse to beat his own child" The bard's eyes dropped over how cold the words came out.

"Maybe"

"How can you think that Gabrielle?" The Amazon Queen shrugged her shoulders as she stared at the floor thinking.

"I forgave him when I left home back a year and half ago" A deep breath. "Its just what's worse Xena? A father that lives with you and beats you, or a father that you've never met before?" The bard felt her soulmate go still and suck in her breathe, then she slowly began to breathe again.

"Really I don't know" Gabrielle turned her head to look at her soulmate sidelong.

"Either way its in the past Xena, I've learned from it myself" The warrior slightly grinned inwardly.

"Me too" The bard smiled to herself and brought her head to rest back against Xena's chest. The bard stiffened a yawn as it rose up. The older woman chuckled to herself and then moved her arms from the blond's waist to the bed. Gabrielle lifted herself up off the warrior's nude body and onto the soft bed, then Xena laid back down on the bed, beside her small soulmate. The warrior turned on her side and the smaller woman turn her back to the warrior and snuggled into her. Xena wrapped one arm around the Amazon Queen while the bard's head rested on the large shoulder, their legs intertwined under the covers.

"Goodnight Xena" Xena nuzzled the back of Gabrielle's neck and whispered back.

"Sleep well love" The bard grinned and let Morpheus take control of her. Her body relaxed, her mind began to conjure up dreams, while her breathing slowed. Soon to follow the small female was her stoic soulmate.

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Green eyes shot open to stare across to the large bolted wooden door. The bard's breathing was ragged as she tried to calm herself. She lifted one hand up to her eyes wiping away any wetness, her eyes still stung. She felt against her back the strong warrior's body, her breathing slow. Gabrielle lay there trying to think and calm back down. Heartbeatss passed and the only thing that came to mind was the horrid nightmare. She finally gave up and very carefully extracted herself from the warrior's arms and rolled out of bed. The small woman quietly padded over to the saddlebags and slipped on one of her soulmate's large shifts. The scent of spice and leather enveloped the bard, making her grin to herself. She then leaned back down to extract a quill and her diary from her scroll satchel. The woman then walked to her left to the fireplace and grabbed a large log and placed it into the fire. She then sat down on the warm floor by the fire and opened her diary. She turned to a new page and stared at it blankly for a moment, then she decided where to begin the whole diary's basis. Gabrielle wrote.

Gods it seems like so long ago that Xena and I confessed our love for each other. Yet I still feel the pain of when she died just only a few weeks ago. I thought my whole world was going to spin out of control if I didn't have her beside me. It almost did. I remember staring over the Amazon Queen throne at Xena's funeral pyre, watching it begin to burn, that's when I had given up any hope and realized I'd truly lost her. That's when I heard Xena's warcry, well more like man's version of it, the part of me that became empty when she died filled back up. Eventually Autolycus, Xena's soul, and I all retrieved some ambrosia to bring Xena back to life.

Some where a long our journey I'd met Xena in another world, a limbo between spiritual and mortal. I told her how much I needed her in my life and Xena promised me she would never leave me. We'd shared our first kiss then, it was light but filled with so much promise. Once Xena returned to her body we decided to leave the Amazon village for the night, just her and I. I can still remember it all so clearly, the night when everything came together and a soul became whole once more.

The two women sat on the log in the woods, the Amazons gone, as well as Autolycus. The bard looked to her friend with a bit amused face, but seriousness in her eyes. "Xena?" The warrior looked to the bard.

"Yeah?" The bard took a breath.

"Promise me you'll never die on me again?" The taller female smiled some as she replied.

"Oh I promise" Gabrielle was quiet for a moment then expressed something she thought was important, to her.

"You know for a few moments I knew what it was like to be you"

"And?" The warrior's voice was a bit tight. The bard smiled to herself as she replied her voice light.

"It was warm, friendly, loving..." Xena quickly cut her off with a hint of outrage to her voice.

"Gabrielle it was a fight" The bard sighed.

"I felt protected" A pause. "The world needs people like that...right?" Xena smiled to her friend brightly as she retorted with a calm loving tone.

"Right" Gabrielle smiled back in return as she dropped her head onto her best friend's shoulder. Emerald eyes closed for a while, the bard listening to the rhythmic sound of the whetstone being scraped down the hand crafted sword. She reopened her eyes and brought her head back up to look to the older woman.

"So you want to stay here for the night?" Sapphire eyes looked down to meet another pair of deep eyes, a grin formed on the tall woman's lips. Xena sheathed her sword and held the whetstone in her hand, tossing it back in forth between her hands.

"Not really, you?" The bard smiled up at her friend.

"Nah, I think the Amazons can make do without their Queen for one night" The warrior nodded her head, Gabrielle stood up followed by Xena. Xena's hand quickly shot up to her forehead as she closed her eyes for a moment, she felt small but strong hands grasp her waist. Slowly blue eyes opened again, hand dropping back to her leather side.

"Thanks" Gabrielle quickly dropped her hands from the warrior's side in somewhat fear.

"No problem. Guess you're still weak?" The tall warrior nodded some, Gabrielle knew that to be bad if her friend was admitting to that. "You sure you want to leave tonight?"

I mean it might..." Gabrielle was silenced quickly by two fingers covering her lips.

"It's okay, I'll be fine" A small grin formed on the ex-warlord's lips as she dropped her fingers from those red lips she ached to touch. "I want to spend time alone with you and not a bunch of feather heads" The bard chuckled and began to walk beside her friend towards the Amazon village, happy that it wasn't that far away. "So care to explain who Velasca was?" Green eyes looked up at the warrior then back to the trail in the woods.

"She was the Amazon Queen after Melosa, well I think more Regent than anything considering I am the next in line"

"Natural" A pause. "So she challenged you to the throne?" The bard shook her head as they continued to make their way through the lush green woods.

"No actually she just tried to manipulate me, she didn't get far. She did obviously challenge Melosa and killed Melosa in fair combat" A deep breath. "I think she planned to challenge me soon as I became Queen"

"Well we took care of that huh?" The bard didn't say anything, still remember the feeling of having the warrior's soul inside of her. All the power and protection from it she felt, it felt right to her, she felt like she belonged with the warrior more than ever. Gabrielle could still feel the rush she had from fighting Velasca on the ropes, she enjoyed it. The bard then felt a large hand fall to her shoulder, she looked up. "Thought I lost you there" The bard grinned some as she felt the large hand drop from her shoulder.

"No, just got lost in my thoughts"

"Yeah what were you thinking about?"

"Just..." The bard shook her head, not quite understanding it herself.

"You liked me being inside of you?" The bard's eyes dropped to the forest floor, staring at the rocks and grass as she walked. Then she quietly whispered back.

"Yeah" Xena looked down at her friend, a very small smile playing on her lips. She opened her mouth to respond, but then they heard somebody call out.

"Queen Gabrielle!" The blond looked up to see a medium heightened smiling Amazon walking towards them from a base of a tree.

"Hi Solari, Ephiny already stick you on patrol duty?" The brown haired Amazon huffed as she neared the two women.

"Yeah, she's pretty cruel" The bard raised one eyebrow at that as she kept a straight face.

"I'll remember to let her know that" The Amazon's eyes widen for a brief moment then she grinned.

"Maybe it'll do her some good to hear it from the Queen then" Gabrielle chuckled as she smiled. "So you and Xena headed back to the village?"

"Yeah we are then I think we are going to leave for the night" Solari nodded her head.

"Well then I hope you two both enjoy yourselves, I doubt I'll see you till tomorrow. You are going to be around tomorrow?" The bard nodded her head.

"Yup, not sure exactly what we are going to do, but we'll all find out" Solari smiled.

"Sounds great, I am gonna head back to patrol before Ephiny pops out of bush to yell at me" The Amazon Queen chuckled.

"Bye Solari" The Amazon nodded and walked back to the same tree from earlier.

"Bye my Queen" With those last words the Amazon jumped up high and disappeared among the trees. They two women still on the ground then began to walk towards the village again.

"You know I've got to get you to teach me that sometime Xena" The warrior looked down at her small partner.

"How to use the trees?"

"Yeah, I am the Queen of the Amazons, I need to learn"

"Maybe" The bard arched an eyebrow at her tall friend. Xena looked down at her and grinned. "Or I can just do it for you" Gabrielle smiled as she noticed the gates to the Nation. The bard never replied, but picked up her walk towards the gates. They entered quickly and made their way to the stables where Argo was stabled since earlier. Gabrielle waited at the entrance of the stall as the warrior checked all the tack and saddlebags, then they heard the sounds of somebody entering. The bard turned towards the entrance of the stable to see a curly blond enter in, walking towards them.

"Hey Ephiny" The curly blond smiled as she came near and replied.

"My Queen" She then looked to the tall female inside of the stall with the golden mare. "Xena" The ex-warlord smiled to Ephiny then nodded her head. The Amazon then looked back to the small woman. "So I hear that you and Xena are headed out of here for the night" The bard grinned some.

"Yes we are, we'll stay in Amazon territory. Xena and I just want to catch up" Ephiny nodded.

"That's what I figured"

"So you'll take care of everything for the night?"

"If the Queen would like me to, yes" Gabrielle smiled at the grinning Amazon.

"The Queen would love it" That's when the blond noticed Ephiny's expression went serious.

"So what exactly are the plans or don't we know yet?" Gabrielle turned her head to look to her friend whom was making their way out of the stall, Argo in tow. She then looked back to the Amazon.

"I don't know yet, Xena and I need to talk about that" Ephiny nodded her head in

understanding.

"Well I hope you two enjoy your night" Gabrielle smiled and gave her Amazon friend a quick hug.

"Thanks Ephiny for all your help. Oh by the way, Solari is a bit...upset about being on patrol" The curly blond laughed some and grinned to the Queen.

"Well she was teasing me a bit earlier so I thought I'd tease her right back. She's not going to be on much longer" The bard nodded and all three women and mare walked out of the stables. "Have a good evening to the both of you"

"Thanks Eph" The bard waves as the Amazon watched the

two pair of women make their way out of the village. The second in command chuckled to herself and turned around to head to her hut. Gabrielle turned her head back to look to the woods that lay ahead of her. Neither woman said much, but kept walking, once far away the warrior stopped walking the bard following her lead. Gabrielle looked to her tall friend with a confused look.

"I need to ride" The Warrior Princess hopped up onto the war-horse and looked down to the smaller woman and brought one hand down. "Care to join me?" The younger woman grinned and grasped the large warm hand as she felt herself pulled up into the saddle in front of the warrior.

"This is a switch" The tall female chuckled to herself as she reached for the wood staff, Gabrielle giving it to her with ease. Xena turned back some and placed the Amazon staff in the saddle directly behind her. She then turned back around and slipped her arms between the bard's sides and arms on either side. A large hand grasped the reins while the other hand reached for the bard's hands. Xena placed the leather reins into the bard's small hands, Gabrielle feeling her heart rate pick up some. "Xena you know I hate..." The warrior cut her off.

"Gabrielle this is a good area to learn, we're in Amazon territory, nothing will happen" A pause as she still felt the small woman's body tense. "For me" The bard let out a ragged breath as she nodded her head. Xena squeezed the bard's hands briefly then released her small hands. She then moved her hands to rest lightly on the bard's waist. "Start out slow" Gabrielle nodded and squeezed the mare's sides and Argo went at a walk, a tighter squeeze and the mare went to a trot. They stayed like that for a while, going through the woods and making their way closes to the edge of the territory, farthest from the Nation. Gabrielle then began to build up confidence as she rode on.

"Xena can I try Argo at a gallop?" The warrior grinned to herself.

"Well maybe a canter to start out with okay?" The bard nodded.

"Ready?" Xena wrapped her arms completely around the bard's waist.

"Yup" Gabrielle gave the mare a hard kick and clicked with her mouth, Argo went into a fast canter. Both women felt the wind whip by them as the horse went through the woods and between the trees, Gabrielle directing the horse. That's when it hit the tall warrior, her head began to feel light, a bit of dizziness taking over. She squeezed the bard's waist tightly, Gabrielle quickly knew something was wrong and slowed

Argo down. The mare came to a stop but the warrior's hold was still strong on bard's waist.

"Xena you okay?" The leather-clad female released one hand bringing it up to her forehead while she closed her eyes, willing the feeling to stop. The bard didn't get a response from her friend, she turned in the saddle as much as possible, moving the reins to her left hand with her right hand she caressed the warrior's cheek. Slowly blue eyes opened again, a bit unfocused but a small smile played on the warrior's lips.

"Hey I am fine" The bard smiled some.

"Uh huh, you're a bad liar you know" The tall female chuckled and grasped the bard's hand, placing it back to the front.

"Keep a hold of the reins in both hands" The bard sighed as she turned back around, Xena wrapping her arm back around the small waist.

"Xena?"

"Hmm?"

"Why don't you go to sleep, might help" Gabrielle felt her friend's body go stiff at that suggestion, then she relaxed.

"I probably should huh?" The small female grinned to herself.

"Yeah, your body is still recovering" A pause. "I can take care of everything" The warrior grinned as well as she dropped her head against the small shoulder. Gabrielle feeling a victory over the stubborn warrior, she made a click and squeezed the mare lightly and went into a trot. Within a few minutes the older woman was asleep her arms had loosen some around the blond's waist, so Gabrielle compensated by placing one hand over the warrior's hands to hold her. They rode for another three fourths of a candle mark, coming near the mountains to where the border of the Nation lied. Gabrielle pulled back on the reins some, Argo slowing to a walk while the bard squeezed Xena's large hands.

"Xena" The blond felt her friend stir some. "Xena wake up" The warrior stir again and slowly raised her head, that's when Gabrielle realized exactly how much her friend's body need rest from the past accident and reawakening. Xena readjusted her hold on the blond as she gazed around, her mind coming back around.

"We're here huh" The bard smiled as she pulled the reins once again, the mare stopping in her tracks.

"Yup" The tall female nodded and released the bard, hopping off the mare. She looked to the mountains briefly to see the sun just beginning to sink beyond them. She then looked back to her friend still on the large horse, Gabrielle swung one leg over and hopped off, landing into waiting arms below. Xena smiled and got one in return, her hands lingering on the small waist. She released her small friend and moved to the saddlebags while the bard began to look around for wood.

By dusk the pair had camp set up, the sun almost gone from beyond the mountains. The warrior had caught a rabbit in her travels while Gabrielle pulled out some spices and herbs to cook it with, the rabbit over the spit. Xena went about sharpening her

sword, the bard watched the food but noticed her friend never worked on her scrolls. The warrior made a mental note to ask her friend about that later on. Dinner as always was good and quiet, neither had anything to say, yet. By the end Xena went back to sharpening her sword, the bard cleaning up after the dinner. After she was done, Gabrielle sat in front of the fire staring into it. Her thoughts wandered to the past week, collecting all the memories and letting them sink in. Cobalt eyes lifted up from the sword to the bard, sharpening becoming forgotten about resting on the sword. Xena sheathed her sword quietly and stood up, and turned to her right and placed the whet stone into the saddlebag on the ground. She then turned towards her friend and quietly walked over to her and sat beside her. Gabrielle didn't say anything nor did she give Xena any acknowledgement. Xena looked to her friend for a moment then to the fire.

"So what's on your mind?" The younger female didn't say anything immediately as she gazed at the fire then responded after a few heartbeats.

"Just thinking about the past few days" Xena nodded her head.

"Was a hard one huh?"

"Yeah" Blue eyes turned towards the bard.

"But you made it through it...we did" Emerald eyes broke away from the fire to become locked with strong sapphire eyes she adored so much. Gabrielle smiled some as tears began to trickle down her cheek.

"We did" Xena reached over and grasped her friend, pulling her into her lap. The bard buried her face into the warrior's chest as she cried, getting the pain out from the warrior's death. The Amazon Queen took a shake breath and then brought her head back up to look into loving eyes. "Xena I didn't think..." For the third time of the day the warrior cut her off, her fingers going up to the bard's lips.

"Its okay Gabrielle, I know" Her fingers moved from the bard's lips to under her chin, the warrior's thumb running across ruby lips, tracing them. Gabrielle closed her eyes in response, then Xena's hand moved to the side of soft face. She lowered her lips, stopping as her lips brushed with her small friend's, giving her a chance to back away. The bard didn't, Xena sealed their lips in a strong kiss. The kiss was more intense then their first one, it held all their love, passion, desires, need, and soul in one. By the end they both were breathless, Gabrielle resting her head against the warrior's chest, Xena's chin on top of the bard's head. Gabrielle's eyes went up to her friend and whispered up to her.

"Xena I can't live without you, that's one thing I learned these few days" Blue eyes stared down at her, Gabrielle watched as all the anger, hatred, and darkness disappeared in them. They softened to a degree Gabrielle had never seen before, they only held love in them the kind a person knew to be an unstoppable love, the love that is centered in one's soul. Xena lowered her head, Gabrielle could smell her friend's spice scent mixed with leather that she loved.

"I love you more then anything in the world Gabrielle" Eyes locked in intensity. "I need you" The bard smiled as she brought one hand up to the back of the warrior's head, pulling her down. Their lips met again, the kiss intense with love, trying to ravish one another in the kiss. Both their worlds exploded in the moment, everything

fitting, their lives gaining even more meaning then before. They needed each other, craved each other, linked to each other, they belong to each other. They slowly pulled away from the kiss they stared into each other's eyes not sure whether to fully believe this was happening. Gabrielle let a small smile crease her lips as her hand slid from the back of Xena's head to the warrior's cheek. Electric blue eyes drifted shut, Xena leaning into the touch her hand coming up to the bard's. Then blond scooted more into the warrior's lap, her legs wrapped around Xena's waist. Xena grinned as she went in for another kiss, her hands moving to the bard's green tops, the Amazon Queen's own hands to the straps of bronze armor. That's how it all began, within a candlemark two soulmate's owned one another, mind, soul, heart, and body.

Later into that night, the two lovers talked about the near future plans. Xena didn't want to stay with the Amazons, Gabrielle quickly agreeing even though she loved her Amazon's none the less. The bard as well as the warrior both still had too much energy in their spirits to settle down yet. Xena had easily suggested a problem to the Amazon Queen role, telling of how a regent could take the bard's place. The Amazon Queen automatically knew whom to leave as the regent and would probably be even better then her to rule. Once the fire began to grow weak, the two soulmates began to drift into sleep, their body's intertwined as much as their souls. Both their chests rose and fell together at the same slow pace, their dreams brought the promise of a perfect future soon to come together in a world with no end.

~*~*~*~

The bard looked up from her diary, the fire was slowly beginning to die in the fireplace. She took a deep breath and let it release at a slow pace. There was a rustle on the bed, Gabrielle figuring it was her soulmate shifting in her sleep. But it wasn't, a warm hand dropped to the bard's shoulder, she turned her head to look up into eyes with an endless depth. A small smile crossed the bard's lips, she received one in return.

Xena was dressed in her leathers that were thrown to the floor earlier. The tall female removed her hand and walked off to the side of the fireplace where the stack of wood rested. She threw in a large log into the fire and turned back to her soulmate. Bare feet padded back to the bard, then the tall sleek body bent down in front of the fire, indigo eyes locking with green.

"Couldn't sleep?" Gabrielle shrugged her shoulders once.

"Just a dream. Thought I'd try to write to get my mind off the dream" Xena nodded as she rose back up, she walked over to the barred window. Large hands went up to grip the bars, the knuckles going white, Xena rested her head against the barred window. She looked through them down to the ground to see two archers looking back at her, she narrowed her eyes then closed them. Gabrielle immediately knew something was up, she closed her diary and put it on the ground next to her, quill on top. She stood up and made her way close to her warrior, she walked to the wall next to the warrior, and Gabrielle rested her back against it, her head turning to the warrior. "Xena?" The tall female's head lifted up, her eyes still gazing out the window, her hands still gripping tightly at the bar's of the window.

"Gabrielle, I hate having you here" The Amazon Queen's eyes dropped to the stone floor of the room.

"I hate being here, can think of a lot of better places to be with my soulmate" A sarcastic laugh escaped Xena's lips.

"Same here" The bard's eyes moved back up, she brought her hands in front of herself to rest in lap, her fingers intertwined.

"Well where ever I am, I only want to be there with you" A very small smile creased the warrior's lips, her eyes softening just a hint. "And I don't like you here either" A pause. "But what I want to know Xena, is what's really eating at you?" The Warrior Princess turned her head to look to her small soulmate, Gabrielle staring across the room to the large wooden door. The blond gradually turned her head to look to her lover. Gabrielle held Xena's eyes strongly, she held understanding in her emerald eyes, the warrior reading into that making her give in willingly.

"You've...you've been through enough as it is so far Gabrielle. I don't want to see anything else major happen to you" Xena took a deep breath. "I don't like that I have little control over the situation nor knowledge. It gives me less options to better protect you" Then the warrior growled some, her anger surging up as she pulled at the bar's hard. Her memories of how Gabrielle ended up here in the first place came rushing to Xena's mind, the warrior's fault. The shafts were feeling the strength of the pull and began to loosen, small grinds of stone began to fall to the floor. Gabrielle reached over with her right hand, placing it onto the taller woman's arm, her touch was warm and relaxing. The bard watched as the taut muscles began to relax, hands still grasping the rods firmly, teeth clenched together.

"Xena?" No response. So the blond moved her hand from the still tense arm to her soulmate's face, she placed her hand to the opposite side. She turned Xena's face to look to her, Xena's eyes held anger, not towards the bard but to herself. "Xena, we'll get out of this, we always do" A deep breath. "I can tell you think it's your fault for all this..."

"Gabrielle..."

"No listen to me Xena" Emerald eyes burrowed into Sapphire ones. "It wasn't your fault, it was mine as much. I forgot my staff just like you forgot your weapons, it happens. We were both weren't expecting it and we were in an...emotional moment. And if I know you, you'll get plenty of control over this situation, that's one of your many skills" Xena slightly grinned at the end remark, but let it slip as she went serious again.

"I feel like I just need to always"

"Protect me?" Cobalt eyes dropped.

"Yeah" A pause. "Even though I know you hate that"

"Xena" The warrior looked back up. "You know what?" A shake of the head. "I kind of like it" A dark eyebrow shot up, Gabrielle grinning. "Just as long as I don't feel like a kid. We bother protect each other...right?" Xena smiled to her soulmate as she replied in a low soothing voice.

"Right" Those white knuckles turned into faintly red ones, then finally normal tone of skin color. Large hands dropping and the tall body turning to face the bard, Gabrielle

turning her own body to Xena. "Gabrielle?"

"Hmm?" The warrior closed her eyes for a moment then reopened them again.

"Say the word if you want to leave this one...or any other fight in the future" The small woman stood in shock for a moment. She wasn't sure if Xena offered to her what she thought.

"Xena, the greater good" The warrior shook her head as her voice went very serious.

"I don't care about the greater good when it comes to you" A pause. "We'll walk out of here one way or another if you want too" Gabrielle blinked twice, her stomach feeling butterflies over the power she realized she held over her soulmate. She knew Xena would be true to her word if it meant killing ever man here to do it and she knew the warrior could if set in the right frame of mind. The bard closed her eyes for a brief moment then opened them again to look up at her other half.

"Okay Xena" Gabrielle stepped closer. "I don't want to leave this one, nor probably any others later on. I couldn't..." The tall warrior nodded in understanding, knowing Gabrielle always had that side of her that felt she had to save the world. Make the world perfect for everybody. Some goal, one that could never be reached, but she'd go to the ends of the earth with her bard to try and do it. "But Xena?" The warrior came back to the present.

"Yes?"

"Just let me know if you ever want to walk away from any one of these adventures of ours. Alright?" Xena's eyes softened, no walls being shown within them, her vulnerability being shown for only Gabrielle to see.

"Okay...thank you" Gabrielle stood on tiptoe and pressed a kiss to the warrior's forehead. Xena then reached for the bard's hand, their fingers weaving together. They made their way over to the fireplace again, the bodies not yet tired. Xena figured it would be another five candlemarks till daylight, plenty of time in her mind. They both sat down on the cool stone floor, Gabrielle reaching for her diary with quill, placing them in her lap. "What were you writing about?"

"Um...what happened after you came back" Xena grinned knowing exactly what time frame her partner spoke of.

"May I see your diary for a moment?" The Amazon Queen arched an eyebrow and neatly handed the leather diary to the other woman.

"Didn't have to ask" Xena grinned as she opened the diary, flipping threw a number of pages to the end of the entry. The end of the entry was about one fourth of the way down on the left page, she placed the diary back in the bard's lap.

"I want you to do something for me" The blond looked to Xena and nodded with a smile. "Okay close your eyes" The bard raised an eyebrow at that, but did as she was told. "Now try to imagine the camp we were in that night" Xena silently stood up and then moved behind her soulmate, crouching behind the smaller woman. "All the trees, the camp fire, the Amazon mountains in the back ground" Xena's hand went to Gabrielle's lap where the quill rested. She picked it up carefully and reached for Gabrielle's right hand, she placed the quill in the small hand. Then wrapped her larger

hand around the small one and squeezed some. "Every little detail, the way shadows fell on the ground, the sun's rays swept through the mountains" She leaned in closer to the bard's ear. "Remember us" A small shudder ran through Gabrielle, Xena backing up some and released Gabrielle's hand. "Lock that image in your head" A pause. "Open your eyes again with that image in your mind and try to draw it" Ever so slightly the bard's eyes reopened, she gazed down at the diary, the image still in her head clearly. She brought the quill to the blank area below the entry of the journal. Gabrielle then began to draw from her mind, remembering all the details from the exact time at dusk. Xena watched from behind as she grinned to herself, the bard's lines growing more distinct with each passing moment. Within a quarter of a candlemark a perfect image of that night was drawn in the diary, Gabrielle placed the quill in the middle of the book to gaze at it. She was astounded at how good the drawing is a perfect resemblance.

There in the diary, was a drawing of mountains in the background, the sun's light passing through, shadows cascading down the sides then not too far off to the left was a log, a saddlebag against it. In the foreground were two women. A taller one on the ground left of a fire, her dark hair blowing ever so slightly in the wind, her sword hilt glistening in the firelight. Beside her sat another woman of opposite looks, she had her hands in her lap, as she stared into the fire with her friend.

Xena smiled to herself at the drawing, she came back around to sit down on the floor beside her partner. Gabrielle still stared at the image, then she looked to her soulmate.

"Xena, how'd you know I might be able to draw?" The Warrior Princess shrugged her shoulders as she reached for the journal and quill, just enough ink left on it. Xena smiled at the drawing then flipped the pages till she was at the very front, happy to find the first page blank.

"Mind if I do something on this page?" Gabrielle shook her head. Xena looked to the page and closed her eyes, an image consumed her mind, and she looked to the page again. She brought the quill to the paper and let her mind draw the image. "I kind of figured you could. Most bard's are either excellent draws as well or really bad" The bard chuckled some.

"Really?" Xena nodded as her hand moved, slowly an image began to appear. First it was a large built figure, from the waist up.

"Yeah, bards as we both know..." A grin from both women. The large figure began to receive armor, a look of a female as breasts reappeared, a sword on her back. The head was tilted down, and now the mouth, it was slightly open, the eyes almost closed. "...have really good imaginations and detailed minds. So they're able to create such a perfect image in their minds then write about it. So why can't they draw it with lines as well as words?" She stopped talking and drawing for a moment as her eyes drift shut then quickly reopened as Xena moved the quill from the first figure. The first figure was distinctly the warrior, but yet with no arms. Xena began to draw a second figure, lighter hair, and breasts as well but with a halter-top on instead of leathers. She was smaller with her eyes shut. Xena continued. "The better bard's mostly likely can draw very well since their hand is as much as a part of their mind. One of the most key things to drawing" Gabrielle watched as the last of the drawing became finished. The smaller woman's head was tilted up, her lips almost touching the warrior's lips. Arms wrapped around one another as the perfect image covered the

parchment in the leather bound journal. One last touch the warrior mused to herself.

My drawing to my soulmate, I am yours forever.

Love Xena

Xena smiled and then handed the open journal to the smaller woman and studied the bard as she stared at the drawing. A bright smile creased Gabrielle's lips as she ran a small hand down the drawing and then very carefully closed the diary. She then looked to Xena whom handed her the quill, Gabrielle took it with ease.

"Thank you Xena" The warrior smiled as she leaned over to kiss the bard on the forehead. "How long you been drawing for?" The older female looked to the fire as she retorted.

"Hmmm I probably did it till I was about...ten winters old or so, maybe a little older"

"What did you draw?"

"Oh a little this, a little of that" The bard arched a brown eyebrow at her, the warrior chuckled. "Normally the village from afar, then eventually I'd draw animals. Then right before I stopped I would draw people in the village, like in taverns. Always got better as I went along" The blond's head bobbed up and down a few times and looked to her friend again.

"Why did you stop? The fighting?" Xena nodded her head.

"Mostly, that and I thought it to be a talent of a weak person" A pause. "But I always did miss doing it" The warrior grinned to herself as she looked to her soulmate again. "I do remember when I was in meetings with my men or other warlords or what have you. I always had a scroll with me and a quill too. Sometimes those meetings got so boring I would start doodling on my scrolls with my notes" Gabrielle laughed some, just imagining her soulmate doing that with a bunch of filthy nasty men. "Now that I think about it, when I first became a pirate, I use to go to the bow of the boat and watch the dolphins and then draw them" Gabrielle smiled at that.

"You still have them?" The older woman looked back to the fire.

"No, burned them in time as I changed" The small woman looked to the fire as well, realizing she found another thing about her soulmate she never knew of. "We better get back to bed, going to be a long day"

"Yeah" The Amazon Queen rouse up then Xena did as well. Gabrielle walked over to her satchel and slipped in her quill and leather journal and made her way to the bed, Xena starting to crawl in. Gabrielle was quick to follow as she snuggled up against Xena. Not to long after they fell into a deep sleep with only four candlemarks till their day would begin along with their challenge together.

Part 3

Section 3

~*Part 6*~

Now you have to come to understand that Xena enjoyed the mornings, unlike her companion, the warrior always being the first to wake normally. The tall female's eyes had drifted open as she stared at the door, she noticed some sun light just touching the top of the wooden door. She figured it to be sunup, Mene would be here soon and they need to move. Xena then felt her soulmate stir in her arms, the bard rolling off her side and onto her back. Blue eyes looked down into sleepy green ones.

"Morning Xena"

"How'd you sleep?"

"Not to bad" Gabrielle rolled onto her right side into Xena's chest and then groaned.

"I really don't want to do this today" An amused smile played on the warrior's lips.

"Neither do I, but we need to get up before Mene comes" Xena felt the bard nodded her head then she sighed deeply. The bard then rolled onto her back and sat up from the croak of Xena's arm. Then the warrior herself sat up and rubbed Gabrielle's back for a moment. The blond smiled, then felt the weight beside her gone as her soulmate got out of bed. Then she herself rolled out of bed, her mind semi waking up as the cold floor connected with her feet. The bard looked to her soulmate whom was in the washroom, Gabrielle could just make out Xena's muscular back.

"Xena?" The leather-clad female walked out with her cloth from last night, drying her face.

"Hmmm?" Xena dropped her hands, towel in hand as she looked to her partner.

"Make a mental note, that if we ever settle down that we get a home without a cold stone floor" The warrior chuckled as she watched Gabrielle make her way over to the saddle bags beside her, tossing her towel to the chair by her. Xena watched the bard almost finishing lacing her green halter-top, skirt on already. Threading the last bit, Gabrielle turned back to the saddlebag, pulling some salve she'd placed from last night. "Xena?" The warrior nodded as she pulled her leathers off, holding them in her hands dangling in front of her as the bard came to her left side. The bard removed the three wraps from the warrior's body and studied the wounds, as did another set of eyes.

"They look good" Gabrielle looked up and smiled.

"Yeah they do, its amazing how fast you heal" A pause as Gabrielle placed some salve onto the wound on Xena's waist first. "Do you want to leave them unwrapped today, they look like they'll be fine" Xena studied the wound on her waist and hip then lift her left arm up looking to her shoulder.

"Yeah I think they'll be fine" Xena looked to the bard whom had her head down. "What you think?" The bard stopped placing the slave onto the waist and looked up.

"Um yeah, think a little air will only help" The warrior smiled and nodded her head and looked back to the floor as the Amazon Queen went back to putting the balsam on. One last circular rub and the bard moved on to the hip arrow wound, quickly putting slave on it as well. She then stepped back as Xena put her leathers back on and Xena grinned to her, deciding to make things simple and bent down on to her knees.

The bard raised an eyebrow as a grin crossed her lips and she rubbed some ointment onto the shoulder injury as well. As soon as she was done, the tall woman rose back up to tower over Gabrielle, the bard making her way back to the saddlebags ridding herself of the salve. Xena then turned to the chair to her right, she reached for her boots on the floor by one of the legs. She slipped them on then propped one foot at a time onto the chair, tying her boots tight. The bard's small hands laced on brown leather boots and then green eyes lifted to see her soulmate working her brass armor on. The small woman moved quickly to assist her warrior with the armor. "Here let me help" Xena nodded as a smile formed on her lips.

"Thanks" Gabrielle looked up and smiled and went back to her task at hand. She was done in a few seconds and watched as her partner walked back to the chair and reached for that well-known breast dagger. She slipped it in between her breasts and let her eyes follow Gabrielle while she went into the wash room, washing her own face now and using the other facilities. She then strolled back out her blond bangs a bit wet as she came up to her warrior. Xena wrapped her arms around the smaller woman and gazed into her sparkling green eyes. She then leaned down kissing her bard deeply, Gabrielle moaning in response. Then that infernal knock came to the door and the bolt being undone. Xena dropped her arms quickly then stopped the kiss as Gabrielle took two steps back. Both their chests went up and down at a rather fast pace, making Mene wonder as he entered both sets of eyes on him.

"Morning ladies. Ready for the first day?" Xena just nodded Gabrielle not doing anything. "Follow me" And so they did, Mene, the two soulmates, and two guards all made their way down to the practice area which happened to be the center of the fortress. The warrior had taken notice that the armory was now open, she took a gander at it across the grounds. She could see inside the glinting of metals and it looked like it was a long building. Xena began to wonder exactly how big of a problem her and Gabrielle just stumbled into? The warrior sighed to herself and noticed that there were around seventy-five men in the center of the practice area. Mene stopped walking, as he was seven paces from the men, everybody else stopped walking in the group as well. He turned his head to look at the female warrior and bard, Xena interrupted the look and signaled for her partner to follow her.

Now they stood beside Mene, all three are looking at the large number of men. "There are seventy-five men here Xena. Your friend will be training twenty-five today with the staff, you will be training the rest with the sword, hand combat and other basic skills needed to fight efficiently"

"Exactly how many men will I be training all together?" The leather-clad woman wasn't sure she really wanted to know.

"You'll be training exactly five hundred" A pause. "Between a hundred to fifty a day at time" Ice blue eyes just stared at the men, not liking the numbers at all.

"Alright then, lets get started"

Everything started out simple, Gabrielle received a crash course from her lover on how to train people. Pretty much Xena told her to do what her Amazons taught her when she first learned how to use the staff. Then for her to show any basic techniques Xena had showed her as well. The bard had merrily nodded, that worried Xena, she wasn't sure if Gabrielle like this idea or not. Either way she knew her partner would

go through with this. The bard could feel strong eyes watching her through the morning as she trained her set of men, Xena's group and Gabrielle's group next to each other.

So now here were the two heroes training their own enemies.

The loud sound of two wooden staffs could be heard as Gabrielle's practice staff met her opponent's staff in the early morning. The bard had immediately regretted using this man for staff example. Some how he just managed to pick up everything all to fast. Another kicker was he was a large strong man that had the worst amount of power in his eyes. Gabrielle had already gone through with the men on how to hold a staff and different positions you could place it around your body. Now she was using this large man to demonstrate to them how if you moved fast and knew the different positions you could fight well. But one thing Gabrielle had unfortunately accidentally forget to show to the twenty-five men was the most important position to hold the staff to protect one's self. The bard smirked to herself inwardly.

Another smacking sound rung through the fortress as the two staffs connected hard this time. Gabrielle gritted her teeth as she realized this man did in fact know how to use the staff. Another large sound crashed through the air as Gabrielle felt the blow take her to her knees, her staff above her head. The man became dirty now and held the staff down using his strength to pressure the bard to stay down. Then he went from dirty to pure nasty as he kicked Gabrielle in the stomach, the blond growled and then felt the pressure gone and the shadow that was over her just got bigger. She looked up to see the man staring back at her at eye level, blood trickling out of his nose. A tall strong dark woman came to the bard's side as the warrior knelt down and looked to the suffocating man. Gabrielle looked to her soulmate, Xena to the bard.

"He seems to know what he is doing huh?" The bard nodded as she took some deep breaths, her staff rested on the ground in front of her, her hands still on it. Xena looked back to the man, her voice came out cold and deep as she looked to the large man. "Well I think he'll come join my group and let him try to pull some of his moves over on me" A pause as she directed her words more to the man. "Is that okay with you?" The man nodded his head in a yes response. "Yeah you think you're a tough smart guy, we need to fix that" Her two hands quickly shot out and jabbed him in the neck on either side. The man gasped for air as Xena and her soulmate both stood back up, staff in the bard's hand. Gabrielle caught site of Mene walking rapidly towards them, his gate spoke of anger.

"What in Hades happened here? Why is one of my men on the ground, breathing like somebody almost killed him?" Dangerous ice sapphire eyes looked to Mene, the commander stood behind the large man still breathing heavily on the ground.

"He decided to play a little joke and pretend to not know how use the staff, almost hurt my friend. Don't think he's laughing unfortunately for him" Mene's eyes narrowed for a second as he knew to what Xena might have done to the man.

"Well put him in your section" A cold deep voice replied to him.

"He already wisely agreed to that" Mene nodded.

"Alright" He then talked in a louder command voice to all. "Lets break for breakfast...Now!" All the men grumbled and slowly made their way to the mess hall.

Mene looked down at his man, he then kick him in the back. "Get up and go get some food" The large man growled then stood up, he looked to Gabrielle his eyes narrowing. Xena stepped up to him, her face right in his, her ice eyes were menacing, darkness center within them. The man's skin crawled and he turned his back to the women and walked off to head to the mess hall as well. Mene looked to the two women, his face serious.

"Follow me" The two females were lead to the opposite side of the fortress from the men. They made their way back into the same dinning hall from last night. They sat at the table again, just Mene, the three of them while two guards stood at the doorway. Then two servant girls came out of platters of food for the three of them. They ate in silence, Xena and the bard sharing words in physical ways. After their breakfast they headed back to the training field where the men waited.

For the rest of the day they all practiced, no more incidence happened. Unless you would like to be reminded of the large man from earlier, that man who lost his smarts that day. He'd ended up on his butt, dirty, hot, and stupid with a dull tip of sword pointing to the tip of his neck. After that he too understood exactly how stupid he was for trying out his joke on the smaller woman. By dusk it wasn't worth practicing any more, nobody feeling up to losing a body part. So they ended the sessions for the day, Gabrielle and Xena being led back to their room to clean up for dinner.

The large wood door slammed behind them, the bolt being set into place. Three torches had been lit in the room in two corners by the fireplace and another by the door, lighting dim almost a romantic air to it. The bard moved to Xena as the warrior closed her arms around the small woman. The Amazon Queen wrapped her own arms around her soulmate and rest the side of her face on the warrior's chest. They closed their eyes as they enjoyed the closeness missing the physical contact all day. Gabrielle took a deep breath and sighed, she spoke to her lover.

"Thanks Xena for today" A dark eyebrow went up while Xena reopened her eyes.

"What you mean?"

"For stopping that guy and I just knew you were watching over me all day" The warrior smiled to herself as she rubbed her hand up and down the smaller woman's back and then stopped.

"Hmmm he was a jerk, I'm always watching over you my bard" Gabrielle smiled to herself.

"I know"

"Well it wasn't like I didn't felt a beautiful set of emerald eyes on me the entire day" The younger woman chuckled some, her eyes going closed again.

"I hate passing up any chance to see you fight"

"That was the only reason?"

"That, and I would have knocked any man there senseless if he tried to pull something over on you" The tall woman laughed some and hugged her bard tightly afterwards. They then released each other and Xena made her way into the washroom with her towel. Gabrielle though plopped down onto the foot of the large bed to rest for a

while. When Xena walked out of the washroom, Gabrielle went in to freshen up as well. She came out feeling a bit refreshed, but still tired from the long day. As her sluggish gait brought her out of the washroom, emerald eyes glance to the right at Xena in the wood chair. The blond sheepishly smiled down at her and she threw the towel onto the desk to her left. Gabrielle sat in the warrior's lap, her back snuggling into Xena's chest, large arms wrapping around a small waist. She closed her heavy eyes, her head sinking onto Xena's shoulder, Xena grinned to herself. Within a few minutes sleep over took the young woman, the warrior still wide-awake. The ex-warlord sat and thought about the situation, wondering what Okeanos could be up too. Her mind work, coming up with different ideas. She needed to know how he was managing to get all these men and money considering he was just starting as a warlord.

Gabrielle stirred in her arms and turned so that her small arm wrapped around the back of chair and the side of her face rested on Xena's chest. Xena smiled to herself and kept one arm around the small woman's mid-section the other gently stroking strawberry-blond hair. The tall female stared at the bar window becoming lost into her thoughts. A quarter of a candlemark passed, boots moving on stone could be heard outside as Xena realized Mene was headed for them. She leaned down placing a gently kiss to Gabrielle's forehead. "Xena?"

"Hey I am here...you need to get up love" The Amazon Queen nodded her head and stood up, running her hands through her hair. Xena stood up and looked to her partner. "Feel up to the plan tonight?" Gabrielle nodded, a knock at the door, and Xena walked to the saddlebags and dug out a cloak. Once she turned back around Mene stood inside with them. The tall leather-clad female handed the bard her cloak, the small female slipping it on and walked towards Mene with Xena right behind her.

~*~*~*~

Sea green eyes stared at the food, her appetite dropping, but she forced herself to eat the squid. Gabrielle hated slimy foods, but she wasn't in the mood to antagonize Okeanos. She restrained herself best as possible from spitting it back up as she took a swallow, blue eyes watched her. The bard's eyes widen for a moment and Gabrielle reached for her glass of wine taking a large gulp. The blond felt a large hand fall onto her leg and squeeze for a instant then move off her leg, Xena winked at her. The warrior turned her eyes off her partner and to the warlord at the head of the table, listening to him. For the entire dinner, the bard drank heavily, but made sure to eat numerous rolls of bread to better absorb the wine. Near the end, the small woman pretends she is drunk playing it off perfectly. She rambled about random things that were incoherent, everybody but really Xena laughing at her. Occasionally the older female chuckled more in the knowledge that her soulmate was faking it all and doing it in perfection.

At the end of dinner everybody had enough of each other and went their separate ways. Xena and the fake drunken bard climbed the stairs, one guard in front another behind. Mene had retired for the night, not escorting them to the room. They neared the open office of Okeanos, Gabrielle began to stumble into the partially lit room and quickly made her way to the desk.

"Come on, Xe lets go tuh thhhe bed, ya know hit thhee haaay"

She smacked into the desk, almost tumbling into it as she searched rapidly for

something. The bard spotted a scroll to her right that had that seal from the other night the messenger brought to Okeanos. Gabrielle reached for it pulling it underneath herself as she slumped over the desk.

"Gabrielle?" The warrior came up behind her partner.

"Hey, you two get out there!"

"I'm getting my friend, she's so damn drunk she doesn't know which room is ours" Xena looked down at Gabrielle while she turned back around, holding a scroll in hand, the warrior just nodded. The two guards quickly rushed in and the bard put her hands to her back underneath the cloak. She slipped half of the scroll down her skirt, her cloak hiding it easily. The two guards came in and had their swords drawn as they came to each of the female's sides. One talked in a cold voice.

"Out now! The room is farther down" Xena nodded as she tightly grasped the bard's shoulders, leading her out.

"Gabrielle its farther down" They walked down the causeway with the two guards right behind them.

"Aawwee, Xxxena I thought that" A hiccup. "Ex..excuse me, thought tthat wwwuz our room" The warrior shook her head as the door to their real room was opened.

"Uh huh Gabrielle, you drank way to much" They stepped in, the door was slowly shut and locked, the room still torches self-lit. Both women took a deep breath, Gabrielle straightened her back and turned around to face her warrior with a big grin. The blond reached behind under the cloak and slipped out the scroll to reveal it to her partner and handed it to her. Xena took it and made her way over to the bed, Gabrielle went to the chair propping her one foot at a time as she took off her boots. She bundled up her brown cloak and placed it back in the saddlebag and walked over to her soulmate whom sat on the edge of the bed. Xena had the scroll unrolled and was studying it, Gabrielle hopped up into the bed and moved behind her lover. She brought her arms up onto the strong shoulders and rest them as she placed her chin on top of her arms. Gabrielle glanced down at the scroll Xena held, her brows knitted in a split second. "Xena?"

"I know, I'm trying to read it"

"What language is that?"

"Its Latin"

"Latin...you mean Roman Latin?"

"Yeah" The blond looked at the top where the sender's name was in bold centered, it read:

Senátóres Rómánós

Gabrielle didn't need a philosopher to tell her what that translation meant.

"The Roman Senate?"

"Uh huh"

"Xena..."

"I know, let me read this" The bard dropped her chin back into her arm that rested on the large shoulders. Xena slowly read the Latin scroll, her mind still rusty with her Latin, but it came to her, glad she'd learned it during her warlord days. The bard waited patiently, she knew her soulmate knew multiple languages considering how much the warrior travelled in her past. Xena took a deep breath after awhile and rolled the scroll up, placing it on the bed beside her. The blond lifted her arms off the broad shoulders and moved to sit by Xena, picking up the scroll to place it in her small lap. "We have some large problems"

"Like exactly what?" The warrior stood up and moved to the fireplace, feeling a chill to the room, she threw four logs and padded over to a torch by the fireplace. Reaching up, the ex-warlord grasped the torched and walked back around, throwing it into the fireplace. She turned back around to face her soulmate.

"Seems the Roman Senate is funding Okeanos, that explains why he has so much money. Some of the men are Romans probably sent to help protect the Senate's...investment"

"But why? Why would they spend all this money for a warlord?" The warrior's eyes dropped to the ground, Xena wasn't saying something to Gabrielle. The tall woman walked back to the edge of the bed sitting back beside her lover.

"The Senate needs money"

"What?"

"Well, that's the part you're not going to like Gabrielle" The Amazon Queen arched an eyebrow at her partner.

"Xena?"

"The Senate hired Okeanos to invade the Amazon Nations" A pause, Gabrielle waiting. "From what I know of the slave trade, there is large money in having an Amazon slave, they go for a lot of money" The bard dropped her eyes to the ground. Gabrielle whispered something to herself.

"Especially the Queen" She looked up to her soulmate. "Xena, why would the Senate want that money, I mean they're paying Okeanos in the first place?" The tall warrior shrugged her shoulders.

"The amount of money they would get for the Amazons would pay for it and leave plenty of money left over. Besides, the Roman Empire is looking to invade Greece and take it over. Killing the Amazons off with an insider would be a perfect way to destroy a possible threatening enemy to them, not be suspected of anything and afford a profit off it to boot leaving an inside army" Gabrielle didn't reply right away as she thought, considering all she heard.

"So what are we going to do?" The Warrior Princess stood up from the bed and slowly made her way over to the chair. She sat down in it, her back arched high, elbows on the arms of the chair and her chin resting on top of her lace hands. Gabrielle herself

looked to the scroll in her lap, staring at the seal on it, memorizing it for future reference. "Xena?" Cobalt eyes lift to the bard, Gabrielle still staring at the scroll as she talked. "Is Caesar in with the Senate?" The Amazon Queen looked up to her soulmate whom still regarded her.

"Yes" A pause. "He's probably one of the more powerful influences to the Senate to urge them that Rome should conquer Greece" Gabrielle nodded her head, being told the story of Caesar from Xena's past. Without even meeting Caesar, the small woman hated him, hated what he did to her soulmate. But in way Gabrielle was thankful for him, if it hadn't been for the people in her soulmate's past, they would probably have never met. Emerald eyes looked to her partner.

"So we need to get out of here first huh?"

"Yeah, then we need to head to the Amazons"

"Xena, do you think that my Amazons can stop an army of five hundred men?" The tall warrior grinned some.

"They won't need to" Gabrielle looked to the floor and thought her face brightening once she realized what Xena meant by that.

"Lykus?" She looked up. "We can use that" The warrior nodded her head with a smile.

"That will help the odds somewhat" Xena stood up from the chair and began to pace on the floor in front of the fireplace, green eyes watching her the entire time.

"So we use the fight with Lykus to lessen the men" A grin. "And to use it as a diversion to leave?" The tall warrior nodded her head in agreement.

"But we are going to need a little money ourselves before we can disappear" Xena stopped pacing and looked to her soulmate. "And we need to continue training these men" The blond arched an eyebrow.

"That makes a lot of sense" The warrior walked over to her soulmate and knelt down in front of her, placing her hands on the bard's lap. Xena smiled and Gabrielle mirrored the smile back.

"It does though, that's Okeanos stupid mistake. We train these men, but training them the wrong way give us a small advantage later on" The small woman smirked to her lover.

"Yeah, I sorta forgot to show the soldiers in my group how to defend themselves" Xena's smile turned into a grin.

"Good, we'll keep it that way, defensive fighting is more important then offensive" The Amazon Queen nodded.

"Saved my life a few times"

"Mine too" Xena smiled and straightened back up giving her lover a pat on the leg and made her way to the chair. Gabrielle rose up from the bed and they both shrugged out of their clothes. The bard's muscles were a bit stiff from the day, she grimaced as she brought her arms up letting her soulmate's shift slid on. Xena stood in her leathers as

she watched her soulmate's grimace from behind knowing she was sore some. The warrior moved and came up behind the blond and wrapped her strong arms around the younger woman. Gabrielle sighed and dropped her head back into her soulmate's chest. Xena whispered into the blond's ear as she ducked down to the bard's smooth neck. "Nice shift" The small woman smirked to herself.

"Thanks, it makes a great night shift" Gabrielle could feel Xena's lips form into a grin as they nuzzled her neck. The Warrior Princess at that time began to lightly kiss the bard's neck, her breath warm.

"It looks comfortable for you" Two light kisses. "Want a massage?" Gabrielle moaned and places one hand to rest on Xena's hands around her small mid-section.

"Yeah I could go for one" The ex-warlord stopped her attack and the blond groan in reaction then she was lifted up by strong arms and carried to the bed. Xena came to the side of the bed and leaned in, placing her soulmate onto the bed.

"Roll onto your stomach" The bard lazily rolled into her stomach, her shoulder was exposed to her lover and Xena glance at it. A large hand lightly caressed the little remains of the arrow mark. "It looks almost healed" The blond nodded.

"It's the spot that's the most sore" Xena nodded her head and moved on top of the bard. She straddled herself over top of Gabrielle, her knees digging into the soft bed, her body positioned right over the bard's butt. The warrior pressed no weight on to Gabrielle's body but all of it on the bed. The older female leaned forward and her strong hands went to the bard's neck first. The massage started, Xena made it more relaxing saving her seduction techniques for another time knowing both of them were tired. As the warrior's hands work the bard's neck Gabrielle let her mind drift.

"In another time, another land" Gabrielle looked up to her soulmate to see a grin. *She can't be telling a story? By the gods she is!* The bard smiled to her lover and dropped her head back down as she listened, Xena continued. "There was a well known warrior, everybody loved him, respect him, want to become him or kill him. Everybody called him Jasco" Xena took a deep breath her hands moving to Gabrielle's shoulders. "The only thing was, is this warrior was so great and known but he lacked something so vital to life" A pause. "Nobody noticed this one thing about Jasco, but it was his one true weakness" The warrior stopped as her hands moved to Gabrielle's upper back. "He knew of it, but never cared to admit it to himself. So he went on with his life, fighting whom got in his way, helping people or being hired to do so. Then one day he was resting by a lake, thoughts consuming his mind, then something came to mind and he couldn't turn his back on" Xena's hands moved to the bard's mid-back. "He'd come to realize that his life was truly worthless, all he'd ever done with his life is kill and slaughter, either for his own pride or for money. His emotions finally came to life after all those years since his childhood, and emptiness engulfed him and depression surged into his heart once the walls fell" The bard felt her partner's hands go to her lower back as she listened to her lover. "So he didn't care about himself any more, no pride, no happiness, no meaning, nothing. Within a few days he ended up in a village, there was group of raiders attacking them, Jasco decided to try and stop them. He went running in, he fought with all his strength but his heart wasn't in it. Why should he had bother to fight?"

Xena moved her hands to Gabrielle's left arm beginning to massage it. "The raiders

were winning, Jasco was becoming more and more bloody with each passing moment. None of the blood being of the raider's, but he didn't care. He was about to give up and let death claim him, but something stopped that. Right when he thought death would bring him peace, a warrior reappeared from no where. The warrior was a female, she fought, protecting Jasco and the villagers from the raiders. As soon as she arrived the raiders were running out of the village in fright from the female warrior" The bard's other arm began to be massaged. "Jasco had been badly injured from the fight and stayed in the healers hut for two days, unconscious. His dreams were consumed with the female warrior that saved him, her beauty, voice, and skills. Once the warrior finally awoke from his concussion he was happy to see that the woman who saved him was there beside him"

The Warrior Princess took a deep breath and moved off the bard's body, Gabrielle still listening. Large hands moved to the Amazon Queen's legs now. "After that they teamed up, enjoying each other's companionship. They learn each other's abilities, weakness, history, what made them happy or sad, a perfect match. In short time Jasco and Sarana became extremely close, couldn't take their eyes off one another. Then one day it happened, their lips had met after a heated battle between them and a warlord. They thought they'd lost each other during the fight, but didn't and were relieved to find each other alive" A pause then Xena's voice softened into a seeming dreamy tone. "Jasco finally found meaning to his life, he'd fight for Sarana, protect her, love her, he couldn't live without her. For once he stopped regretting his past because he knew otherwise he'd never met Sarana. They cherished each other for eternity, their souls inter linked. One of the few small fine tales of two soulmates" The tall female moved her hands from the muscular leg and stood up from the bed. Xena grabbed the one torch from the near the door and walked to the fire place tossing it in and then the last torch from near the fireplace, throwing it in to. The fire crackled and sparked for a moment then went back to normal, the room darker now. The warrior made her way back to the bed and slipped under the covers, Gabrielle having done that after Xena had left the bed. The bard snuggled into her lover's arms.

"Thank You Xena"

"You're welcome love, go to sleep" The smaller woman nodded and closed her eyes.

"Night Xena, I love you" The warrior smiled to herself and pulled her soulmate in tight.

"I love you too my bard" The two soulmates let sleep take them over. Gabrielle's subconscious mind replying that story in her dreams but with different people. Xena playing the exact dream as her bard. They each took on one of the characters as their dream intertwined together.

~*Part 7*~

The next day went on as usual, Mene bringing them down to the practice fields. There the two women trained the men, leaving out certain small but yet important details to fighting an enemy. By the end of the day, the bard was escorted to the room while Xena was sent to see Okeanos. The warrior stepped into the large room her face hard. That's when it hit the tall warrior, there was a very small door in the wall behind Okeanos that hung open at eye level. The female figured it to be where the warlord kept all his money he received from the Roman government. Okeanos looked up as he

realized Xena and two guards stood inside with him.

"What do you want Okeanos?" Amber eyes stared up into blue eyes.

"It seems Lykus will be here a little earlier then we planned on"

"That's not my problem"

"On the contrary it is Xena. You and your friend are going to be teaching my men a lot faster and more at a time"

"And how long do we have?"

"Lykus is about two days away, by the third day he'll attack. I suggest you teach my men fast and efficiently" The tall warrior leaned forward towards the sitting warlord some.

"Exactly what will happen after this...fight?"

"Then you will continue to train my men till they're well skilled"

"Then?"

"You'll have to wait till then, don't want to spoil all the surprises now Xena" Cold eyes narrowed at Okeanos his simply reply was a smirk. Xena held back her urge right then to kill the man where he sat, and so she did. "Now then, dinner will be later, I look forward to seeing you and Queen Gabrielle there" The Warrior Princess turned her back on the blond haired warlord and walked out of the office two guards right behind her. Xena entered the room in a huff, her eyes were still cold and her frustration level high. Gabrielle turned from the fire to her soulmate as she stood up from her kneeling position.

"Everything okay Xena?" Cold eyes looked to her, Xena only had one word.

"No" The word came out way to sharp then she wanted to, she moved quickly into the washroom. She leaned over the bowl and splashed her face with chilly water. It felt good, helping to drive away some of her frustration as she relaxed her mind. She dried her face and leaned over the table that held the bowl, her eyes stared into the water. Gabrielle entered into the washroom coming up beside her warrior, a small hand fell onto Xena's shoulder. "Sorry Gabrielle, I shouldn't have snapped at you like that"

"Its okay, I know you're getting frustrated with everything" A small nod and then Xena straightened up and turned to her soulmate. "So what is going on?" The warrior sighed.

"Lykus is going to be here in two days, Okeanos figures he'll attack in three days" Emerald eyes dropped to the ground.

"That means we have to train those men faster"

"Uh huh" Gabrielle looked up, but the bard grinned.

"Guess that gives us a large opportunity to miss a few pointers to give the men" The warrior smiled as she wrapped her arms around her partner, pulling her in.

"That it does" Gabrielle smiled.

"Xena" The warrior looked down with soft eyes.

"Yeah?"

"We'll get out of this" The older woman smiled lovingly and leaned down to kiss the bard on her forehead.

"I know, thanks love" The bard smiled and grasped the warrior's large hands, Gabrielle lead her soulmate to their bed and they settled onto it. They both snuggled for a while till they left for their dinner. Amazingly the dinner was relatively quiet, Xena figured it to be due to the news of Lykus. By the end of that long grueling dinner, the soulmates were back on the bed. The bard had herself sitting up against the head of the bed board, a mug of tea on her nightstand beside her. In her lap rested her diary, occasionally the small female would drop her quill and drink from her mug the go back to her writing. She felt relaxed in her warrior's night shift. On her left leg was the warrior's head, resting. Xena was under the covers, no cloths were on as she let her body relax, eyes closed. The bard's left hand though was playing with Xena's jet-black hair or her hand would snake down ever once in awhile to caress the warrior's chest under the covers. Then her small fingers would just glide over the warrior's breasts and nipples, not starting anything. Even though the touch was light and not meant do anything but being soothing, Xena could still feel jolts of passion shoot through her. It was amazing to her.

"Xena?" Sapphire eyes drifted open to stare at the ceiling.

"Yeah?"

"Why do you think Jasco got into fighting in the first place?" The older woman didn't respond right away as she thought.

"Really I don't know" A pause. "People can just get pulled into it or they want to" Gabrielle nodded as she went back to her diary.

Last night, Xena had told me an interesting story about a warrior named Jasco and how he fell in-love with a female warrior named Sarana. I was surprised that she told me that particular story. But then I know in Xena's quiet way she was relating that story to her and I, to us. Gods, I love that, being able to say us knowing the meaning behind it. But Xena's story, it was something I won't forget. I can tell in a way I believe Xena was telling me thank you for coming into her life, works both ways though.

But our day wasn't too bad, till the end. We found out that Lykus who is after Okeanos for some past history is coming two days earlier. So Xena and I have to train these men real fast, in three days is when Okeanos expects Lykus to attack. If that's the case, then Xena and I are going to need a plan on how to escape the fortress and make our way to the Amazons. After that, I don't know what Xena has in mind, but I can tell she is thinking about it, even now she is.

The other day though Xena revealed something to me that...shocked me out right. She told me that if I wanted to leave here that all I had to do was say the word and she'd get us out of here. Or in any other future fights for that matter. I never imagined she'd

do something like that, for me. I realized how much I meant to her, but I never expected her to leave a fight for me. She put me before the greater good, any time. Gods, that makes me feel so warm all over. But I didn't let her slide with just that. I told her myself if she wanted to ever leave a fight to tell me, I'd do the same. I'm in-love with her too much to put the greater good before her. Xena had smiled at that.

Tomorrow will be interesting to see what happens. Especially in three days when this fight happens. Xena wants to see what kind of warlord Okeanos is. She thinks he's to arrogant, have to agree with her. But he seems to know what he's doing for the most part. He did do a few stupid mistakes, for one bringing Xena and I here and then having us train his own men. I thought I was going to laugh when Xena told me why they took us prisoner. But then I figured there had to be more to everything, there defiantly is. Okeanos seems to have been hired by the Roman Senate to capture as many Amazons as possible. Then Rome plans to sell them in the slave trade for money. Neither Xena nor I were too happy about that. We'll see what happens.

The bard closed the book and placed it on the stand with her quill. She reached for her mug of tea taking one last sip and placing it back on the stand. Gabrielle looked down at her soulmate and continued to run her fingers through raven locks. "Ready to go to sleep?" The blond smiled.

"Yeah you tired Xena?"

"Uh huh" The warrior stiffened a yawn.

"Yup you are" Xena chuckled and felt Gabrielle drop herself down onto the bed. Xena straightened her body out on the bed, resting her head on the bard's shoulder and wrapped one arm underneath her small soulmate. The bard rested her one hand on Xena's muscular soft stomach. Her fingers caressed the older woman's stomach in relaxing patterns. "Night Xena"

"Sleep well love" Another stiffened yawn as the bard kept caressing her stomach. Gabrielle soon learned that the gentle touch sent her lover into a deep sleep. The Amazon Queen made a mental note of that for future use. Her heavy emerald eyes stared into the fire as her body relaxed with her mind. The bard was quick to follow her lover as she fell into a deep sleep.

~*~*~*~

The next day was not that much of to tell. There were no incidents that day for our heroes to confront. All the men that day were excited after hearing the news of Lykus early arrival. They were ready to fight in their minds, but their skills lacked due to Xena and Gabrielle's training techniques. But none knew of this considering Mene was never around to watch nor was Okeanos. This posed a large advantage to the bard and Xena if they were to fight Okeanos in the later part of this adventure. The Warrior Princess for the most part was forming a plan in mind to escape this fortress with her soulmate. She knew it would work, she was going to make it work.

That night to follow in the dinning hall was filled with hustle and bustle of everybody's excitement. Even Okeanos was reeling stories about his possible future win over Lykus. He went on about his past adventures and stories he heard from other warlords that were sure to make everybody laugh. All laughed except for a small woman and her soulmate. Gabrielle despised, as she called, warrior stories. Stories that had no point and spoke nothing but of blood, chopping this guy's head off, or

ripping this person's heart out. She thought it was the foulest thing bearing in mind her stomach was tempted to empty itself. Xena on the other hand had other thoughts coursing through her head. She stared at the table, studying the cracks as her mind filled with past images. Images of her slaughtering people in her hatred filled days the days she sought for some release only to find it in one woman she would come to call her soulmate.

The warrior continued to study the cracks of the wooden table intently and tried to block out the gruesome tales Okeanos and the other's told. Then she felt a warm hand fall to her leg, she knows who's it is so she moves one of her hands from the table to drop it to her leg. A large hand clasped a smaller warm one, Xena held tight, Gabrielle squeezing back in equal effort. In just that small hidden contact the dark woman was able to bring herself around, the reassurance. The assurance from her soulmate that she never cares about her past, that she knows of it and accepted every last part of Xena.

By the end of that dinner to two women were exhausted and went into the comfort of their bed as soon as they entered the room. Through the night the crackle of the low fire and warmth protected the pair, but little could protect them of their dreams.

~*Part 8*~

Sea green eyes stared at the destruction, she couldn't believe, wouldn't believe. The bard began to turn in a circle where she stood, taking in her environment.

This wasn't real.

That's all her mind could repeat. She took in the site. The burned wood, torched bodies, the smoke still rising into the dark clouds above. Gabrielle could smell the death in the air. She stopped moving and stared into one direction she recognized all too well, her house. She grew up right over there. The bard could still imagine how her house looked when it was standing with the barn next to it. Gabrielle then screamed.

"Nnooooo!" It was a scream of anger, hatred and pain. It echoed through the lands, being heard far and near. But it didn't settle the pain in the young woman's heart. Then she realized another thing.

She is all alone.

Gabrielle cried.

She fell to the ground.

Gabrielle clutched her body.

She shivered and screamed and sobbed.

Gabrielle's heart only felt the pain and anger.

She had nothing, not her family, not her soulmate, not her home.

Gabrielle knows she is alone.

The torment trembled through her body, consuming her heart. She had tremors rocking through her body as she shivered and cried. Her body became covered in soot,

black as death itself. She was beginning to become apart of the scorched village, her home. The bard rolled to one side and into a pool of warm liquid. Immediately Gabrielle sat up on her knees, in the warm liquid. She looked down it was red. The small woman lifted her hands and saw the red liquid covering her hands. She desperately wiped it off onto her skirt only smearing it onto her legs and lap. Gabrielle looked down into the clear red pool, it reflected back an image of her. Her hair was black as night, red streaks going through it and her face was black covered, red smeared on her cheeks with tears still coming down washing away some of the soot. She looked at her hands again and threw her head back. Gabrielle screamed again. Her throat ached, but nothing near her heart. Her emotions surged to the top, threatening to kill her being, destroy her soul. The bard's head fell back into her hands as she rocked back and forth crying. She whispered words to herself.

"Gods, I am alone"

"My village is gone"

"Xena's gone"

"Where are you Xena when I needed you?"

Gabrielle dropped her red hands and looked to the dark clouded sky, searching them.

"Xena I need you!"

"Why aren't you here!?"

"You left me!"

"Xena!"

Alone in the end.

~*~*~*~

Gabrielle shot up from the bed as she yelled.

"Xena!" Before the bard could do anything or looked around she felt two strong arms pull her in. She became consumed with the feeling of safety and love. She knew who it was.

"It's alright Gabrielle, I'm right here" The bard sobbed in her soulmate's arms, her body shaking. Xena held her tight as they swayed back and forth some. "I am here Gabrielle, I'm not ever leaving you again" The warrior took a shake breath. "You're alright, we're alright" The smaller woman had her head buried into her lover's chest as she cried. Gabrielle took a deep breath and took control of her mind, calming herself and soon to follow her tears. She took one last deep breath and released it with uneasiness. She brought her head up to looked to her tall soulmate. Xena dropped her head and kissed the bard on the forehead. The warrior brought one hand up to brush back some blond hair from Gabrielle's face. "You okay?" Gabrielle nodded her head. "You want to talk about it?" The bard shook her head in a no response, Xena's heart felt a pang of hurt.

She brought her hand up to push the younger woman's head back against her chest. Gabrielle hugged her partner tightly as Xena placed her chin on top of her head. "You

know, a wise friend of mine told me a piece of advice" A pause. "She told me that it was always good to tell other's you trust your emotions or what bothers you" A deep breath this time. "She then said it would help you feel better, deal with things better, and take away the alone feeling" A very small smile formed on the bard's lips, Xena could feel that smile on her bare chest, making her smile as well.

"Yeah I know, its true too" Gabrielle brought her head up and looked into blue eyes. "Sometimes I need to take my own advice, better at giving it then taking it huh?" The warrior just smiled to her soulmate. "So which dream would you like to hear about?"

"All of them, but I want you to tell me the one's you feel ready to tell" The bard nodded her head and repositioned herself in her lover's lap to be more comfortable. She then locked her eyes with sapphire one's that sparkled in the dim lit room.

"The one I just had was mostly about Poteidaia" A deep breathe. "I was in the middle of the scorched village and I was looking around then I fell to the ground crying. Then when I sat up I was covered in ashes and blood. I stared up at the sky and just started screaming...yelling at the sky as if you could hear me. Asking why..." The bard dropped her eyes, then she shut them tight, fighting back tears. She didn't want to say, she didn't want to hurt her soulmate yet she figured Xena knew. "I kept asking why you...why you left me" Green eyes opened again and looked back up to pained blue ones.

"It's okay Gabrielle. What else?" Gabrielle closed her eyes then reopened them.

"Others I have had were one's I'd watch my village be burned to the ground. Lila, mother, and father screaming in the background. Or I'd have nightmares of your death. Even a combination of both" A large hand reached out and grasped the Amazon Queen's nearest hand. "The dreams of your death are either based on anger and rage or sadness and emptiness. The dreams I wake up from feeling anger or mad at you make me so sick for feeling that way" The small woman slowly began to let teardrops trickle down her cheeks. "I can't stand them Xena. I don't know what to do about them" Xena's hand tightened even more. The warrior nodded as she thought her eyes unfocused. They refocused on the bard as Xena laced her fingers with the bard's.

"Gabrielle, I am not going to ever leave you, I promise, never. You hear me?" Gabrielle nodded her head as tears continued to fall, her cheeks red.

"Even in death Xena, I won't leave your side, promise" Xena nodded as her own tears began to appear, a lump in her throat. Her heart raced as she felt love control her.

"I'll never leave your side my soulmate" One single word in which Xena breathed hit home in the bard's heart.

Soulmate

Xena pulled Gabrielle back into her arms, they hugged tightly and let the emotions run through them, they didn't want to let go. Too scared if they did the other would disappear from them. Xena took one deep breath as her body relaxes.

"Gabrielle I want you try something for me the next time one of your dreams happens again okay?" The bard simple nodded her head. "Next time think of me, of our love we hold, of us. I'll be there" Gabrielle closed her eyes and tightened her hold even

more, Xena doing the same. After a few heartbeats they released each other. Xena looked down into red eyes, she brought one hand up to wipe away any wetness. "You'll try that for me?"

"I'll try Xena" The warrior smiled.

"Let's get some sleep" The small woman nodded her head and Xena laid back down and brought the bard with her. Gabrielle slept on top of her soulmate, feeling Xena's warmth and safety. She couldn't live without this other woman, didn't want to.

Home

Both women closed their eyes as they hugged each other while they slept for the rest of the night in utter peace.

~*~*~*~

The following day is the finally day of training for the two women. It was a long day, a day they both wanted to get through quickly with. Yet it dragged on and on, a never-ending day. Finally when dusk broke up the training sessions both women were sent to Okeanos for a little chat. The sturdy warlord was at the front of his desk, leaning against it as he read a parchment. He looked up when the warrior and bard entered, he smiled an ugly smile. Okeanos placed the parchment behind him on his desk. Xena walked up to him with Gabrielle directly off to the side of her.

"Okeanos?" A rough smile from the blond haired man.

"Xena" He looked to the bard. "Queen Gabrielle" Okeanos looked back to the warrior. "Lykus will be here early tomorrow from my reports tell me" He kept his small smile and while he watched Xena bring her arms up to cross against her chest. "That's where you come in Xena" The warlord took a deep breath and walked around his desk. "You will be in the fight, Queen Gabrielle though on the other hand will stay in the fortress under guard protection" The blond's eyes were wide for a moment and she spoke with an edge.

"What? I am not going to be guarded with your foul men. I am a better fighter then most of your men" Amber eyes turned on the bard with rage filling them, he walked back around the desk.

"You will stay with my men" His words came out in a low growl, the bard was about to retort but she felt a large hand clasp onto her shoulder, she held her tongue. The warlord was actually surprised that Xena was able to silence the over spoken woman. The female warrior looked to the blond haired man.

"And why am I going to be fighting?" Okeanos smiled once again as he kept his back straight.

"You'll be out in the field with Mene and I, you'll be helping us with fighting tactics" The Warrior Princess simple nodded her head. Gabrielle was stunned by her soulmate's easy agreement to all the terms. That's when she realized the warrior had something in mind.

"Is that all Okeanos?" The man nodded his head and the two women walked out with two guards behind them. Xena never dropped her hand on the bard's shoulder till they entered the room. That's when the questioning started for the warrior once the door

was slammed behind them.

"Xena, why...why did you..." The warrior came up to her and placed her hands on each of the bard's arms and gazed into crystal emerald eyes with a smile.

"Gabrielle listen" She took a deep breath. "If you're in the fortress tomorrow I'll know you're safe and I can get to you quickly"

"But Xena I want to be by out there with you"

"Don't worry, in all the fighting I don't think anybody will notice me disappearing. I'll come into the fortress and get you and we'll be out of here" The bard arched an eyebrow at her lover.

"That simple huh?"

"No not that simple, it never works out that simple" The bard chuckled some.

"Okay, I think I can work with that" The warrior nodded her head and bent down to capture her soulmate's warm lips. The kiss was heartfelt and passionate and soon it found them both in bed. Two warm bodies moving against the other and pleasing the other.

~*~*~*~

Gabrielle looked up to the dark sky and something dropped in her. She then looked across the hill's edge to see smoke rising up into the air, her breath caught. She dropped her staff to the ground and broke out into a run, she went flying down the hillside. Gabrielle almost lost her footing as she went speeding down the hill, but it didn't matter to her. Once Gabrielle reached the bottom she looked to where the smoke had come from, not again. She stopped dead in her tracks as she stared in disbelief at the site.

No not again.

She raked a hand through her hair and slowly walked closer and closer to the charred land. Gabrielle felt like her everything was being squeezed to death, life drawn from her with each step she took. Now she stood at the edge of the burnt town, her eyes were holding back tears, for how long she could last she wasn't sure. The air was thick, lingering of death, everything dark and hit making anybody disgusted. Gabrielle's eyes scanned the destruction, a lump entering her throat, her mind spinning out of control, her breathing ragged, her legs shaky.

Not again.

Tears began to flow down her face, she took a step into the burnt village, a very small one. Charred wood cracked under her weight, she looked down and gasped. Gabrielle stumbled forward and turned around to stare back at where she last stepped. There lay her sister, what little was left of her. The face was recognizable there was no doubt in that. Lila's body was black as her hair once was. Lila's eyes were open, horror still contained within them, her mouth open as if she was screaming as she died. Gabrielle leaned down, reaching out with one hand as tears quivered her body. She was about to touch her sister's face to make sure it was real, but she pulled back at the last second. Gabrielle trembled as she hugged herself and tears spilled from her red eyes. Gabrielle turned her back on the corpse to look in the direction of where her home once stood.

Gabrielle walked over in that direction, making her way through the burnt wood, corpses, blood, and other items. As Gabrielle neared the area where her house once stood she spotted two large poles standing in the air. She neared and saw what hung from those last two standing large wooden poles.

Gabrielle lost whatever contents were in her stomach and turned her back on the poles. Turned her back on the two bodies that hung from the poles that swung back and forth lightly in the air. Lifting her head back up Gabrielle turned back around to look at the bodies, wanting to make sure it was real. It was, her parents swung in the breeze from the taut ropes around their necks, heads leaning forward, mouth gaping open the same look of terror in their eyes like Lila's.

Gabrielle's heart shattered into a million pieces as she screamed. It echoed over and over and rolled and rolled through the world. It never quenched her anger and sadness. Another screamed rung through the area, shattering the world's peace. Yet again Gabrielle fell to her knees, rocking back and forth while she cried.

"Not again"

She shut her eyes tightly against the pain. Gabrielle wanted to end her life, she couldn't take the pain. It devoured her soul and heart leaving only an empty shell of which she was at one time.

Nothing left.

But yet Gabrielle felt something tugging in her heart, hope, which was the answer. She needed something to grasp and that was the only thing she could, Gabrielle let it surround her and become her protector. Gabrielle still ached like there was no satisfaction in life except for death, but this small emotion hope seem to make it alright to keep fighting, that it was worth it. Hope built a wall around her heart and soul, encasing her showing her a small amount of light in all the darkness, Gabrielle stood in it. Gabrielle reopened her eyes and she looked to the sky, her heart's pain calmed but only a small fraction as she looked up.

The sky was not longer black, dark, gray and eerie. It was now clear, and a brilliant shade of sapphire swept across the sky's world. Gabrielle stared at it, the air around her changed. Gabrielle felt safety over this sky's blue, she didn't know why either. Then something came to life in her, it was love, from where she did not of. She clung to it as she looked back to the burnt ground below her body. It felt so familiar that love. Why did it? Gabrielle clung to that unknown love as she wished it to save her. Would it?

She wasn't alone.

Her soul told her she was never alone.

Gabrielle looked up to see a very tall dark form walking in the smoke in her direction. Gabrielle was still on her knees, slight hunched forward with her arms wrapped around her body. That tall dark form grew and made its way to her through all the dark smoke. Redden emerald eyes stared up into an intense blue, Gabrielle felt herself become complete. The tall stranger leaned down and lifted Gabrielle from the ground into strong arms. Gabrielle wrapped her arms around the strong form and cried as she buried her face into the stranger's chest. The stranger carried Gabrielle out of the

torched village and onto the hillside. The stranger then sat on the ground and Gabrielle curled up into the stranger's arms as she kept her back to her massacred home. Gabrielle cried long and hard, trying to rid herself of the pain knowing it would never leave. The stranger never loosened their grip on Gabrielle, only holding her tight as she cried. Finally ending her tears, Gabrielle looked up into sapphire. She stared at the stranger and a very small smile broke across Gabrielle's lips.

"Xena?"

"I'm here"

"But...but how?"

"I told you I'd never leave your side, not even in your dreams" Xena leaned forward and placed a kiss to the bard's forehead and quietly whispered to her "I love you" Gabrielle breathed a sigh of relief as she cried again out of happiness and she reached up with her left hand. She caressed Xena's cheek to make sure she was here, it was true. Gabrielle kissed Xena lightly and wrapped her arms around Xena, hugging her tightly while she cried out of joy. She wasn't alone.

Soulmates

~*~*~*~

Emerald eyes flew open in the dark room.

Emerald is locked with sapphire.

"You were really there weren't you?" Xena smiled at the question.

"Yeah" A few tears trickled down the bard's face as she hugged her soulmate. Gabrielle was comfortably positioned on top of her warrior's bare body.

"How did you get into my dream?" The warrior shrugged her shoulders some.

"Not sure, I knew you needed me so I came" Xena moved one hand from the bard's back to Gabrielle's face, she brushed back a few stray piece of strawberry-blond hair. "I felt an intense amount of pain right here" The warrior's hand dropped to her own chest over her heart and moved her large hand back to Gabrielle's face. "I knew you were in pain. Some how my dream connected with yours and I heard you scream when I first got there" The small woman smiled to Xena and dropped her head onto the warrior's chest and closed her red eyes.

"Thank you" A pause. "I love you" The Warrior Princess smiled and lifted her head some to kiss the bard on the head. She dropped her head back and ran one hand through strawberry-blond locks while the other arm rested around the bard's bare body. The two women fell back into a pleasant sleep for the remaining few candlemarks.

~*Part 9*~

You will remember that this is hopefully the warrior's and bard's day of escaping, even though Xena would have been more than happy to break out earlier with her own means. But as you recall only the bard's refusal stopped that. So now it is a candlemark before dawn and Xena had risen from bed and quietly placed two logs

into the fire. She looked back to her sleeping soulmate and smiled.

The warrior had been surprised she was able to make it into her soulmate's dreamscape. Xena had been in her own dream when she heard a loud scream ring through her dream. She immediately recognized the scream and the pain that stood behind it. Something deep in her grew stronger forcing her to close her eyes and it calmed back down so she reopened her eyes to see a seared village with smoke rising from it. Then another scream inflamed through the lands and she moved quickly to its source.

Xena turned back to the fireplace and moved to the saddlebags, she pulled out her leathers and slipped into them. She could feel the tightness of them, enjoying the feel of power she received from them, it reminded her of her warlord days. A very small side of her missed those days, the power and control, but she wouldn't give up her life now for that or anything. She wouldn't give up her soulmate for battle lust, hatred and blood. The warrior turned back around and quietly made her way to the side of the bed, she sat down on the side. Blue eyes stared at the beautiful face she'd come to admire, love and treasure. Xena knows she needs Gabrielle in her life.

Xena reached out with her close hand and lightly stroked the bard's face. Gabrielle didn't open her eyes, but one of her hands came up from under the covers and grasped the warrior's hand. The Amazon Queen moved the warrior's hand to her lips and placed gentle kisses to Xena's hand. The Warrior Princess smiled and watched as green eyes opened with a small sparkle to them. Gabrielle then interlaced her fingers with Xena's and pulled their hands under the bard's chin as she smiled.

"What's up?" Xena grinned as her thumb rubbed the bottom of Gabrielle's wrist.

"You're not" The bard chuckled some.

"Yeah it's too comfortable in this bed"

"True, but we need to get moving. I'm sure Mene will be up here soon" Gabrielle nodded as she took a deep breath and released Xena's hand. Xena stood up from the bed and moved back to the fire as she heard the bard's feet hit the stone floor. The tall female then heard a muffled curse under the blond's breath, Xena chuckled to herself.

"I officially hate cold stone floors" The warrior then felt two small arms wrapped around her leather-clad waist.

"I like them, wake me up" Gabrielle huffed and dropped her head against Xena's back.

"That's just the problem, they wake me up to fast" Xena laughed some as squeezed the bard's hands and felt her small soulmate release her. The bard made her way to where her clothes lay and quickly slipped them on and looked around for her boots. She looked to the taller woman in question and Xena nodded over to the chair by the entrance to the bathroom. Gabrielle quickly spotted her boots by the chair and walked over to them and slipped them on and laced them. The warrior by now was working on her armor with long fingers, her frustration kicking in some. The bard had finished lacing her boots and turned around to stare at her partner with a small grin. Blue eyes regarded her and the bard chuckled and made her way behind Xena. Gabrielle easily then buckled the warrior's armor for her and then she stepped around to face her soulmate. "So is this simple plan going to really work?"

"Don't know, we'll find out huh?"

"Uh huh" Gabrielle agreed in amusement then heard the faint sound of people moving outside, she sighed.

"Xena, what about our weapons?" The tall female grinned.

"I'll take care of it. You just worry about protecting yourself okay?" A brown eyebrow curved up at that.

"How can I when I'll be more worried about you?" Xena smiled.

"I'll be fine, we'll be out of here...one way or another" The end statement was mere truth and it sent a small chill down the bard's back. Then there was a bang at the door, both heads turned to see Mene walk in with two guards. Xena crossed her arms against her chest.

"Queen Gabrielle, you are to follow me" The small woman looked to her partner, icy blue eyes turned to her, Xena simply nodded. Gabrielle nodded back and brought her hand up for a moment to Xena's hand on top of her one arm and squeezed. For a moment the bard could see the warrior's eyes shimmer then go stern again and Gabrielle moved to Mene. Gabrielle disappeared behind the closed door, her gate held pride in it as always making Xena smile inwardly. Once the door was closed Xena moved quickly to pack their things and moved the two saddlebags close to the door along with her small soulmate's scroll satchel.

Within a half of a candelmark Mene returned for Xena this time. The Warrior Princess had been led down to the center of the fortress where around four hundred men stood, getting their gear ready in last of darkness of the night. Their armor and swords glistened and gleamed in the moon light, even the sharp spear heads flashed. The armory had been open with men shifting in and out collecting whatever weapons they pleased of. Mene had disappeared for a moment, but the two guards remained with the female warrior.

Once he returned, he held Xena's handcrafted sword inside the leather sheath, he handed it to the warrior. Xena took it, feeling the familiar weight to it, it sent power coursing through her body. A faint amount of darkness over took her, the side that was of Ares. Her dangerous sapphire eyes twinkled in the early dawn light and then she slipped it onto her back, clipping on with perfection. She turned to look at the men as they began to move out of the fortress in groups and moving to the land surrounding the fortress outside.

"Good morning Xena" Slowly steel eyes turned to look to Okeanos, he had his sardonic smile on. His silver armor was well polished and he sheathed his sword to his right side as he came up to Mene and the Warrior Princess. "Nothing like a fight to start the day off"

"Where is Gabrielle?" His smile dropped for a moment as he regarded the tall woman, then his amber eyes narrowed as he smiled again. He looked to Mene and nodded his head, the second in the command went off in pursuit.

"Your horse will be saddled up and brought out to you when the time is right Xena" The warrior merrily nodded her head and then she looked back to the moving troops.

"So how many are going to be out there fighting?"

"I've decided four hundred out to fight the other hundred to watch over the fortress" Xena mentally cursed herself at the number that would still remain inside of the fortress.

"How many men does Lykus have?" Okeanos shrugged his shoulders as he looked to his men as well.

"Around two hundred, if that, easy fight" Xena then figured Lykus must know Okeanos' men are new, considering Lykus fought with low odds. About two of Okeanos' men per Lykus' single men, two to one. Maybe it would be a good fight after all considering the odds. As Xena continued to gaze at the men slowly making their way out of the fortress she heard the sound of chains rattling in the background. The sound became louder in her direction, so the warrior turned around.

Cobalt eyes instantly narrowed at the site, her jaw tightened and one hand fisted up at her side. Gabrielle was walking in her direction beside Mene and three other guards behind her. She was chained by the legs with shackles on her ankles, her hands tied with ropes in front and around her throat she was led by a metal collar, Mene grasping the end chain of the collar. Rage built up in the warrior's body, she controlled it as best as possible. Mene and the bard neared with the guards stopping three paces away. "Well Queen Gabrielle is here" The Warrior Princess looked to the warlord, her eyes glossed and dark. Okeanos looked from the Amazon Queen to the ex-warlord, his cynical smile still plastered on his lips. "You will have to excuse Queen Gabrielle for being manacled, but we can't let her run off in the middle of this fight. We still need her as well"

Ares' chosen.

In one quickly fluent motion the Warrior Princess had pulled her dagger from between her breasts and had it at Okeanos' throat. Okeanos was frozen in place as he was captured by feral blue eyes, those eyes spoke volumes that only harvested darkness deep in them that are just being controlled.

"Release the bonds from her" Okeanos didn't move at the low voice. "Now!" The warlord shivered at the loud growl.

"I can not"

"Yes you can or you'll be breathing through your neck soon"

"Xena, you're in a middle of a fortress with five hundred men, there is no way you can escape" Blue eyes narrowed.

"Don't tempt me Okeanos" A long stare. "Now remove them"

"I'll remove part of them, deal?" Xena stared hard and long into amber eyes, she knew he had him scared. But she wasn't in the mood to fight five hundred men right now, so she nodded her head. Okeanos looked to three guards.

"Remove the collar and loosely manacle her hands behind her back" Neither guard moved. "If either of you three don't now I'll kill you myself!" One of the guards jumped and reached behind the bard's neck and undid the collar, and attached it to his

belt. He then reached forward to cut the bindings around Gabrielle's wrists. Okeanos was still busy with a dagger at his throat. The small woman's arms were pulled ruffle behind her as her wrists were shackled behind her back with cold metal, but not tight. Xena dropped her dagger from the warlord's throat and placed it back between her breasts. "Nice place to keep a dagger" The warrior just smiled to him giving him her own sarcastic smile, a seeming smirk. He then took a fast glance at his troops spotting them all outside, Mene moved and headed outside of the fortress walls to the men. Okeanos turned his gaze back to the tall female and spotted a flaxen mare and a large sable stallion coming up behind her. Xena had already heard the hoof beats from earlier and recognized one set as her war-horse. She turned around and the corner of her mouth almost began to start the form of a smile, but she kept her straight face. The stable man handed Xena the reins then gave the other set to Okeanos, they both mounted. Okeanos looked to Gabrielle's three guards. "Take her away for the fight" The bard had looked up to her soulmate with loving eyes, the warrior's own crystalline eyes softened only to her.

"I'll be back" Gabrielle simply nodded her head, understanding the meaning behind the words. She was lightly pushed in the direction from where she had come from, small dungeons. The Warrior Princess turned her head back to the exit of the fortress and Okeanos kicked his horse with Xena right behind him. Xena glimpsed around at the fortress as she rode out, making mental notes of where all the men on the walls and on the grounds were.

Her body began to course with the anticipation of the fight, her mind reeled at the knowledge and her dark inner strength came to life deep in her. Her love was forced down for protection reasons, her eyes glossed over while her back was straight and her instincts peaked. Xena's dark hair flowed in the gentle breeze while her icy blue eyes narrowed once she was outside the gates, her posture only conceived power.

This is the warrior.

The warlord and ex-warlord tugged on the reins, the mare and stallion stopping just behind the troops. The second in command came jogging up to Okeanos and Xena, his head down. He looked up as he neared them, stern face.

"Lord Okeanos?" The blond haired warlord looked down at Mene, his own features masked with coldness.

"Report Mene" The second in command took a deep breath and began to regurgitate what he heard from the scouts.

"Lykus is about a quarter of a candle-mark away. He has hundred and seventy-five men on foot the other small twenty-five are on horseback" Okeanos nodded his head.

"Exactly where is Lykus himself?" The second in command grinned some.

"Amazingly in the front leading, they're coming at a fast trot right now" The warlord nodded again.

"Good, report back of any problems, you know how to handle the situation correct?" Mene nodded his head. "Good" Mene turned on his heels and jogged back to the forces. Okeanos watched him leave and then looked back up towards the direction of the woods where the forest was about two hundred thousand paces away.

"I take it Lykus has it in bad for you?" The warlord chuckled as he averted his amber eyes on to the female warrior.

"Yes he does, he was very much in-love with that little boy" Xena's azure eyes narrowed at the information, knowing how Lykus must feel. Knowing how she would react to losing her younger soulmate.

"Well then, I think I can understand Lykus" Okeanos' features went a bit baffled as he tried to make sense of the comment. Then it struck him from a blind side, his eyes widen just slightly as he grasped everything and he quickly moved his eyes some where else. The warrior had caught the small shift in air between her and Okeanos, he knew, but it didn't matter to her now. A small grin formed on her lips as she thought about it. *Took the idiot long enough to figure it out.* The warrior chuckled inwardly then refocused her mind to the problem at hand. Her eyes focussed on the woods and she listened hard as she bent her head down some.

The sound of metal rattling faintly.

Twigs are being broken.

Stones knocked around on gravel.

The sound of hoofs hitting the ground.

It all stopped in a few seconds, nothing but quietness. At that moment piercing yells were made as steel blue eyes looked up. She spotted a number of men charging towards them and riders directly behind the running warriors. In the middle at the front was a rider, his sword unsheathed and a cape on, Lykus. "And now it starts" Okeanos looked to the tall woman.

"That it does" Both looked to the see Okeanos' men charging into Lykus' men. The sound of metal clashing into metal whisked through the clear day. Warcries and yells of pain were heard as the fight raged on. Okeanos scanned the fight, seeing the Lykus' Calvary trying to break through the mass amount of men, but having little luck. He then located Lykus himself, he was about half way through Okeanos' men astonishingly and still on horseback. Xena then began to count Lykus' footmen, trying to figure if they were all there. She started from left to right, once she reached the end her back stiffened. But it was to late, a large wave of fifty men came flooding from the right of the woods where there is a large opening in Okeanos' line. That's when Mene came rushing back to Okeanos and Xena, breathing hard.

"Lord Okeanos..." The warlord quickly cut him off.

"I see what happened fool, I told you to keep an equal amount of men spread through the lines" He took a deep breath, Mene waiting for him. "The left flank is a bit thick, spread them out, it should tighten up the right wing" Mene nodded his head and ran back to the men and began to order the men around. But unfortunately it wasn't early enough. Lykus' men were pushing through and fast not to mention Lykus himself. Okeanos scanned the fight and saw Lykus pulling his long sword from a man's chest. Lykus looked up to meet eyes with Okeanos. They stared at each other for a long moment, then Mene came running towards Lykus is sword preparing to kill him. Yet he failed, Mene had came head on, to fast and lost his head. Lykus looked back up and kicked his steed hard and was at a gallop towards Okeanos. The blond haired warlord

grinned and unsheathed his sword. Xena watches the entire time. Okeanos kicked his own horse and went at Lykus. Before the two swords met, Lykus yelled out.

"Losers ahead!" Okeanos widens his eyes and ducks as Lykus' sword swished past the top of his head. Xena shook her head as she watched the two men come at each other again.

"Boys will play" The Warrior Princess kicked the mare in the side and went at a gallop to the back of the fortress, she rounded it and looked up to see a bar window and grinned. She pulled Argo to a stop and jumped off the mare's back onto the ground. Once she landed a lanky man with a bow and arrow appeared from the woods. Xena looked to the man to see him aiming a poison tipped arrow at her, her eyes narrowed.

"Don't move Warrior Princess" Xena's composure never faltered, she took a step forward. "I said don't move!" She took another step towards him, his hand just began to faintly shake. "Don't move or I'll shoot at you" A dark eyebrow rose up as she smiled evilly.

"Oh I don't believe you can" She'd hit the right button, he let go of the arrow and it came flying through the air at her. Xena shifted her body to the left and brought her right hand up to catch the arrow. She broke it in her hand and dropped it to the ground. Now the young man was fondling to retrieve another arrow from his back. Before he could, the tall woman was right in his face, her eyes cold and dark. He froze in place and stared into those deep blue eyes. "Oh I wouldn't" His eyes widen and he grasped an arrow. Xena brought up her fist and pulled back, then her knuckles connected with the archer's face. He fell to the ground in a one limp motion. "I told him not to" The Warrior Princess shrugged her shoulders and turned to look at the rod window again. She spotted a ledge coming out directly underneath the window, perfect, she then took account the distance from the ground to the ledge, too much. Her jaw tightened as she looked back behind her to the woods. Xena looked up to see a high branch over her, she grinned. Bending down, she sprung back up to soar through the air and landed neatly onto the branch. She looked across to the fortress wall to see the ledge just a little higher up and she ran on the thick arm of the tree. The warrior leapt and flipped in mid-air and straightened her legs out to make contact with the ledge. Xena leaned forward as her hands grasped the stones that stuck out from the wall the most. She looked to her right to see the window, Xena dropped her hands from the stone wall to carefully glide her feet across the ledge. The ledge is only long enough to support her feet from the heel to the tips of her toes. A large hand grasped the middle bar and she pulled hard. Xena closed her eyes as her muscles strained against the bars. The sound of metal grinding against stone could be heard as the bars gave in to their antagonist. They were ripped from their home, the bars came soaring through the air to fall to the ground far below except for one to the far right, but no matter. Xena quickly shifted along the ledge to crawl in through the window.

Boot hit stone floor and the warrior made her way over to the saddlebags and the satchel. She hefted one saddlebag into her hands. The tall female then kicked at the door hard producing a loud bang. Quickly the door was opened and a single guard peaked in with a confused look only to receive a saddlebag in the face. He fell back into the ground as his eyes swam then a fist merged with his face, his body going out of commission. Xena dragged the guard into the room with the saddlebag and walked out of the room, closed the door behind and bolted it. She broke into a jog towards

Okeanos' office.

~*~*~*~

The bard listened to the sounds of the battle far above her, she sighed. The three guards stood outside of the jail, two leaning against the bars while the third huge sentry stared at her. Her skin had goosebumps for how long the single guard eyed her, which had been the entire time. The guards never spoke, but this one decided to as he looked to his two comrades.

"You think Lord Okeanos will mind if we have some fun?" Both of the guards looked to the large boned man whom had a smirk on his lips. They then looked to each other and shrugged their shoulders. The one to the right, the leader, which was tall and muscular yet exceptionally dirty, grinned to him.

"Why not?" Gabrielle's green eyes narrowed at the idea itself, she stood up from the bench. Her hands behind her rattled from the movement.

"Oh it seems she's looking forward to it" All three men laughed at the large man's joke as the lead muscular guard began to unlock the gate. The small woman's jaw tighten as she formed a plan in her head and rapidly. Her palms grew sweaty as they entered. Why did this always happen to her? That's right, she was suppose to be the weaker one in distress all the time. The lead muscular guard moved closer to her, right in her breathing space a grin to his lips. The Queen of the Amazons growled and abruptly lashed her head forward to hit the guard's head. He howled and stepped back a few paces as he reached for his head. Gabrielle was then roughly hit in the face as she slammed into the bench and slid down the wall. She looked up to the large guard his eyes cold and narrowed. She tasted blood in her mouth, her hands reached down to the edge of the bench. The bard then instantly lifted her legs to hit the large guard under the chin. His world seemed to splash into a million whirling specks of light as he went reeling into the lead guard behind him. They both smashed into the bars of the prison. That's when the third guard acted and grabbed Gabrielle by the throat and held tight. Green eyes shut tight as her legs began to move. She struggled with her legs to slip through her arms. Her knees tightened up and then her feet slipped through the open circle in the bard's arms. Her hands intertwined as she brought up the double fist to meet with the third guard's chin. He released the bard's throat and Gabrielle leaned to her right, her face almost touching the bench. She coughed and gagged, air finally flooding into her lungs while the world around her stopped spinning.

Gabrielle looked up to see all three guards towering over her, her stomach turned into knots at the sight. The larger built guard leaned down towards her face as she sat back up.

"Don't even bother little bitch" The bard's upper lip twitched at the command and her eyes flashed red. Her temper went up and in reaction Gabrielle threw up her hands with the manacles. The chain linking the two manacles fell behind the back of the large man's head. Gabrielle crossed her arms tight, choking the man around the neck. He reached up to the chain to try and removed it but was failing. Then the lead guard punched the bard in the face, her head snapped while blood trickled from her lip and nose. She then kicked the large man in her manacles in the stomach, he tumbled to the ground. Again the lead guard punch Gabrielle but harder this time, this sent her head bashing against the wall, almost knocking her cold. Her image swam her head falling forward into her hands, her body expecting another blow. Yet it never came to her.

Instead she heard somebody being thrown through the air and into the bars hard, falling onto the first large man's unconscious body. Then another man yelled but it went unanswered as his body landed to the ground in a pile. The next thing Gabrielle felt were warm hands on her head, lifting her head up. Unfocused sea green eyes stared into sky ones.

"Gabrielle?"

"Xena?" The warrior smiled.

"Hey, yeah its me. You okay?" The bard sort of smiled at the dumb question.

"Never better"

"Can you stand?" Gabrielle didn't know, so she tried and she almost toppled onto the ground with the exception of strong hands holding her up.

"Guess not" The small woman closed her eyes and felt warm arms lift her up. Xena made her way quickly out of the prison, the gate to the jail being slammed shut and automatically locked. They went outside to the fortress grounds. The tall woman moved to a corner and waited till five men passed by, she then moved in the opposite direction of the five soldiers along the walls to where their room from the nights was located. Gabrielle had her head slumped into Xena's bosom as she kept her eyes shut trying to stop her images from swimming. The warrior looked down at her soulmate, seeing blood still trickling down the lower half of her face. Xena looked back up to see the stairs to the balcony way, she ascended them and jogged down to the room. They entered it being undetected, the guard from earlier tied in the washroom. Xena placed her partner on the edge of the bed. "Feel any better?" Gabrielle shook her head. The warrior nodded and moved to the saddlebags on the chair. She pulled out the medicine kit, bring it to the bed. "Vision swimming?"

"Yeah" The warrior nodded and pulled out a leather bag containing small dried leaves. She handed one to Gabrielle.

"Place it under your tongue, it'll help okay?" The bard nodded and slipped it into her mouth under her tongue. It had a small bitter taste but her mind was already relaxing. Gabrielle closed her eyes as large hands moved to her injuries, placing some jewelweed oil to the cuts, they stung. But the small woman didn't care, her soulmate's touch comfort her. Xena tossed the med. kit back in the saddlebags and walked back to her soulmate. "We've gotta remove these" Large hands grasped the chains of the manacles to the bard's arms and pulled. Gabrielle watched as the warrior strained herself, her eyes closed, jaw tight her muscles stood out in her arms, knuckles pure white. The bard watched in amazement as one of the links in the chain began to rip apart, then it snapped. Then the tall woman's hands went to the chain at her legs, Xena tugged at them breaking them apart as well. She smiled at her gaping soulmate and walked back to the saddlebags.

Then she lifted the two saddlebags and satchel up from the ground, she pulled out a rope from one saddlebag. She tied the rope onto the bags and then the satchel, putting them out the window. Xena lowered them to the ground and then tied the other end to remaining bar. The ex-warlord then made her way back to her partner, Gabrielle looked up. The bard took to notice that her warrior had the chakram on her side along with her sword, she had to grin inwardly. "I want you to stay on my back, I'll gets us

down" The bard nodded her head and Xena put her back to the bard and bent down directly in front of her. The Amazon Queen wrapped her legs around the warrior's waist then her arms around Xena's neck. Xena stood back up and padded over to the window, Gabrielle spotted the window.

"Xena, that window won't fit use both at the same time"

"Yes it will, I want you to hug me tightly and keep your head low" Xena turned around and ducked low as she brought her legs out of the window to touch the ledge. Gabrielle lowered her head, just missing the top of the open window, the warrior straightened back up. She grasped the rope and wrapped one leg around the rope. They slowly moved down the rope as Xena moved her legs against the wall her hands holding the rope firmly. Gabrielle looked below to see the saddlebags and her scroll satchel and right by them was her staff, she grinned. She then closed her eyes before the height got to her, dropping her head into Xena's neck. The warrior smiled. "We're almost down Gabrielle"

"I know" A pause. "So while were here, what happened out there?" Xena sucked in a deep breath of her muscle strain.

"Lykus is rather smart"

"Not compared to you" The warrior huffed as she continued down.

"He sent about fifty men at Okeanos' right flank breaking it. And when I left the scene Okeanos and Lykus were to idiots fighting on horse back" The bard grinned at the description and glazed over story. She'd have to work the rest out of her soulmate later. But right now, Xena's feet hit solid ground and Gabrielle dropped her legs and arms and Xena bent down to untie the bags. She whistled and Argo came out of the woods and over to her master. The warrior threw the bags on, tying them and then attaching the scroll satchel. Lastly Xena put the staff into the mare's saddlebags. The tall woman then abruptly lifted her partner up and helped her into the saddle. Gabrielle scooted back and watched as Xena hopped up in front of her. Neither female moved as they listened, the bard wrapping her arms around her lover's leather waist. They both heard the sounds of battle still going on. Then there was a loud yell from the window above. The soulmates looked up to see a guard looking down at them, Xena grinned up at him. The guard grasped the rope and stepped out onto the ledge, another guard reappeared at the window. The Warrior Princess laughed in evil amusement at the site and reached to her side. Her chakram went hurtling through the air at incredible speed, it's edge sliced through the rope and bounced off the fortress wall. It then lowered in angel and came back down at Xena, she plucked it out of mid air once it neared her. In a rapid motion it was back at her side from start. The one guard had crashed to the ground, out cold while the other at the window cursed and ran out of the room.

"Lets get out of here Xena" The Warrior Princess seconded that and pulled the right rein to have Argo face the east woods. She kicked the mare hard in the sides and they vanished into the woods and into the early morning.

Part 4

Section 4

~*Part 10*~

Now as we recall Xena's soulmate and herself had escaped Okeanos and the fortress, and currently they are at a speeding gallop through the woods in the direction of the Amazons. The pair rode for about a half of a candlemark, then the warrior began to feel her soulmate's head falling onto her back. There would be a jounce of Argo and Gabrielle would lift her head once more, only to have it falling back to Xena's back within a few heartbeats. So Xena slowed down, and pulled on Argo's reins, the bard straightened up immediately wondering what was going on.

"Why are we stopping Xena?" The warrior slipped her feet out of the stirrups and swung her left leg over to one side to sit sidesaddle. Then she placed her right leg where her left leg was originally, so basically she now sat backwards in the saddle. Xena smiled at her bard's curious expression as she rested her large hands on her own thighs.

"Wanted to check on you, that's why" The bard arched one eyebrow. "How's your head feel?"

"My vision still swimming but not as much as earlier"

"Does the leaf still have a bitter taste to it?" A shake of the head. "Let me see it" Gabrielle removed the tiny leaf from under her tongue and handed it to her lover. Xena held the end and placed the very tip of it into her mouth. She chewed on the tip of it for a moment and instantly her mouth was invaded with a tart taste, her teeth almost curling. The warrior removed it from her mouth, handing it back to the bard. "Just go ahead and eat it " The bard's emerald eyes widen in surprise. "It'll help rid of your shaky sight"

"If you say so" The small woman placed the leaf in her mouth as Xena leaned into the bard with her right hand reaching out. She grasped a water skin from the side of the saddlebag and sat back in the saddle to watch her soulmate. Once the bard began to chew on the petal, her face squinted together, emerald eyes closed as she shook her head briefly then swallowed. "Wow that was strong stuff" Xena chuckled and handed her partner the water skin, Gabrielle briskly took a long drink to wash down the strong taste. She then corked the skin again and turned in the saddle to place the skin back onto the saddlebag. When she turned back around, a large hand went up to her face to touch the cut on the right of her lower lip.

"How does that feel?" The Amazon Queen smiled and felt Xena's thumb move across her lips in a gentle touch.

"Its fine" A pause. "Thank you for getting there when you did" The older woman nodded her head as she dropped her hand to Gabrielle's hands.

"I'll always be there for you" Gabrielle's eyes softened another degree at those words. Xena looked down at the bard's wrists that still had the shackles.

"I can wait till later to remove them" Blue eyes looked up and the warrior nodded her head in understanding.

"If we get moving now and go for the rest of the day and take a break some where in there, we could make it to the Amazons by nightfall. Or go non stop and make it there by late afternoon" Gabrielle's eyes went shadowy for a moment as she thought, then she looked to her tall partner again.

"I'd defiantly would need a respite some where in there" The tall woman chuckled at the bard's words and then leaned in to tenderly kiss the young woman. Xena's mouth was tainted with the taste of tart blood, that was something she'd never experienced before. The warrior then repositioned herself in the saddle, facing forward once more.

"Tired?"

"Yeah"

"Try to get some sleep love, there'll be a road up here soon, make the ride more smooth" Gabrielle smiled as she wrapped her arms tightly around the warrior and dropped her head against the muscular back. Within a quarter of a candle mark the small woman was dozing soundlessly on Xena's back as they rode on at a canter.

~*~*~*~

Green eyes opened again as she felt Argo slow down, Gabrielle lifted her head from Xena's back. The warrior steered the mare into a small open clearing off the rode. Pulling on the reins again, the horse stopped and threw her head up and down, Xena patted the mare on the neck.

"Good girl" Xena's boots came out of the stirrups and she landed to the ground, her knees bending then straightening back up. Next to follow was the bard herself, her bonds rattling as she landed on the soft green ground. "Why don't you go sit down, I'll be right there to get the shackles off" Gabrielle nodded her head and moved to the center of the clearing and sat on the ground. Xena unbuckled a saddlebag and carried it over to where her soulmate sat. She sat down in front of the bard to face her while she dropped the bag to ground next to her. Xena sifted through the leather bag, finding a long dagger and then some fruit. She pulled out an apple and tossed it to her soulmate. The bard caught it in mid-air and began to munch on it and the warrior's hands went to the bond on the bard's right leg. Xena placed the tip of the dagger into the open keyhole and began to move it around. She listened to the workings inside react to the dagger's movement as she twisted and turned the knife. Gabrielle took a few bites from the red apple.

"Xena, what are we going to do if Okeanos survived that fight?" Blue eyes looked up for a moment then went back to the shackle.

"We'll take care of him"

"Xena we don't have enough Amazon to stop the men" A pop and the shackle fell to the ground. The bard grinned and took a few more bites from the apple as large hand worked on the other leg shackle.

"The Amazons won't have to fight them alone" Xena grinned as she saw her soulmate bring up a brown eyebrow in wonderment.

"What are you planning?" The warrior chuckled as she turned the dagger left then right then a hard left. A ping was heard as the second shackle fell to the ground.

"Let me see your right wrist" The small woman held her hand out, but it contained the apple as well. Gabrielle offered her a bite, Xena gratefully taking a few then the other small hand held the apple. The tall female held the bard's wrist as the dagger probed the keyhole. "The Amazons are going to hire some mercenaries. I figure Okeanos will be receiving more warriors and experience ones at that" The blond swallowed from an apple bit.

"Xena, the Amazons can't afford a group of mercenaries, we both now that" Xena grinned up her lover as the wrist manacle gave in and unlatched from the small wrist hitting the ground. The ex-warlord moving to the last bond on the bard's body.

"Well as of now, the Amazons' treasury increased" Gabrielle took another chew from the apple as she thought. Her mind raced at where Xena could have gotten that idea. Her mind centered on the treaty, Okeanos was being paid, the saddlebags looked a little heavier then normal. She turned her head to glance at the one on Argo and looked back to her smirking soulmate.

"Xena you didn't?" The older woman chuckled some, then she pressed down hard with the dagger, and the manacle lost the battle and slipped off the bard's wrist. Gabrielle took a last bite from the crisp apple and then she tossed it into the woods and watched as Xena retrieved her own red apple.

"I stole enough money for two mercenaries technically, so the Amazon Nation has extra money now" The bard shook her head as she smiled to her soulmate. Gabrielle rubbed her wrist.

"Let me guess, you also know a mercenary from your past that's an old friend that'll help out" Xena grinned at her friend as she munched on the apple.

"Actually, he and I didn't have a great friendship per se to say, but I think it'll still work out" The warrior glanced at her lover's wrists as she rubbed them, she was happy to see no rashes, yet. Gabrielle then crossed her legs and picked up the four shackles and looked at them.

"What you want to do with these?" The tall warrior took a huge chomp from the apple and didn't respond till she swallowed the juicy tidbit.

"Amazons can use them" Gabrielle raised an eyebrow and stood up still glancing down at her partner.

"In what way is what I'd like to know" The bard caught sight of her friend's mouth hanging open right before she turned her back to the older woman and made her way over to Argo. She slipped the shackles into the saddle bag and then turned back around crossing her arms against her chest. "So you and this *old* mercenary friend have a history together I assume" A simple nod and a bite into the apple one last time and tossing the remains into the woods where Gabrielle had. Xena then picked up the leather saddlebag beside her and stood.

"We do, haven't seen him in years though" The tall female padded over to Argo to stand next to the bard. The saddlebag she carried was effortlessly buckled back onto the mare's rump. Gabrielle now stared into beautiful sky splashed eyes, she became lost in them for a few heartbeats. Her mind refocused while she grinned up at her

soulmate.

"So were you both lovers?" The warrior's heart missed a beat at the unexpected question that came smacking into her from no where.

"No we weren't" The bard kept her grin, surprising the warrior some as she wondered why her partner was grinning over something rather serious. "What are you smirking about?" Gabrielle chuckled as she dropped her head for a second then looked back up.

"Its cute to watch you get under pressure" A dark eyebrow rose up.

"Cute huh?" Xena's face went extremely serious, Gabrielle quickly noticed as she dropped her grin. "Why you so calm about that topic?" The bard still had her arms crossed against her chest, but she loosened her hold some as she relaxed.

"Well I will admit whatever past lovers you had does start a hint of jealousy" A pause as Gabrielle thought, her eyes staring at the ground while her words came out in thought. "But I stop myself, knowing it isn't worth the jealousy or fair to you" She looked up to lock eyes. "In the end it doesn't matter to me Xena because I know..." Xena cut her off, finishing the sentence for her.

"You're my soulmate" Gabrielle smiled up to her and nodded her head. One of the warrior's rare warm smiles over took her lips as she bent down to capture the smaller woman's lips. Once the sweet kiss was broken Xena kept her head low.

"Thank you love. That means a lot to me" A pause as Xena organized her feelings and thoughts. "Makes me feel more comfortable to talk to you about my past relationships...just my past in general" Gabrielle kept her smiled as she uncrossed her arms to rest a hand on Xena's upper arm.

"Xena, I love you, you are all that matters in this world to me" They both fell into soul searching kiss, but the heroes had to leave the small clearing. The Greater Good beckon them to bring a small amount of order and safety to this world. So they climbed onto the war-horse and rode on at a full gallop. For once Gabrielle tried to enjoy the ride, she did. She let her body take on the sensation that she was flying, she thought she was. The bard thought she could get use to this feeling which actually shocked her. Then she wondered if the only reason she was slowly beginning to enjoy riding was because her soulmate was sitting in front of her? Or was it because a part of her that is her soulmate was coming more to life as each day passed?

As each day brought their souls closer and closer until one day they would become one *once again*.

They rode for the rest of the day, making good time towards the Amazons. Once they reached the Amazon Mountains did they dismount and begin to walk through them. Unfortunately it was becoming late afternoon and the sun glared at an angle into their eyes. It made the trip conflicting more then anything. Especially for the bard who loved the mountains, the beauty of them. Yet they still moved through the mountains, estimating to walk into the forest on the other side within a candle mark or so. The bard had removed her staff earlier from the saddlebags. She was getting rather bored. To entertain herself the small woman began to spin the staff in her hands, forming a circle in front of her with the staff. Blue eyes watched intently.

"Trying spinning faster" Gabrielle shifted her eyes back to the warrior behind her.

A challenge.

The small woman sucked in a deep breath and looked ahead, her eyes slits from the sun's rays. She saw nothing in her path ahead to conflict with her as she followed the path. It wouldn't matter any way, the bard knew inside, her soulmate would watch over her. Hence she began to spin the staff rapidly in front of her as she walked. The wooden staff began to turn into a bit of blur as she tried to go faster with the twirl. Xena watched tenaciously to see exactly how fast her lover could get the staff to spin, rather a valuable technique to show power and prestige. Taking a risk the bard closed her eyes as she walked, hoping nothing was in her walking path. She concentrated more and more on the movement of her arms. A dark eyebrow extends up as the staff rapidly picked up speed to become nothing but a brown blur. Xena grinned at the demonstration, she was more than satisfied. The next thing to happen was the staff coming to a sudden stop and the end of it meeting the rocky ground in triumph. Green eyes were flashing when Gabrielle looked back to her soulmate with a grin.

"How was that?" The warrior grinned.

"Not bad" The Amazon Queen rolled her eyes at the older woman and then averted her eyes back ahead of herself.

"Not bad means good huh?" Xena's grin shifted more into a smile.

"It wasn't good either, it was perfect" A surprised face looked back at the warrior, Xena held her smile towards the bard.

"Thanks" Gabrielle knew her soulmate never handed out compliments lightly or all the time. They were one of the small things the bard held onto.

The small things in life truly matter.

That was one thing Gabrielle had learned in her time with the warrior. It was the small things and the people she loves that she'll never let go of. Those were the entities that she held within her heart to never let go. Then the warrior tossed a question at her soulmate that broke her thoughts.

"How you feeling?" The bard slowed up her walk to now be beside her soulmate, matching her broad gait.

"Better"

"Must be if your spinning your staff around" A grin was passed to the warrior from the bard.

"Yes well, I figured a little exercise would be nice considering how talkative we are right now" Xena chuckled at the explanation.

"As soon as we make our way into the Nation, there will be plenty of talk then" The bard sighed, knowing exactly what kind of talk that would be.

"That's not the sort of things I was thinking of chattering about"

"Not in the mood to gossip with Ephiny?" Gabrielle stared down her partner with a look and then she grinned some.

"Xena, I am not the one to gossip"

"Really?"

"Xena!" The warrior eyed the bard as she shrugged her shoulders and looked back ahead with a more than wry face. "Okay okay, I'll admit I gossip some" An arched eyebrow. "Maybe more than some" Two arched dark eyebrows now. "I gossip, happy?" A cough from the warrior. "Fine! I gossip often are you satisfied now?" Xena's head bobbed up and down twice.

"You gossip my bard" Gabrielle gave a small snort at that.

"Come on now Xena, give me some slack, I only talk to Ephiny about..." The bard searched for the right word. "...Things" The tall woman looked to her soulmate with a grin.

"Yup, you only talk to Eph so far. I am waiting for Solari to become part of the fan club and then maybe Eponin" The young woman rolled her eyes.

"Epinion, you've gotta be kidding me Xena? Epinion we both know is too much into that warrior ego"

"Oh warrior ego huh?" Gabrielle mentally slapped herself over the use of her words as she hastily tried to come up with an explanation or something, anything.

"Not that a warrior ego is bad or anything" A moment. "Just well..." She is stuck in a rut. "You know Xena, warriors are hard to talk to" Another mental slap. "Not saying you are or anything, just in a general aspect that is"

"Uh huh" Oh boy, she bit her lower lip and her mind worked. A small hand reached up to rest on her tall lover's shoulder.

"Xena, you've changed a lot compared to then. You're more open, give more chance, try to talk more" Xena smiled to her partner and grasped the small hand with her reins-free hand. Their fingers interlaced together as their arms dropped to their sides again.

"Its okay Gabrielle, I knew what you meant" The bard smiled some.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah" A deep breath. "Just a rare warrior" Gabrielle's face brightened.

"Hey, I never thought of it that way" They both chuckled some at the little joke, the small woman actually liking the description. It was her soulmate in a nutshell.

~*~*~*~

Within a quarter of a candle mark to follow that conversation did the two soulmates make their way down the mountainside into the Amazon Nation forestry. Once they were decently into the forest did Xena pick up on the sound of branches being jolt and jarred. Then three masked women fell from the trees, all three in front of the pair. In

response the two travelers raised their arms above their heads, the three other females lifted their masks off with a smile.

"Queen Gabrielle" The bard dropped her arms at the same time as Xena did. The blond smiled to the three Amazons.

"Solari" The Amazon took a few steps towards the bard, as did Gabrielle to the second in command. They both hugged tightly.

"Its good to see you safe, we heard from Joxer what happened" Gabrielle sighed dramatically and held her hand low on her staff.

"Unfortunately things aren't settled quite yet Solari" The second in command chuckled as she smiled to the bard.

"That's what I figured Que..."The brown haired Amazon stopped herself as she received a little glare, Solari coughed for a second. "Gabrielle" The bard now smiles to her. The bard then looked to the other woman on either side of Solari. Epinion to the right and Lysia was on the left. Gabrielle smiled to Epinion.

"How are you Epinion?" The weapons master smiled and clasped arms with the bard.

"I'm good...Gabrielle, yourself?" The bard kept her smile.

"I'll be great as soon as I get something to eat" The entire group laughed while the warrior in the background kept her grin to herself. The small blond then looked to Lysia and clasped her arm as well. "Its good to see you again Lysia" The Amazon bowed her head momentarily as she smiled to the smaller woman.

"Glad you've returned Gabrielle" Somebody got her title right for once, a brilliant smile now. Gabrielle had turned around to face her soulmate to see the tall warrior chatting with Solari. Xena chuckled for a moment and the bard grinned to herself. Blue eyes lifted from the Amazon to meet emerald eyes, they locked. The second in command caught what was happening and began to move back to her three comrades. Xena moved closely beside her lover with Argo directly behind the tall form. The bard broke the contact and looked to the second in command.

"We have to get back on duty Gabrielle, unless you'd like us to escort you to the village?" The bard shook her head and smiled to Solari.

"Thank Solari, but I think we'll be fine" Solari bowed her head with a smile and looked back to the bard.

"As you wish Queen Gabrielle" The small blond shook her head as she watched the three women disappear among the trees again. The two females left on the ground continued on their journey to the village. The sun was just kissing the horizon of the world. Within in a quarter of a candle mark they arrived at the entrance to the Amazon Village, they were spotted by many on the go Amazons. "Wouldn't have been as much fun" The bard shook her head and walked in with her soulmate directly behind her. Xena dropped the saddlebags onto the table relatively close to the bed.

"Go find Ephiny, Xena?" The Warrior Princess turned around from the wooden table to see her best friend at the foot of the bed, her satchel on the bed.

"Yeah" Gabrielle nodded her head and strolled over to the door with Xena following her. The two women briskly walked to the regent's hut and knocked on the door. In return they received an angered response, they entered.

"What's wrong now?" The regent had her back to the two women, sitting at her desk reading something or another.

"Just a warlord headed this way, nothing much" Ephiny whirled around in her seat with wide eyes, surprised look constructed on her features.

"Gabrielle!" The Amazon hopped out of her seat the marched over to her friend, giving her a tight hug. Then she looked to the tall warrior with a smile and didn't wait, she just hugged the warrior. Amber eyes looked back to the bard. "Warlord? What warlord?"

"Okeanos"

"Never heard of him"

"Well you have now Eph" The curly blond shook her head and looked to the taller soulmate.

"You've heard of him?" She got a hard toned response in return.

"No I haven't, he's rather new to the game of warfare" The regent nodded her head and looked back to her desk then back to the two women.

"Come on sit down" And that's exactly what they did. Ephiny had pulled up two more chairs by her desk for them to sit in, Gabrielle placing her staff against the wall. Amber eyes gazed at them while sapphire and emerald stared back. "I heard about how you were kidnap" Her words going to the bard. "Joxer is still here as a matter of fact, we wouldn't let him leave since Xena requested him to stay here till either or both of you returned" The bard looked to her soulmate and raised an eyebrow at her.

"What?"

"Keep Joxer here Xena? Amazons, all women" A shrug of the shoulders.

"Want to make sure he was safe, besides it is good for him to be around some mentally and physically strong women" The bard chuckled. Then Eph cut in.

"So tell me the story" Xena looked to her lover with a grin, Gabrielle interrupted the look immediately and looked to her Amazon friend.

"Well..." And that's when the story began that we've ventured through, so far. Our bard retold the entire story to the Amazon, Ephiny absorbing it in and Xena nodding once in a few to confirm the bard's words. Gossip. Or was it just a story? It didn't matter in the end. "...and as you know Xena and I just got here" The tall warrior took a quick gander out of the window to see the stars twinkling in the sky, it'd been a little more then a quarter of a candle mark since they'd arrive. The regent leaned back in her chair and thought for a moment, she looked to a grinning warrior and knew something was up.

"So what's the plan now? I can tell there is one" The Amazon Queen smirked to her

regent and crossed her arms against her chest.

"Well Xena has a mercenary friend she knows will help us fight Okeanos" Ephiny's amber eyes widen for a moment then she spoke in a hasten voice.

"Gabrielle, we don't have enough..." She was cut off by the warrior, almost same repeated words from earlier in the day.

"The Amazon's treasury increased as of today" The bard looked up to her partner with a grin then shook her head as she looked back to the baffled regent.

"Xena...burrowed some money from Okeanos. We have plenty of money to hire a group of mercenaries" Xena piped in.

"Ephiny you're going to need the help" The curly-blond's eyes shift up to the dark leather clad woman and studied her for a moment, then nodded.

"You're right, we'll need to bring the council together to get their approval first" Gabrielle nodded her head in agreement. "We'll do that early tomorrow morning" Two nods now. Quick to follow was a rumble of somebody's stomach, amber and amused blue eyes looked to Gabrielle. The small woman lips formed into a sheepish smile. "But first lets get something to eat" All three females laughed at the regent's suggestion along with the bard's stomach's words. They all stood up, the Amazon Queen retrieving her staff and they made their way to the food hut.

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Gabrielle stumbled into the hut, glad of the room being lit by candles on the table. Her stomach was pleasingly full. She and Xena had met up with Joxer and told him he was free to go when he wished. Surprisingly he wanted to leave, he'd thank Gabrielle, Xena and Ephiny then bid good night. He planned to leave early tomorrow morning.

"Joxer sure seemed to want to leave in hurry huh?" The bard heard a deep chuckle in return as the warrior moved to the saddlebags, the bard leaving her staff by the table. Both prepared to change for the night, Xena removing two of her shifts from the bags. She slipped into one once she removed all her armor, leathers and boots tossing them aside. Her white clean shift slipped on and she turned to face her soulmate, Gabrielle just removing her last article of clothing, her skirt. The tall female came up behind the smaller woman, wrapping her free hand around the bard's waist. Xena pulled her in tight and lowered her head. She nibbled on the soft neck below, the bard dropping her head back into Xena's neck, her eyes closed. Gabrielle's sleepy feeling long disappearing since her lover first turned around to face her from behind, she had felt the desire from her soulmate. The warrior could feel the heat of the other woman's body, smell the honey scent that always is of her. She then shifted her nibbling to the other side of Gabrielle's neck, the bard moaning in response to the sensual feel. A large hand began to snake up to the bard's soft breasts. That's when the second night shift went flying landing into one of the chairs.

Gabrielle lifted her head and turned in her partner's arms to face her, fire was in Xena's dark eyes. The bard grinned some.

"I guess going to sleep early has been tossed right along with my night shift" The ex-warlord grinned and brought her lips down close to Gabrielle's.

"Hmm we can always go to bed early at least" Gabrielle's smile turned more sexual as she finished the distance and locked lips with Xena. Large warm hands glided across the small woman's soft but well defined stomach, her breasts and neck. Every where and anywhere. They soon found themselves early in bed as they both planned, but sleep on the other hand was another story in itself to tell.

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By the time the sun had crept through the east window, the light began to crawl up the lovers' waists and up to the couple's faces only a few candle marks after they began to sleep. Both sets of eyes fluttered open to the light warming their faces. The bard rolled to her right to face her warrior, her back to the sun now, as she blocked the sun from Xena. Sleepy blue eyes gazed at her then Xena formed a smile.

"Morning" The tall female leaned in to kiss the bard on the forehead then pulled back and replied.

"Sleep well?" Gabrielle chuckled as she burrowed her head into Xena's neck.

"Of what little sleep I got yeah" The warrior grinned to herself, hot breath tickling her throat. She ducked down to capture soft warm lips, a searing kiss. They both pulled back, their lips almost feeling burnt from the consuming touch.

"Xena, we better get moving or we'll be here all day" Gabrielle grinned at her soulmate.

"That wouldn't be a bad thing"

"Being here all day with you wouldn't but when Ephiny comes in here it will be"

"Oh gods" A dramatic sigh and the bard pulled the bed sheets over her head. "I swear she acts like our mother sometimes" Xena laughed at that and slowly her hands began to creep down. All of a sudden the smaller woman yelped and began to squirm in bed while large hands tickled her bare sides. "Xena...Xe" She was having enormous fits of giggles as she tried to get away from her attacker with no success. Finally the warrior stopped her attack and pulled Gabrielle in with a tight embrace, the bard breathing hard. Gabrielle hugged her partner back then ending with Xena releasing her and rolling out of bed, the younger woman being quick to follow. They both decided to move at a rapid pace, knowing the regent would show soon and didn't want to get caught being late by the Amazon. Right as Gabrielle finish with the last buckle of the warrior's armor, there was a rap at the door.

"Come in" Both soulmates laughed for a second since they both yelled in unison. They looked to the door to see a curly-haired blond step into the hut a raised eyebrow. Ephiny looked to the soulmates, Gabrielle standing behind the warrior then the bard moved next to Xena.

"Glad to see you both up and ready to go" The two partners looked to each other, reading each other's looks. Ephiny knew something was passed between the women, but she had no idea what. Gabrielle looked back to her Amazon friend.

"When are we meeting with the council?" The regent smiled.

"Right after breakfast" The bard's face brightens at the word that had relations to food.

"Great, let's go then" Gabrielle whirled around behind herself to grab her staff against the hut wall and turned back around on her heels and stepped up to Ephiny. The regent had a big grin on her lips, the bard just smirked back. That's when Xena moved quickly and came up next to the regent's side and placed a hand on Ephiny's shoulder.

"Thanks for coming to get us...Mom" Ephiny's mouth hung open and Xena laughed dropping her hand then heading out of the hut. The Amazon closed her mouth, angered features coming to life on her face as she looked back to Gabrielle for an explanation with an arched eyebrow. Gabrielle for her part was a hint red, a large smirk. She saw the question written all over the regent's face and just shrugged to her. The bard patted Ephiny on the shoulder and quickly moved out of the hut after her soulmate.

Xena heard her soulmate coming after her, felt her. The warrior walked with a fast gait but slowed up for her partner, her lips still in a grin. The bard came up to her side and Xena wrapped an arm around the small woman's shoulders pulling her in, Gabrielle slipping an arm around Xena's waist. Ephiny was right behind them but decided to stay a few paces behind them, watching the small exchange.

"Xena I can't believe you said that" The warrior chuckled at the regent's reaction from earlier. "It was funny though, she won't let us get away with that you know" Xena looked down to her soulmate.

"I'm counting on it" The small woman groaned and looked back briefly to her Amazon friend to see Solari coming to her, the bard grinned.

"Cute couple huh?" Blue eyes glanced back to Solari and Ephiny, she caught sight of the regent's amber eyes, and they were glowing. Xena looked back to her bard.

"They are"

"I think we should...help their relationship along" A dark eyebrow went up. "Come on Xena it would be fun" The warrior chuckled as they neared the food hut.

~*Part 11*~

Gabrielle looked from the regent to an older Amazon, the bard's face was constructed in sheer seriousness and began to show a lack of patience. She took a deep breath and knew this meeting would be done with soon.

"So explain to me again why we would need the help of mercenaries?" The small blond looked to her right at the almost white haired Amazon, she had only a few black streaks left in her hair. Her face dramatically aged over time that spoke of experience. The Amazon Queen finally responded

"The Amazons are going to need the extra help" The older Amazon Council Member huffed.

"The Amazons can handle a warlord in our territory" The bard groaned and looked to her soulmate who was leaning against the wall, arms crossed against her chest. The warrior was feeling Gabrielle's frustration, creating frustration with in Xena. Before the small woman could even respond to the earlier statement she was thrown a question.

"Even so if we need extra support why not get another Amazon tribe's help?" Green eyes turned to the head Amazon Council member and retorted her answer.

"Because we do not have the time to get help from another tribe, the closes one is within three days travel not to mention the time it will take for them to be ready. Okeanos will probably be here sooner then that and his forces strength from the Roman Senate" That's when Ephiny spoke up from where she sat, at the opposite end of the large wooden table.

"Queen Gabrielle is right, we don't have the time to send a messenger to another tribe, but we have efficient time and money to have a group of mercenaries" A few of the twelve council members nodded in agreement, but not all, some still not siding yet. Then a deep voice cut through the paused silence.

"Okeanos won't be expecting mercenaries in the fight, he's not an experience warlord" All sets of eyes with the exceptions of the bard's looked up to the Warrior Princess, now more people nodded in agreement. But Gabrielle still didn't have the head member's acceptance, she couldn't figure out why either. That's when the head council member looked to Gabrielle with serious eyes.

"What I'd like to know Queen Gabrielle, is how you expect us to trust these mercenaries? Even more so expect us to trust the Warrior Princess's suggestion to hire them, she is not one of us?"

Gabrielle snapped.

Xena straightened up but Gabrielle stood up from her seat, making Xena stop from saying anything. The Queen of the Amazons placed her hands on the table and leaned forward. Her dark emerald eyes locked tightly with the Head Amazon Council Member, her eyes flashing.

"Expect you to trust Xena's word? Is that what you ask of me?" Her words came out in a low growl. The Amazon felt her palms go sweaty at this younger woman's temper and hidden strength. Gabrielle leaned forward. "Please care to explain why then the entire Amazon Nation *trusts* their *Queen* with Xena of Amphipolis yet they can not trust Xena to select a mercenary group? Now that is a question that is beyond me and I'd like for you to explain that to me" The Head Amazon was frozen in spot by the feral green eyes. The older Amazon dropped her eyes and Gabrielle felt she proved her point and sat back down in her seat, her breath a bit shake by her own reaction and forcefulness. So she took a deep breath and looked to the Amazon again, her face still very much serious. The Head Member looked back up.

"I apologize Queen Gabrielle for my rudeness and ignorance. I did not thinking straight. The Amazon Nation does trust our Queen with the Warrior Princess and the Warrior Princess's choice. My apologies again" A bow of the head and a small smile slipped onto the bard's lips.

"Thank you and I apologize for over reacting" The Head Amazon nodded her head and looked to the eleven other members to see all nods of their heads, the older Amazon looked back to the Queen.

"Then it is agreed that the Amazon Nation will hire a group of mercenaries for the fight against the warlord Okeanos" And that was that, all the members smiled to

Gabrielle with a nodded and left the room, leaving the regent, warrior and Queen behind. Ephiny stood from her seat and walked down to Gabrielle's end, Xena moving to sit down beside Gabrielle. The small woman took a breath and looked to her soulmate and friend.

"I'm ready to do that again" The regent chuckled while Xena grinned.

"You did a good job Gabrielle" The bard looked up to sky blue eyes. Gabrielle felt pride swell in her and not because she was happy with her temper, but because Xena was feeling pride.

"Yes you handled that perfectly" The bard rolled her eyes and looked to the regent.

"I could have not blown up like that" Ephiny shrugged her shoulders.

"No, you had a right to Gabrielle, that trust shouldn't have been questioned" Gabrielle nodded her head in response and the regent patted her friend on the shoulder and smiled.

"I'll see you both at dinner later" Ephiny began to leave the room and called back. "By the way, the sparring field is free if you two want to brush up on your practicing" Xena grinned and Gabrielle yell back.

"Maybe we'll use them. Thanks Mom" The two soulmates heard a growl then a snort then the sounds of the Amazon's boots were distant. Gabrielle looked to her soulmate. "So what did you think really?"

"I think you're a great Queen" A snort from the bard herself. "Gabrielle?" The bard looked to her partner with serious eyes. "Not many Amazon Queens can handle the councils well, you did a beautiful job okay?" Gabrielle smiled and nodded her head then stood up, Xena also doing the same. "So are you up for some sparring?"

"Yeah, haven't practice in awhile huh?" The warrior nodded her head, the pair making their way out of the hut, Gabrielle's staff making pounding sounds on the dirt ground.

"We haven't practice together in while" The bard's eyebrows furrowed together as she thought about the warrior's words.

"We haven't have we Xena?" A shake of a dark head. "So after this a bath?" A nod of a dark head. "Sex after the bath?" Another nod. "Then I'll have sex with Ephiny?" A third nod. Then Xena's eyes widen the look of utter shock and outrage and Xena stopped walking to stare at her bard.

"What?!" Gabrielle broke out into a fit of giggles at her lover's expression and clutched her stomach. A few small tears rolled down her cheeks and Gabrielle took a deep breath and slowly let it out. She looked back to her tall lover.

"Xena your looks, oh gods" The bard laughed a few more time then smiled to her soulmate. "I was just testing you to make sure you were still with me" A corked grin from Xena and the warrior started to walk again.

"Come on bard" The younger woman nodded her head and grinned to herself, walking close to her soulmate.

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"Gabrielle a hard thrust" A groan. "That's it, don't you feel it working your upper muscles?"

"Yes" A low growl. "Xena, stop moving" A laugh from the warrior.

"Gabrielle" The name rolled off the warrior's tongue in a low seduction tone. "That's the whole point" A loud smack as metal and wood met. Gabrielle took a step back, a grin on her lips. Xena showed her own grin. They both loved this for some reason. The bard always enjoyed sparring with Xena, but even more so now that they are lovers, all the moves and looks heighten. Gabrielle was able to pay attention better, figuring out Xena's moves faster and with better anticipation. The bard drove forward with her staff, Xena redirecting the thrust at the last minute.

"You know I've been coming up with this new move Xena" A laugh and then Xena's sword was stopped by the end of Gabrielle's staff at the side. Xena then spun around to try the opposite side to only have her sword stopped again. The warrior then brought her sword up to come down on the bard, Xena pressing her body in close to Gabrielle's.

"A new move huh?" A nod, Xena leaning her head in more, their weapons both above their heads in a test of strength. "I'd like to see it" The Amazon Queen gave a seductive smile throwing Xena off for a moment as Gabrielle took the opening to push against Xena. The warrior was pushed back by the drive from the bard's strength. The Warrior Princess spun the sword in her hand.

"It's a move especially made for you" Xena chuckled, then she came at the bard again this time low at her legs, Gabrielle jumping as the blade swiped under her feet in mid air. She landed to the ground and brought the end of her staff around to Xena's waist, connecting with the leather clad side. The warrior just winced in reaction and brought her blade down at an angle on the bard, Gabrielle just stopping it as she leaned in this time to Xena.

"For me huh? Gonna show me?" The smaller woman grinned and pressed hard into Xena, the warrior easily holding her ground. Their weapons between their bodies at an angle, the bard pressed hard into Xena, now their bodies touch between the weapons. Then without warning Gabrielle leaned up at the bent head to capture warm lips. The kiss was light for a few moments then the bard forced it on, it became burning and deep, tongues being sucked on. Xena's one free hand came up to push the bard's weapon out of the way, the bard easily agreeing. The tall woman then wrapped her one hand around Gabrielle's back as the kiss continued. Once it did end they were both breathless. "Nice move" The younger woman grinned. "And I hope it's only for me" Gabrielle's body prickled all over as her body was tightly pressed against the warrior's.

"Oh it certainly is" Dark blue eyes peered down at the small woman as the warrior grinned.

"Hmm I have a few techniques meant for you I'd like to show you" Then Gabrielle's free hand snaked up to Xena's breast armor. Her small fingers began to trace along the swirling brass armor on Xena's breasts.

"Mmmm I have a few others I'd like to show you" Xena leaned down to kiss her

soulmate deeply.

"Lets go then" Gabrielle chuckled deeply and the two lovers quickly made their way back to the Queen's hut for a bath and as some might call play.

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A tall sleek body rose up, water trickled down her nude body and into the water below her. Large hands reached behind to squeeze the water from her dark hair. Then beside her was a smaller woman who appeared and grinned up at her. Xena turned some and bent down to kiss her soulmate lightly then stepped out of the bathtub and next was the bard. The tall figure padded out of the washroom and into the main part of the hut to the table on the opposite side. Xena picked up two towels and turned back around, throwing one towel across the room. Gabrielle neatly caught it in mid air and the pair pressed time to ready themselves. Within a quarter of a candlemark they were dressed, the sun low in the sky. But for once Gabrielle wasn't in her normal attire, she had put on her own leathers. The bard turned from the saddlebags to see blue eyes gazing at her already, a slight flush covered the bard's cheeks. Xena just grinned at the Amazon Queen in her leathers. Then there was a tap at the door, Xena moving to the door to open it. In stepped a brown haired Amazon.

"Queen Gabrielle" The small woman looked to the Amazon.

"Solari, what brings you here?" The second in command grinned and watched out of the corner of her eye to see Xena moving to the table to sheath her sword and pick up her chakram. Solari then lifted up the mask in her hands.

"The Queen's mask" Gabrielle smiled and the Amazon moved to the bard, handing her the mask.

"Thank you Solari" The warrior turned around to watch her soulmate place the mask under her arms, curious. Ivy eyes looked back up to the Amazon with a smile. "So did Ephiny send you?" Solari smirked to her Queen.

"Actually yes, she's plotting on how to get you two back for the whole Mom thing" Both soulmates snickered and Xena shifted to her soulmate's side. "So what is the deal with all this Mom stuff?"

"Well I was sort of noticing the way Ephiny always is checking on Xena and I and seeking us out" The second in command chuckled at that.

"That's Ephiny, she's always looking for me" A pause. "I think to put me on patrol more then anything" Both Xena and Gabrielle smirked to each other.

"Maybe she isn't Solari" The Amazon looked up to the taller woman.

"And what makes you think that?" Xena grinned and shrugged her shoulders then she walked out of the hut, leaving her bard to do the detailed part.

"Well Solari, next time you're around Ephiny tell me if she glows or not?" Solari arched an eyebrow at the Queen and watched her leave to catch up with her soulmate. The Amazon shook her head and turned to leave the hut, wondering. Solari watched as the two women in front of her linked arms and then the Amazon finally caught up with the fast paced soulmates. Their shadows were all long, pointed in the direction of east, sunset soon. All three women entered into the food hut, which was fancied up for

tonight's occasion. The night for the begins of a war, one celebration Gabrielle never liked going though, but it had to be done. The bard didn't want the celebration, believing a war shouldn't be celebrated for yet Ephiny only came up with another excuse. The Queen arrival. Emerald eyes had rolled at that and Gabrielle said that the Amazons would find any excuse to have a party. Ephiny had just smirked at that, not denying it.

Once they entered the hut, the regent came stomping over to take the Queen's mask with a smile. Then the warrior, regent, and Queen all made their way to the head of the table. There on the table lay a scroll, a scroll to hire the mercenaries. Now all this scroll needed were three signatures to prove its truth and then the Amazon messengers to seek them out. Gabrielle looked down the long stretched table to see all the council members and a plethora of other Amazons. She quickly spotted Solari, Eponin, Lysia, and Teresa all together she had to smile at that. Teresa had faintly waved to the Queen, Gabrielle smiling directly at her then nodding her head. Then the Queen turns to the regent with a serious face, Xena on the bard's left side. Ephiny lifted the mask over the bard's head and spoke in a loud voice.

"Queen Gabrielle has return to us to protect the Nation from a threat. Hail Queen Gabrielle" Then there was loud cheers from all the Amazons, everybody's ears rung from the yells. The bard bent her head and slowly Ephiny placed the mask onto the bard's head, fitting perfectly as the old one once did. The mask covered Gabrielle's face, the long strands went down her back with an marshalling of colors, feathers coming off the sides. Slowly the Gabrielle turned to face all the Amazons the acclaim only becoming louder and then the regent held her hand up, immediately everybody was quiet. The Queen pushed the mask up over her head and placed her hands to her hips, her face stern.

"It has been decided, between myself, regent Ephiny and the Council that the Amazon Nation will hire a group of mercenaries select by Xena of Amphipolis. We expect a battle with the Warlord Okeanos within five days, maybe less" A pause as the bard searched her audience then spoke again in her loud tone. "Till that day comes, the Amazon Nation will take the necessary preparations for this battle. In the name of Artemis the Nation will succeed in stopping this warlord!" There was another loud round of yelling made by the Amazons as Gabrielle looked down to the scroll. She lifted up the quill on the right and signed the document as *Gabrielle, Queen of the Amazons* then the next signature was *Amazon Regent, Ephiny* the last signature to follow is *Xena of Amphipolis*. The bard folded the scroll up then sealed it with a small blotch of red wax then pressed the wax with the seal of the Amazon Nation. Last the scroll was tied with a red ribbon the ribbon lying over the seal. Gabrielle turned to her left near Xena was a middle aged medium height Amazon, the bard handed it to her and the Amazon nodded her head then disappeared out of the hut. By then the cheering had silenced and everybody began to move to get a well-prepared dinner.

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By now it was late night, dinner being over and the Amazons had moved outside. There was a large fire built in the middle of the village with Amazons dancing around it, Gabrielle watching intently. The bard sat on the ground, Xena right beside her, the small woman looked to her larger soulmate.

"I remember the last time I danced here" A dark eyebrow arched in questioning.

"I don't believe I was here" The bard thought then looked back to Xena.

"You weren't were you?" A shake of the head, but Xena noticed Gabrielle was a bit red.

"So what was so funny about the dance?" The Amazon Queen did a double take.

"Funny?" The words came out frazzled, "Um nothing funny about it, just one of those dances you know" The bard only grew another shade of red, not even the darkness of the night could hide it. Xena just smiled in amusement at her lover.

"Yeah I know, one of those dances where you get so caught up in dancing that you don't hear the music stop playing. One of those dances?" Red all the way to the roots. Gabrielle turned away for a moment then a large hand touched her farthest cheek and turned her face. Instantly warm lips seized the bard's and Gabrielle melted into the kiss. Once their kiss broke Gabrielle pulled back with dreamy eyes, Xena stood Gabrielle doing the same. The warrior took one of the bard's small hands in her own. "May I have this dance my Queen?" Xena had her head bowed to the bard, so Gabrielle placed her fingers under Xena's chin and lifted her head.

"It'd be my pleasure" Xena grinned and slowly back stepped into the ring of Amazons dancing. They moved with the Amazons, it was a slow dance. So the tall female pulled her soulmate in placing her arms around the bard's waist. Gabrielle wrapping her own arms around the warrior's leather clad waist. The pair moved to the music, slowly. Their bodies became lost in the rhythm and beat of the drums with the chanting. Eyes locked in a passionate gaze. Slowly the world around them faded out and it was just the soulmates and the music. Xena felt her body warm, her senses zenith, the air around her was warm with a light breeze that flowed around them, to only give the couple a sensation of flying.

The bard stared into deep twinkling moonstone eyes, Xena's dark mane lightly rolled in the wind, a smile creased her lips with her white teeth flashing in the night. Her lips were a vibrant red emphasizing her eyes and high cheek bones. Her armor glistened while the reflection of the fire swept across the brass armor drawing her out.

But the Nation's Queen, herself, was elegant on this night capturing an equal amount of fans as her tropical forest eyes flashed reflecting the moon. Her tan body was lustrous in the fire's light as her feather earring and her soulmate necklace glinted the fire light into cobalt eyes. Her own sunset hair waved in the light breeze her smile radiating with her slightly flushed cheeks.

The soulmates glided around the fire with the other Amazons. The on lookers became lost in the singled out pair by the way love illuminate off them. It protected them while at the same time it connected them closer and closer. Everybody in the Amazon Nation quickly realized that night that there was no force that could separate this pair.

The Queen of the Amazons is the Warrior Princess, the Warrior Princess is the Queen of the Amazons.

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The bard stared at her drawing in her diary for a few moments, then her mind began to pick up on the sound of the rhythmic sharpening. Green eyes lifted and so did blue

from across the room.

"Xena, what were Okeanos and Lykus doing when you left the battle scene?" The warrior shrugged her shoulders then went back to sharpening her sword.

"They were both charging each other like a bunch of idiots" Gabrielle grinned and looked back to her diary and began to write. She sat in the middle of their made bed while Xena sat at the table, sharpening her sword. The bard knew her soulmate was thinking, by the way her face was constructed, her shoulders ever so faintly slouched. The blond stopped her writing again as she stared at her drawing, in the book, of Okeanos she had done. She had to admit it looked pretty realistic. She chewed on the tip of her quill then went back to writing.

Ephiny seemed to be pleased with the idea of hiring a group of mercenaries. The council though took a little more work, but they agreed in the end. The one thing I am worried about is the mercenaries might not follow my orders. Mostly due to the fact, one I am a woman and second I come off as a weak Queen. But then Xena has commented to me before that I have strength in my stance, the way I talk, just carry myself in general, I hope she is right. Besides that, Xena will be there and she knows the leader of these mercenaries. Tomorrow we're expecting two scouts to return from their mission of spying on Okeanos. Hopefully the troops have lessened, but Xena seems to think he'll have new men, I have to agree. Find out tomorrow.

But Xena and I decided to try and get a few chuckles in the mean time. It's been dead obvious Solari and Ephiny are in-love, can feel it between them. They just don't seem to realize it or acting on it. Gee, sounds just like Xena and I not to long ago. Thank the gods I can laugh at all that now. But we're going to try and push the relationship some, I can see how happy Ephiny becomes anytime Solari is around.

Till the battle comes between the Amazons and Okeanos we'll just be preparing.

The bard closed her diary then hopped out of bed, her bare feet touching the smooth wood floor. She walked over to the table where her satchel lay, placing the journal and quill inside. Then Gabrielle moved to the other side of the table where her lover sat, still in full armor with weapons. Small hands fell onto the sword, stopping the whetstone from moving on it. Two sets of eyes locked.

"Thanks for the dance earlier" Xena smiled to her partner as she gazed up into beautiful spring eyes. She then sheathed her sword and placed the sharpening stone onto the table then retorted back.

"Thanks for dancing with me" The tall soulmate then rose up from her seat, Gabrielle watched as the strong dark form towered over her. It sent a small wave through her body at the strength of her soulmate. "I want to show you something Gabrielle, if you're up for it" The bard smiled up to her best friend and nodded.

"Anything"

"Get your boots" A nod of a blond head and the bard went to the foot of the bed to slip on her boots. She tied them and walked to Xena whom was by the door. The warrior opened the door and Gabrielle stepped through, Xena pursuing her. The door closed quietly as Gabrielle waited for her soulmate. The bard still had her Amazon Queen attire on, the mask naturally still back in the hut. Xena stepped up to her soulmate and

grasped her small warm hand, the warrior walking a little ahead to lead the bard. The small blond began to notice Xena was guiding her in the direction of the sparring fields. She gazed up to see that the night was clear, the air crisp. The stars above looked like droplets of water caught in the sky, it made her smile. Now they stood dead center in the practice field, the Warrior Princess stopped and pulled Gabrielle in front of her. The small woman willingly moved in front of Xena, strong arms engulfed her and pulled her in tight to a warm body. Xena bent her head down closer to Gabrielle's head. "See those three bright stars a little ways above the tree line?" Dazzling sea eyes looked up to those three stars.

"The three that are right in a row?"

"Yup all about the same brightness" Xena released one arm and pointed to relatively near the three aligned stars. "Now look down a little see those other two" A nod of the small head. "Then looked above them you see the three almost make a triangle"

"Yeah...it sort of looks like a person" The warrior's lips formed into a grin.

"Look at the star to the far right, then there are five other slightly faint stars that seem to make out a sword or a club?"

"Oh wow, I see it now" Xena's large arm snaked back around the bard's waist.

"It always reminded me of a warrior or a hunter" A deep breath from the warrior. "The three stars look like a belt"

"It does, when did you notice it?" A shrug of the shoulders.

"Back when I was a pirate. I always used those set of stars to know when fall was coming"

"How?" The tall woman grinned to herself over her curious bard.

"Well when I saw the constellation I began to always look to it and began to notice during the fall season they would touch the southern horizon fast at night" A pause. "But by summer the stars were never around unless it was right before dawn" Gabrielle stared at the diamonds caught in the sky that formed a warrior to her. She began to really like it, deciding the constellation will always remind her of her soulmate.

"I guess that was helpful huh?"

"Yes, considering my ship could be at seas for months never seeing land to catch sight of the leaves turning" The younger woman nodded her head and Xena lifted her head back up and ever so carefully Xena rested her chin on top of strawberry-blond hair. They stood in the moonlight that flooded over them making them glow. The stars twinkled and glowed, developing pictures in the sky, but the one warrior constellation is what stood out for the bard and her warrior. Neither spoke, becoming lost in the moment as it took over their world. For once Gabrielle forgot about her duties as a Queen, as a fighter, a bard. Her mind let go of her family's death and destruction to Poteidaia, Perdicus's death, and Xena's own death. The weight lifted from her as she felt Xena protect her and along with the knowledge Xena only loves who she is.

For Xena she too felt the weight of her past disappear in this rare moment. The deaths,

fight, battles, losses, pain all drifted into another place. All that mattered was now, this instant in time. They both knew the love they held was unbreakable. The soul that controls the mind and body and is reflected through the heart.

This small thing that the soulmates shared is a small entity of the heart.

"Want to lay down for a while?" Gabrielle smiled. It was late and they both knew it, but the bard rather spent time with her soulmate. She knows that precious moments were worth the lack of sleep.

"Yeah" Xena nodded her head and released the smaller woman, she walked off the dusty sparring field to the grass near the trees. She unbuckled her sword as she saw her soulmate step up beside her. Xena sat down and placed the sword down closer to her hands, the chakram being removed and placed on top of the sheath. The younger female then bent down only to have large hands pull her on top of a large body. The bard smiled to the twinkling blue eyes, her back now resting on top of Xena's body, her head directly between the warrior's breasts. The brass armor was cool but quickly warmed between the two bodies tightly pressed together. Legs intertwined as Xena's strong arms wrapped around the bard's mid-section to keep her warm. The bard's own hands went to Xena's thighs, lightly caressing them like they were delicate as glass itself. Deep ivy eyes looked to the moon a little to the right. "The moon's beautiful" Navy eyes look to the moon as well, a smile formed on the warrior's lips.

"It is, almost full"

"I always wondered why the moon would go through those different...stages" The tall woman considered the moon as she contemplated the bard's words.

"Not sure, but I know it has an effect on the tides" Green eyes blinked as brows furrowed.

"Really? I always thought that legend about Kripdis was true"

"It might, but when ever the moon is full there are tremendous low tides then when the moon is new there are extreme high tides" A pause. "It makes you wonder if the moon has anything to do with the tide changes"

"I could see that" Silence and the bard began to chuckle.

"What?"

"It would make for a worse story though if it were true" The warrior chuckled a few times.

"This is true my bard" A comfortable silence fell once again and the pair enjoyed the embrace. But Gabrielle's eyes were becoming heavy and she began to drift to sleep after the day's excitement. Xena felt her bard's chest rise and fall at a slow speed, she smiled to herself. Ever so carefully Xena sat up with the bard still soundlessly sleeping in her arms. She released one arm and picked up her sword and buckled it on with both hands while the bard continued to lean into her. The warrior hooked her chakram on and moved one arm under Gabrielle's legs and slipped the other behind Gabrielle's back. The Warrior Princess stood up the smaller woman curled up in her arms, a look of peace on her face. Xena stared at the beautiful face, her mind relaxed to see that peaceful look, it hadn't been there since Xena's death. Xena only hoped the

bard was through the worst of the pain, the healing needed to begin.

Xena made her way back to the hut with her soulmate in her arms. She quietly entered the hut and placed Gabrielle onto the bed and then removed her leather boots. The tall female placed the boots at the foot of the bed and then proceeded to remove her armor, boots and weapons. Within a few heartbeats Xena was just in her leathers and crawled into the bed beside her lover.

"Xena?" A warm body pressed into the bard's back.

"I'm here" The small woman rolled to her right to face her partner. She closed her eyes again and wrapped her arms around Xena, the warrior doing the same. One of the warrior's hands went to the strawberry-blond hair to stroke it, Gabrielle going back into her serene sleep.

~*~*~*~

A large knock at the wooden door rung through the room, the small bard rolled out of bed. She groggily walked over to the door and opened it a little. The sunlight from the early morning blinded Gabrielle for a moment then her eyes adjusted. There stood the regent with a serious face.

"Gabrielle the scouts have returned with news of Okeanos" The Queen nodded her head.

"Alright I'll be there in few moments" Ephiny nodded her head and turned on her heels, the bard closed the door and turned back around. Her soulmate slept on the bed soundlessly, at least is looked it. The small woman made her way to the foot of the bed to get her boots and sat down with them in a chair by the table. She quickly tied her laces as her mind tried to wake up.

"Where you going?" Small fingers tied the knot and Gabrielle looked up to a propped up warrior.

"The scouts have returned"

"Okay" Xena began to move out of bed.

"Xena you don't have to come, its pretty early" The tall form stood up in her leathers and looked to the bard.

"No I need to come" Gabrielle nodded and watched as her soulmate quickly moved to her boots. That gave the bard a few seconds to try and wake up. Then the warrior went to her armor putting it on, immediately Gabrielle got up to buckle the armor on. Afterwards Xena grabbed her chakram and sword while Gabrielle retrieved her staff and they left.

~*Part 12*~

The tall Amazon stared at the other two Amazons about twenty paces away, out of earshot. They were the scouts. Lysia watched as the regent stepped up to them and began talking. That's exactly when Teresa stepped up beside the tall Amazon with a smile.

"Hey Teresa"

"Morning" Now both Amazons stared to the returned scouts and regent. They watched as the Queen and her soulmate came stalking over with serious faces. "She looks a lot like you" Lysia looked to the smaller Amazon then back to the scene her eyes falling on the Warrior Princess.

"She does"

"Hmm, except she's a little taller" Lysia replied with a grin.

"Xena also has black hair and more blue eyes"

"She does"

"Teresa, I'm sure she's a better fighter too" Teresa grinned up to her taller friend. Both Amazons chuckled. "But I wouldn't mind sparring with her some day, be a good lesson" Teresa nodded her head.

"Lysia, I think you'll not be able to walk for a few days" A huff from the taller brown haired Amazon.

"Queen Gabrielle though on the other hand is a great staff fighter, I won't forget that" Teresa nodded her head.

"Yeah I guess you think different now eh?" Lysia glared down at Teresa, the smaller Amazon thinking she might have over step her line. But Lysia then grinned to her with sparkling eyes.

"I do, I vowed my life to her" Teresa nodded her head twice. "Come on we better go find Solari" Teresa looked to the group of Amazons near them. All of them conversing.

"Yeah, I'm surprised Solari isn't over there with them" Lysia chuckled and the two women began to move from their spot.

"You'd think so since Ephiny is there. Always see them together" The two new Amazons of the village disappeared from the scene, the boots scuffing along.

"Hold on, how many days ride is he from the village?" The two scouts looked to the Queen. Both were short, one had brown hair, the other blond. Both of them were not young nor that old, they looked to be in their twenty seventh summer.

"We believe they'll be here in two days...Gabrielle" The bard nodded her head and looked to Xena. Then back to the scouts again.

"Were you able to get a count of the men?" The brown haired Amazon nodded her head and retorted.

"There were a total of six hundred, well equipped and three quarters looked trained" The Warrior Princess then cut in.

"All footmen?" The brown haired Amazon shook her head with a sigh.

"No there were hundred on horse back, they're well prepared" Ephiny nodded her head and looked to the two scouts.

"Thank you both, let us know of any changes" The two scouts nodded their heads and made their ways to the food hut. Gabrielle looked up to her soulmate, the warrior's face etched with seriousness.

"Xena, will the mercenaries be that much of an advantage?" Cobalt eyes looked down to the bard.

"We need any advantage we can get right now" Gabrielle looked down to the ground.

"The Nation doesn't have enough fighters"

"No, but we have strategy we'll have to just out smart Okeanos" The bard nodded her head as did Ephiny.

"I'm going to go find Solari, Eponin and the Council Members, update them" Xena and her smaller soulmate looked to the regent.

"Thanks Ephiny" The curly-haired blond looked to the Queen and smiled then went off on her mission. Green eyes looked up to the warrior.

"Is two days enough time for the mercenaries to get here?" Xena's eyes shut for an instant then reopened.

"I hope so, depends on how far away they are and how fast they can move" Gabrielle nodded her head, her stomach tightening into a bigger knot.

"Xena can we really do this?" It was a low whispered question.

"Its going to be close, but we'll stop them" The small Queen nodded her head and she felt a large hand on her shoulder. "Either way my bard, we're going to live through this" A small smile from Gabrielle. "Lets go get something to eat" And that's precious what the soulmates did. We can not assume exactly the number of people whom will lay on the ground by the end of this battle and will never rise up from the ground. We can not guess the number of bodies that will become lifeless over one countries desire to rule another. But we can naturally assume that our heroes will win out this future battle. Because to us they are the greater good.

~*~*~*~

By that afternoon all the Amazons of the Nation were being trained. Their weapons and leathers prepared for battle along with their minds and bodies. The village was rowdy and everybody mentally prepared for the battle. Xena, Gabrielle and the regent went over their forces, figuring them. There were twenty-five archers, thirty horseback riders, and then two hundred on foot. The only questions that were left were; who is leading the Amazons? How are we attacking Okeanos with the forces? Where are the mercenaries figuring into the plan? And where is Gabrielle, Ephiny and Xena going to be located in the battle? Those all being the main questions. So Gabrielle in the end had rolled up the map of the area to take to her hut for the night and work on the plans with Xena. In the morning she would consult Ephiny since the regent would be to busy during the day prepping the Amazons. The soulmates for their part went into the woods just on the edge of the village to spar. By early afternoon the pair had returned. The Queen of the Amazons and the Warrior Princess made rounds through the village, watching the preparations. The soulmates stood at the edge of the sparing field, watching.

"Xena, what if we have the archers out first?" Blue eyes studied the fighters on the practice field.

"Begin the attack?"

"Yes and have their arrow tips poisoned" The bard's eyes narrowed for a moment. "Let Okeanos get a taste of poisoned arrows" A deep breath. "Or we could use the archers to stop the cavalry?" Xena didn't respond right away, her mind thinking the idea out.

"That would probably serve us better" A pause. "Keep the archers in the trees to take out the horses then a few warriors up in the trees to jump any riders" The warrior crossed her arms against her chest while the bard continued to lean on her staff.

"What of the mercenaries?"

"I'm not sure, either way they'll be a surprise attack" The bard nodded her head. The Queen spotted the regent mingling with the Amazons, then she made her way over to Solari and Epinion. "Come on" The bard looked up to her soulmate and nodded, the bard following her partner. Xena made a beeline to the Healer's Hut, her gate broad. They both stepped inside to see the healer raise her head.

"Queen Gabrielle" The bard smiled to the healer.

"Hi Eilis"

"What may I help you with Gabrielle?" The bard looked up to her soulmate, Xena looking to the older healer.

"Do we have any hemlock?" The healer nodded her head to the warrior in answer.

"Yes we do, plenty in stock, how much you need Xena?" The warrior thought for a moment.

"I'd say enough to kill two hundred" The healer's eyes widen then she looked to the Queen.

"Do we have enough Eilis?" The healer nodded her head.

"Actually we do have plenty. For the battle?" Gabrielle nodded her head. The warrior moved to a shelf by the wall, analyzing the jars with labels. She plucked at one jar, holding it in the palm of her hand. She read the label and grinned. Xena turned around with a twinkle to her blue eyes.

"Mind if I borrow some of this Eilis?" The healer looked to the jar and smiled.

"Go right ahead"

"Thanks I'll bring it back tomorrow" Eilis nodded her head and then looked back to the Queen.

"Exactly how are you going to use the hemlock?"

"We're putting it on arrow heads" The old healer grinned.

"Oh I see, okay I'll prepare the hemlock poison today and report to..." The bard finished the sentence.

"Eponin will be in charge of the weapons" The healer nodded her head.

"Okay, I'll have it done soon as possible Gabrielle"

"Thank you Eilis" The two women left the hut to leave Eilis to prepare the death poison for the archers. Once Xena's boots hit the ground from the steps of the hut she looked to her soulmate.

"Lets go to the artillery hut, want to pick something up" The small blond arched an eyebrow but nodded and the pair made their way to where the weapons of village were stored. Xena ducked in with Gabrielle right behind her. The hut twinkled for a moment with all the metal. The bard remembered the last time she was here when she'd first received her weapon of choice as the Amazon Princess. The warrior scanned the weapons searching for something, the bard not sure what she was looking for.

"What you trying to find Xena?" Blue eyes locked on her prize and Xena made her way through the hut into the middle.

"Here it is" The Warrior Princess lifted the wood top off the small box on the middle table. Inside contained around fifty small arrowheads that had handles. Gabrielle knew from experience that they were meant to be small to conceal then throw a short distance at a target. Small hands picked up one from the box and gazed at it, her thumb running on the edge, finding it sharp to the touch.

"Xena what's this for?" The warrior grinned as she collected five out of the box and closed it. Gabrielle then placed the one she had in her hand into Xena's hand. Xena handed the jar from earlier, in her other hand, to her soulmate. The Queen read the label on the front of the jar. "*Ipecac*" The bard wrinkled her nose as she tried to think of what drug that was.

"It causes vomiting" Then it hit Gabrielle and she looked up.

"Xena you're not going to?" The warrior chuckled some.

"I am, Okeanos deserves it" The younger woman shook her head and handed the jar back to the grinning Xena. The pair stepped out of the weapons hut and into the late sun. "Lets go back to the hut so I can drop these off" Gabrielle nodded her head and they migrated to the Queen's hut.

~*Part 13*~

The moon hung low in the eastern sky, full, acting as a light source to all that moved in the night. Within a vast wooden lay a tribe of women and in one single hut was their pacing Queen. Her head down as she paced in front of a tall warrior whom sat in a seat beside a round table. There was a worn map on the table, unrolled. The Queen wasn't much for fighting let alone tactics on how to fight a battle. That's where the warrior came into play, she being an ex-warlord with years of experience.

Xena looked up to her pacing soulmate. She then sighed and stood up from where she sat, Gabrielle coming to a stop to look at the ex-warlord. It was early night and they

wanted to finish this quickly. The bard took a few steps to her lover and looked down to the map, Xena doing the same. They both looked to where Okeanos planned to come from, west of the Nation, through the Amazon Mountains.

"Xena what if we place the mercenaries right at the base of the mountains?" The warrior shook her head.

"No I think it would be more beneficial to keep them as a surprise attack from an angle" Xena then pointed to the mountains. "Personally I'd like to take five archers and thirty fighters and go into the mountains to nip away at some of Okeanos' lines"

"You think that'll really help or get those warriors killed being in an open spot? Those mountains are barren" Xena looked to her partner then her eyes stared back to the map.

"Not if I go" The bard looked to her soulmate, studying her profile then blue eyes looked up to lock contact with her.

"Xena" An extreme breath from the bard. "I don't know if it would be safe"

"That's why I should go, it be good to produce weak points in his lines so we can destroy Okeanos" They still had their eyes lock, Gabrielle not at all content with the idea. Xena turned her body to face her partner and placed a hand to each of the bard's shoulders. "Gabrielle, I'll be fine" Emerald eyes dropped.

"I just don't like not having you by my side so I can see what's happening" The warrior smiled to her friend.

"I know, but you know I can take care of myself" A snort from the smaller woman.

"For the most part" A deep chuckle from Xena and the pair looked back to the map. "Okay, what else?" A stare of the map. "I am left with twenty archers and a hundred and seventy fighters" The bard's head turned some as she studied the map more. "The twenty of the archers in the trees with...twenty fighters. Let see then the riders...thirty correct?" A nod of Xena's head. "You think we should have them mixed in or as back up?" The Warrior Princess crossed her arms against her armored chest.

"Back up, always good to have that" Gabrielle nodded her head and strolled over to her satchel. She removed her quill and a new scroll. She then jotted down her final order of troops.

1. *Thirty warriors and Five archers in the mountains under Xena's command.*
2. *Twenty archers with Twenty warriors in the trees in the Amazon forest under Solari's command.*
3. *One hundred Fifty warriors on foot in the Amazon forest under Gabrielle's command. -Main Force*
4. *Thirty riders as back up under Regent Ephiny's command.*
5. *Mercenaries will be under Queen Gabrielle's command or Eponin's.*

The bard looked up from the scroll and placed the quill on top and pushing it to the

side of the table.

"We should place the riders directly behind the main force Gabrielle" The bard nodded her head.

"What of the fighters on the ground?" A pause. "A hundred fifty, three waves?" Xena studied the map as she considered the numbers.

"Tight or loose?"

"Tight would probably be to hard with the trees" The warrior nodded in agreement.

"So loose to start then from there we should let them have free rein to fight" Xena uncrossed her arms from her chest and rested her hands on her hips.

"That would be the best way to go. Then just have the force in the trees moving freely under Solari's command"

"Ephiny's cavalry will move when I signal them to"

"Yes, that would be the best idea, have her riders split on each side of the fight equal then sweep in"

"What about you Xena?" The ex-warlord looked to her soulmate for briefness then back to the map.

"We'll come from behind, try to take out as many as possible then once it gets messy I'll let my fighters have free reign" The Queen nodded then picked up the scroll once more with the quill and jotted down information again.

1. Xena's fighters will surprise attack Okeanos from mountains then follow behind the troops and lastly intermingle in the battle.

2. Solari's warriors and archers will stay among the trees, unless commanded otherwise, to take out as many of Okeanos' men as possible with hemlock poisoned arrowheads. Main target is Calvary of Okeanos.

3. The Main Force will be broken into three loose waves of fifty warriors, once battle is well engaged then the warriors have free rein to fight.

4. Ephiny's Calvary will be signal by Gabrielle and split equally to come in by the sides of the battle and work in.

5. Mercenaries will come from weakest side as surprise attack.

The Amazon Queen rolled up the scroll and then the map and placed her scroll back into the satchel. Gabrielle looked to her soulmate with a tired look. Xena pulled her lover into a hug, the bard resting her head on her lover's chest.

"Why don't you change into something comfortable. I'll get the fireplace going and some tea" Gabrielle looked up and nodded.

"Deal" The warrior released her bard and stalked over to the fireplace, throwing in some wood to start it soon. Gabrielle went to their things, she retrieved one of her soulmate's shifts and then went to the bed. The blond sat down and leaned forward to untie her boots then take them off. Standing back up, the small woman untied her

halter-top then slipped out of her skirt. Putting up her arms, the soft white shift slipped down her smooth body. Gabrielle reached behind and pulled her hair out from under the shift. She looked to her soulmate whom was standing in front of the fire, her blue eyes fixed on the growing flames. The small woman quietly came up behind the warrior and reached up to unhook the sheath. The bard felt the weight of the sword in her hands and watched as Xena lifted her chakram from the small clasp. Small hands took the round weapon and moved to place them on table. Gabrielle looked to the fire as she walked back to her lover, hanging over it was a small pot of water. The warrior then bent down in front of the fireplace and removed the boiling pot of water from the fireplace.

Xena filled the cups while the bard gathered the tea and honey. The taller woman handed the mugs of boiling water to the bard. Gabrielle put in the tea then placed put in some honey and stirred it, as she did Xena stood back up with a smile. The warrior walked to the foot of the bed and removed her boots placing them besides the bard's. Her long fingers then began to work on the buckles of the brass breastplate, but small fingers took her job. The warrior grinned to herself, Gabrielle working on the buckles while the warrior removed her wrist and armbands. Once that was done with, Xena walked over to the table again and dropped everything into a chair. She turned around just in her leathers to the fireplace to see her soulmate moving back to the fire. The tall form walked over to the fireside and sat down on the warming wood floor. She crossed her legs and soon the bard sat in her lap with a mug of tea in each hand.

"Tomorrow is going to be really busy" Xena nodded her head in agreement.

"That it will be" The warrior took a sip of the warm tea, she could feel it travel through her body warming her insides.

"Xena what happens if things don't work out?" The older woman had one arm wrapped around her bard's mid-section. Gabrielle in the warrior's lap her head resting on Xena's right shoulder, both her hands holding the mug.

"They will" The bard's right thumb rubbed up down on the side of the mug as she stared at the fire then retorted back.

"What if it doesn't?" A deep breathe from Xena, her mug settling onto the wooden floor.

"If it doesn't then we'll be out of here" The mug moved down from Gabrielle's lips as she considered that.

"Xena we can't just..." She is cut off.

"We won't be running Gabrielle, if things look real bad then we'll get who we can and get out of there" A pause. "It won't do us any good to get killed, we can always get more help to stop him" The small woman nodded her head. "We'll stop him" The Queen nodded her head and both females took another sip of their honey tea. They studied the fire, feeling it warm their bodies along with each other.

"Winter is coming huh?" A smile from Xena.

"Yeah it is, I like winter"

"Me too, not sticky like the summer" A smile formed on the bard's lips. "Then there's

always Solstice, always been my favorite" The warrior's mug found the floor again as she replied.

"I use to love Solstice when I was a child"

"Yeah it's when the family comes together. Lila and I always had so much fun together" A twinkle had entered Xena's crystal eyes, but it wasn't noticed by Gabrielle. So the conversation went on.

"This Solstice should be interesting"

"Why you say that?"

"Well I thought we would spend it at mother's" The bard quickly swallowed her tea and replied.

"Really? Sort of like a vacation huh?" A large smile formed on Xena's lips.

"Thought you would like that. We need one" A snort from the bard.

"Especially after this fiasco and we were suppose to have one" A deep chuckle came from the warrior as she lifted her three-quarters empty mug. She drank from it then it went back to the floor.

"We need to get ourselves some cloaks, I think this winter is going to be bad" The bard's brows furrowed.

"You think so? I mean the leaves are turning now but the air's still warm"

"But during the day, the nights are quite cool. There'll be a cold snap and it'll be the end of the warm days" The small woman nodded as she swallowed her empty mug going off to the side.

"Time to pull out the furs" Xena grinned as her drained mug was placed beside the bard's. Her arm encircled the bard's stomach pulling her in more, Gabrielle's head finally staying on Xena's shoulder to rest.

"Do the Amazons have any cloaks?" Gabrielle's eyes unfocused for a moment as she thought.

"Actually they do now that I think about it"

"Good" The bard giggled for a second.

"Xena, how long you think we'll stay in Amphipolis?" The Warrior Princess shrugged her shoulders.

"How ever long we like" The bard sighed as her warm body relaxed.

"That sounds great"

"Mother makes great nutbread by the way" Emerald eyes sparkled.

"Oh really?"

"Uh huh" The Amazon Queen grinned to herself.

"Mmm, I'll have to trade secrets with your mom for nutbread" The warrior arched an eyebrow.

"Secrets?" Gabrielle nodded as her eyes drifted shut.

"Secrets about your appetite" The warrior laughed and smiled.

"What good would that do her?" The bard's eyes drifted open again and looked sidelong to the warrior, a grin on the bard's lips.

"Xena we both know that's the route to your good moods" Xena grinned back and leaned in to kiss her bard lightly.

"And your good moods too" Green eyes rolled and her head fell back onto the tall woman's shoulders.

"That and enough sleep" Xena nodded her head, her bard's small fingers gently stroked the warrior's large hands. "Mmm your temper"

"My temper, what's that have to do with anything?" A smile just began to form on the crease of Gabrielle's lips.

"Xena that temper of yours puts you in a bad mood for an entire day"

"Oh? And like yours won't?" The smile increased.

"But I can get out of mine" Xena huffed for a moment.

"Well I guess you'll just have to get me out of mine" The bard looked to her partner then back to the fire.

"I can think of a number things that would do it" The older woman grinned.

"I bet" Gabrielle chuckled some, her eyes slowly closed again.

"Tired?" The smaller woman nodded her head in answer.

"Long day"

"Mmm, it was. Want to go to bed?" Gabrielle shook her head but a yawn caught up with her making Xena grin.

"To comfortable" Xena chuckled. Silence fell but then Gabrielle quietly spoke.

"Xena?"

"Yes?"

"What's this mercenary guy's name?"

"His name is Criostoir" The bard took a deep breath.

"Criostoir, interesting name. Nice guy?" The warrior shrugged her shoulders.

"He was smart but very precious about things, enjoyed his work, overall he was nice if you were nice to him" Gabrielle nodded and Xena went on. "Met him after I became a

pirate. When I did land my ship for attacks occasionally I hired him to help with the attack against any large villages" The bard nodded her head.

"Large mercenary band he has?" The warrior's mind work fast to recall recent information of him.

"The last time I heard he had a band of hundred men or so"

"All foot"

"No I believe all cavalry"

"That will be helpful if they still are" Xena nodded her head, completely understanding. "It will even more so if his band is larger"

"It could be, he was always good at what he did, cost quite a bit to hire" The bard chuckled at that.

"Considering how much you took from Okeanos to pay for these mercenaries it wouldn't surprise me" The warrior smiled.

"Well if the Roman Senate finds out, that'll just tick them off" Emerald eyes opened again to looked to Xena.

"You think after this battle the Romans will back off from Greece?" A sigh escaped Xena's lips.

"I doubt it. So as long as Caesar is alive Rome won't give up"

"Cut off the head of the snake and then you kill the rest of it" Xena nodded her head and Gabrielle looked back to the fire.

"Afraid so"

"But he's only one man Xena. How can we get to him?" The warrior's lips curved into an evil grin.

"We don't, we let him come to us" The bard nodded her head gingerly then slumped into Xena's embrace, her body wearing out. "Go to sleep love" A small smile slipped onto the bard's lips as she let her eyes close shut. Xena stared into the slowly dying fire as she felt her lover's breathing slow up and her body relaxed while in the warrior's embrace. Xena looked to her soulmate for a moment and smiled then looked back to the fire. For a half of a candlemark the pair stayed like that then Xena felt her own body's tiredness. So she lifted the bard in her arms and gently placed her in the bed then she herself crawled under the covers. The bard subconsciously snuggled into Xena's body, the warrior wrapping an arm around her soulmate's waist. Soon the warrior fell into a deep sleep with her bard.

Part 5

Section 5

~*Part 14*~

The regent looks skeptically from the bard's hand writing to the map again then back to the scroll.

"Gabrielle, I agree with everything but Xena going into the mountains" The bard took a deep breath and retorted.

"Ephiny, Xena will be fine"

"It's not Xena I am worried about its my Amazons" The blond arched an eyebrow at her Amazon friend.

"They'll be fine Ephiny so as long as they follow Xena's orders" The curly-blond crossed her arms against her chest and straightened her back.

"I don't know Gabrielle"

"Ephiny?" Amber eyes still stared at the map. "Ephiny" The regent look to the Queen. "Xena can handle this, you know that. She's been a warrior all her life practically" The regent took a deep breath and thought for a moment.

"Alright Gabrielle but she better be damn careful with the warriors" Gabrielle smiled to Ephiny.

"She will, I'll remind her too" And a pause. "She's not stupid" A snort from the regent.

"Quite the opposite huh?" The bard grinned.

"Now is everything else meet your approval?" Ephiny studied the scroll again over the basic plans then she nodded her head.

"Looks good to me...daughter" Emerald eyes widen and the regent chuckled. "Servers you right"

"You know that's incest Ephiny" The regent brought up one eyebrow in question. "If Xena and I are your daughters and her and I are...lovers" A blush from the bard. Both of Ephiny's brows went up.

"Gabrielle it's a joke" The bard nodded her head quickly and rubbed her neck for a second then averted her eyes back to the map and scroll.

"So plans sound fine?" The regent grinned at the change of subject.

"Yup, sound great" The bard nodded her head and rolled up the scroll and left the map to Ephiny.

"Glad I caught you before things got to busy. I am going to go find Xena"

"Alright, talk to you later" The bard nodded and headed out of the regent's hut. Ephiny heard the door shut and she shook her head for a moment then chuckled.

~*~*~*~

Xena dipped the second to last throwing arrow into the thick red liquid. She lifted it up from the bowl and held it up, a little of the thick liquid running down. But it all quickly dried onto the tip, the arrow soon found itself placed down to the other four red tipped throwing stars. The hut door swung open and a small form entered. A large

hand picked up the last star arrow and was dipped into the liquid.

"Well Ephiny is a bit stingy about letting you go into the mountains" The hut door closed with a thud.

"I kind of figured she would and that's why I let you talk to her" Blue eyes looked up from the drying tipped arrow.

"Yeah well I think she's okay with the idea" Xena grinned and replied.

"Well its not like she could say no to the Queen" The bard rolled her eyes.

"Or my temper that would have flared otherwise" The warrior nodded her head and placed the sixth star arrow by the other five on the wood table. She strolled into the washroom to rid of the red liquid. Xena returned to see her lover laying on the bed, eyes closed.

"You feeling okay?" New spring eyes opened up to stare at the wood ceiling.

"Yeah, just not in the mood for any of this" Xena nodded her head in understanding. "But its got to be done" Gabrielle sat up. "So what were you doing?" The warrior picked up one of the arrows and handed to her bard.

"Tipped it with the Ipecac" Gabrielle nodded her head and studied it for a moment then handed it back to Xena. "Plan on using it to put Okeanos out of commission during some of the fight"

"Won't kill him?" The Warrior Princess turned back around from placing the arrow back on the table.

"No, just make him puke for a number of candlemarks" The smaller woman nodded her head. Xena then noticed that amount of stress in her lover's eyes. "Hey, how about I return this Ipecac back to the healer's hut and we'll go to the edge of the forest to spar for a little?" Gabrielle's eyes looked up from the wood floor to her lover, a small smile formed on the bard's lips.

"Yeah?"

"Why not? Ephiny can handle things here for a while" The Queen nodded her head and hopped off the bed.

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The warrior sheathed her sword and smiled to her soulmate.

"Not bad" The bard grinned and leaned against her staff, her bangs a bit wet from perspiration.

"Yeah you didn't do to bad either" Xena laughed and took a step forward and gave her bard a hug.

"Let's take a breather"

"I'm all for it" So Xena walked over to a tree and sat down on the cool ground her back against the smooth tree. The bard stalked over and dropped her staff next to the warrior and Xena propped her legs up. Gabrielle sat down between her partner's legs

and leaned into Xena. The warrior is feeling extremely warm from the sparring. New spring eyes drifted shut, the bard's arm crossing against her chest. Her mind began to drift back to the night in the camp before Gabrielle had been kidnapped.

"Xena I don't know how to deal with all this" The warrior's eyes dropped to the ground, her arms crossing against her chest. She looked back up to her soulmate, locking eyes with her.

"Tell me what you're thinking, feeling. Please get those emotions out Gabrielle" The bard dropped her own eye contact and started pacing again, her hands on her hips now. She brought one hand up to go into her blond hair again. Tears started to slowly trickle down her cheeks.

The bard's face shifted into sadness, her eyes tightly closed. Her memories glided past.

"I want to kill her so bad Xena, so badly. I still see her in my dreams, hear her cynical laugh, her voice calling my name, see her cold white glossed eyes. Gods I want to kill the murdering bitch" The warrior kept her eyes lock with the sea green ones before her, she replied but her voice was becoming shaky.

"I know you Gabrielle, you can make it through this. I remember once a wise friend told me that the cycle of hatred has to end and the only way to do that is through love and forgiveness. Please don't give up that fight" The bard nodded some, a very faint smile to her lips.

Gabrielle's body loosened up some, her memories of that night still drifted to her.

"Only if you're beside me Xena. I can't do it without my soulmate" The tall warrior let her tears begin to trickle down her cheeks. Gabrielle threw herself into Xena's arms, the ex-warlords arms immediately wrapping around her tightly.

"I'll never leave your side my bard"

The Amazon Queen took a deep breath her body feeling protected. She wasn't sure if she was going to start crying again, but she held it back. Her memories went back a little in the conversation that night.

"Hate myself" Gabrielle looked up into blue eyes, pain evident in her emerald eyes. Xena uncrossed her arms and then quietly replied with a question.

"Why?" Now it was the younger female whom crossed her arms against her chest.

"I hate myself for leaving them, if I never had it wouldn't have ever happened" The warrior nodded.

The bard's brows furrow at something in that memory, her mind replayed that scene over again.

"Hate myself" Gabrielle looked up into blue eyes, pain evident in her emerald eyes. Xena uncrossed her arms and then quietly replied with a question.

"Why?" Now it was the younger female whom crossed her arms against her chest.

"I hate myself for leaving them, if I never had it wouldn't have ever happened" The warrior nodded. The look of pain just faintly crossed the warrior's face, her right fist

clenched together for a moment then unclenched.

Gabrielle held that image in her head of Xena's face looking like she was in pain. Her mind remembered the set of blue eyes at that instant.

Blue eyes went distant for a second, self-anger filled them. It was if those words stung the warrior like a million arrows, her guilt coming to life.

Immediately Gabrielle's eyes flew open, she mentally slapped herself. *Xena thinks I'd rather have been at Poteidaia then travelling with her.*

"Gabrielle you okay?" The bard sat up from her spot and turned to face Xena, on both of her knees.

"Xena, remember the night in the camp before I was taken?" The warrior's eyebrow's creased together as she nodded.

"Yeah I remember, why?"

"Well remember how I said I hate myself and you asked why then I said if I had left then it wouldn't have happened" The bard quickly noticed those blue eyes picked up a hint of distance to them

"Yes"

"I'm sorry"

"What?" The Amazon Queen took the warrior's hands holding them.

"I know that must have hurt you. I didn't mean for it to sound like I'd rather be at Poteidaia then with you" The warrior's cobalt eyes lost their distance and filled with love.

"Thanks" Gabrielle smiled and got one reflected back. She leaned in and lightly kissed Xena on lips.

"Gods I'm sorry Xena, I want to be with you, no where else"

"I know, I only want to be with you my bard" The older woman pulled her partner in, they hugged. "We better get back" The smaller woman sighed and released her friend and stood up. Gabrielle snatched her staff up from the ground and lowered her right hand to Xena. The warrior grinned and took the offered hand and was hauled up to her feet.

"I'm probably the only person that gets to do that" Xena arched an eyebrow.

"Do what?"

"Help lift you up" Xena laughed at the smug look and her bard's words. They both started walking to the Amazon village.

"You are"

~*~*~*~

"How far away is he?" The scout looked to the regent with a serious face.

"He's about a day's ride. We're both positive Okeanos will be here by late tomorrow morning" Ephiny nodded.

"Okay thanks, both of you get back out there and keep an eye on him" The scouts both nodded and began to move.

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Gabrielle chuckled then lifted her head up after hearing Xena's laughs stop. She figured out why real fast. The bard watched as the two scouts nodded to Ephiny and hurried off.

"Ephiny!" The regent whirled around to see the bard and her warrior. "What did the scouts say?" Ephiny quickly powered walked to the Queen to answer her.

"They said Okeanos will probably be here late tomorrow morning" The threesome stood only a pace away from each other.

"Is his troops larger?" The curly-blond looked up to Xena and replied.

"No, still the same" Then the regent looked to Gabrielle again. "We haven't heard anything of the mercenaries yet"

"Hades, nothing?"

"Afraid not Gabrielle"

"Xena?" The warrior looked down at the bard. "You think we'll still be able to win this one without the mercenaries?"

"If we're smart about it, yes" Gabrielle nodded her head and Ephiny looked up to the Warrior Princess.

"I heard you're taking some of my warriors into the mountains"

"I am"

"Be careful with them Xena. The mountains are barren and it's easy to spot people" The warrior nodded.

"I know Ephiny" The warrior brought up one hand to fall on Ephiny's shoulder, she looked deep into amber eyes. "Trust me Ephiny" The regent slightly smiled.

"I do Xena" The warrior smiled and nodded while releasing the Amazon.

"Ephiny?" The regent looked to the bard. "Has Eponin heard from Eilis?"

"No why?" Ephiny's face brightened in realization. "The hemlock arrows right?" Gabrielle nodded. "No I haven't heard anything about it"

"Okay, Xena and I will go take care of that" The curly-blond nodded. "How is everything else looking?"

"Pretty good, everybody is in top notch performance, Eponin and Solari are busy right now organizing the weapons and forces"

"Good, how about in...a quarter of a candlemark Xena and I will meet up with you, Solari and Eponin to go over everything"

"Sounds like a plan" Gabrielle smiled

"Great" Ephiny nodded and she hustled off to take care of any last minute things. The warrior and bard began to make their trek to the Healer's Hut.

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Eilis looked up as a dark haired female entered with a blond right behind.

"Eilis?" The healer smiled to the pair.

"Gabrielle, what can I help you with?" The bard stepped up to the Amazon standing up behind the desk.

"Do you get the hemlock prepared?"

"Yes I did as a matter of fact, just awhile ago, took it over to Eponin" Gabrielle smiled.

"So that's where you were earlier?"

"Yes, I'd went to drop it off" Eilis looked up to the tall warrior. "By the way thank you for returning the Ipecac"

"You got it? Thank you" The healer nodded to Xena.

"No problem" Then the healer looked back to the Queen. "Is there anything else you need Gabrielle?" The bard smiled.

"No, just wanted to check and make sure you got the hemlock to Eponin. Thank you for doing that on short notice" Eilis smiled.

"You're welcome, that's what I am here for"

"Xena and I have to go"

"Good luck with everything Queen Gabrielle and Xena" The bard waves with a smile and the two soulmates left the hut. They then made a beeline for the sparring field. The bard stopped in her tracks all of a sudden, Xena took another step then stopped and asked.

"What's wrong?" Gabrielle snapped her fingers.

"Forgot about the scrolls with the plans. Um you go ahead Xena, tell them I'll be right there" The warrior nodded her head and walked on to the practice field, the bard power walking off to the Queen's Hut.

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Ephiny nodded her head then looked up to catch sight of a leather-clad warrior coming her way, she smiled. Xena came up to the group with an expressionless face. The regent looked up to the warrior with a grin.

"Where's my other daughter?" The Warrior Princess let an eyebrow go up as she

replied.

"Gabrielle went to get the scroll with the tactics" Ephiny nodded her head. "Ephiny?"

"Yeah?"

"That's incest" The regent closed her eyes and shook her head, opening her eyes again she half laughed.

"Xena it was a joke" Xena nodded her head with a grin.

"I know" A pause. "A bad one too"

"Thanks" The warrior chuckled and Eponin looked to Solari with a confused look. The second in command grinned.

"It's a running joke Eponin" The weapons master nodded her head at Solari's explanation.

"What's this about a running joke?" Everybody turned to see the grinning Queen of the Amazons, scroll in one hand, the staff in the other.

"They're talking about Ephiny's incest joke" Gabrielle looked up to her soulmate, her eyes widen for a second then went normal.

"Oh she tried to pull that one on you too huh?" Xena nodded and Gabrielle looked to the regent. "Ephiny, it's a bad joke" Ephiny threw up her arms for a second then huffed.

"Okay it's a bad incest joke, are you both happy?" Both soulmates smirked and Gabrielle replied.

"Yes, now lets get this over with" Everybody went serious as Gabrielle let her staff lean against her shoulder and she unrolled the scroll. "Okay here's the break up, Xena is going to be in charge of thirty warriors and five archers. Xena and her group will be going into the mountains to start the attack by trying to surprise attack as many of Okeanos' men as possible. Then Solari" The bard looked to the second in command whom nodded. "You will be in charge of twenty archers and twenty warriors all in the trees, your job will be to take out as many calvary as possible" Solari nodded her head. Gabrielle looked to the scroll and went on. "I will be controlling the main force of a hundred and fifty Amazons in the Amazon forest and we will be loosely organized into three waves of fifty" Then the Queen looked to the regent. "Ephiny as you know you'll be in charge of the calvary of thirty riders and will be back up. When I signal your group will split in half and come in on the sides of the battle and work in" The regent nodded her head in understand and the bard looked to Eponin. "Eponin you are in charge of the mercenaries, we have no idea when they'll arrive, could be between now and in the middle of the battle" Gabrielle took a deep breath. "If they don't arrive by the time the fight starts you are to stay with me. Once they do, the mercenaries will be attacking the weakest side of Okeanos' men" Eponin also nodded her head. "Did I leave anything out?" The regent looked to the bard.

"How about the hemlock?" Gabrielle rolled up her scroll, nodded and looked to Eponin.

"Did Eilis bring you some hemlock?"

"Yes she did, she said you order the arrow tips to be poisoned with the hemlock"

"Yes, I want them tipped then distributed to all the archers, make sure there are plenty of poison arrows" The weapons master nodded and replied.

"I already have people tipping the arrows as you requested" Gabrielle smiled and looked to Solari.

"Solari your archers will be having the main supply of poison arrows, make sure the archers use them efficiently to take out the calvary" Solari nodded.

"Gabrielle what about retreat?" The bard looked up to her soulmate and then back to everybody with a lopsided smile.

"Nuts I forgot that huh?" Everybody chuckled at the bard's words. "Okay, if it does happen we are losing we are to retreat"

"But Gabrielle that's not the Amazon tradition"

"I don't care Solari, I am not going to get this Nation killed over one warlord. We are to retreat and regroup...where's the nearest Amazon Tribe?" The regent answered that.

"There's a tribe south of here on the coast, large fishing one. Their Queen is Mairead and it's about three days ride"

"Okay that's where we regroup. Any arguments with that?" No body disagreed but Eponin questioned.

"Gabrielle, why are we going to regroup?"

"If we don't win this battle Eponin we need to win the war and that means getting more help from other Amazons. It won't do us any good to get us all killed" Everybody nodded in agreement.

"What's our retreat signal going to be?" The Queen looked to Solari.

"We'll use the retreat bird call"

"Gabrielle I think we should have the village burned if we do retreat" Gabrielle looked up to her soulmate, Xena's eyes were serious, Ephiny backing the warrior up.

"Xena is right Gabrielle, we shouldn't leave anything for Okeanos to make use of" The bard's eyes drops. This is getting to hard, to much weight on her shoulders. She looked back up to everybody.

"Alright, if it comes to that, have the village burned" The Queen took a deep breath. "Any questions?" Nobody said anything-just shakes of the heads. "Okay, stress to the Amazons in your group to follow orders, this is serious keep everybody in line. If we lose this battle we're not sure if we'll be able to stop them later on, lets not screw this up" All the people in the group nodded to their Queen. They were all surprised the bard's sternness and power but then again this was a serious issue. "Good luck you guys and thank you, all of you have been a big help" Everybody smiled in return.

"We'll get them" Gabrielle grinned at Eponin.

"Let's hope so, but no counting chickens before they hatch" Eponin nodded.

"I believe we all have things to get in order" The regent looked to Solari and Eponin after her statement and the two Amazons chuckled and stalked off. "Good job Gabrielle" The bard smiled to her friend.

"Thanks Eph, I hope this works"

"Well it won't be because you haven't tried" Gabrielle coked grinned. "See you two" And with that Ephiny left the two soulmates.

"Incest?" Xena chuckled at the bard.

"Yeah that's what I told her"

"So did I, but I felt a little stupider about it" The two soulmates turned from the sparring field to head in the general direction of the Queen's Hut.

"Well I think we got her back for that one then" The younger woman grinned.

"Poor Eph" The bard took a deep breath.

"How you feeling Gabrielle?"

"Other than being stressed, just great" Xena grinned.

"You're doing a good job Gabrielle, on top of things"

"Need to be"

"Well I think you had them all surprised about your firmness with them" Gabrielle nodded her head and the warrior opened the door to the hut. The bard stepped in then Xena did, the small blond dropped the scroll onto the table and then large hands fell to her shoulders. The warrior quickly felt the tension in them. "Sit down on the bed, give you a shoulder massage" The bard nodded her head and placed the staff against the wall her warrior already moving to the bed and sat down. Gabrielle came over and the warrior scooted more onto the bed, her boots just touching the floor. The small female sat down in front of her warrior on the bed between Xena's legs. Large hands went to the bard's shoulders and began to massage them. "You are awful quiet Gabrielle" Sea green eyes closed.

"Sorry, just tired any more"

"Hmm I noticed. How are those dreams?" Gabrielle dropped her head forward while Xena worked her neck.

"They're getting better" Large hands moved down to the bard's shoulder blades.

"Good, you look like you're sleeping better"

"Yeah I think after this escaped I'll be able to catch up on my sleep" The warrior grinned as she moved her hands to the upper middle of the bard's back. Gabrielle groaned in reaction. "That's a spot"

"I'd say so, I'd think you've been caring a mountain"

"Feels like it"

"Just relax" Xena's partner nodded. "Hey, we'll have a vacation real soon, I promise" Gabrielle smiled and her right hand fell on the warrior's leg.

"I can't wait. I think I'll sleep for two days straight" The Queen's eyes drifted open again as Xena's hands went to her shoulders again.

"Two days in bed with you, I wouldn't mind that myself" Gabrielle laughed at the warrior's connotation.

"You wouldn't"

"Oh? And you wouldn't mind if I did?" Again a few laughs came from the younger woman then she retorted.

"Oh no I wouldn't mind at all either"

"Thought so" Xena is grinning, her hands still massaging the slowly relaxing shoulders.

"I'd probably actually force you" The Warrior Princess laughed. The pair went quiet again. "Xena, you think your mom would let me tell a few stories in the tavern?" Xena began to let a smile form.

"I don't see why not"

"Haven't told a story in a long time it seems"

"You haven't been a bard for a long time it seems" Gabrielle nodded in agreement.

"Yeah I know, I need to start working on my stories again, miss it" A pause. "I have a couple of stories to write since...well since a while" The warrior knew what the "since" meant. "I really do love that journal you got me"

"I knew you would" The bard smiled and replied back.

"Ah well you really surprised me with it" The taller woman could tell her smaller partner was feeling more relax by how much she was talking. "You know I was always thinking about getting one, just never got around to it" Yup, more talking she was feeling better. Xena grinned inwardly. The bard's muscles were relaxed so she stopped massaging them and wrapped her arms around the bard's stomach.

"Well I'm glad the both of us thought so" Gabrielle turned her head and little of her body. Her right hand going up to Xena's closes cheek. Xena smiled down into emerald eyes and bent her head down, they both kissed intensely. Slowly they pulled back from the kiss and the bard smiled to her warrior, her small hand still on Xena's face.

"Thanks again for that journal" Xena smiled. "And for the massage"

"Any time" Gabrielle straightened back in the warrior's arms and dropped her head against her soulmate's right shoulder.

"Oh, gods I want to go to sleep" The warrior grinned and brought one hand up to the bard's head. Her long fingers began to massage Gabrielle's head. "And you're not helping" Xena chuckled for a moment and kept her massage going. "I can't go to sleep Xen" Xena grinned at the nickname slipping from the bard's lips.

"Shh, just relax" Within moments the Queen's mind glided away into another world, Gabrielle's body was completely relaxed in the warrior's arms. Xena had slowed the massage then finally stopped it, she lifted the smaller woman up into her arms and carried her over the side of the bed. With ease the blond was placed in bed, the covers pulled over her, Gabrielle slightly moaning to the actions in response. The tall female grinned then slipped out of the hut. As soon as Xena exited the hut did she spot an Amazon headed her way. It was the head Council Member. Xena's mind quickly worked to recall the Amazon's name. *Maska Muska...no its Masika.*

"Is the Queen in her hut?"

"She is" The warrior stepped into the head Council Member's path.

"I need to speak with her"

"She's taking a break right now, so you can speak with me" Masika looked up to the warrior and glared at her.

"This doesn't concern you warrior" The Council Member sidestepped the warrior, but Xena took two large strides and was in front of the Amazon again.

"Look Masika, nobody but me is allow to disturb the Queen right now. So either tell me now or tell her later" For emphasis Xena crossed her arms against her chest and straightened her back.

"Who in Hades do you think you are Xena? Even more so to this Nation? You're just some pet of the Queen's" The warrior brought up one eyebrow and her eyes iced over, an evil smirk crossing her lips.

"Let's put it this way Masika, I am the Queen's other half. Now then, what's your choice, me now or the Queen later?" The Amazon's hands fisted together as she glared up at the tall woman.

"I'd rather speak to the Queen"

"Then leave" And with that Masika stalked off in angered mood. Blue eyes watched her till she left the area then Xena went off in search of Ephiny.

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Ephiny heard a knock and lifted her head to see her second in command walk in.

"Solari, what's going on?" The Amazon shrugged her shoulders.

"Everything is in order" The regent turned to her desk, picked up the scroll from her desk and leaned against her chair.

"Good, anything else?"

"Uh" Amber eyes lifted up from the scrolls to look to Solari in question. "I want to

talk to you Eph...if you don't mind" The regent smiled to her.

"Sure" The curly-blond rolled up the scroll and tossed it onto her desk and looked back to the second in command. Solari opened her mouth to say something but a rap at the door stopped her. "Come in" A tall dark female came in and looked to the pair.

"Am I interrupting anything?" Ephiny was about to reply but Solari quickly cut her off.

"Oh no" Xena looked to the regent for conformation, she just nodded to the warrior. The warrior moved to stand next to the second in command.

"Where's Gabrielle?" Xena looked to the regent.

"She's back in the hut"

"Sleeping?"

"Yeah, she needs some sleep" Now Solari piped in.

"Defiantly for tomorrow" Xena nodded in agreement with Solari.

"She hasn't been sleeping well Xena?" The tall ex-warlord looked back to Ephiny.

"No she hasn't" The regent frown at that.

"My guess is since your death huh?" Xena just nodded.

"Thank the gods that whole episode with Velasca is over with" Both Xena and the regent looked to Solari and nodded.

"Yeah that was a mess, glad she's stuck in the cave" Blue eyes lifted back up to the regent's words.

"Speaking of which Ephiny, were you able to get the approval to have numerous dummy tombs made up?" The regent nodded to the warrior.

"The council went for it Xena, so we plan on working up a few. The one tomb that is here we plan to hide the enchanted scroll in" The warrior nodded at that.

"Good idea. Do we know where we'll have the real one?" Ephiny smiled.

"Yeah actually I was thinking that you and Gabrielle might want it in the Amazon Mountains but on the western side. When I was younger I use to explore those mountains and I recall stumbling onto a cave there, well hidden"

"I'll talk to Gabrielle about it later" The regent took a deep breath.

"I'm sure that's what she just wants to talk about, where to be buried" The ex-warlord's head bobbed up and down a few times.

"Has to be done unfortunately"

"Is that all you needed Xena?" The warrior grinned to her Amazon friend.

"That wasn't my real intent, I swung by to find out how things are going?" The regent

looked to the quiet Solari then back to Xena.

"Well Solari just told me everything is ready to go"

"Good, no problems?" Both Amazon's shook their heads at that. Xena looked to Solari. "How many arrows were tipped with hemlock?" The second in command didn't reply right away but stared at the floor then looked up to Xena.

"If I recall Ep said there were...two hundred" Xena nodded in approval.

"Good" She then averted her eyes to Ephiny. "By the way, I burrowed six throwing arrows if you don't mind" The regent arched an eyebrow.

"Don't mind at all, but if you don't mind. What you planning to use them for?" A devilish grin formed on Xena's lips, the regent was official worried.

"I tipped them with Ipecac" The second in command's eyes widen and she looked up to the warrior.

"Ipecac? The same Ipecac that causes vomiting?" The Warrior Princess nodded her head.

"The same" Ephiny raised an eyebrow at the warrior.

"What you plan to do with them?" Xena's grin was still on her lips as she retorted to Ephiny.

"Gabrielle and I owe Okeanos for those poison tipped arrows" Both Amazons chuckled at her.

"Glad I am not on the receiving end of that" Ephiny and Xena looked to Solari as she continued. "I'd hate to be throwing up in a middle of a battle" The regent laughed again, the warrior just grinning.

"I think I am going to go practice out on the sparring field" Ephiny nodded to Xena's words and Solari looked to the regent.

"Yeah I need to go too, going to go double check everything" The curly-blond Amazon crossed her arms against her chest, a suspicious look masking her face, Xena just arched one of her dark eyebrows.

"I'll talk to you both later" Xena nodded and went to the door, opening it.

"Later Eph" With that the second in command left with the Warrior Princess.

"Solari, walk with me to the sparring field?" The second in command shrugged her shoulders.

"Sure why not? Headed that way myself" The pair were quiet for a few moments. Xena then broke the silence.

"So why didn't you talk to Ephiny?" Solari looked up to the warrior with a shocked look. Xena could always be blunt.

"Because...because I don't know what she thinks" Xena chuckled.

"Well you're not going to unless you talk to her" Solari nodded her head and kicked at a rock, she felt like a kid.

"Yeah I know, its just Eph is always so busy that...I don't know" The tall warrior grinned to herself and stared ahead.

"Solari, just sit down with her one day and talk to her. It won't kill you"

"But what if she doesn't feel the same?" Xena shrugged.

"Well at least you'll know the truth, don't wait till the last minute Solari. Been there done that. Besides she loves you" A shocked expression took over Solari's face.

"You think so huh? I don't see it" They came to the sparring field and stopped, Xena turned to her friend.

"I know so. And you wouldn't see it because you're not on the outside. Everybody else see it Solari. Just talk to her" The Amazon nodded her head and smiled to the warrior.

"Thanks Xena" The warrior smiled back.

"No problem"

"Never knew you went into those sensitive chats" The warrior's blue eyes rolled.

"Don't tell anybody" Solari chuckled, realizing Xena must consider her a friend if she talked to her about something like this.

"I guess Gabrielle is rubbing off on you huh?" Xena grinned.

"Yeah" Solari began to move.

"And you're rubbing off on her too" Solari turned around ten paces from Xena. "Bye Xena, thanks again" And with that the Amazon turned back around to stalk off after Eponin. Xena shook her head and stared at the ground for a moment.

"Ha, wait till Gabrielle hears that" The tall dark warrior unsheathed her sword and stepped into the middle of the empty sparring field. It was late afternoon a little more then a half of candlemark till sunset. She began to run tactics through her head and performing them.

Her sword becoming apart of her, it cut through the air. Her body moved in grace and elegance, many would see it as a dance. We'd label it a dance of death, of power and passion. When she began to reach the end of her drills did she feel a warm sensation enter her. Boots scuffed on the dirty and a small form sat on the ground and watched the warrior. Xena grinned to herself and her battle cry erupted as she quickly did a flip, eyes watching her the entire time. She landed back on her feet to face the other person with a huge grin. "How'd you sleep?"

"Pretty good" Xena walked over to her soulmate as she sheathed her sword in natural habit. "I love watching you practice" Xena smiled and sat down on the ground directly in front of the bard.

"I noticed you did. You love watching me fight, I love watching you tell stories"

Gabrielle smiled.

"Thanks" The bard then playfully pushed at Xena's left knee. "I can't believe you let me fall asleep" Xena shrugged her shoulders with a grin.

"You could use the rest" Gabrielle nodded her head. "Talked to Ephiny" Emerald eyes lifted to Xena.

"Yeah? What she have to say?"

"Said everything is ready, we have around two hundred hemlock tipped arrows"

"Plenty" Xena nodded at that.

"I also talked to Solari about Ephiny" Both of the bard's eyebrows shot up.

"You're kidding me? You the sensitive chats? I must still be asleep" Xena laughed and then grinned to her partner. "What did you say?" Xena shrugged.

"Just something" The bard huffed.

"Uh huh, come on Xena" The warrior smiled.

"Told her to talk to Ephiny before anything bad happens" Gabrielle nodded and Xena went on. "And that even though she doesn't see it, everybody else can see they love each other" The bard chuckled at that.

"Hopefully that'll work"

"Hmm yeah" Xena noticed the sun was setting by the way the bard's body seemed to turn a shade of red. Xena decided she liked that. "She made an interesting comment"

"What was that?"

"Just that you seem to be rubbing off on me" Gabrielle arched an eyebrow, there was more to it then that.

"And?" The older woman chuckled.

"And that I'm rubbing off on you" The bard's brows furrowed, her eyes dropping as she thought. She looked back to Xena.

"Am I really?" The warrior grinned.

"Well do you feel like fighting tomorrow?"

"No"

"Then I'm not rubbing off because I'm ready to fight" The bard chuckled some.

"Well, want to hear something scary?"

"What's that?"

"I'm sorta liking the whole riding bit more" Xena grinned to her partner.

"Oh really? Well that works out perfectly"

"What does? Xena what are you planning?" Gabrielle's soulmate crossed her arms against her chest with a twinkle to her eyes and answered back.

"I thought I'd let you ride Argo tomorrow"

"You've got to be kidding me right? I mean I know I said I liked riding some. But not by myself"

"You won't be by myself"

"Oh yeah just a couple of hundred Amazons around me but nobody on Argo with me" Xena grinned a little.

"You'll be fine"

"Xena"

"Hear me out?" The bard huffed and nodded to her now serious soulmate. "If you're on Argo then I know you'll have an easy way to escape if need be. For the both of us too. And it'll make it easier for me to find you" The Amazon Queen couldn't win.

"Okay you win" The warrior smiled.

"You'll be fine, Argo will look after you"

"She hates me"

"No she doesn't"

"Yes she does" A pause. "I think she doesn't like me talking about her as if she were human" Xena chuckled.

"You're probably right" Xena stood up. "Lets go get something to eat"

"Yeah I'm starved" And with that Gabrielle took Xena's offered hand and was pulled up. "Hades"

"What?" Gabrielle looked to her warrior as they began to walk and replied back.

"My butt hurts from sitting on that hard dirt ground" Xena bursted into a fit of laughter and hugged her soulmate.

"Queen Gabriele?" The bard looked to her left to see an Amazon coming for her. Even from here in the coming darkness Xena could see whom it was, her mood immediately dropped.

"Yes Masika?" The Amazon quickly noticed whom stood beside her, she glared at Xena. Gabrielle quickly caught the look, her protective instincts came to life in an instant. "What do you need Masika?"

"I wish to speak to you...in private"

"Whatever you have to say can be said in front of Xena as well Masika"

"Gabrielle, she is not an Amazon" The bard's eyes narrowed at the Amazon.

"Nor am I Masika" The head Council Member's mouth dropped. "Now what do you need?" The Amazon looked up to the warrior then to Gabrielle again, she stepped closer to the bard. Her reply came in a low whisper.

"I don't think Xena should be allowed to take needed Amazons into the mountains" The bard obviously knew her soulmate heard that with her acute hearing.

"That is not of your concern"

"I am the head Council Member, it does concern me"

"No it doesn't" The bard took a step closer to the older Amazon. "I am the Queen it only concerns me and possible regent Ephiny" Gabrielle took a deep breath. "Nor do you have the right Masika to pass judgement on Xena's abilities when you do not know her or her skills"

"But Gabrielle" Gabrielle quickly cut her off.

"No Masika, it has nothing to do with you, that's final" The bard watched as the Amazon's eyes turned angry, but the Queen's own temper was higher than what the birds could fly. "Excuse us" With that the Queen of the Amazons turned from the Amazon and began to walk off with her soulmate. Gabrielle stopped and turned back to Masika. "By the way Masika" The head Council Member looked to the bard. "It's Queen Gabrielle" The small woman turned her back on the Amazon and kept walking with Xena. Masika stood there half-angry half shocked. Her fists clenched up and the Amazon stalked off. The pair of soulmates kept walking in silence for awhile, Xena waiting for the bard to calm down. "Gods that was ridiculous"

"You were right Gabrielle" The bard sighed and kept her head low, her anger draining out of her.

"I shouldn't have been so...so hard on her"

"She questioned your authority Gabrielle" The smaller woman looked up to her friend.

"Still Xena, I'm not a tyrant" She looked back ahead. "I need to listen to other perspectives"

"You did"

"Guess so" The bard caught sight of the food hut. "You know what really set me off?"

"Hmm"

"That look she gave you" A deep breath. "I don't like the fact she doesn't like you and just prejudices"

"She'll learn Gabrielle"

"I suppose" The bard looked up to Xena with a grin. "Right now I just want to worry about filling my stomach" The warrior chuckled and the soulmates entered inside of the hut.

~*Part 15*~

Slowly the sun crept up through the window, it awoke from the other world to shine on this world. It warmed the faces of our heroes. The pair went to bed early that night, knowing they would need the sleep for the following day. There had been no arrival of the mercenaries or word of them. Gabrielle, we can deduce, is worried about them not showing in time for the battle. Which could ultimately change the outcome of this battle. We know that this could be the difference between pushing the Romans back or letting them flood into Greece. We could only hope that this battle would be won to suppress the Romans. Until a day when the one man that calls himself Rome will come to overtake Greece. Xena knows this day will come in her future and she could only hope she would be able to stop this one man. But at what cost is what haunted her mind.

So our warrior and bard slowly rolled out of bed to find out their destiny that lay ahead. They both dressed quickly, Gabrielle into her Amazon Queen attire, Xena in her normal leathers and brass armor. Large hands picked up the mask and Xena turned to her partner with a smile. Gabrielle smiled back as Xena handed her the Amazon Queen mask, the bard slipping it over her head. Gabrielle expected them to leave at that moment but her warrior moved over to their saddlebags. Xena removed a small leather pouch and went to the table right next to her.

"Throwing arrows?" Xena nodded and reached for them.

"Yeah can't forget them" She slipped four of them into her pouch then tied it to her waist on the left. She then took the fifth off the table and held out her right arm. She easily slipped it down her gauntlet the same she did with the sixth in her other gauntlet. The bard watched the entire time as she leaned against her staff. The warrior then turned back to the saddlebags and dug through them, Xena retrieved what she was looking for. She straightened back up and turned to Gabrielle, in her right hand was a dagger in a small dagger sheath, two pairs of leather straps hanging down. "I want you to take this with you"

"Xena you know I don't like blades"

"I know, but I want you to take this for extra protection" Emerald eyes stared at the small dagger, Xena gently held it. Gabrielle immediately had to guess something was special about it.

"Xena?"

"Yeah?"

"Who's dagger was it?" Blue eyes were shocked for a moment then went normal.

"It was Lyceus' dagger" Xena took a deep breath. "It saved his life a number of times" Gabrielle nodded her head then faintly smiled.

"Okay I'll take it. I might just need it" A lopsided smile came onto the warrior's lips and she nodded. Xena bent down to one knee and tied the dagger with its sheath around the bard's right boot. It fit perfectly, the hilt held a small blue gem much like the one that was in Xena's hilt. The small hilt was made of silver so was the blade, double edged with an almost ivy design that started right at the top of the blade that

Gabrielle guess went all the way down. She couldn't tell though since most of the blade was held in the sheath.

"Let's go" Xena stood back up with a serious face. The soulmates headed out of the hut and within seconds Ephiny came running up to them in her leathers, mask on top of her own head.

"You two ready?" Gabrielle was the one to answer.

"Yup, is everybody else ready?"

"Pretty much. I'm headed over to the stables to get my horse saddled up"

"Great, I'll go with you, I'm riding Argo" Ephiny nodded. The regent quickly noticed that there was a lot of difference to her friend these days. She'd grown so much in a short time.

"Ephiny, is my band getting organized?" The regent looked to the warrior.

"Yes they are"

"Okay" Xena looked to her bard. "I'll come with you for a few then" Gabrielle finished it for her.

"You'll need to go to your group" Xena nodded her head. "Let's go then" The three females were off at a power walk to the stables. They entered to them, Argo was in the third stall, and Ephiny's horse on the other hand was at the end. So that left the soulmates out of earshot. Xena began to put the saddle on, while Gabrielle put on the tack. Xena noticed how quiet her soulmate was, so she efficiently saddled up Argo and came to the front to her best friend. She watched as Gabrielle put the bit in.

"You'll do fine Gabrielle" The bard sighed and slipped the crown over the mare's ears. She could feel the nervousness in her stomach, the twisting of her stomach.

"I know, just can't help be nervous. This is scary" Xena nodded her head.

"It is, but you have over two hundred Amazons that are protecting you"

"Not to mention a powerful warrior" Xena chuckled.

"That too" The bard buckled the nosepiece, the final part of the tack. She reached for the reins. "You know I'll be there if something happens. I'm not going to let you get killed over this" Gabrielle nodded and then turned to her warrior, reins in one hand the staff in the other.

"Nor am I going to let you Xena" The warrior smiled and she took a step closer. She leaned down and captured her lover's lips, the warrior's right hand going to the side of the bard's face. They pulled back as they heard the stamping of hooves.

"I love you Gabrielle" The bard smiled deeply.

"I love you...my warrior" Xena smiled back and leaned down to place a kiss to the bard's forehead. Xena turned around and opened the door to the stall and look to the regent.

"Good luck Ephiny" The Amazon smiled.

"Be careful out there Xena" The warrior smiled with a nod.

"I will, you do the same" Ending with that Xena looked to her bard one last time with a smile and winked to her. The Warrior Princess then jogged out of the stables and to the entrance of the village.

"She's something else" Gabrielle chuckled at her friend, the pair walked out of the stables. They both stopped walking and the bard moved back to the saddle and reached up. She pulled down the stirrups from the saddle, Ephiny doing the same on her horse. The Queen was the first up onto Argo then Ephiny on her horse. The bard had just made it up with staff, it had almost been impossible, but she managed. Gabrielle held the reins tight in both hands, her right hand being tricky with the staff. They rode to the entrance of the village where everybody waited.

When they arrived that was when Gabrielle found out just how much two hundred leather and feathered Amazons looked like. She was certainly impressed. They all looked to the Queen and the regent. Gabrielle spotted Solari, Eponin and her soulmate at the head of the Amazons looking to her with knowing smiles. The Queen of the Amazons then spoke in her strongest and loudest voice.

"Today we fight the warlord Okeanos. All of you have been broken up into different sets of bands. You are to follow the leader of your group accordingly. If there is a need for a retreat then the bird call will be sounded and we are to regroup at the Amazon fishing tribe that is three days south of here" Gabrielle pause and took a deep breath. "This is a serious battle, not just for us but for Greece. If the Amazons loose this battle it is highly possible that the Romans will flood into Greece to over take it. Winning this battle will insure the safety of not just the Amazon Nation but of Greece. However it will not stop the Romans only contain them for an extended time. Together as Artemis' chosen we can defeat this threat" All of the Amazons threw up their arms and cheered. It was loud and echoed through the village. The Queen kept her back straight and her eyes were cold as she watched her Amazons break up into their groups.

Xena looked up to her soulmate on the mare. Emerald eyes met her and softened. The warrior flashed her a brilliant smile and nodded, Gabrielle did the same. Xena went to her band and ordered them to move. They quickly left the village. The following group was Solari's they quickly headed out of the village gates and into the forest. The calvary mounted up onto their horses and Ephiny joined them, yelling out her commands to them. Gabrielle looked to her Amazons of a hundred and fifty. Eponin stepped up beside the mare.

"They're waiting for your orders Queen Gabrielle" The bard nodded to the Amazon and looked back up to the Amazons.

"Alright, after you get beyond the gates of the village. I want this band to break up into three waves of fifty Amazons, one wave behind the other. Lets go!" All the Amazon warriors walked out of the gates of the village and formed into exactly what the bard commanded in no time flat. Gabrielle trailed up behind them with Eponin walk down beside her. The Queen half turned in the saddle and looked behind herself to see the regent following up behind with the calvary. Ephiny nodded to her and the

bard turned back in the saddle. "Each wave will attack when I give the order. Once done so you are allowed to freely fight. If there are any orders given by me, Eponin, regent Ephiny, Xena, or Solari you are to follow them precious. Be aware that above in the trees that Solari's band is shooting hemlock tipped arrows mainly at Okeanos' calvary. Finally, we hope that the mercenaries will arrive during the battle and they will be attacking the weakest side and we expect the mercenaries to mainly be calvary. To the forest!"

Gabrielle took a deep breath and the three waves headed into the woods in perfect flanks. Ahead the bard saw as a few last minute Amazon archers going up into the trees. Behind her she heard the sound of hooves beating the ground. She could only hope her soulmate was going to make it fine.

~*~*~*~

Xena crouched behind a huge rock, her head poked just over the top. She was at the top of a high side of the mountain, almost like a canyon side. Across the sides of the mountain were three archers and fifteen warriors, all hidden behind rocks. Teresa had been in Xena's band, so she put Teresa second in command, confident in her abilities. So now Teresa was on the opposite side with the three archers and fourteen other Amazons. Directly above Xena were the other two archers and then down on the level ground on her side of the mountain were the other fifteen warriors, hiding around the bend.

The Warrior Princess looked across to the other side to see Teresa looking west through the mountains. Teresa looked to Xena and smiled, Xena smiled back and looked back west, as did Teresa. The warrior closed her eyes and listened.

Boots scuffing against ground.

Metal clanking.

Horses nickering.

She opened her eyes again and felt the wind blow from the west to the east. She took a deep breath and picked of the fine scent of horses, her blue eyes narrowed. Xena looked back to Teresa and nodded. The Amazon knew what that meant and hide back down behind the huge brown rock. She brought her hands up to mouth. Xena then saw metal reflecting off the sun, her body began to course with anticipation. There they are, Okeanos' men came over the ridge. The warrior quietly slipped her sword out of her sheath and lowered it to her lap. She waited. They came closer and closer, louder and louder. The warrior's heartbeat picked up, adrenaline washed through her body. Her dark side grew and the claws began to come out. Cobalt eyes glossed over, the enemy were now a hundred paces ahead down below. The Warrior Princess ducked down the ledge and watched as Okeanos' warriors just began to flood under them.

Xena looked across to Teresa and nodded her head. With that Teresa took a deep breath and made a cuckoo bird call. All the men below stopped moving and looked around frantically. The Amazon archers wedged around their hiding spot and began to shoot down at the men below. The hemlock arrows working beautifully. Xena nodded again to Teresa whom did another birdcall and the thirty Amazon warriors flooded from their hiding spots to pull off a hit and run attack.

The fifteen warriors on ground level came at the front line taking out a number of

footmen then running back into the hiding of the mountains. The fifteen warriors of Teresa came tearing down the side of the mountain and at the sides of the troops. They doing a hit and run as well and running back into the mountain sides. Xena took a deep breath and gave off her war cry it echoed through the mountains and it signaled the archers. The archers stood up from their hiding spots to shoot at Okeanos' footmen. But it didn't last, some of Okeanos' men broke off and began to climb up the mountain side after the archers and warriors. As well as Okeanos' own archers began to shoot back. Xena gave off another battle cry and the archers stopped and ran down the eastern side of the ledge along with the warriors.

"Let them go! Get back into your flanks!" It wasn't Okeanos' voice, but Xena knew it was one of the captains. The warrior figured Okeanos to be in the back of his forces with the calvary. Xena kept her eyes down at the men, she lifted them east to see the Amazons running to the base of the mountains as she told them to. Xena specifically order her band to hide at the base of the mountains till Okeanos' entire army came through then to come up behind. "Fall out men!" The footmen began to move, trampling over the dead bodies of their comrades. Xena counted fifty dead footmen. *Not bad, stir them up a little. Fifty down only five hundred and fifty to go.*

Blue eyes watched as the men flooded below her and through the mountains, her eyes searching for Okeanos. Soon the calvary began to come through all mounted. Xena switched her sword into her left hand and reached into her gauntlet for the arrow. She held it tightly in her right hand, she continued to scan the calvary. Then gold flashed into Xena's eyes, she looked to that person. A grin formed on her lips, a blond haired man.

Xena pulled her right arm back, looked to the mountainside across from her and calculated the angle. She spotted the perfect spot and waited for Okeanos to line up in the angle. Now! Xena threw the arrow and it spun through the air with a whistling noise it hit the mountainside across the way and ricochets off the mountain wall. Some of the riders heard the whistling sound and frantically looked around, Okeanos being one of them. That's when the bladed arrow sunk into Okeanos' right arm directly below his shoulder armor.

Okeanos yelled and looked to his right arm bringing up his left hand from the reins. He pulled the arrow out and studied it then he looked up along the canyon walls not seeing anything. He cursed under his breath and threw the sharp weapon to the ground. Far above blue eyes went darker, a grin crossed the warrior's lips. Xena moved and silently went along the mountain ledge and went ahead of the army to her band.

~*~*~*~

Teresa watched from her hiding spot to the opening in the mountains where she expected the army to come. She could hear them. All the Amazons were hidden in crease of the mountains, out of seeing. Then a large dark form hit the ground right beside her. Teresa bringing her sword up to the person, it was stopped by the person's wristband.

"Its okay Teresa it's just me" The Amazon took a deep breath as she realized who it was.

"Hades Xena, you gave me a heart attack" Xena chuckled and went serious again.

"Everybody make it fine?"

"Yeah we're all here"

"Good now get back in there while we wait for them" Teresa did as she was told. She re-sheathed her sword and went into the niche of the mountain with the other Amazons, Xena crouching behind the rock Teresa had been behind.

~*~*~*~

Brown eyes narrowed as she heard the distinct sound of men, horses and metal. Solari released the branch and quickly moved along the branches to where she suspected Gabrielle to be. The second in command spotted the Queen and came close as possible and bent down, in earshot of Gabrielle.

"Queen Gabrielle?" The bard looked up into the trees to see Solari.

"They're coming?" The Amazon nodded her head.

"The army is just coming out of the mountains" Gabrielle nodded her head.

"Okay thanks Solari" The Amazon nodded back and stood back up on the branch and went along the branches back to her group.

"Everybody listen up, Okeanos is almost here. Get your bows and arrows prepared. Aim for the calvary archers, the others I want you to jump some of calvary below try and take their horse if you can. Got me?" The archers nodded as did the Amazon warriors. They all pulled their masks over their faces. The archers pulling out hemlock tipped arrows and put them against their strings.

~*~*~*~

"Amazons, the army is just coming out of the mountains. Prepare yourselves" Everybody nodded their heads to the Queen's orders. They pulled their own masks down, as did the Queen. Gabrielle looked back to Ephiny and nodding.

~*~*~*~

Ephiny looked to her right first. "Alright everybody, Okeanos is almost here" Ephiny looked to her left where there were fifteen other mounted warriors. "When Queen Gabrielle signals" The regent looked back to the fourteen riders to her right. "We are to split in half and go off to the sides" She turned her head to the left. "Then fight into the center" She looked ahead to the three waves of Amazons. "Everybody understand?" Ephiny saw from the corner of her eyes everybody nodding. They then pulled their masks over and unsheathed their swords. The horse's hooves stomping at the ground and nickering over the expectancy.

~*~*~*~

The Queen of the Amazons took a deep breath as she heard the sound of men coming at them. She gripped her staff tightly, her knuckles white. That's when she just began to see the army coming, the sound of her Amazons' swords being unsheathed could be heard, metal scraping. The air was tense, Okeanos' forces inched nearer and nearer, Gabrielle's stomach tensed up more and more, her palms sweating.

The army closed in.

The Queen raised her staff up over her head and yelled.

"First wave attack!"

Then Queen's staff fell back down.

The sound of people yelling could be heard as fifty Amazons went racing into the footmen of Okeanos. The Amazon Queen watched them mix, screams being heard.

The Queen's staff went up again and she yelled her second command.

"Second wave attack!"

Her staff came back down.

The second wave went sprinting into the battle yells echoing through the woods. Emerald eyes watched as the battle began to push closer. Her eyes narrowed and she took a deep breath.

The Queen's staff went up at the same time she yelled.

"Third wave attack!"

~*~*~*~

The second in command watched as the calvary flooded into the battle below. Solari looked up to her archers.

"Attack!" That command sent hemlock arrows whistling through the air down to riders. One at a time the Amazons in the trees fell out of the trees and onto riders, taking them out. The warriors kicked the riders off their horses for the main part, only a few here and there grabbing the riders to hit the ground with them. The calvary was falling quickly from the poison arrows. Solari grinned at the perfect idea.

~*~*~*~

"Let's move out" Xena ran into the woods with her thirty warriors and five archers. As she ran she yelled back to her archers. "Archers I want you five up in the tree immediately and you are to follow Solari's command!" Once into the woods the five archers disappeared into the trees, running down the branches and pulling their masks over. The thirty Amazons coming up from behind to Okeanos pulled their masks over. Xena's grin spread across her lips. I wonder how Okeanos is feeling?

~*~*~*~

Emerald eyes scanned the fighters, so far they haven't reached her, Eponin down beside her. Gabrielle spotted Okeanos. She grinned as she watched Okeanos lean to his right, head hanging down and he threw up. Xena you are good. The bard inwardly chuckled at her own thought. She watched as Okeanos kicked his horse and tried to get to the back of his army, not much luck either.

Gabrielle watched from high on her mount, the Amazons not doing to bad. She kept scanning.

One Amazon went down. A man. An Amazon. Another Amazon. A third. Okeanos' man. A second man. A fourth Amazon.

Gabrielle gritted her teeth and pulled her boots out of Argo's stirrups. She hopped of the war-horse and slapped Argo's rump. The mare nickered and through her head up.

"Go Argo!" The mare nickered again and the horse cantered off into the woods behind the bard. Gabrielle looked back to the battle. It was coming closer to her.

An Amazon fell. A footmen. Amazon Warrior. Okeanos' warrior gutted. An Amazon's chest pierced. Now another Amazon. Five of Okeanos' riders fell off their horses from arrows.

Gabrielle turned to Eponin. "Eponin I want you in the trees, keep an eye out for the mercenaries. You know what to do right?" The weapons master nodded her head as she heard the bard's words over the yells. Eponin then jumped and disappeared in the trees. Gabrielle turned to Ephiny and the calvary, her mask still over her face. The bard brought up her staff in front of her spun it at a rapid pace into a blur. She abruptly stopped its twirling and the butt end hit the ground and she nodded her head to the regent. With that the regent moved her arm forward.

The sound of hooves erupted through the air as the calvary split in half and sped through the woods. The Amazon Queen turned around as they passed by her, she watched as the calvary veered out and then came in at the sides of the battle. The Queen then lifted her staff in front of herself and took a deep breath, energy pumping through her. A hint of darkness seeped into her, the darkness that was of her soulmate. The Queen of the Amazons yelled and ran ahead into the battle.

~*Part 16*~

Xena saw the rumps of horses and she raised her sword up. The fangs showed now. Her battle cry erupted through her and broke through all the yells. Xena did a flip and landed onto and back of a horse. Instantly the rider turned to see whom was on his horse.

"Hi there" A surprised look came over the man's face but he was too late. A fist connected with his face and he went crashing to the ground. The Warrior Princess hopped into the saddle.

~*~*~*~

Gabrielle ducked as the sword slashed past her head and she swung her staff to connect with man's side. He howled and slashed down at Gabrielle. But she was to quick for him and moved out of the way and he ended up with the butt end of the staff in his face. He withered and fell to the ground, still conscious though. But the bard took care of that and brought her staff down on his face and he was out.

The bard looked up and pushed her mask above her head to see her Amazons fighting Okeanos' army. She then heard the distinct sound of her soulmate's battle cry, her heart skipped a beat. Gabrielle grinned as another man stepped up to her. She went at him, but his sword stopped her staff and then he kicked her in the stomach. Gabrielle bent forward and coughed. The warrior's sword then slashed at the bard's staff and broke it from her right hand. It hit the ground too far away from her and another kick came to her stomach and she fell to one knee.

The man grinned down at her and the bard's right hand went to her boot. He brought his sword up to strike the Queen down. Before he could he had a dagger in the side of

his leg which threw him off and Gabrielle spoke with a sharp voice.

"I don't think so" With that distraction Gabrielle rolled on the ground over to her staff and hopped up with her staff. The man was gritting his teeth and the bard swung. It hit him square in the face and he crashed to the ground out cold.

"Queen Gabrielle duck!" In a flash Gabrielle ducked down finding it the perfect time to sheath the dagger again. Then a large warrior fell to the ground to her left, and arrow in his back. The bard looked up to the trees and was flashed a smile from Solari, an archer right beside her. Gabrielle smiled a thanks and stood up to run into the battle again.

~*~*~*~

Okeanos looked around and then he heard a familiar voice from behind.

"Nice day isn't it?" The warlord ducked his head down as a sword swished over his head. He turned his horse around to face a grinning female.

"Xena"

"You got that right" Their swords met in a clash. Okeanos eyes averted down to one of his warriors and he nodded to him. Xena caught the look, she yelled and jumped. The warlord looked up to the trees, not seeing anything or anybody. He then bent forward off to the side and threw up onto one of his dead riders. He closed his eyes and sat back up in the saddle. He felt like shit.

"Archers! I want my archers shooting to the trees!"

Xena moved along the branches at an incredible speed, she looked up and jump. Her hands grasped a branch and swung up and let go to do a flip and land on another branch. She bent down and scanned the fight below. She began to count.

~*~*~*~

Gabrielle held her staff up and front of her as two swords hit her staff. She dropped to the ground and swung, one warrior fell to the ground the other had jumped. The warrior's feet hit the ground and he brought his sword down at Gabrielle. But the bard had rolled away from him in time and bounced back up on her feet with a grin.

The second warrior got up to his feet and they both charged Gabrielle. In an instant the bard bent down her staff in front of her. Both of the two charging warriors legs got caught up in the staff and the fell flat on their faces.

"Idiots" The bard breathed under her breath. She stood up and whirled around to squarely bring her staff to their faces. Their heads fell to the sides. Gabrielle turned her back on them and she heard two whistling sounds behind her. The arrows embedded into the laying warrior's chests. Now the small woman ducked and a sword slashed past her head. She came back up and swung at the warrior. Her staff was stopped and the man's sword came in at her stomach, Gabrielle jumped back, the sword just missing her stomach. Then she lunged forward with her staff to connect with man's stomach. He bent forward and the bard in mid action of bring her staff up caught sight of another warrior coming at her right side.

Her staff hit over the bending warrior's head knocking him out. The warrior to her right raised his sword at the bard. Gabrielle wasn't sure if she'd have enough time

but... Then out of no where a dark figure crashed down onto the warrior his sword crashing to the ground with his body. A few leaves fell down to the ground and Gabrielle smiled to her savior.

"Thought you would like a little help" Gabrielle grinned to her soulmate.

"Yeah thanks" The bard's eyes widen and she pointed behind the warrior. Xena unsheathed her sword and rammed it behind herself, it dug into a man's gut. He fell off the blade and hit the ground. Xena brought her sword back around.

"There are four hundred footmen and twenty-five cavalry of Okeanos' army" A warrior came at Xena from her right and one at the bard's left. The Warrior Princess put her sword up to her right to stop the man's sword. She turned to him. Gabrielle hit her man in the left side then the right then over again in rapid motion.

"How many of ours Xena?" Metal dinged and Xena laughed for a second. Her sword cut the man's arm.

"We have a hundred and fifty warriors" Xena flipped her sword and drove forward at her opening. Her sword sliced through the Okeanos' warrior. "Twenty-five archers" The Warrior Princess whirled to her left, the tip of her sword right at a man's throat.

Gabrielle struck the warrior across his face he flipped onto the ground and she turned to her right to hit a man in his side then brought her staff to swipe his feet.

"How many riders?" Xena looked down at the moaning man and drove her sword into his chest and turned to see her bard hit her man between the legs. Xena faintly cringed. That warrior fell to the ground gripping his lower self and was knock across the face. Gabrielle turned to face Xena.

"Thirty riders still"

"Good"

"Yup, lets go try our new move together" The Queen nodded her head. And Xena quickly moved forward to her, the warrior's left hand going to the top of Gabrielle's head pushing her down. Gabrielle followed the command and bent down. The next thing she heard was a man groaning and falling to the ground behind her. She rose back up and Xena nodded to her. The pair raced more into the center of the battle.

~*~*~*~

The second in command landed on the ground and gutted a warrior behind Ephiny's horse. The regent smiled to Solari and second in command nodded her head. Ephiny looked up to see the Queen and her soulmate.

"Ready Gabrielle?" The bard nodded and Xena punched a man beside her. She sheathed her sword and the bard dropped her staff to the ground. The warrior held her hands out and Gabrielle latched on. In a second Xena had her bard spinning in a circle at a fast pace.

"Will you look at those two Solari" The second in command looked over to where Ephiny nodded and saw the performance.

"They're a good team" The regent nodded her head in agreement.

Xena's war cry went off as seven men fell from Gabrielle kicking them in a face. Not to mention four other idiot warriors tried to stop her and only ended up getting knocked out for their troubles. The bard landed on the ground and she picked up her staff, Xena unsheathing her sword. A bunch of warriors began to close in on the soulmates. The Warrior Princess then caught sight of Ephiny and nodded to her.

"Solari get back up there and get them out of there now!" The second in command jumped up into the trees as a warrior slashed at her, just missing her feet. Solari ran along the branches as she untied a rope from her side. She got right above the Warrior Princess and Queen. Xena punched one man and a rope fell in front of her, her sword was sheathed.

"Gabrielle grab on to me" With that the Queen grasped her soulmate and that's when the bard noticed all the dry blood and her soulmate's armor. Xena leaped. She made it half way up the length of the rope and grasped it with both hands. Gabrielle hung on for dear life as she looked down to see some of Okeanos' men trying to climb the rope. The soulmates on the branches and Xena cut the rope, the men falling to the ground. Xena looked to her soulmate to see Solari hold her at the waist, knowing the Queen never been in the trees.

"Well I guess this is my turn to learn how to move in the trees huh?" Xena grinned to her soulmate. They three females moved along the branch closer to the trunk of the tree where it was sturdier. They all bent down to look down at the fight. Gabrielle watched.

An Okeanos' footman fell to the ground from an arrow.

"Archers!" The bard looked to where she heard the yell. It was Okeanos and around his horse were five archers. They raised their arrows to the trees. One released his arrow and Gabrielle followed it to see it strike an Amazon archer in the tree in the shoulder. The archer lost her balance and fell to the ground.

"Solari"

"I'm on it Gabrielle" The second in command cup her hands over her lips in did a birdcall. She saw some of her archers nodded their heads to her. One of them repeated the same birdcall. "There now they know of the archers below"

"Hades" The bard turned to her warrior, after hearing the warrior's curse.

"What's wrong?" Xena's right hand went up to rest against the trunk of the tree and replied.

"We've lost twenty-five Amazons, ten riders and one archer" Gabrielle's mind quickly did the calculations.

"So that leaves us with a hundred and...twenty warriors, twenty riders, and twenty four archers. What's Okeanos' army like?" Blue eyes scanned the fight counting.

"There's...three hundred footmen and twenty-five calvary" The bard gritted her teeth.

"Hades" She looked to Solari. "Solari go get Eponin" The Amazon nodded and hurried off. The Queen looked back to Xena. "Xena if we lose another fifty Amazons, I can't keep them here. It'll be a massacre" The Warrior Princess looked to her partner,

her hand shot up all of sudden and caught an arrow in front of the bard's chest. Xena threw it and looked to the archers one of them eyeing her. Xena reached into her right gauntlet and pulled out an arrow.

"I know" The star arrow sped through the air and sunk into the archer's right leg. He fell to the ground, clenching his ankle where the arrow dug in. "If those mercenaries get here we'll be fine" Xena scanned the fight for Okeanos.

"Exactly, but Hades if they're here" Right then Solari and Eponin reappeared and landed on the thick branch beside the soulmates. "Eponin any sign of the mercenaries?"

"Afraid not Gabrielle" The Queen took a deep breath.

"We're down to a hundred and twenty" Gabrielle looked to her warrior. Xena looked to her then the Warrior Princess head suddenly turned to the southwest, her eyes closing.

"What is it Xena?" Xena began to grin and her eyes flew open.

"The sound of horses coming at a gallop" Emerald eyes widen and the bard turned to Eponin.

"Eponin I want those mercenaries coming in from behind. Their leader's name is Criostoir" The weapons master nodded her head and she went through the trees towards the sound of galloping horses.

"Let's get back down there Gabrielle" The bard looked back to her soulmate and nodded.

"You coming Solari?" The Amazon nodded her head to the Queen in answer.

"In a second, need to make a birdcall to the archers about the mercenaries coming in" The Queen nodded and Xena turned to her soulmate.

"Think of it as just a really big hug Gabrielle" Gabrielle chuckled and tightly wrapped her arms around her warrior, her head going into Xena's breasts. One arm going around the bard's back. "You ready?"

"I'm never ready for back flips" The warrior grinned and birdcall went off as Xena replied.

"Hang on" With that said Xena did her battle cry and she bounced off the branch doing a back flip in mid air and landed on the ground. "Drop Gabrielle" The bard did as she was told and bent down as she heard Xena's fist connect with somebody's face. Gabrielle then whirled around as she crouched to take the man's feet out from under him. She stood up and Xena unsheathed her sword and reached behind with her sword. Another sword slammed into Xena's and the female warrior spun around to face her opponent.

Part 6 (Conclusion)

Section 6

~*Part 17*~

"Are you Criostoir?" The man pulled his horse to a halt and looked down to the woman who just reappeared from above. He held up his hand and some where around a hundred horses came to a stop. Two Amazons were directly behind him, the messengers.

"I am"

"I am to report to you from Queen Gabrielle that you are to attack from behind the battle" The mercenary nodded his head and he turned in his saddle. All the riders unsheathed their swords.

"Follow me men!" He looked back to Eponin and nodded.

"Thanks" Right after that he kick his horse into a gallop. Him and his band of mercenaries all turned veered to the left some then came in directly behind to the battle. Criostoir's mercenaries yelling with their swords raised. The two messengers Amazons had walked over to Eponin with smiles.

"Glad you two brought them back" The two Amazons chuckled.

"Sorry we weren't earlier" The weapons master looked to the Amazon on the right.

"I'm just glad you came now instead of later"

~*~*~*~

Gabrielle looked up to see a dark man on a jet-black stallion come charging in behind the battle, the bard grinned.

"They're here Xena!" Xena slashed her sword across the warrior's stomach and he fell. She looked up to see a mass amount of men on horseback flood into the fight. Xena grinned at the familiar man and laughed. She charged into another warrior, as did the bard.

Soon the yells of Amazons could be heard. Their voices renounced. Some hollering over the mercenaries arrival. Xena then spotted Lysia.

"Lysia over here!" The tall Amazon spun around and rushes over to the Warrior Princess.

"Need help with something Xena?" Lysia ducked as a man swung at her head, she punched him in the face.

"Yeah, protect Gabrielle got me?" The tall Amazon nodded her head.

"You got it" Xena nodded to the Amazon and whirled her blade to gut a running warrior. She leaped into the trees. Emerald eyes watched her go.

"Lysia where is she going?"

"I don't know Queen Gabrielle" The bard turned to her left and found a horse just a few paces away. She looked up to see Okeanos.

"Long time no see Queen Gabrielle" The Amazon Queen gritted her teeth.

~*~*~*~

Xena landed onto the ground and kicked a man in the stomach and looked to Ephiny on her horse.

"Ephiny?!" The regent turned her head to the right to see the warrior.

"Xena, what's up?"

"I need you to tell your archers to pull back. I'm worried they'll kill some of the mercenaries" The regent nodded and Xena stepped up close to the horse. Ephiny cupped her hands over her mouth and did a different birdcall then Solari's.

"Its done" Xena could hear the birdcall be repeated through the trees.

"Thanks Eph" The regent smiled and she kicked a man in the face to her right. Xena turned around to spot a large stallion, Okeanos on it far away. She then spotted her bard right in front of the horse. Her heart skipped a beat. "Hades" The warrior was about to leap up but two men rushed her and she was pressed. Her mind worked quickly as what to do. *Gods Argo! How could I forget?* The Warrior Princess jumped out of the way of the warriors and they almost slashed each other in half. Xena whistled sharply and the warrior heard the familiar sound of hoof beats.

~*~*~*~

Lysia rushed Okeanos and his sword met hers. Gabrielle stepped back and a man was on her, she made quick work of him with her staff then she looked back to Okeanos. The bard's memory quickly flashed back to the day when she first got her staff. Ephiny's words coming to her.

Ephiny looked up to the bard, staff in her hands, a brown horse to Ephiny's right.

"Centaur's have certain strengths and weakness. Their fast and agile, we use that to our advantage" Ephiny raised her staff. "As a centaur passes at full gallop" Ephiny quickly brought the butt of the staff to the horse's left mid leg "The staff goes here. To crack the knee at the joint" Gabrielle nodded and Ephiny went on. "This splits the leg forward and drops them to the ground" Now Eponin looked to the bard from her side. "As the centaur falls" Ephiny begins to whirl around with the staff. "A strike to the lower shoulder" The butt of the staff now at the back of the horse's mid joint. "Dislocates the two front legs"

Gabrielle's eyes refocused and she watched as Lysia was cut in the arm by Okeanos' sword.

"Watch out Lysia!" And with that the bard raced forward, her staff went swinging to the horse's front joint. A crack was heard as the horse whined and began to fall forward. The bard spun around with her staff as the horse began to fall, the end of her staff smacking hard into the back of the horse's two joints. Two loud cracks and the horse rolled onto its side crashing onto the ground. The Amazon had taken to steps away and Okeanos had jumped off his horse before it rolled onto its side.

"I'll kill you for that!" Gabrielle turned around quickly but as a sword came down at her, Lysia's sword stops Okeanos' blade.

"Tsk tsk, nobody mess with the Queen" Lysia pulled back her fist and it connected with Okeanos' face. The warlord stumbled back but he rapidly recovered and brought his sword up to the Amazon's side, he grinned at Lysia and jerked his sword out of the Amazon's side. The large Amazon's fell to her knees then on her side, her hands grasping her sides trying to stop the bleeding.

"And nobody messes with me" Okeanos turned to the Gabrielle whom was in her fighting stance. The man laughed and stepped up to her.

~*~*~*~

Xena rode out of the battle, a warrior running after her from behind. So she spurred Argo in a certain spot. In reaction the mare stopped galloping and kicked with her hind legs. Okeanos' warrior went flying through the air and crashed into a tree, sliding down it. The Warrior Princess then kicked the war-horse hard and she broke out back into a gallop. The horse cantering along side the battle, Xena looking in. Gold armor flashed and she pulled on the horse's right rein and Argo turned towards the battle. Xena stood up in the stirrups, her heart raced and she unsheathed her sword. She spotted her soulmate and Okeanos in the middle of the entire battle.

~*~*~*~

Gabrielle held her staff over her head against the sword. Okeanos released and came at the bard's side, Gabrielle hopped back out of the way. She sucked in her stomach as the tip of the sword breezed by her mid-section. That was to close for comfort. Her staff's end came around and hit the warlord on the shoulders and he yelped. But he was quick to take his opening, his sword swiping at the bard's side and cutting down the length of the bard's left arm.

Gabrielle gritted her teeth and she swung, but it wasn't as powerful as normal, her body still reacting to the new wound. Okeanos brought his hand out and grabbed the staff's end in his hand. It stung but he kicked with his right foot. He got the Queen right in the stomach, so Gabrielle lost her grip on the staff. Okeanos tosses the staff behind him. His sword went under the Queen's chin as she kneeled before him, her right hand over her right boot.

"I may not win this battle Gabrielle, but at least I know I've killed their Queen" Her green eyes narrow.

"At least I'll die knowing my Nation beat your army" Slowly the bard's right hand clasped around cold metal.

"That may be so, but your warrior will be quite upset when she sees you dead" The bard's hand tightened around the hilt of the dagger.

"Maybe she wont have to" His eyes widen then Gabrielle brought up her right hand to throw the dagger it sailed through the air and dug into his left waist. Okeanos faltered and the tip of his sword just swept across the bard's neck, the bard falling on her back, her neck bleeding. The warlord pulled out the dagger from his hip and tossed it to the ground, turning back to the bard. He raised his sword up at the bard, Gabrielle closed her eyes, her heart was pounding out of control. The sound around her was drained out of her world.

A war cry crashed through Gabrielle's world. Time seemed to slow up. Emerald eyes opened again and she saw a tall form behind Okeanos flipping through the air. The

warrior almost seemed to slowly land between Okeanos and the Queen, the warlord's sword coming down already. It embedded into the tall warrior's left shoulder, sending the female warrior to one knee over the pain. Xena then reached between her breasts and then time sped up again. The next thing Gabrielle saw was her soulmate's breast dagger going into the warlord's heart. His eyes slowly rolled back up into his head. Xena's voice rung through her world in a low growl.

"Nobody messes with my soulmate"

Time slowing again.

Okeanos still tightly gripped his sword and he began to fall back. The sword coming out of the Warrior Princess's shoulder, the red breast dagger slipping out of his chest, a drop of blood slowly fell. Xena dropped the dagger. He hit the ground with a crash then the dagger met the ground beside Xena's knee. Gabrielle sat up to her knees which seemed to take infinite to do. She watched as Okeanos' grip on his sword relax and the hilt rolled out of his hand, his chest never moving up or down.

Time went back to normal.

Xena quickly turned around.

"Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle threw herself into the kneeling warrior, Xena wrapped her arms around her soulmate and pulled her in. Neither cared how bloody the other was nor how sweaty. They just needed to feel each other in their arms. They hugged for what seemed like a lifetime. Then a loud cheering crashed into their world. Xena lifted her head from the bard's shoulder and looked up. Amazons surrounded them all with the mercenaries directly behind them on horseback. Ephiny hopped off her horse and wedged through the cheering Amazons over to the soulmates in the center of circle.

"Gabrielle?" The bard lifted her head to her soulmate's voice and took a look around.

"We won?" Xena pulled back and looked into emerald eyes.

"Yeah we won" Gabrielle smiled and without expectancy she pulled Xena in for a passionate kiss. Xena melted into the kiss as one hand went to the bard's cheek, one of Gabrielle's hands behind Xena's head. Now the cheering grew as the soulmates continued to kiss. Once the kiss broke the pair rose up to their feet both smiling. The cheering went on with Amazons raising their swords and masks over their heads in triumphant. Ephiny stepped over to her two friends with a huge smile.

"We did it" Gabrielle quickly pulled her Amazon friend in for a hug, Ephiny was surprised.

"Thanks Ephiny" They pulled back and the regent still had her bright smile.

"Anytime" Now the cheering slowly began to turn into a chant.

"Queen Gabrielle! Queen Gabrielle!" Xena stepped up to her soulmate and wrapped an arm over her shoulders, pulled her in and looked down with twinkling blue eyes.

"That's you" The Queen of the Amazons blushed a deep red as she heard everybody

yell and chant her name.

~*Part 18*~

Gabrielle stumbled into the hut and Xena shut the door.

"Lets get that gash taken care of" The bard huffed.

"You're the one to talk, you have a sword wound in your shoulder" The warrior shrugged.

"I can wait, you're first" Gabrielle turned to her soulmate and put on her best stern face.

"You're first...Queen's orders" Xena arched an eyebrow and then grinned.

"Alright you win" The bard grinned.

"Sit down and take off your shoulder armor" The warrior nodded and did as she was told. Gabrielle placed her staff against the wall and walked into the washroom. She came back out with a bowl and cloth. Small hands grasped a chair and moved it in front of Xena, Gabrielle then lifted the medical kit up out of the saddlebag and the tossed the cloth into the bowl and lifted up with her free hand. She moved over to the seat and sat in it facing Xena. She dropped the med. kit to the floor then placed the bowl in her lap. "You know you were right" The wet cloth went to Xena's shoulder wound, it stung at first.

"About what?"

"About the dagger" Xena nodded and the bard careful cleaned the wound of the blood and the skin around. "Saved me twice"

"I knew it would, saved my brother a number of times" Gabrielle nodded then she reached to the medical kit pulling out a needle and thread.

"Needs a few stitches" Xena nodded and the bard threaded the needle. "Thanks for letting me burrow it"

"Hmm I want you to keep it" Ivy green eyes looked up from the needle to Xena.

"Xena I couldn't, it was your brother's"

"Even more the reason you should have it" Gabrielle brought up the needle to Xena's shoulder and began to stitch the wound up. The bard noticed her soulmate's jaw tightened up.

"Why would that be even more a reason?"

"Because I know Lyceus, if he had known you, he'd want you to have it as would I...as protection" Sometimes the bard just couldn't win.

"He would huh?"

"Yeah" Gabrielle grinned and put in the fourth and final stitch.

"You sure?" Xena responded with a serious tone.

"Positive" Emerald locked with blue.

"Alright" The bard grinned. "Thank you" Xena nodded with a smile. Gabrielle then reached down to retrieve some salve. She carefully began to rub it into her partner's shoulder. "Thanks for stopping Okeanos"

"I'm glad I made it" Gabrielle nodded her head.

"I was pretty scared"

"I felt it" Gabrielle looked to her warrior's eyes then smiled.

"That breast dagger seems to be another lucky dagger huh?" Xena chuckled.

"It's a great dagger, glad you decided to get it so long ago"

"It was only about a year ago from now"

"Was it really?"

"Uh huh" The bard pulled out a wrapped and Xena lifted her arm to let Gabrielle easily wrap it. The small woman then looked to Xena with a devilish grin. "You getting old?" Cobalt eyes narrowed but a grin formed on Xena's lips.

"No, I just can't believe it was only a little more then a year ago" Gabrielle took a deep breath and finished the wrap.

"Yeah sometimes it seems like a lifetime ago huh?" Xena nodded her head and picked up the bowl with the blood stained water. She went into the washroom to pour out the water and retrieve fresh water. She walked back out, sat on the bed and took the bard's left arm and began to clean the blood off.

"That's time for you, either to slow or to fast" After cleaning the wound, Xena added some salve to keep it clean.

"I suppose" Xena grinned then cleaned the cloth in the fresh bowl of water, ringing out the excess water. The warrior's left hand went under the bard's chin and lifted it. The cloth went to the nick at Gabrielle's throat, emerald eyes closing. "Its stings...like a parchment cut"

"Looks like it would" The small woman slightly nodded her head.

"Xena?"

"Hmm?"

"You think we should have the mercenaries stay till tomorrow?" Large hands dropped the wet cloth into the water again and a dab of balsam was rubbed over the small nick.

"For what?"

"Well you know Eph and the other Amazons will want a party over this" Xena averted her fingers from the bard's chin to her own lap.

"Mmm, those feather heads would" The bard arched an eyebrow. "Criostoir would probably like that, get in good with him too" The Queen grinned to her soulmate.

"Figured that, but we owe them big for their help" Xena nodded her head in agreement.

"Be a good idea"

"Hades, we better get back out there Xena" Gabrielle stood up, the feathers from her mask rustled behind her. The warrior also stood up and went to the washroom with the bowl. She came back out empty handed, walked close to the chair at the foot of the bed. Her large hands grasped the top and swung it back beside the table and looked up to her soulmate whom leaned on her staff in front of the door. Xena walked over to her. "They're probably thinking bad things about us right now being in here" The warrior wickedly grinned.

"Let them" The small bard chuckled and opened the door heading out of it, Xena right behind her. As soon as they were out the door, Gabrielle stopped dead in her tracks. "What is it?" Emerald eyes looked to Xena.

"Lysia, by the gods I am such an idiot" The small woman hefted her staff up and broke out into a run to the Healer's Hut. Xena ran along beside. "I can't believe I forgot, damn me" Boots pounded up the steps to the Healers Hut, Gabrielle quickly swinging the door open. Eilis looked up from a bed pallet off to the left. There on the pallet lay a tall brown haired Amazon.

"Queen Gabrielle" The bard rushed over to the side of the pallet and looked to the healer.

"Eilis, how is she?" The healer's eyes dropped.

"Not well I'm afraid Gabrielle" Xena was beside the bard, looking down at her almost look alike.

"Is she..." Eilis shook her head.

"I think she's lost to much blood" Spring eyes looked up to the warrior, Xena looked to her bard. She quickly understood the bard's look and stepped up to the pallet. The Warrior Princess lifted the cloth over the wound, it was stitched cleanly. She noticed how pale Lysia looked, it would be something risky. The door to the hut then abruptly swung open, an Amazon rushing in. Gabrielle looked to the door to see a stricken Teresa.

"Is she?" Teresa stepped up beside the bard.

"No Teresa" The Amazon looked to her Queen, a look of relief washed over her face. Teresa looked back to Lysia on the pallet. Xena shifted up and dropped her head over top of Lysia's chest, she listened to the heart beat. It is weak, the warrior frowned. "Xena is there anything that can be done" She brought her head back up from Lysia's chest and turned to look at her bard.

"There might be" Xena's eyes focussed beyond the bard to the shelf a ways behind her. She quickly stepped between the Queen and Amazon, Eilis watching the scene. The warrior scanned the jars of herbs and medicines, searching for one. Her large hand

went up to a jar and Xena pulled the jar off the shelf and came to the pallet again. "Eilis, I need a bowl with a little bit of water" The healer rushed off to gather a bowl, placing a small amount of water and returned. Xena popped the top of the jar off and sprinkled some of the powered into her hand then dropped it into the bowl of water. It quickly diluted in the water, the water changing to a dull white shade. "Eilis lift Lysia's head for me" Eilis shifted to the head of the pallet and slipped her hands under the Amazon's head and sat her up. The warrior slipped some of the herbed water between the Amazon's lips, Lysia subconsciously drinking it. "That's good" The healer gently placed the Amazon down again.

"Xena, what will that do?" Xena lifted the bowl up and handed it to Eilis then the jar. She turned around to face her soulmate.

"Speed up her heart rate hopefully, foxglove. But that's all that can be done" Gabrielle nodded her head then looked to Teresa beside her.

"Teresa you going to stay?" The Amazon looked to the bard with a sadden face.

"Yeah, I think I will" The small blond gave Teresa a one arm hug then smiled to her.

"Hang in there huh?" The Amazon nodded her head and walked over to the pallet beside the laying Lysia. Gabrielle looked up to her soulmate and Xena nodded her head to the door. They started to head out and the Queen looked to the healer and waved, Eilis waving back with a sad face. The soulmates stepped out of the hut and down to the ground, Gabrielle looked to her partner. "Is she going to make it Xena?" Blue eyes averted to the bard.

"I don't think so Gabrielle. As Eilis said, she's lost a lot of blood" The small blond felt a lump in her throat and nodded her head. Xena pulled her lover into a hug then released her.

"We better go find Ephiny" Xena nodded her head in agreement.

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Ephiny brought up her right hand to rest on her hip as she smiled to the mercenary. She actually liked the man, pretty nice guy for a mercenary. The regent then noticed the Queen coming at a fast pace behind Criostoir with her tall soulmate right beside her. Criostoir turned to let Gabrielle and her partner stood with himself and the regent.

"Queen Gabrielle" The man lightly bowed his head then looked back up. Then he looked to Xena with a huge smile. "You know I never thought I'd see you again" The female warrior grinned and grasped the mercenaries out stretched arm, shaking arms with him.

"Its good to see you again Criostoir after all these years"

"We had some good times then Xena" The Warrior Princess brought her arms up to cross against her chest.

"That we did" The mercenary smiled then looked to Gabrielle.

"I apologize for arriving late as I did" The bard thought her mouth hit the ground. A mercenary apologizing? She must be dreaming.

"No apology needed Criostoir, I was just happy you made it" The man kept his smile. "And we owe you and your band a huge debt for everything. We'll have the money sent to you as soon as things quiet down" Gabrielle then looked to her regent. "Ephiny, I'm assuming tomorrow will be the big party?" The Amazon grinned devilishly.

"If the Queen wishes one" The bard snorted lightly and rolled her eyes.

"I don't think I have much of a choice in the matter" Ephiny chuckled.

"I don't think you do" Gabrielle nodded her head with a grin.

"Well then I think with your permission Ephiny" The bard looked to Criostoir. "I'd like to invite Criostoir and his men to the festival" The regent smiled and looked to the mercenary and back the Queen up.

"I think that would be great if Criostoir and his men stayed for the day" Criostoir crossed his arms against his chest and looked to the regent and Queen.

"My men would appreciate it, they haven't had a celebration in a long time" Gabrielle smiled.

"Great then we'll have things set up" Ephiny nodded her head in agreement to Gabrielle.

"But we'll have to leave by tomorrow afternoon, my men and I need to be going to another engagement we've been hired for" The Queen and regent both nodded their heads.

"That's fine" Criostoir smiled at the bard's words.

"Well I think I'll be on my way to check on my men" He then looked to the regent. "Nice meeting you Regent Ephiny" The mercenary looked to Gabrielle again. "And its wonderful to meet the Queen of the Amazons, Queen Gabrielle" The bard smiled to him with a nod. Criostoir then looked to Xena. "And Xena, its been to long" The warrior grinned.

"We'll have to catch up with each other then Criostoir" The man nodded his head.

"We will have too" With that said Criostoir began to leave.

"Bye ladies" The mercenary leader then left to take care of his men outside of the village. Gabrielle turned to Ephiny.

"Nice guy huh?" Ephiny nodded.

"He is"

"How are things coming along Ephiny?" The regent crossed her arms against her chest.

"We've gathered all the wounded and dead. There were fifty-seven Amazons killed and twenty three wounded" Gabrielle nodded her head.

"What of Okeanos' army?"

"The one's that live were around a seventy-five, they ran" A deep breath from the regent. "The five hundred twenty-five that were left behind, all dead" The Queen couldn't believe the numbers.

"Mercenaries?"

"Criostoir said none of his men were killed, few wounded"

"And I assume they're making camp out in the forest, southern side?" Ephiny nodded her head in agreement.

"Right now I have Solari and Eponin checking on everybody, getting the dead rounded up. What would you like to be done with Okeanos' men Gabrielle?" The bard took a deep breath and thought, her eyes going down to the ground. An idea came to her and she looked back to Ephiny.

"Let's have them put on pyre's then set on fire going down the Nestus River north of here" Ephiny dropped her one arm off her hips.

"It'll be done"

"Ephiny, you have time now?"

"Yeah I have a half of a candlemark or so"

"Let's go back to my hut and get the money, head over to Criostoir" The regent nodded in agreement. The bard then looked to her soulmate. "Do you want to come Xena?" Blue eyes unfocussed a moment then looked back to the bard.

"No I think I'll check on Argo then help out around here, you two go ahead" Gabrielle nodded and Xena stepped closer to her partner. Leaning down, the warrior captured the bard's lips in a light kiss. She stalked off with a wink. Gabrielle shook her head and looked to Ephiny.

"Better get this done with" The regent nodded and the two women headed to the Queen's hut.

~*~*~*~

Xena dropped her right hand down to the soft wool, it was a dark navy blue cloak. It had a dirty white wool collar as well. It looked pretty warm. In the warrior's right arm hung a partial wool, partial leather cloak that she hoped would fit her soulmate. Xena hefted the cloak hanging off her right arm and placed it on top of the stack of leathers to the right. Her large hands lifted up the navy cloak and unfolded it in front of her body.

"Hey Xena" The warrior stared at the front of the cloak and looked up to see a curly-blond Amazon.

"How are you Eph?" The regent smiled and took a few steps more into the hut and came up beside Xena.

"Pretty good, nice cloak" Xena nodded her head.

"Yeah, I was wondering if you'd mind Gabrielle and I each taking a cloak?" Ephiny

shrugged her shoulders.

"Sure why not, it's going to be a cold one" The warrior nodded her head.

"Yeah that's what I told Gabrielle" Xena took a step back with the navy cloak and turned to the regent while holding the cloak against her body. "Look good?" Ephiny looked to the warrior with a grin.

"It does, your color, dark" Xena grinned. "Long enough too" The warrior chuckled a little.

"You Amazons don't have many long cloaks" The regent arched an eyebrow.

"That's because not many Amazons are as tall as you" Xena smirked back.

"Didn't notice" Xena tossed the navy cloak on the stack of cloaks again and picked up the one she had in mind for her soulmate. She held it against her body for Ephiny to see.

"To small" A dark eyebrow went up.

"Ephiny" The regent looked up from the cloak to the Warrior Princess' face. "It's for Gabrielle" The Amazon laugh for an instant then looked up and down the length of the cloak.

"Yeah, I think it'll go good with Gabrielle's hair" Xena sighed and shook her head.

"I'm more concerned on how warm it is then what it'll look like on her" Ephiny nodded her head.

"Oh it'll be plenty warm, made out of wool and leather" Xena smiled.

"I do have to agree though, her hair will look good with the cloak" The regent grinned to her friend.

"Is that the feminine side of Xena coming out" Xena replied in a low growl.

"No" The Amazon just nodded her head. The warrior then placed the cloak on top of the navy one she intended to keep for herself.

"Speaking of which, Gabrielle did a good job handling the situation" Sky splashed eyes looked up from the cloaks to Ephiny.

"She did"

"Mmm especially considering what she's just been through with Poteidaia" Xena nodded her head and crossed her arms against her chest. "How is she doing with that Xena?" The warrior took a deep breath.

"Gabrielle is handling it better. Gets better as each day passes" Ephiny slightly smiled.

"That's good to hear. When you two plan on leaving?"

"I don't know, I need to talk to Gabrielle about that. My guess tomorrow afternoon or so" Ephiny nodded her left hand going to the table to lean against. "Do you guys have

any plans?" Xena smiled.

"Yeah we plan to take a vacation in Amphipolis" The regent now smiled brightly.

"That's great, you both could use one. For how long?" Xena shrugged.

"How ever long, I'd like to stay for Solstice at mother's. See what happens. You'll have to come visit Ephiny when you get a little bored here" The regent laugh.

"I will" Xena then turned to the two cloaks and picked them up.

"Hey Ephiny, why don't you come by tonight and visit with Gabrielle? I'm sure she'd love that before we leave" The regent smiled as Xena turned back to her.

"Sure I'll come by for a candlemark or so. We need to catch up" The warrior snorted lightly.

"On gossip" The Amazon rolled her eyes.

"Well that too. By the way Xena, we plan to have the Amazon pyres tonight" Xena nodded her head then replied.

"Have you heard anything about Lysia?" The regent sighed.

"They don't think she'll make it. Teresa is pretty upset" Cobalt eyes dropped for a heartbeat then looked back up.

"I know, I saw her earlier" She took a deep breath then began to walk past the regent. "I'll talk to you later Eph" The Amazon turned around looking to the warrior by the door.

"Bye Xena" Xena smiled with a raise of her hand and left the hut. Ephiny looked to the table stacked with cloaks, leathers, armor and other items. She then headed out of the hut.

~*~*~*~

Gabrielle turned around from the table to the door as a tall figure entered the room. She smiled.

"Hey, was wondering where you were" Xena smiled and walked over to her partner.

"Came back from the Material Hut, got us some cloaks" Sea green eyes drifted to the two cloaks in the warrior's arms. Xena lifted up the one for her soulmate and tossed it to her. Gabrielle caught it and held it in out in front of her. She stared at the front of it, it was long probably reach to about her lower shins. It was made of brown leather and white wool. The leather covering in patches from her wrist to her upper arm, her sides, mid-section, then some of the back along with the collar. On the front it held a few buttons, the wool looking warm and almost having a dirty look to it. All the wool and leather was stitched together by black thread. Gabrielle loved it.

"This is great Xena" The warrior smiled to her partner.

"Like it huh?"

"I love the cloak" Gabrielle looked up to spot her soulmate's own cloak. "Yours made

out of just wool?" Xena nodded her head then held it out for the bard to see. Xena's cloak was defiantly long, made of completely wool a deep rich navy blue, the collar on the other hand was an off white almost gray. The bard had to grin, it is her soulmate's color. "I like yours too" The Warrior Princess chuckled.

"It'll work" Xena stepped over to the bard and took the Gabrielle's cloak along with her own and placed them by the saddlebags. "You up for a bath?" The bard arched a brown eyebrow.

"I think both of us need it no matter what" Xena chuckled and rose back up to her full height.

"I agree"

~*~*~*~

The tall female ran her fingers through her wet bangs and sighed. She had on her clean leathers and armor with boots, but had yet to put on her gauntlets or armbands. Gabrielle for her part didn't just toss her Amazon leathers into the bathtub after cleaning herself unlike Xena. Instead she had other plans to have them cleaned up on her own time by a stream or lake. The warrior though after they had their bath, put her armor into the water and cleaned it of all the tarnishing blood, scrubbing it good. Then she hung it up to dry while she put her leathers into the bathtub to clean as well. The bard had to chuckle at her lover's technique, but it worked. Fortunately for Xena she had a spare set of dry leathers to wear with her armor, her wet ones now on a chair drying.

"Gabrielle?" The Amazon Queen strolled out of the washroom, her head down while her fingers worked the laces of her halter-top.

"Yeah?"

"You ready?" Gabrielle looked up with an arched eyebrow.

"No, nor are you" Xena sighed.

"More ready then you I'd say" The bard grinned to her friend.

"Uh huh" The small woman stood in her bare feet in her normal attire, her skirt on and her green halter-top on in the process of being laced up. Xena moved over to the table where she left her weapons, gauntlet and armbands.

"I spoke to Ephiny earlier" Green eyes lifted, small fingers now tying the laces.

"Yeah"

"Uh huh, she said she'd come by tonight to visit before we disappear" The bard's head went up and down.

"Speaking of which when are we leaving?" The bard moved to the foot of the bed where her boots rested on the floor. Xena looked to her soulmate as she slipped on her last armband.

"I figured tomorrow around late afternoon" Gabrielle looked to her left to Xena, her right leg up on the frame of the bed, her hands tying the boots.

"Sounds good to me. I'm ready to be alone a few days with you" Xena grinned to her bard, as her left hand twisted the gauntlet into place on her right wrist.

"Me too" Xena turned to the table again, she lifted up her sword in sheath then looked to her lover again. Her large hands went behind her with the sword, working the clips. "Also I think I've had enough fun with all the leathers and feathers" The bard chuckled her other foot going up to the bed frame.

"I have to agree for once. Don't tell Eph" Xena grinned her right hand moving behind to lift her chakram up from the table. Blue eyes stared at the round weapon in front of her.

"Yeah a vacation will be nice" Gabrielle's left foot hit the floor and she turned to face her partner.

"Solstice will be real nice" The bard looked to the chakram as well. "You realize that is the first time you were in a battle and didn't use your chakram" The chakram lowered and then was clipped to the warrior's side.

"I was just thinking that. There were just too many people anyway" Gabrielle nodded her head. Xena crossed the distance between them and placed her hands to the bard's sides. She lowered her head down close to the Queen's their foreheads almost touching. "Mmm, I've missed our time alone together" One of the bard's hands rested on Xena's hip the other against the muscular stomach. Sparkling spring eyes lifted up to sky splashed intense eyes.

"Me too" The younger woman sighed. "Been one thing after another" The warrior also sighed.

"It has but I promise we have our break now from everything" Gabrielle grinned up to her soulmate.

"Good" Then their lips were sealed together for an instant in time. It lasted for heartbeats, causing emotions and physical sensations to heighten beyond most people's capacity. Once the kiss was ended did they stare into each other's eyes for moments on end, their hearts raced. The soulmates always enjoyed these small moments in their lives together. Soon afterwards they left the hut.

~*~*~*~

The Queen of the Amazons looked west to see the sun just looking to the horizon, nightfall would come once again. She still had on her normal travelling attire, but she had taken her Amazon Queen mask and slipped it over her head. Off the platform to her right and left stood the remaining Amazons of her tribe, wounded and unwounded alike. Even Criostoir arrived for the funerals. Ephiny stood directly on her right, then Xena to her left, Solari and Eponin were down on the ground with their backs to the Queen. Beside the weapons master and second in command were two torch stands. On the ground a ways ahead were twelve funeral pyres, just about all eleven pyres held above five killed Amazons. Then there was one funeral pyre directly in the center that held one Amazon's body, Lysia. The Queen held herself strong over these saddening numbers.

"The Amazon Nation has defeated the Warlord Okeanos with the needed and thankful help of Criostoir" The Amazon Queen turned her head to the mercenary in the mass of

standing Amazons, he was distinguishable. "The Nation thanks you Criostoir and your band for all your help in stopping Okeanos" The mercenary bowed his head to the Queen with a broad smile. The Amazons broke out into a cheer between the mercenary's help and the Queen's words. It was all agreed. Gabrielle then looked back to the pyres, the Amazons all went dead silent. "As all of us know, battles, wars, and fights always come to an end with at least one person dead if not many. Today we lost fifty-eight true Amazon Warriors. Each and every one of them was loved and well known, which is what makes each individual lost Amazon important to this Nation. This Nation may have lost these true Amazon Warriors physical" A deep breath from the Queen. "But we did not lose them in spirit, they will live on forever in our minds, hearts and in each breath we speak of them"

Gabrielle paused for a moment her eyes searching the pyres. "Each of these pyres hold an Amazon that risked their life not just for this Nation but for each and every one of us. I know myself that each Amazon warrior risked her life to protect each and every one of us and this Nation. I want each of you to remember that when it comes to the future. Remember in the future of these Amazons that risked their lives for a Nation, a Nation we will keep in existence because of the lives that went into keeping this Nation together" The Queen paused and watched as twelve archers stepped up to the front and came up along side of the torch stands with arrows. One at a time they began to light their arrow tips then line up in front of the platform. "Let the Amazon Nation now take time to remember these true Amazon Warriors. Remember them and never forget them, they are always apart of this Nation"

The two center archers were facing the Queen, Gabrielle nodded to them. They turned back around and shot the first two arrows, then quick to follow were the other archers right down in a line. The pyres rapidly caught on fire, the breeze helping it along. It was nightfall now. The stars twinkled high above as crystalline jewels would. Hanging low in the western sky was the waning moon. The bard began to step off the platform with Xena and Ephiny right beside her. Her leather boots scuffed on the ground, she shifted closer to the pyres. Gabrielle could feel the heat from the fires on her body, it warped her. Slowly the crowd of Amazon's began to encircle the pyres, some Amazons on their knees praying, others with their heads down or with tears stained eyes staring at the funeral. Xena came up along side of Gabrielle.

"You okay?" Emerald eyes shifted up to Xena then back to the pyres, she responded.

"Yeah I'm fine" They were silent for a few heartbeats, both taking in the scene. Gabrielle then looked to her right in the crowds, she spotted Teresa. The warrior looked to where the bard was to see the Amazon.

"Go to her" The Amazon Queen looked back to Xena with a smile.

"Thanks, I'll be back" The Warrior Princess nodded her head and watched as her soulmate began to shift through the people to the Amazon. Gabrielle watched Teresa as she came her way. The Amazon's face is stained with tears, her right hand up covering her mouth. Occasionally she closed her eyes and more tears trickled out, the fire reflecting off her tanned body and short blond hair. Teresa then turned her head to spot the Queen coming her way, Gabrielle came right to her. The Amazon immediately went in for a hug from the Queen. Gabrielle wrapped both of her arms tightly around Teresa, the Amazon's head going into the other woman's chest. They both stayed like that for a few moments. Teresa then took a deep breath and brought

her head back up. "Teresa she's better off now" The Amazon nodded her head as the pair released each other.

"I know, she was in pain" Gabrielle sadly smiled.

"She was and she didn't die in vain" Teresa nodded her head again.

"You know I should have been there with her in the fight" The bard's right hand reached out and rested on the Amazon's left shoulder.

"Don't do that to yourself Teresa, it won't help. It happened, you can't stop something's from happening" Again the Amazon nodded her head. "Teresa, Lysia died the way she wanted to, personally protecting the Queen" Teresa sadly smiled now and Gabrielle pulled her in for another long hug. They released each other again, Gabrielle smiling some to only hope it'd help her friend. "You'll be okay?" The Amazon nodded her head.

"Yes, thank you Gabrielle" The bard nodded her own head.

"You're welcome" The bard's small right hand then moved to rest on Teresa's chest over her heart. "A part of her is inside of you there" A few tears came down the Amazon's cheek, a sad smile.

"Thank you again" The Queen nodded her head with a smile and turned to leave. Teresa looking back to Lysia's funeral pyre. Xena caught sight of her partner coming. Every now and again blue eyes had averted to the Amazon and the bard, then back to the pyres. Xena had quickly realized how much the bard is in this world. Gabrielle came up to stand beside Xena again.

"How is she?" Emerald eyes stayed fixed on the pyres.

"She's defiantly upset, I think she'll be okay" Xena nodded her head. Silence filled the air again but within a few moments Gabrielle broke it. "This sort of thing shouldn't happen" Xena looked to her best friend.

"No they shouldn't" Gabrielle looked up to Xena, eyes locked. "But these are the times" The smaller female's eyes dropped.

"They are unfortunately" Both women shifted their eyes back to the pyres. Then the bard's right hand came up to her bangs pulling them back with her hand still over her head, a lump entered her throat, her eyes began to slightly burn. "Xena?" The warrior's right hand reached over to the bard's hand, Gabrielle tightly gripped the large comforting hand.

"I'm here" Xena wanted to quickly bring the bard into her arms, but held back. Xena knew her soulmate had something to say and work through at this instant. Gabrielle's memories had quickly invaded her mind from a time not so long ago.

"I can still remember it Xena" Now a lump entered the warrior's throat, her muscles tense.

"I know you can" Hot tears trickled out of the bard's eyes, her right hand fell from her head to wrap around her own stomach. Xena briefly squeezed the bard's hands in reassurance.

"Then when I was in the Amazon hut, I can still recall my words of moving on" More tears began to roll down the bard's cheeks.

"Remember me coming back?" Gabrielle slightly nodded her head.

"Yeah I still remember staring into your coffin placing the ambrosia into your mouth, thinking it wouldn't work. But then your eyes slowly opened" Gabrielle then whispered something quietly. " I thought I was in a dream" A sorrowful smile crossed Xena's lips.

"You weren't nor are you now" Xena then turned her body to face her soulmate. "I'm never leaving you Gabrielle" They released hands and Gabrielle was pulled into strong protective arms that always comfort her and helped her to believe. After a number of tears left the bard, the pair faced the pyres again, Gabrielle leaning into Xena with the warrior's embrace still protecting her. For once Gabrielle could look to those funeral pyres without feeling the loss of her soulmate, because it really never happened. The memories now held little power over her. The wounds slowly disappearing. The healing had begun for them both.

~*Part 19*~

Gabrielle broke out laughing, she smiled and lifted her small almost empty mug of wine.

"Gods yes I remember that Eponin" Xena grinned at her soulmate as she looked down to her mug of port, studying it.

"I knew I missed a few things, but this many?" Solari, Ephiny, Teresa, Eponin and Gabrielle all looked to Xena after her words. Slowly blue eyes lifted to them, a big grin on her lips.

"Oh you missed quite a bit Xena" Had been Eponin's response. The five women all sat in front of a fire, music was beating loudly in the background with the Amazons and mercenaries all dancing and celebrating. This group decided to vacant a spot in front of a fire to talk about old memories. The night before was hard at the beginning then the night climax went down as the night wore on. Once the soulmates disappeared to the Queen's hut, Ephiny dropped by for a visit. Xena stayed for awhile then decided to disappear to visit with Criostoir. By the time she had returned the bard was alone in bed writing in her journal. Gabrielle had sat there intensely grinning on the bed, Xena asked why. She quickly found out what Ephiny had told the bard.

Now Xena's eyes looked to the regent and second in command across the fire. Ephiny's left hand is laced together with Solari's their hands resting on the regent's knee. Eponin though sat off to the Queen's left while Teresa was across from the weapons master. Once in awhile Gabrielle had caught Teresa staring at the weapons master, she had to grin at that

"That's what I've heard. I missed Gabrielle's dancing, her staff training, anything else?" Eponin began to grin and looked to Ephiny.

"Eph, remember when you taught Gabrielle how to take down a centaur?" The regent chuckled a little then answered back, Gabrielle though groaned.

"Yeah that was another. I swung by to check up on how well Gabrielle was picking up on the staff work" Xena nodded her head, listening intently. "Once I got there, she said she was getting it and that it was fun" The warrior looked to her soulmate and arched an eyebrow at her.

"Fun?" The bard sighed and shook her head at Xena's question.

"Okay I'll admit I didn't know what to say, I was young. Quickly learned my lesson" The regent was grinning and Eponin finished it, Xena looking to her.

"Well after Gabrielle said that, Ephiny got into her detailed...fun explanation on how to kill a centaur. I still remember Gabrielle's shocked face" Xena chuckled and took another sip of port from her mug. The Queen's face then brighten up and she looked to Ephiny.

"Ephiny, Gods, I just remembered now that we talked about that. Near the end of the battle when Okeanos found me he was on his horse. Well I used that move on his horse" The curly-blond Amazon raised an eyebrow at her.

"You mean the move I showed you on how to kill a centaur?" Gabrielle nodded her head.

"Yeah, I knew I needed to get him off his horse or I'd be dead. My mind flashed back to that memory and I went at the horse's joints. Worked alright"

"I bet it did" The regent chuckled for a second.

"Well it was one of the things that saved my life" Xena looked to her partner with a curious face.

"One of the things huh?" Gabrielle looked up into blue eyes, she grinned.

"One of the things" The Queen then looked to Ephiny, her closes hand went up to rest on the warrior's knee. "Then there is my warrior who constantly saves me" Xena grinned and her right hand went up to the bard's hand on her knee. Xena's long fingers slipping between the bard's fingers.

"I'd say she keeps you out of trouble Gabrielle" The bard looked to the weapons master and retorted.

"Well that too" Ephiny across the way was smirking and decided to get her own statement in.

"Personally, both of you get each other into fixes" Emerald and sapphire eyes looked to the regent. "Personally...that is" Gabrielle looked up to her soulmate.

"Both of us?" Xena looked to her partner and responded.

"Sounds reasonable" Gabrielle nodded with a grin. Teresa then looked to the Queen.

"I was wondering" Everybody turned to look at the now not quiet Amazon. "Well you remember when you first met me Gabrielle?" The bard nodded her head. "When Solari, Lysia, and I were all coming towards you, I sort of noticed Xena had stopped walking abruptly and stiffened up and you ran ahead. What was that all about?"

Everybody quickly took note of the bard's face turning bright red to her roots. The warrior squeezed the bard's hand for a moment and replied for Gabrielle.

"Teresa, Gabrielle had told me something a little...shocking. That's all" The Amazon nodded her head to Xena. The bard wasn't as red, but was fairly still red. She'd been caught. Solari's words then cut through the air.

"Xena, do you have any stories about Gabrielle that you'd like to share?" Xena devilishly grinned across to the second in command.

"I have many stories about Gabrielle, but..." Gabrielle was staring up at the warrior. Eponin was grinning at the sight. Solari decided to egg it on.

"Come on Xena, you have to tell us at least one of Gabrielle" Xena chuckled and looked from her soulmate to Solari again.

"Oh no I like keeping them to myself" Ephiny chuckled at that, she could relate. The regent squeezed her lover's hand for a moment, Solari knew what that meant. So the second in command let it go for now. Xena looked down to her soulmate with a smile. "Ready to go?" The bard nodded her head.

"You two going to head out?" The two soulmates looked to the regent, Xena responded.

"Yeah, we should start heading out of here" That said Xena and Gabrielle stood up, leaving their mugs on the ground.

"You *both* better stop back here before you leave" Xena nodded her head.

"We will" The bard was smiling and the pair headed back to the Queen's Hut to retrieve their stuff.

~*~*~*~

"Hey girl. Ready to get out of this stall?" The mare nickered and threw her head up and down, her front hoof pawing at the dirt ground. "Yeah me too" The bard chuckled at her soulmate. *Sometimes I wonder if they really do talk.* "No we don't talk" Wide emerald eyes looked to Xena.

"You...you read my thoughts?" Xena laughed and tightened up the girdle on the horse.

"No, I just know you" Gabrielle grinned and buckled the nosepiece of the face tack. The Queen held the reins and Xena walked around the horse to the front. Gabrielle handed the reins to Xena and opened the stall's door. The two humans and one horse walked out of the stall then out of the stable. They all made a beeline to where Ephiny, Solari, Teresa, and Eponin are sitting by the fire. Gabrielle noticed that Teresa had shifted from across the fire from Eponin to sit beside her now. The sun began its decent in the western sky. Once the soulmates neared, the four Amazons stood up.

"You both better get to Amphipolis for once" The small blond chuckled at her regent's words.

"We'll try Ephiny" Xena then cut in.

"We will Ephiny" Gabrielle grinned up at her soulmate. She liked that.

"Good, maybe Solari and I will stop by for a visit" Teresa looked to the Queen with a hurt look.

"Am I not allowed to come?" The bard smiled and remarked back.

"Of course you can come Teresa" Gabrielle looked Eponin. "And you too Ep. We'll probably be there all winter" All the Amazons nodded their heads, the small bard looking to the regent. "You'll take care of the mercenaries?"

"It's all covered Gabrielle. You and Xena just get out of here before anything else happens" Gabrielle smiled. The Queen then made rounds and hugged everybody and thanking them. Ephiny being the last, the bard whispering something to her. "Thanks for all your help Eph" They released each other from the hug.

"You're welcome my Queen" Then the regent looked to Xena by Argo. All four Amazons each at a time attacked Xena with a hug. The warrior couldn't believe that one. "Xena thank you for your help" The warrior smiled to the regent, their hug was the last one.

"No problem Eph"

"By the way, Solari told me you talked to her. Thank for that too, means a lot to me" The warrior smiled to her Amazon friend.

"Anytime" Gabrielle moved from Solari's side after briefly talking about her relationship with Ephiny. The bard looked to her soulmate and Ephiny.

"Gabrielle" The Amazon Queen looked to the regent. "Take care huh?" The bard smiled with a nod. They went in for another hug.

"I will, take care too. And watch out for Solari, I hear she's nothing but trouble in relationships" The curly-blond Amazon devilishly grinned.

"Oh I'll keep her in line" The bard grinned back.

"I know what you mean" The warrior snorted. The soulmates then turned to leave. Gabrielle turned around and waved to her Amazons. They all waved back with bright smiles. Xena kept walking on with a huge smile and chuckled to herself. The bard turned back around and looked to Xena. "At least we got to sneak out quietly" Xena looked to her soulmate.

"Don't be so sure, we're not through the gates yet" Then in a heartbeat a loud roar of people's yelling erupted through the air. Gabrielle's shoulders slumped, her staff hitting the ground harder.

"Oh gods, Ephiny didn't?" The soulmates stopped walking and looked back. All the Amazons and mercenaries were looking to them yelling and screaming. Gabrielle spotted her regent in the front with the largest smirk, she could even see the smirk from here. The crowd of Amazons and mercenaries still cheering.

"She did" It came out with a chuckle from the warrior. Gabrielle groaned and the pair turned back around and headed out of the village. The cheering never stopped till they

got well into the forest. It was incredible. "Amphipolis?" Gabrielle looked up to her soulmate with a huge smile and replied back with an excited voice.

"Sounds great to me"

"All of winter for a vacation?"

"Gods yes"

"A lot of sleeping in bed?"

"Uh huh"

"A little nutbread?"

"Oh yes"

"Feel like riding?"

"The sooner we get there the better" Xena laughed and hopped up onto Argo. She then took the bard's staff and placed it in the saddle. The warrior then helped her soulmate up behind her. The bard wrapped her arms tightly against Xena's waist. Then the Warrior Princess kicked the war-horse into a gallop. Our heroes disappeared into the woods, headed southwest to Amphipolis. That leaves us with a mind full of wonderment off exactly how their winter goes.

The End