

~ Dreams ~

by Red Hope

Disclaimers: Violence ~ This series is violence happy.

Copyright ~ Well Universal and company own Xena, Gabrielle, Cyrene Ephiny, Solari, Eponin, Velasca, and the rest of the Amazon idea. But I own Joan and Teresa all to myself along with the story line.

Subtext and Mature Stuff ~ Oh yes definitely that women being in-love with each ruckus. ;-) Sex stuff... it may happen it may not, it's casual.

Violence ~ Will have violence at some point, but nothing to bloody.

Special Dedication ~ The character, Joan, I have created just for Deb. Deb wanted to bring life to Joan in a fashion so I decided to help her out. Deb, I hope you like this version of Joan. ;-) Thank you for giving me a chance to create a new and special character. This story is dedicated to you Deb! And Joan will become a regular character too, hope y'all like her.

Questions? Comments? or Advice? Send it away to me at redhope@redhope.net

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Series Three: **Putting the Puzzle Together** Story: **Eight**

Section 1

~*Part 1*~

Xena leaned down to gently capture her partner's lips, the kiss was long and loving. Never had these kisses shown demand or a need in them, up forward. However they both in their soul shared a great demand and shattering need.

The warrior lifted her head back up and smiled to her friend. "Be careful huh?"

Gabrielle nodded and let a smile slip into place. "Don't worry, I'll be with the Amazons for just a week." She leaned against her staff. "Make sure you stay out of trouble."

Xena laughed and lowered her head close to Gabrielle's. "That's my line."

"Hardly warrior." Gabrielle turned around and walked out of the tavern to come up beside Ephiny. She turned back around. "Take care of yourself Xena."

The warrior moved her head in agreement and leaned against the inn's doorway. "In a week I'll be in the village."

"Better be!" Gabrielle turned to Ephiny to see the regent hopping onto her horse. She was soon on the horse as well thanks to the regent's help.

"Watch after her for me Eph."

The Amazon gazed over to Xena and winked. "No problem."

"Right!" Xena gave a grin.

"Hey!" Gabrielle squeezed her arms around Ephiny. "I'm not that difficult."

The Warrior Princess arched an eyebrow. "Just be careful Gabrielle."

"I will be." The bard gave a sad sigh. "You be careful too Xena."

"Definitely." The warrior gave a warm smile. "I'll only be at mother's."

The Amazon Queen quietly laughed and turned back forward in the saddle.

Ephiny turned her stallion around. "See you Xena!"

"Bye Eph." The warrior kept her eyes on her partner.

Gabrielle turned her head around and gave a warm smile to Xena. She mouthed out, 'I love you.'

The older woman's smile only became more wonderful while she mouthed the same words back. She watched her best friend disappear out of the village and out of sight. She sighed sadly and turned to go back into the inn to gather her own things.

Ephiny grinned and talked to her Queen. "I didn't know about you and Xena."

"Ephiny." Gabrielle shook her head with a grin.

"Sso... what is she like in-"

"Ephiny." The Queen took a deep breath. "We haven't been together... like that... yet."

"You're kidding me!" The regent laughed lightly. "You've gotta be kidding me. Why not?"

"Because we're taking things slow." Gabrielle gave a sigh in this explanation she'd have to do.

"There's something I am missing here." Ephiny turned her head sidelong. "Xena nor you are slow pace people."

"I know." The bard went serious. "But Xena and I have been through a lot lately and we wanted to take it slow. For each of our own safety."

"Mmm, understandable." However a grin took control of Ephiny's lips. "So how long have you two been... going out?"

Gabrielle laughed and shook her head. "Nine days, eleven candlemarks, and thirty-five minutes."

That did it, the regent fell forward laughing, which made the horse stop walking. "Oh gods, that's the cutest thing."

Gabrielle let go of her regent and glared at the Amazon's back. "Look, move it regent." She gave a small grin. "Or I won't tell you anymore."

"Oh there's more?" Ephiny straightened up. "I'm serious now." She kicked her horse into a fast walk again. "Sso..."

"Well..." Gabrielle's face brightened up to go into bard mode about her new relationship with Xena. She became completely immersed in her past days with the warrior.

It had all began on the night Xena and Gabrielle destroyed Hope and her son in longing to never deal with Dahak again. After the pair finished staring at the lifeless bodies of Hope and the Destroyer they buried them and went into the bard's home. And well, since that night in Gabrielle's home things had changed between the warrior and bard. They'd slept in Gabrielle and Lila's room in the separate beds.

Lila had decided to sleep in the guestroom for the night. She didn't know exactly what happened between Gabrielle and Xena but she knew enough that they should be alone.

Gabrielle flopped down on her bed and heard Xena close the door behind. Her head fell into her hands as she moaned lightly. "Oh gods, that was crazy." She ran her hands through her hair and looked up with tiredness.

The warrior moved in the small room to sit on Lila's bed. "It was," she agreed with a deep breath. "Thank you Gabrielle."

The bard furrowed her eyebrows. "For what?"

"Coming back, fighting to come back."

The smaller woman took a long breath and slowly released it. "I don't feel like I did anything Xena." She shook her head. "I owe so much to you."

"You listen to me." Xena leaned forward closer to her friend. "You don't owe anything to me. Do you understand me?"

Gabrielle faintly nodded with sadness. Then she whispered, "Then why do I feel like I do?" Her eyes lifted to Xena. "I took so much from you... from us."

The warrior shook her head. "That's crap." She looked away then back to Gabrielle. "We've been through a lot... the both of us Gabrielle. We both learned so many lessons these past months. We paid a lot for what we went through. It is over and we both need to let it go."

The younger woman nodded. "You're right." She smiled sadly. "There is one thing I've come to learn that I would like to tell you."

Xena smiled warmly. "What's that?"

Gabrielle smiled lovingly and reached out with both her hands. She carefully took Xena's larger hands and studied them for a moment. Her eyes lifted up to the warrior's soft eyes. "I am trusting you with my soul for now on Xena." She shook her head as her throat tightened. "I can not... I can not make it in this world without you. So wherever you go Xena I will be going with you. I don't care where we go. I just know I need to go with you."

Xena studied her partner while repeating the small speech in her head over again. Her

thumb now began to rub against Gabrielle's hands. If she tried now to push Gabrielle away she would never win. Gabrielle would never back away, that she knew. "Be careful with that Gabrielle. I could lead you to darkness."

"I don't care." The bard squeezed her partner's hand. "I don't care as long as it's with you." She smiled sadly. "Don't ask me not to go with you Xena. I can't make it in this world without you." She faintly grinned. "I signed up to be your partner for eternity."

The warrior smiled warmly. "Gabrielle?" Her smile went sad and she lifted her right hand to her friend's cheek. "Don't ask me to lead you to your possible death."

The bard let her head rest into her best friend's touch. "I want to be with you Xena." Her eyes shut while her right hand came up to rest against Xena's. "Don't leave me after everything."

The older woman took Gabrielle's hand again along with her other. Xena moved to stand then kneel down in front of Gabrielle, she was eye level with Gabrielle. "Gabrielle?"

The small woman opened her eyes to study directly into her partner's sky eyes. "Xena, I love you."

Xena smiled lovingly. "I know, I know." She moved her hands with Gabrielle's into her partner's small lap. Carefully she leaned in to kiss her partner on the lips carefully. Then she pulled back with her smile never losing its depth. "I love you too."

Gabrielle felt herself blush a little, that version of love coming from Xena's lips were different. It meant more and held more depth. However it made a warm smile ease across her lips then she slowly leaned in to gently kiss Xena. Her kiss was timid because it was something new to her. And timid because she was still hurting inside and she knew her partner was as well. However she felt a fire come to life deep in her soul, a fire soon she wouldn't be able to ignore. Pulling back she leaned her head against Xena's. "Xena?" It was low whisper of need.

"Sshh." Xena stood up with her best friend. Reaching behind she unhook her sword and chakram throwing them on the bed behind Gabrielle. Carefully the warrior pulled the other woman in with protection.

The bard buried her head into Xena's neck and closed her eyes. She felt safe. Next thing she found was herself being lifted off the floor and laying on top of Xena's body. Gabrielle wrapped her arms around Xena and held tight.

Xena wrapped her legs with Gabrielle's while keeping one arm around her friend's waist the other hand was behind Gabrielle's head. Leaning up she placed a kiss to the small female's head. Resting her head back down on the pillow, she shut her eyes.

Soon the two women went to sleep from the long day. They slept hard and long in each other's arms and warmth. By that morning they were up late. And when they awoke they didn't leave the room right away. Instead they spent the rest of the remaining time together alone, talking about their relationship.

Xena sat back up against the headboard. Her boots were off and her legs propped up in front of her body.

Gabrielle on the other hand was at the foot of the bed with her own boots off and sitting cross-legged. "Slow, definitely."

The warrior nodded with a smile. "That's what I figured."

The bard quickly glanced up. "Is that okay with you?"

"Definitely." Xena let a smile take her lips. "We don't need to rush this Gabrielle." She took a deep breath. "Still have to get use to the idea."

Gabrielle nodded with a small smile. "That's what I was thinking." She quietly laughed. "Gods, the last time I got involved in a love relationship the person ended up dead." She lost her smile. "You sure you want to do this now Xena?"

The Warrior Princess raised an eyebrow. "Sure? I was positive the first time I met you Gabrielle." She grinned a little. "I think I can fend people off."

The younger woman snickered. "To say the least." She then went serious. "First time you met me?"

"Yeah." Xena smiled warmly. "In the grove."

Gabrielle's lips shaped into a grin. "The same for me."

"Ohh?" The taller gave a cat grin. "Wish I'd known." She immediately saw her friend blush deeply and the warrior chuckled lightly. "Hey come here."

The bard was hesitant for a moment but moved to crawl into her best friend's arms. She leaned her back into Xena's warm body and felt strong arms come around her stomach.

The older woman took Gabrielle's hands and rested them on the bard's stomach. Xena propped her legs back up. "Comfortable?"

"Oh yeah." The small female sighed happily and rested her head against Xena's right shoulder. "Thanks Xena."

"Mmm?"

"For finding me." Gabrielle shook her head. "I was worried you really thought I was dead." She took a long breath. "I just can't believe you tried to search me out."

The warrior thought before replying to that. "I always will. You would have done the same for me."

The young woman chuckled quietly. "I don't quite know about that. You went through some rough things to try and find me."

"I did." Xena smiled. "And I'd do it again... for you."

"Thank you." Gabrielle turned her head up to capture Xena's lips in a light kiss.

"Here we are... finally." Ephiny hopped off her horse and turned around to her Queen.

Gabrielle easily climbed off the horse and recovered her staff from the saddlebag.

"So that's the whole story?" The regent had her hands on her hips.

"Yes." The bard grinned and leaned against her staff. "Nothing... sexual."

Ephiny sighed and shook her head with her hands dropping. "You know, I was expecting you to tell me some wild tale." She ambled over to the horse to take the reins. Her feet carried her through the Amazon forest towards the village. "That was... boring." She smirked over to her friend.

"Right." Gabrielle shot back a grin. "I know you find it interesting Eph."

"Actually I do." The Amazon let out a sigh. "Xena can be surprising."

"How you figure?"

"I don't know." Ephiny shrugged her shoulders. "I just never thought of her as the... slow pace kind of woman. More like jump into the sack at the first chance."

"Ephiny?"

The Amazon turned her head to the Queen.

"She isn't a warlord."

"I know... I know." The regent quietly laughed. "It's just still... she's a warrior and well..."

"She's changed Eph." Gabrielle shook her head with a smug look. "You can't back yourself up."

"I guess not." The regent laughed and shifted her attention to her walking again. "Still I would have thought... ah centaur butt hair... I give up." She gave a dragged out sigh with a shake of her head.

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Xena pulled her mare to a slow walk as she entered into the familiar village.

Argo walked up close to the tavern and stopped there with a whine.

The warrior patted her war-horse's neck and dismounted. "Stay here girl." She walked into the tavern and gazed around. "Mother?"

The kitchen door opened with a creak and a short black and white haired woman came ambling out. "Xena?"

The Warrior Princess gave a warm smile. "Mother, it's good to see you."

"How have you been?" The older woman pulled her daughter in for a tight embrace.

"Well," responded Xena with a hug. "You?"

Cyrene pulled back with a warm smile. "Better... now."

The warrior's lips spread into a warm smile. "Thank you."

"It's good to see you." The innkeeper however suddenly had a confused look.
"Where's Gabrielle?"

"Gabrielle actually went to the Amazon Nation to take care of some affairs."

~*~*~*~

"Been good Solari?"

The second in command evilly grinned. "In what fashion my Queen?"

Gabrielle quietly laughed. "Both."

"Oh... I have been... but only in one fashion."

The regent glanced over and lightly glared to her second in command.

Solari snickered and smiled back to Gabrielle.

The bard nodded and glanced back to her food. "No further details... please."

Solari laughed and sat back while continuing to eat her dinner.

Ephiny gave a long drawn out sigh as she finished her dinner in the food hut.

That evening had been rather quiet. Both the regent and Queen tired from the travels of the day. Yet, Ephiny had huge plans to make sure that there was a celebration for the Queen's returns. But that wouldn't be till tomorrow night, ample time to prepare for a good Amazon bash.

Soon the night came and Gabrielle was in her hut sleeping deeply. During that deep sleep her dreams came to her in riddles. Riddles that spoke to the bard of a beautiful woman of northern lands.

This woman was not of Greece and held a deep Celtic accent that could be traced to possible Britannia or maybe Gaul. Gabrielle could not be quite sure about that detail for she was not good with dialects. However she did remember that in the dream this Celt was a warrior with long majestic red hair and deep green eyes. Different scenes would flash to Gabrielle of this woman repeatedly saving her life in one fashion or another. By the morning when the Queen awoke she was left in mystery of this woman for this Celtic warrior seemed so real to her. Hence this left Gabrielle through the next day trying to understand the curious dream.

~*Part 2*~

Xena stood on the porch of the tavern in the early morning, she felt the light breeze kiss her cheeks. She slowly lifted her mug of tea up and carefully drank. The mug lowered but the warrior's sky teemed eyes stayed pinned on the village around.

The village itself was quiet on this early dawn. The only thing rising with the sun was the small thin patches of fog. Quietly the floorboards creaked as they held another form that exited the tavern.

"Morning."

A smile tugged on Xena's lips. "Morning mother." Her voice held hints of sadness.

Cyrene peered up to her daughter and studied her profile. She'd taken into consideration about Xena's lack of attempt to talk about Gabrielle. For fear if Xena talked of Gabrielle it would say something and it bothered the innkeeper. Although at the same time she was concerned about the fact the warrior neglected to speak her thoughts on Gabrielle. So being the mother that she is, she acted as that mother. "You miss her."

The tall woman took a long deep breath and let her fingers curl more around the warm mug. "Yes."

The tavern owner turned her sights away. "You haven't spoke of Gabrielle since I asked about her."

"True." Xena lifted the mug to drink from it.

Cyrene lifted her arms against her chest. "I can understand that." A sigh freed from her as she added more. "It's hard without your... other half."

Very gradually sapphire eyes lowered to the innkeeper with hidden surprise.

The mother smiled up to her daughter. "I just know Xena... I'm a mother."

A fine smile creased Xena's lips.

Cyrene mirrored the smile and turned her eyes forward. "How long?"

The warrior lifted her mug to her lips but spoke before drinking. "Nine days, eighteen candlemarks, and fifty-seven minutes... and thirty-two seconds as of... now."

The mother quietly laughed with an amused smile playing on her lips. "That serious huh?"

"Very." The Warrior Princess swallowed the warm tea and peeked into it to see most of it gone.

The innkeeper had a serious look on her face as she stared over the town. "Slow or fast?"

"Slow... and we both agreed to the pace." Xena took a long drink and lowered the mug.

Cyrene moved her head in approval. "Good." She drew out a sigh. "You both were made for each other."

Xena's eyes flickered over to her mother.

The tavern owner smiled but didn't look up. "Trust me dear, I know these things."

The warrior quietly laughed and lifted her tea to finish it off. "A mother knows best."

"Yes she does." The older woman's expression was serious all over again. "How is Gabrielle feeling about all of this?"

"Very excited." The warrior crossed her arms over her chest while holding the dry mug. "She almost refused to go to the Amazons."

"And you convinced her otherwise?"

"Yess." Xena took a deep breath. "Be good time for her to completely consider the relationship."

"Xena..." Cyrene glanced up to her child. "If you're trying to get her to reconsider it won't work." A grin took over her lips. "The longer you're away from her the closer she'll come to death... as will you." She winked. "Distance makes the heart grow fonder." With that Cyrene strolled away and back into the tavern.

The warrior out of the corner of her eyes saw her mother disappear. Slowly her attention went to Amphipolis again. And so gradually a satisfied and happy smile crept along Xena's lips.

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After Gabrielle risen from bed and left her hut then Ephiny instantly hunted her down for talking.

The regent questioned her friend about how to go about the affairs with the Amazons.

These affairs dealing with treaties with surrounding villages and the centaurs. Nothing to lose sleep over but non-the-less were quite serious. All these treaties were coming to their expiration dates and need renewal and possible new terms.

As of now, Ephiny and the Queen stood in the center of the village. Ephiny to the bard's right talking in her ear. Gabrielle however was staring across in the village with half her attention on the regent and the other half on her thoughts of Xena.

"Gabrielle?"

"Yeah?" The bard turned her head to Ephiny.

"Did you hear anything I said?" The regent crossed her arms against her chest.

"Sort... of." Gabrielle gave a sheepish grin.

With a sigh the Amazon asked, "Want me to repeat myself?"

"You better." The Queen went serious and faced her friend, as she tried to focus.

"Okay, first we should speak with the centaurs...." Ephiny started chatting away with her ideas but stopped as she noticed Gabrielle not paying attention. "Now what?"

The small bard shook her head. "Ephiny... who is that?" Her face held a mix of surprise and fear.

The regent turned and gazed in Gabrielle's direction. "Who?" She pointed at a passing female. "Her?"

"Yes," was Gabrielle's whispered response. "Who is she?"

"That's Joan." Ephiny glanced at Gabrielle. "Why?"

"She... she..." The bard shook her head. "She looks exactly like the woman from my dreams."

The Amazon's face lit with an evil grin. "She's in everybody's dreams since she's arrived here."

Gabrielle corked an eyebrow at her friend. "I don't wanna know." She sighed. "Since she's arrived? She isn't an Amazon?"

"No... no." Ephiny shook her head and turned her attention to the woman, Joan, watching her shift through the village. "Joan... is from Gaul. She quite literally stumbled into our territory."

"Gaul?"

"Yesss." Ephiny put her hands to her hips. "She has a beautiful dialect... Celtic. The weird thing is the accent sounds more Britannian then Gaelic."

The Queen stared at the fairly tall woman that had long flowing bright red hair and forest green leathers on. "She is pretty."

"Very... and her accent only makes her more deadly with beauty."

Gabrielle quietly laughed but went stern while turning her eyes to Ephiny. "How'd she come into our territory?"

"She came in stumbling... drunk off ale."

The bard's head bobbed while she watched Joan amble through the village and out of the gates. "I'll have to talk to her."

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"Wahoo!" Eponin laughed and fell to a seat beside her Queen. "How's it going Gab?"

Gabrielle sighed knowing her Amazon was heavily drunk tonight. "Fine Ep, how are you?"

"Just wonderful." The weapons master leaned against her Queen. "How you feeling Gabrielle?"

"Almost perfect Ep." The bard turned her head and grinned.

"Really?" The weapons master corked an eyebrow. "Anything I can help with?"

Gabrielle bit her lower lip. "No... no." She patted her Amazon's knee. "I'll live."

Ephiny strolled up to the group by the fire with a mug of wine. "You causing trouble Ep?"

"Me? Nah!" The weapons master smiled. "Just trying to figure out who to sleep with tonight."

The regent choked on her wine, she coughed, and hit her chest. "Well... if you're

hoping for your Queen, she's taken."

"Since when? And by who?" Eponin looked between Ephiny and the Queen. "You Eph?"

"Oh no... no." Ephiny shook her head and sat down on the ground in front of her friends. "I have Solari."

Eponin chuckled. "How could I forget?" Now she glanced between Gabrielle and the regent. "You know what I never could understand?" She sighed and mumbled out, "I couldn't... couldn't understand how the two most beautiful women can travel with each other but not... not be sleeping with each other."

Ephiny grinned. "You talking about Xena and Gabrielle?"

"Of course I am!" Eponin faced Gabrielle. "Why is that? Is Xena blind or something?"

The bard bit her lower lip again. "I don't know what it is Ep. Strange huh?"

"It's messed up!" The weapons master gave a drawn out sigh. "Why don't you just jump her Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle's eyes widen. "Oh god, that's the worst image."

"Oh come on, I would." Eponin grinned and drank some more of her port. "What's the risk?"

The regent grinned up to the weapons master. "Ep?"

"Yeah?" Eponin turned her head to her friend.

Ephiny evilly grinned. "Ep, do you like your sword? Do you like your mask?" She paused. "Do you like your face?"

The weapons master sheepishly grinned. "That's true... Xena would do that."

"My point exactly." Ephiny drank more of her wine.

Eponin drank more of her port and furrowed her eyebrows to Gabrielle. "Not drinking?"

Gabrielle shook her head. "Trying to quit... thanks though."

The weapons master chuckled. "Never the true Amazon." She smiled warmly. "Gotta love it."

"What's happening over here?" Solari stood with a small sway in her stance.

"Just talking about how Gabrielle should jump Xena." Ephiny patted the ground beside her.

"Really?" The second in command sat down beside her regent. "I gotta hear this." She lifted her mug of wine to take a long drink. "So what's the tactic on how to jump Xena?" She glanced up between Eponin and Gabrielle.

"There is non." Gabrielle laughed and shook her head. *I'm surrounded by three drunk*

Amazons... this is not good. Where are you when I need you Xena?

"You know..." Eponin's lips slipped into a grin. "I bet I could jump Xena."

Gabrielle arched an eyebrow very high. "Right."

"No really." The weapons master turned her head to the Queen. "I could."

"I guess she doesn't like her face," mumbled Ephiny.

Solari laughed. "I'd love to see that!" She took a deep breath. "And in which way would you jump her? Sexually or just... hop off a building to knock her to the ground?"

"Either." Eponin shrugged her shoulders. "Jumping is... jumping."

"I'd love to see you try Ep." Ephiny shook her head. "There's no way."

The weapons master narrowed her eyes. "I bet I can." She turned her head to her Queen. "When's Xena coming?"

Gabrielle shrugged her shoulders. "In six days or so." She reached out with her right hand to the weapons master's shoulder. "I suggest you don't jump her... as Eph said, you won't have a face."

Eponin rolled her eyes. "I can handle Xena."

The bard groaned and dropped her hand. "Alright."

Solari laughed and shook her head. "And nobody can tell Xena about this. I wanna make sure Ep does this all on her own."

Eponin glared at the second in command. "Don't worry, I don't cheat."

"Oh that's not what I am worried about." Solari turned her head to the Queen. "I'm worried about Xena's little partner there saying something."

Gabrielle batted her eyes. "Me? Never!"

"Right." Ephiny quietly laughed. "I'll keep tabs on our Queen."

The bard huffed. "Now I'm getting a babysitter."

The regent quietly laughed.

Eponin took a long deep drink. "So it's a bet. If I jump Xena... I don't have patrol duty for a week."

"And if you don't?" Solari's expression went smug. "You get patrol duty for a week straight."

"Sounds good to me." The weapons master grinned. "It's a deal." She stood up and almost fell back down. "I'm gonna go find somebody to sleep with... excuse me." She stumbled away.

"Try Joan!" Solari called off.

"I like my face Solari!" Eponin answered back.

Gabrielle sighed and stretched her legs out. "She's not going to have one once Xena gets her."

Ephiny glanced up and had a sad look. "Maybe you better tell Xena."

"I might actually." The Queen sighed. "Gods only knows what Xena will do if somebody jumps her from behind."

Solari chuckled and asked, "What would she do Ep?"

"Nothing on purpose Solari." The bard turned her head to the second in command. "Xena's... reactions and self defense are... high strung."

"True." The second in command chuckled. "Well... it's all Ep's problem."

~*Part 3*~

Gabrielle dropped her head back over the chair. "This is sssso boring."

Ephiny quietly laughed and patted her Queen's arm. "Sorry, Gabrielle... has to be done and only the Queen can sign."

"I know." The bard sighed. "I hate treaties I've decided."

"Well... maybe you can take a break." The regent's face teased with a grin.

"I think I will." The Queen stood up. "Not like I need my regent's approval."

A laugh escaped from Ephiny. "True. Don't be to long."

"Nah." Gabrielle took a deep breath and grabbed her staff from the wall. "I think I'll talk to Joan... go for a walk."

"Good idea." Ephiny stood up. "I think I'll get some early lunch."

"How's the head?" Gabrielle opened the door to the hut.

"Still throbbing."

"But worth every moment of it huh?"

The regent had an evil grin. "Oh definitely."

The pair left the hut and went in separate directions.

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"Dear why don't you come in and get some lunch?" Cyrene stood on the porch wiping her hands. "You've been on that project since sunrise."

"And I'm determined to get it mother." Xena grinned down at her mother.

The innkeeper chuckled and kept her eyes pinned on her daughter on top of the roof of the stable. "The roof can stand a lack of attention for a candlemark."

The warrior grinned. "Alright." She came to the roof's edge and leaped off to do a backflip and land on her feet. "You said lunch?"

Cyrene shook her head. "Yup, come on dear." She walked into the inn.

Xena only wore her leathers and boots but now climbed the steps to go inside of the tavern.

Cyrene sat with her daughter at a table eating a quiet lunch. She took a deep breath. "When are you going to get Gabrielle?"

The Warrior Princess peered up. "In six days."

The innkeeper nodded and asked, "What is she doing with the Amazons?"

"Renewing some treaties with local tribes and villages."

"Ah... sounds like a bore."

Xena quietly laughed. "That's why I'm not there." She grinned. "That's Gabrielle sort of thing."

"I hope that's the only thing she's doing dear."

The warrior nodded. "Me too." She sighed a bit sadly. "She can get herself into trouble."

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"So you're from Gaul?"

"Not originally Queen Gabrielle."

The bard glanced up. "Where you originally from Joan?"

The warrior took a deep breath. "Northern Britannia." She sadly smiled to the Queen. "I was born in Britannia but me parents were killed when I was rather young. So I left Britannia and went to northern Gaul and joined a Celtic clan."

Gabrielle nodded a few times and looked around in the forest as they walked. "I've heard of the Celtic clans there." She turned her head to the Celtic warrior. "Which one you belong too?"

"I *was* apart of Teufates clan... the god of war." Joan gave a sigh. "It was a guid clan but I was hattered to death."

"Hattered?"

Joan quietly laughed. "Hattered... uh bullied... persecuted. Sorry, I keep forgetting about me dialect."

The Queen chuckled. "It's alright. So your clan persecuted you?"

"The clan..." Joan shrugged her shoulders. "The Druids." Another sigh. "Me clan said I needed to seek revenge for me parents' deaths but I didn't want to do that. It's the way the clan works but it went against me own morals. So I left but the clans words

plagued me."

"So is that why my Amazons found you drunk?"

"I'm afraid so." Joan stopped walking and ran her right hand through her red curly hair. "How about we take a saet?"

The bard arched an eyebrow. "A seat?"

"Yes." The Celt chuckled and walked over to a log to sit down.

Gabrielle shifted to sit beside her. "So you had no idea about where you were headed?"

"Not really lass." The Celt warrior sighed and continued. "When I left the clan I started drinking myself silly... I don't know if you've even drunk to excel. But you'll black out and I did and started just wondering through the countryside until I ended up here." She sighed. "I fainted on the edge of your territory and a few of your Amazons took me in." She paused. "When I finally came around I didn't remember how I got here but your regent, Ephiny, told me." She shrugged. "Been here since... Ephiny welcomed me here."

"I'm glad you..."

"Fainted in your territory?" Joan suggested.

The Queen quietly laughed. "Came to our lands." She smiled warmly. "You're welcome here as long as you want Joan." She went serious. "Do you know what your plans are?"

"Afraid not Queen Gabrielle."

Gabrielle placed her hand on the taller woman's knee. "Call me Gabrielle."

"Alright." Joan smiled warmly and took a deep breath. "They told me you only come here every now and again."

"Yup." The bard nodded. "I'm a... traveling bard." Her hand left the warrior's knee.

"Now that must be a real scary lifestyle lass."

"Not really." Gabrielle grinned. "I have a... guardian." A chuckle escaped her lips. "Actually a partner."

"Really?" Joan furrowed her eyebrows. "Who is that?"

"Xena, she's a warrior."

"Xena?" The Celt warrior furrowed her eyebrows. "You mean... the Warrior Princess?"

"The same." Gabrielle nodded.

"I've heard of her... the Destroyer of Nations or something."

"She retired from that job." The bard's lips spread into a grin.

Joan laughed and shook her head. "So what does she do now?"

"Well... we travel around and fight for the greater good."

"Hmmm, that must be a big switch for her ay?"

Gabrielle stood up with her staff. "It definitely is... she's good though."

"I can imagine... I've heard stories." The warrior stood up as well. "So what brought you back here?"

"Treaties." Gabrielle sighed and started walking. "A lot of them are up for renewal... Xena will be here in about six days." She grinned up to the other woman. "I'm just hoping to have the treaties done by then."

"I'm sure you will Gabrielle." Joan gave a warm smile.

The bard took a deep breath and listened to her own staff hitting the ground for a moment. "By the way..." Her head lifted up. "Did Eponin... bother you last night?"

"Eponin?" Joan's eyebrows creased together as she thought. "A very sid Amazon?"

Gabrielle grinned. "Sid... big?"

"Sort of... big built but small?" Joan thought for a moment. "The weapons master?"

"That's her."

Joan started to laugh. "Oh yes, Eponin did say... hello to me last night."

"I hope she didn't bother you too much."

The Celt sighed contently. "Nah, she just hung on me for a few minutes then left since I was ignoring her."

The Queen evilly smiled. "Good." She opened her mouth to say more but stopped as the wind suddenly picked up.

"My, freak weather around here lass."

Gabrielle stopped walking as her bangs blew back and her skin was crawling. "It's not freak weather Joan." She lifted her staff up.

Joan now tensed up feeling her own skin crawl. She went into fighting stance with her hands up. "I can tell this is bad news."

The Queen shook her head to get the bangs out of her face and then in front of her a whirlwind appeared. "Oh no."

The Celt warrior reached back to draw her sword. "Is this how your gods drop in on you?"

"The bad ones... yes."

The whirlwind stopped and a figure reappeared with burning eyes. "It's so good to see you again Gabrielle."

Gabrielle's eyes widen.

Joan narrowed her eyes and saw the newcomer raise her right hand and point her finger. She didn't need a soothsayer to tell her what was about to happen.

"Gabrielle!" She grabbed the Queen and threw her off into the woods. Joan shut her eyes as she felt herself go soaring through the air from a lightning bolt.

"Damn it." The newcomer sighed. "Always somebody getting in the way." She walked over to Gabrielle whom was slumped on the ground.

Gabrielle peered up into white eyes. "Been awhile Velasca."

"Too long Gabrielle." Velasca bent down to one and gave a toothy smile. "Not going to even ask how I am?"

"Don't care." Gabrielle narrowed her eyes as she thought of things to say to keep her busy. "How'd you get out of the lava pit?"

The god laughed and shook her head. "Gabrielle... I am a god." She leaned closer. "Did you really think that lava pit would hold me forever?" She narrowed her eyes.

"I was hoping so." The bard's right hand curled around her staff.

"Sorry to disappoint." The ex-Amazon grinned and took a deep breath. "So where's Xena?" She smiled evilly. "I was hoping she'd be around with you but you have some Amazon with you instead."

"I traded Xena in." Gabrielle grinned.

"Don't blame you." Velasca gave her own grin. "She was always a sad story." She reached up between her gauntlet to extract her dagger. "This is actually boring, you were too easy Gabrielle." She sighed sadly. "Well... I'll have more fun killing your Amazons."

The Queen narrowed her eyes and swung her staff up with strength and a yell.

The god went rolling to Gabrielle's right to hit a tree.

Gabrielle bounced up to her feet and raced in the direction she saw Joan. "Joan?"

The Celt warrior lifted her head that had blood running down the side. "Gabrielle?"

"Get up!" The bard came up to her to grab Joan's offered hand. She helped haul the Celt to her feet.

"Not so fast Queen Gabrielle." Velasca stood up and raised her right hand. "I will have my revenge."

Joan stepped forward with her sword raised up ready to take on the lightning bolt.

"No Joan!" Gabrielle grabbed the Celt's arm and swung her away.

The bolt exploded near the two women causing them to go flying together.

Gabrielle screamed and landed hard into the grass with Joan beside her. She stood up

quickly.

Joan got up and whispered, "Moan." She started running with her sword.

The Queen didn't need a translator to know what the Celt said and she ran behind through the woods. With a fast pace, heavy breathing, and fear Gabrielle put distance between her and the god. On the run she could hear Velasca's laugh follow after her.

~*~*~*~

"Ephiny!" Solari busted through the door of the regent's hut.

"What now Solar?" Ephiny glanced up from her seat.

The second in command was breathing heavy and rasped out, "Velasca... she's back... she's after Gabrielle... and Joan."

"What?" bellowed Ephiny. She stood up with the scrapping of her seat. "How in Hades... Never mind!" She sprang out of the hut with Solari. "What happened?"

Solari took a deep breath. "We're not sure." She took a deep breath. "A few patrol Amazons heard the lightning bolts and investigated." She stopped to breathe. "When they got to the area they saw charred marks all over the place and they searched around to find Velasca walking... walking through the woods."

The regent shut her eyes. "Oh no." She opened her eyes. "Where was Velasca headed?"

"Due east... north-east."

Ephiny thought for a moment. "Back to the ruins." She shook her head. "Gabrielle's crazy... Velasca won't fall for that twice." She turned to her second in command. "Look, get a horse and find Xena."

The second in command nodded and felt her breathing finally relax. "Where is Xena?"

"She's in Amphipolis... with her mother." Ephiny grasped her second in command's shoulders. "Don't stop till you get her Solari. We can't let Gabrielle get killed and Xena will know what to do."

"What you going to do?"

Ephiny looked away to the village. "Slow Velasca down."

~*Part 4*~

Xena tore the thread apart and she finished repairing her gauntlet. She slipped it on next to find it fit better. She smiled at her handy work and she gave a sigh. Slowly standing up the warrior packed away her repair kit and stared out the window of her bedroom to the afternoon sun. She lowered her head to the saddlebag as she put the kit back in. Next, she heard a set of galloping horse hooves coming towards the tavern.

Quickly the warrior walked over to the window and gazed out of it to see an Amazon speeding through the village towards the tavern. "Gabrielle," she whispered with a skip of her heartbeat. She ran out of the room and down the stairs and out of the

tavern.

Cyrene came out of the kitchen and jogged out of the tavern behind her daughter.

"Solari?" Xena ran up to the horse to see the Amazon just holding onto the saddle.

"Xena?" The Amazon fell out of the saddle only to grab onto the warrior.

The warrior had franticness in her eyes and she held the Amazon tightly. "What happened?"

The second in command shook her head. "Velasca... escaped the lava pit." Solari straightened up with a groan and grabbed her horse's saddle horn. "She's after Gabrielle and a Celt named Joan." She took a deep breath and felt her body come back. "Gabrielle and this Celt, Joan, were on a walk in the forest and Velasca showed up. Right now Gabrielle and Joan are headed to the ruins with Velasca after them."

"That's not going to work." Xena turned to her mother. "Get me my stuff mother."

Cyrene nodded briskly and ran into the tavern and upstairs.

"Think you can ride back?" The warrior turned her head to Solari.

"Yeah, no problem." The Amazon straightened up.

"What's Ephiny doing?"

"She's trying to slow Velasca down till you can get there."

"Good, get on your horse and we'll leave." Xena patted Solari's arm and jogged into the stable.

Solari closed her eyes, groaned, and mumbled out, "How'd I get this job?" She turned to her horse and opened her eyes. She slowly mounted her horse and straightened up in the saddle.

Xena came out of the stable with an excited Argo. She patted the mare's neck. "Ready for a long run girl?"

The horse whined and gave a nod.

"Good."

"Xena." The innkeeper came up to her daughter and handed her the saddlebag.

The warrior took it and put it onto the mare's rump. She then turned back around to take her sword and chakram and placing them into their rightful spots.

"Be careful huh?"

"I'll try." The warrior turned to her horse and mounted.

"Make sure nothing happens to Gabrielle."

Xena winked. "Nothing will." She smiled warmly. "See you soon mother." She lifted her eyes to the Amazon while taking the reins. "Let's go." She hit Argo's sides.

Solari sighed. "You have one energetic daughter ma'am."

Cyrene laughed. "I know, good luck."

"Thanks." Solari kicked her horse and followed after Xena.

~*~*~*~

Velasca stopped in her tracks as Ephiny fell from the trees with raised arms in front of her. "Ephiny."

"How are you Velasca? Didn't like the lava pit?"

"No." The god smirked. "It was too warm for me."

"Pity." Ephiny reached behind to unsheathe her sword.

"Really Ephiny."

"Oh come on Velasca." The regent twirled her sword. "For old times' sake?" She smirked. "What's the worse I can do to you... hurt your pride?"

The god laughed and reached back to extract her sword. "Now that you put it that way. I wouldn't mind brushing up on my sword technique."

"Then shut up and attack me!"

Eponin heard the wild scream from Velasca, she turned her head to Teresa. "Let's move, Eph is giving us the time."

Teresa nodded and went through the trees.

The weapons master followed behind.

~*~*~*~

Joan stopped and slumped against a tree.

Gabrielle stopped and came up to her friend. "How you feel?"

"Not good." The Celt reached up.

"Don't." Gabrielle brushed the hand away and leaned forward to study the cut over the warrior's forehead. "Come on, I think you can clean that up."

Joan lifted herself off the tree and started walking beside the Queen. "So... who was that lovely lady?"

"That was Velasca." The bard searched around for a water source by looking and hearing.

"She was a pleasant chap." Joan glanced around feeling her head throb.

The bard chuckled and said sarcastically, "Right." Gabrielle stopped walking and closed her eyes to listen. She heard the small ripple of water and she pinpointed it.

"This way." She led the way through the forest. "She was an Amazon before I became

the Queen." She sighed sadly. "She wanted to become Queen but I took the caste from her... so she says." Gabrielle stepped past a hedgerow and found a small stream. "Here we go."

"So I take it she isn't too happy about that ay?"

"No at all." The Queen turned to the warrior. "She tried to stop me and only in the process ate ambrosia."

"Ambrosia?" The Celt leaned down next to the water's edge and placed her hands in the water.

"Yeah." Gabrielle sighed. "It's the food of the gods."

Joan splashed her face and felt the blood trickle of her face but she could feel fresh blood start to ooze out of the wound. "Great."

The bard chuckled. "Stay here." She got up with her staff and looked around in the forest. She walked up to the hedgerow and found what she was looking for. Very carefully she grabbed a small spider web. "Wash your face again."

Joan did just that and saw Gabrielle come up next to her. "What you going to do with that little thing lass?"

"Put it on the wound." The bard gingerly placed the spider web over the wound. "Leave it there for a few."

"What will that do?" Joan peered up at the web on her forehead with her green eyes. "Other than annoy me."

Gabrielle chuckled. "The webs will clog up the blood so that the scab will develop faster." She smiled warmly. "Trust me."

"If you say so lass." The warrior stood up with a groan. "Remind me never to stand in front of a lightning bolt."

The bard chuckled and leaned against her staff, thankful for a break finally.

"So what's the plan now?"

The smaller woman took a deep breath. "We're head to the ruins, a lava pit where Xena and I last trapped her."

"Lass." Joan grasped the Queen's shoulders. "That trick may have worked on this... Velasca last time. But what makes you think it will a second time?"

"I don't." Gabrielle stepped past the Celtic warrior and started walking. "Let's move."

The warrior sighed and jogged up to her friend's side. "We need a better plan than playing cat and mouse."

"That's all I can come up with right now Joan." The bard gazed up. "We have to till Xena finds us... she'll know what to do."

"Well let's hope we don't get killed while we're lollygaging." Joan sighed. "This is to

exciting for me."

Gabrielle chuckled. "You haven't seen the half of it."

~*~*~*~

Ephiny gritted her teeth as the sword nipped her throat.

"Ephiny, can you feel death coming?"

The regent laughed in the god's face. "Hardly." She pressed hard and gave a hard kick to Velasca's stomach.

The god went stumbling back with her sword. She shook her head. "Not fair."

The regent laughed. "And like your godhood is?" Out of the corner of her eyes she saw two Amazons hidden up in the trees with their daggers flashing to her.

"Oh, poor Ephiny can't handle a little challenge." Velasca smirked in her fighting stance.

Ephiny took that as a good excuse to charge the god. She went racing ahead with her sword and poured her strength into the attack.

The god was a little surprised and was stepping backwards. "Ephiny, you can't keep this up."

"Don't worry." The Amazon gave one hard slash and jumped back with her sword up. "I give up." She looked up to her two Amazons. "Now!"

Velasca's eyes widen and she looked up to the trees in time to see a tree trunk come soaring down at her from both sides.

Ephiny ducked, rolled away, and bounced up to her feet with a grin. She watched the god become smashed between the two flying tree trunks.

The tree trunks dwindled away and hung in mid-air with Velasca stumbling forward.

The regent looked up to the tree behind Velasca. "Now!"

There was a loud pang and a tree trunk came swooping from the treetops towards the god's back. It slammed hard into Velasca's back and sent her flying forward into a tree face first.

Velasca groaned, slumped down the tree, and went unconscious.

Ephiny walked over to the god to see her unconscious and she lifted her head to the trees. "Alright, bring the chains down and let's chain her for now."

The five Amazons fell from the trees with three sets of heavy chains.

~*~*~*~

"Okay... okay... Xena!" Solari slumped forward in her saddle and grasped the saddle horn.

The warrior pulled Argo back and trotted back to the Amazon. "Break?"

"Yeah." The Amazon took a deep breath and barely dismounted her horse. "How you do that?"

Xena turned towards Solari. "What?" She dismounted.

"Keep going like that?"

The Warrior Princess reached up to Argo's reins. "Because I know what's at stake." She turned her hard eyes to the Amazons.

Solari dropped her eyes. "Look..." She lifted her eyes back up. "Go ahead of me."

"No." The warrior shook her head. "The horses need to rest anyway." She patted her mare's shoulder and walked her off the road. "Not to long."

The second in command nodded and took her mare's rein to walk off the road. "Hey Xena?"

"What?" The warrior glanced sidelong.

"I heard Gabrielle was hooked up with somebody... is this true?" Solari came up to Xena's side. "I was wondering who."

The Warrior Princess shrugged her shoulders. "Beats me." She raised an eyebrow. "Who told you this?"

"Eponin... she heard from Eph the other night."

Xena led her mare to a stream and she turned to her saddle. "The other night?" She pulled out her water skin. "Was there a party then?"

"Oh yeah." Solari grinned and pulled out her own water skin. "Big one."

"And was Ep drunk when she told you this?"

"Eponin... gods yes. You should have heard her." Solari drank some of her water while watching her mare drink from the stream.

Xena nodded and finished drinking from the skin. She corked it. "So you believe Ep when she's drunk huh?"

The second in command blinked. "Well..." She corked her skin and put it away. "Now that you put it that way."

The warrior walked up to get her mare's reins. "Solari, as far as I know... Gabrielle hasn't... hooked up with anybody." She lifted the reins over the horse's head and mounted again.

Solari sighed and mounted her horse and glanced over to Xena. "Really? It would have made for some great gossip."

Xena grinned to her friend. "I know." She turned her mare around. "Next time, only believe what Ep says when she's not drunk."

"Good point." The Amazon trotted her mare onto the road behind Xena. "But Gabrielle really isn't hooked up with anybody?"

"Nope." Xena shrugged her shoulders. "She's a traveling bard... who could she... hook up with anyway?"

Solari evilly grinned to the warrior.

Xena leaned close to the Amazon. "Don't even breathe my name let alone think it."

The second in command chuckled. "I didn't... you said it."

The warrior narrowed her eyes. "She's not my type."

Solari nodded. "Exactly." She shrugged her shoulders. "No... need to get all... defensive Xena."

Xena lifted her right hand with her index finger close to her thumb. "You're this close to falling out of that saddle."

The second in command took a deep breath. "I didn't say anything." She shrugged her shoulders and had a mischief grin on her lips.

The Warrior Princess suddenly smiled evilly. "Good." She kicked Argo into a gallop.

Solari watched the warrior fly down the road. She laughed. "Gabrielle is going out with Xena." She laughed with glee and kicked her horse into a gallop. "This is so cute!"

~*~*~*~

Gabrielle walked through the woods with a sigh.

"How can you stay so calm?"

The bard lifted her head up to the Celt. "I'm anything but calm."

"You sure act calm Gabrielle." Joan rested her right hand on her sword on her hip.

"Well..." The Queen let the air around fill her chest. "After... almost three years of doing this sort of thing, you get use to it."

"Three years?" The Celtic warrior's head snapped towards the smaller woman. "That's a lot of adventures."

Gabrielle huffed. "Tell me about it." She stopped and looked around trying to remember the route to the ruins. "Let's go this way." She turned to the right.

"Sso... tell me a guid adventure."

"My tales are long." Gabrielle grinned up to Joan.

"Well maybe not the hael adventure... at least part of one."

The bard sighed. "I'll give you a... selection." She walked along thinking about her past with Xena. "Let's see there's the Titans..." She chuckled. "Um... Prometheus..."

dealing with a giant and army... when Xena had to do a beauty contest." She grinned up to Joan. "Or I can tell you how I first met the Amazons."

Joan's eyes widen. "Oh I gotta hear this story."

Gabrielle laughed. "It was the first time I met Eph."

"I bet that was a ming."

"A who?" The Queen arched an eyebrow at her friend.

Joan chuckled and looked away from the woods to the small woman. "A ming... how you say? Uh... stink."

Gabrielle started to laugh. "That's... that's one way to put it." She took a deep breath and began to tell her tale while leading them through the woods. "This was about two years ago and Xena and I had just finished dealing with freeing the titan Prometheus." She smiled at the memory. "So Xena and I were headed..."

~*~*~*~

Velasca felt a light sting to her cheek and she opened her eyes. The sting came again as a hand connected hard with her cheek. She tried to reach up but found her hands bounded behind her back. "Ephiny," she growled.

The regent smirked. "Morning sleepyhead." She stood in front of the sunset's rays. "Sleep well?"

The god struggled to get up. "This chains won't hold me for long."

"Oh I know." Ephiny straightened up and grinned. "But it's nice seeing you like that."

Eponin stepped up beside her regent.

Teresa stepped up on the other side with her arms against her chest.

Velasca's eyes flickered over to the weapons master. "Eponin... long time no see."

"I was hoping it would be longer Velasca." Eponin turned her attention to her commander. "Ephiny?"

"Get out of here." The regent turned her head sidelong to Teresa. "The both of you."

The two Amazons nodded and jumped to disappear into the trees. They joined up with the three other waiting Amazons.

Ephiny spun away on her heels to walk off.

"Ephiny, you're not going to leave a fellow Amazon tied up to a tree?"

The regent whirled around and stalked up to the god. "Screw you Velasca." She bent down to one knee in front of the god. "You don't even know what Amazon means so don't even breathe the title."

"You're breaking my heart regent." Velasca's eyes glowed white brightly. "I'll get out of these chains and kill all the Amazons one at a time."

Ephiny narrowed her eyes. "Don't count on it... you're plans are going to change real soon." She stood up and walked away but stopped. "Oh by the way." She turned back around. "This is for Melosa." Ephiny did a hard roundhouse kick to the god's head. She was breathing heavy with anger to see the god's head snap back hard against the tree and go unconscious again. "Bitch." She jumped to disappear in the trees.

~*~*~*~

A hard laugh came from Joan and she took deep breaths to calm. "That's a riot." She sighed and smiled to the bard. "Ephiny sounded like a character then."

"She was...she was." Gabrielle came around a few trees and saw the ruins ahead. "Here we are."

The Celtic warrior looked around to see the toppled over gray pillars and buildings. "Don't call it the ruins for nothing ay?"

"Nope." Gabrielle sighed and looked up to the sky.

"What now?"

"We make camp." The bard saw the setting sun. She turned her head to Joan. "Know how to start a fire?"

The warrior nodded. "Of course."

"Good... 'cause I don't." The Queen sheepishly smiled.

"Your friend never teach you?"

Gabrielle chuckled. "That's the interesting part... she's tried to teach me." She sighed sadly. "But I've never been able to pick the art up." She grinned.

"No worries lass." Joan crossed her arms against her chest. "How about you get some wood and I'll try to find us some dinner."

"Sounds like a plan." The small woman leaned against her staff. "Meet you here in a quarter of candlemark?"

Joan nodded and let her breath out slowly. "Sounds guid." She raised a red eyebrow at the smaller woman. "What you think happened to your friendly chap?"

"She's probably getting caught up in Ephiny's traps."

"Guid." The Celt's lips creased with a grin. "Be back." She disappeared into the woods.

Gabrielle sighed sadly and stared across the ruins and remembered the last time she was here. She dropped her head against her staff. "Where are you Xena?" She shook her head. "Gods, I miss you." Her eyes closed while she tried to calm her emotions. She straightened up with a long breath and strolled into the woods to collect firewood.

~*~*~*~

"She's really not hooked up with anybody?" Solari bounced up and down in the saddle

next to the warrior in the early night.

"Solari." The warrior turned her head to the Amazon. "No... what part don't you understand? The 'n' or the 'o'?"

"Sorry it's just..." The Amazon tightened the reins in her hands while she went at a trot beside the warrior. "Well... I can't believe both Ephiny, Ep, *and* Gabrielle would say she's going out with somebody and you don't even know."

"Remember who has an imagination?" Xena shrugged her shoulders. "Besides... you know how Amazons gossip."

"Don't I know." Solari chuckled. "So we're going to keep going at a trot?"

"Yeah." Xena gazed ahead down the pitch-black road. "I don't want to go at a gallop and stumble over something. Safer this way and gives the horses a breather."

"I agree." The second in command gave a stern nod.

"Glad I have your approval." The warrior smirked to the Amazon.

Solari carked an eyebrow. "You are... traveling with the Queen's second in command."

"And your point is?"

The second in command's mouth dropped. "My point is I have a lot of... prestige in the Nation."

Xena suddenly fell forward laughing.

Solari shook her head. "I don't find that funny."

The warrior took a deep breath and sat back up. "Sorry... but I am the Queen's Champion and I think I have higher rank."

"Actually you don't." The second in command smirked. "You're just the Queen's shadow."

Xena slowly raised an eyebrow. "If I remember right it's the Champion's duty to protect the Queen." She narrowed her eyes. "I think my position is a little important there Solari."

"Maybe you have a point there." Solari sheepishly grinned. "So... you're important, just not higher rank."

The warrior rolled her eyes to gaze ahead and spoke with a serious tone, "I don't follow rank."

"I know." The Amazon smirked but her smirk went to a grin. "She's really not hooked up with somebody?"

"Solari!"

~*~*~*~

Gabrielle straightened up with the sticks all in order to begin the fire.

"Looks guid lass." Joan reappeared with a skinned pheasant in hand. "I'll light it and you can get a skewer ready for the pheasant."

The Queen nodded and step forward in the late evening to take the pheasant. She went about skewing the pheasant on a green stick.

Joan on the other hand took her time lighting up the fire. By the time she was done, Gabrielle was cooking the pheasant over the fire. The warrior began glancing around noticing how close the camp was to the ruins. "So why did we put our buil here by the ruins?"

"Camp?" Gabrielle arched an eyebrow.

"Yeah... or resting place." The Celt grinned. "Protection?"

The bard nodded. "That's what I figured. If Velasca shows tonight we can jump behind these ruins to hide... or protect."

The Celt nodded. "Guid idea." She sighed and sat down crossed leg near the fire. "So how long will it take for your friend, Xena, to come?"

Gabrielle stepped back from the fire after putting the pheasant over it. "I'm hoping tomorrow." She shifted to sit beside the Celt. "Depends."

Joan nodded gave a small sigh. "This will be a long night." She faced the Queen. "You better get some rest tonight, I'll keep watch."

The Queen shook her head. "No, let me take watch Joan." She turned her head to the redhead woman. "You're injured, your wound will need the sleep."

"Gabrielle-

The bard's hand went to the Celt's knee. "It's okay... really." She grinned. "You need your sleep."

"Thanks." Joan gave a warm smile.

"It's the least I can do after you saved my life." The small woman stood up to kneel down in front of her friend. "Let me look at the wound too."

"You make it sound like nobody saves your life." Joan reached up to pull back her long curly hair out of the way.

Gabrielle chuckled and responded, "It's not that." She sighed and reached up to pull away the remains of the cobweb to find the webs tainted red. "It's just I'm use to Xena only saving my life." She smiled warmly. "It's... interesting when somebody else does it." She threw the spider's web to the ground and narrowed her eyes while studying the scab. "It'll be fine."

"Guid." The Celt watched her friend sit back down. She stretched her legs out in front of her body.

"We'll have to clean it up right when Xena comes."

"She has medicine?" Her red hair came back down.

"Definitely." Gabrielle smiled. "Nothing to worry about."

~*~*~*~

Velasca took a deep breath and shut her eyes. She swelled her muscles out with her anger and heard a small squeaking sound. The god's eyes tightened and she put more strength into her pull against the chains. A growl escaped her lips and the chains squealed loudly to break apart in defeat.

Velasca grinned and opened her white eyes. She brought her still bonded hands forward to push the chains around her body out of the way. Standing up, the god did the same process to break the chains around her hands.

Section 2

~*Part 6*~

Solari slumped forward but jerked up from her horse's trot. She shook her head and looked ahead to see Xena with a stoic form. She quietly mumbled, "How does she do it?"

"Magic Solari." The warrior glanced back sidelong with a grin. "Ready to start galloping?" She looked ahead and saw the dawn's sun peeking through the forest.

The second in command straightened up in the saddle with a groan. "Sure... let's knock ourselves out." She laughed. "Well at least me anyway."

Xena quietly chuckled. "You'll make it... you'll just be real saddle sore."

"Tell me about it." The Amazon trotted her horse up to Xena's. "I won't be able to walk for a week."

The Warrior Princess's expression was a huge smirk. "You'll live."

"Maybe." Solari then gradually perked up an eyebrow. "She's not going out with anybody?"

The warrior rolled her eyes. "Gabrielle is about to lose her second in command."

"I'm just really curious."

"Would you like me to tattoo on my forehead that she isn't?" Xena leaned towards the Amazon. "You've got a real hard head."

"You're the one to talk." Solari narrowed her eyes at Xena, daring her.

The warrior studied the other woman's eyes as she swayed in the saddle. A grin broke out across her lips. "I won't tell." Her eyes widen with mischief and Xena kicked her horse into a gallop.

"I knew you knew!" Solari kicked her horse into a gallop to catch up.

~*~*~*~

"Ephiny?" Eponin came jogging up.

The regent turned her head to the weapons master. "What's happening?"

"Velasca is free and heading towards the ruins."

Ephiny sighed. "On foot?"

"Yes." Eponin shifted her weight to her other foot. "And Xena and Solari are coming... they're just outside the territory."

"Good." Ephiny sighed and turned her head away from the morning sun. "Are our scouts still finding Gabrielle and Joan?"

"Yes... they reported they're close to their trail."

The regent nodded.

"Are we going to do anything?"

"Yes... wait for Xena."

~*~*~*~

Solari sighed in relief. "Home sweet home." She slowed to put her horse into a canter towards the Amazon village.

"We're not home free yet Solari." Xena slowed Argo to a canter towards the village as well.

Up ahead Solari could see her regent coming out of the gates with Eponin. "Looks like we're going to get greeted."

"Wonderful." The warrior grinned and kept at a canter.

"Hey Xena!" Eponin smiled warmly and stepped up as the horse came near.

The warrior pulled her mare to a stop and saw Solari come past to dismount with a groan. "Where's Gabrielle?"

"We believe she's at the ruins." Ephiny stepped forward to the warrior and her horse. Her hand rested on the horse's shoulder. "There's a Celt warrior with her named Joan."

"I heard." Xena sighed and asked, "Where's Velasca?"

"She's headed towards Gabrielle at the ruins."

The Warrior Princess turned her horse towards where the ruins laid. "Ephiny, get some of your Amazons together. You remember where the cave is with the ambrosia?"

"Yes of course." The regent furrowed her eyebrows.

"I'm going to get Gabrielle and Joan, we're going to come past here headed to the cave." Xena shifted the reins in her hands. "I want you and a few Amazons to slow Velasca down again so we can get to this cave and set things up. Got me?"

"Yeah." Ephiny stepped forward again. "Be careful Xena" She shook her head. "Velasca isn't bright but she can be at points."

"I know, just slow her down Eph. I'll take care of the rest."

Ephiny nodded. "Good luck Xena."

The warrior nodded seriously and kicked Argo into a gallop headed to the ruins.

~*~*~*~

"No!" Gabrielle sprung forward. "Over here Velasca!" She walked out into the open with her hands up with her staff. Her eyes flickered over to see Joan crawling back behind the ruins. She gazed back to Velasca. "Don't hurt her Velasca."

"I won't." The god walked up to the bard a little closer. "So long as I have you." She looked around at the area. "The lava pit... again." Her white eyes rested on the Queen. "Do you think I'd fall for that twice?"

The bard shrugged her shoulders. "Was worth a shot... considering you're not that smart."

The god narrowed her eyes and stepped closer to Gabrielle. "You've grown cocky over the year."

"Yeah well... I live with the best."

"And your point is?"

Gabrielle smirked and lowered her hands with the staff. "My point is, she'll be here."

"Not before I kill you Gabrielle." Velasca evilly grinned taking another step closer.

"How times have I heard that Velasca?" The Queen stepped back. "If I got a dinar for every time I heard that from a bad guy I'd be rich and have a kingdom."

"You're bound to run out of luck one day Gabrielle." Velasca narrowed her eyes. "It's going to be today." She lifted her right hand to shoot off a bolt.

Gabrielle found herself flying through the air on her back. Her staff almost rolled out of her grasp but her fingers curled back around the wood. She moaned and turned her head up.

"Velasca!" Joan reappeared out of the ruins. "I heard you can't shoot bolts worth a damn!"

The god whirled around at hearing the comment. "You!" She stalked towards the Celt. "You're going to die."

"But you only kill Amazons right?" Joan twirled her sword. "I'm not an Amazon."

"I'll make an exception just for you." Velasca narrowed her eyes and raised her index finger.

"What? You've gotta shoot bolts at me to kill me?" Joan stepped to her right with her sword up. "Can't you even fight me like a real female warrior? Or has that godhood shot your courage?"

The god narrowed her eyes. "Alright." She reached behind to unsheathe her sword.

Joan laughed and narrowed her bright green eyes. "Let's swing lassie."

Velasca growled and went on attack.

Gabrielle slowly stood with her pounding heart. She twirled her staff and slowly came up behind Velasca.

Joan kept fighting the god hoping to make some sort of contact. She felt the injury to her head thumping and the new pain in her left arm stinging deeply. "Moan!"

"You won't win girl." Velasca gave a hard swipe but missed.

"Whit ji hink I um?" Joan jumped back and twirled her sword. "An idiot like you?" She began to work the god closer to the ruins.

The god sneered and came after the Celtic warrior. She sped past the warrior and turned around with her back to the ruins.

Gabrielle shook her head at Joan's dialect. She raised her staff and came up behind Velasca. Taking a deep breath, the bard swung her staff hard at the back of the god's head.

Velasca stopped in mid motion with her head bent forward. She whirled around to hit Gabrielle with her left arm and send Gabrielle sailing on her back.

Gabrielle dropped her head back as she fought the faintness that wanted to take her.

The god's white eyes turned back to Joan with anger. She gave a hard punch to Joan's face.

The Celtic warrior went down on her side with her sword still in hand.

Velasca sheathed her sword and turned towards Gabrielle. She raised her right hand to point her finger at Gabrielle.

The bard sat up with her staff in her lap. Her eyes widen at seeing Velasca getting ready to fire a bolt. She had no strength to move.

"Velasca!"

Gabrielle and Velasca whipped their heads towards the forest.

Xena came bursting through the trees on her mare. "Try to get me!" She spurred Argo to go faster.

The god narrowed her eyes and started to shoot bolts at Xena.

The warrior ducked as the bolts exploded behind her mare. "Gabrielle get up!"

The Amazon Queen slowly began to stand up with her staff.

Velasca continued to shoot the lightning at the warrior and mare missing every time as the warrior galloped past.

Xena bent to her left with her right hand taking both the reins.

Gabrielle's eyes widen as she realized what her partner was about to do. She mentally and physically braced herself.

The Warrior Princess narrowed her eyes and lowered her left arm down while Argo kept at a full gallop. Her right hand grasped the saddle horn and she gritted her teeth. Her head buzzed as the wind whipped by with the air filling with the explosion of the lightning bolts. She had only one chance.

The bard shut her eyes as seeing her partner come right at her.

Xena reached forward and came right up to Gabrielle to grab her by the waist and lift her up. "Gotcha."

"Oh gods!" Gabrielle clung on to her warrior for dear life.

The warrior lifted herself back up with Gabrielle. "Hold on to me."

"Good idea." The bard wanted to laugh but couldn't. She felt herself placed in the front of the saddle and her hands wrapped around the saddle horn. "We gotta get Joan."

"I know." The warrior wrapped one arm around her bard. "Let's get Velasca first." She shook her head to get her bangs out of her way. She turned Argo so that she began to do a circle around Velasca.

The god continued to shoot the bolts at the two women on the horse. She slowly rotated as the pair went around her.

Xena glanced up to the remains of a wall to a temple and she noticed the small space between it and Velasca. She headed directly between that space as the bolts continued to explode around them. "Don't let go of Argo, got me?"

"Yeah." Gabrielle felt herself shivering some. "Don't you let go of me!"

The warrior grinned. "I'll try not too." She came right past the wall and heard the bolts strike the ruin wall.

There was a loud crash as the wall broke up into pieces and tumbled over Velasca.

Xena let Argo go a little farther and she pulled the mare to a fast walk. "You okay?"

Gabrielle slumped in the saddle. "I am now."

The older woman chuckled lightly and glanced back to see the rubble of the wall on

top of the god. "It won't hold her long." She turned Argo towards Joan and trotted that way.

"Gods... this just isn't our month."

Xena sighed in agreement. "Definitely not our month." She came up to the Celtic warrior lying unconscious on the ground. "Stay on Argo." She dismounted and knelt down to the other warrior and took the sword to sheathe it in the Celt's sheath. She lifted up the redhead warrior and came up to her mare's rump.

Joan was deposited on the rump of the horse on her stomach.

The warrior turned her head to the large war-horse. "Think you can handle three girl?"

Argo looked back and whined with a nod.

"Good girl, I owe you." Xena mounted her horse behind Gabrielle and wrapped an arm around Gabrielle with her right hand collecting the reins. The warrior did a click and her mare went into a fast walk heading into the woods.

~*~*~*~

The warrior pulled Argo to a stop in the woods. "Come on, let's make camp." She hopped off and turned towards her partner.

Gabrielle swung her right leg over the saddle, slipped her boot out of the left stirrup, and slid off the saddle next to her warrior.

Xena's right hand came up to the bard's shoulder. "You're sure you are okay?"

The Amazon Queen nodded. "Yeah." Her head turned to Joan. "She's been guarding me... she's got a few injuries."

The warrior nodded and released Gabrielle. She came up to Joan and carefully lifted the Celt off the mare's back.

Argo huffed and let her breath out slowly in relief.

The tall woman grinned and carried Joan over into a clearing. "Get me the med. kit."

Gabrielle nodded and pulled the medical kit out of the saddlebag. She knew her partner was in warrior mode and would take her a few minutes to wind down. She came up by Xena's side and bent down. "She's got a wound to the head... a day old and a deep cut down her left arm from today."

Xena nodded and reached up to brush back the red hair from her forehead. "Grab me the wineskin."

The younger woman nodded, went back to Argo, and pulled out an almost empty wineskin. She came back to Xena handing it.

The warrior had a rag out and poured some of the wine onto the rag. She carefully dabbed it along the wound.

"Want me to untack Argo?"

"Yeah, thanks." Xena flashed a smile and turned her head back to Joan.

Gabrielle stood up and walked over to the mare. She began to slowly untack the war-horse. "Thanks girl."

Argo turned her head back and nudged the bard.

"Yes... I'm thanking you."

The warrior grinned to herself listening to her bard's conversation with the horse. She continued to clean the cut then wrapped it with a few poultices over the wound. After that she went back to the head cut and began to reopen it to clean it right. Xena opened the wound again but quickly put the wine soaked rag over the wound.

A hiss came from Joan and she opened her eyes. "Wahoo, howizitgaun?" She furrowed her eyebrows. "You must be Xena?"

"Yup." The warrior looked into green eyes. "Stop moving your face."

The Celt chuckled and went stiff. "Better?"

"Yeah."

Gabrielle glanced back to see Joan awake. "Welcome back."

The Celt warrior chuckled. "Thanks lass... but I did have a rude awakening."

"Be glad you're even alive." Xena pulled the cloth away and grabbed another poultice from her bag. "Keep that pressed to your head wound for a few minutes okay?"

"No problem." Joan shifted her right hand up to hold the poultice in place. She began to slowly sit up.

The warrior helped her up and smiled. "How you feel?"

"Like I was hit by a dragon." The Celt groaned. "I must have been since I've pumped into nothing but trouble."

Xena patted the other woman's shoulder. "You'll live." She grabbed her medical kit and stood up.

"So I've been diagnosed as alive." Joan crossed her legs and held the poultice over her head still. "Thank Teufates."

"I don't think it has anything to do with your god Joan." Gabrielle held the saddlebag in front of her warrior.

The dark warrior came up as well as opened the top to slip her kit inside. "Thanks for untacking Argo."

"No problem." Gabrielle carried the saddlebag over to Joan and placed it there.

Xena came up to her mare. "Let's get you something to drink huh?" The horse nodded in complete agreement. "Gabrielle, I'm going to get water for Argo and some fish."

The bard turned around. "I'll get the firewood and watch over Joan."

"Good." The warrior turned her head to the two women with a smirk. "Make sure Joan doesn't smack into anymore dragons for us... considering they bring trouble."

"Ha, ha." Joan gave a mock glare. She saw Xena leave and she lifted her head up to the bard. "Does she always joke like that?"

"Yup." Gabrielle grinned.

"She's not very funny." The Celt lowered her head.

"I think she is." The bard's eyes sparkled. "You just gotta know how to laugh right with her." Her eyes rose up to the direction her warrior went in. She sighed and patted her friend's shoulder. "I'll be back, stay away from the dragons."

"Yeah, yeah. I'll try to find myself some boars."

"What do boars mean?" The small woman walked near the forest's edge.

The Celt turned her head to Gabrielle. "Strength and courage for warriors."

"Good." The Amazon Queen walked into the forest. "You could use a lot of them right now."

"You're just a riot lass... just like your friend!" Joan sighed and lifted the poultice from her forehead. She looked at the poultice to see small stains of blood. She groaned yet put it back on her forehead.

~*~*~*~

Gabrielle leaned against her staff while her eyes stayed locked on her partner in the water catching fish. "She's cute huh Argo?"

The horse lifted her head from the water and turned to Gabrielle.

"I'm serious." The bard turned her head to the mare. "She's cute... in her own way." She chuckled and turned her head away to study the warrior. A sigh escaped while her head leaned against the staff again.

The mare shook her head and went back to drinking her fill of the water.

"Get sidetracked Gabrielle?" The warrior came walking out of the stream with two fish in each hand. She shot a grin up to her bard.

"Just a little." The Amazon Queen smiled warmly. "I was just walking by and saw this incredibly beautiful warrior wading in the water." She shrugged her shoulders. "Got caught up in the scene and moment."

Xena grinned and put her fish near the stream's edge. She reached behind to undo her hair and it all came flowing down. "So I noticed." She smiled warmly now and stepped up to her partner. "Salmon."

"Sounds good to me." Gabrielle lifted her head up. "Joan didn't take much of a liking to your joke."

"She doesn't understand my sense of humor."

"That's what I told her basically."

The warrior chuckled however went a bit serious. "Glad you're okay."

Gabrielle nodded and sighed. "Glad you made it here in record time."

"For you?" Xena grinned. "Anytime."

The small woman dropped her eyes. "Thanks." She looked back up. "I was pretty... scared there."

"I know." The warrior sighed sadly. "But we'll take care of her."

"Yeah." The bard sighed. "She's my version of Callisto."

Xena groaned. "Don't remind me."

"Still have that dagger?" Gabrielle gave a smug look.

"I wish." The tall woman shifted her weight to her other foot. "How you feel now?"

"A bit beat." The young woman glanced over to Argo still drinking and her eyes came to Xena again. "You must be too."

"Definitely." Xena shrugged her shoulders. "But... loving every moment."

Gabrielle groaned then rolled her eyes. "Don't I know."

"Yup." Xena grinned for a moment and took a deep breath. "Come here."

The bard tossed her staff to the ground and stepped into her partner's arms. "Oh gods."

The tall woman placed a kiss to Gabrielle's forehead and kept her arms tight around the small woman. She quietly whispered into the bard's ear, "I love you."

Gabrielle lifted her head up and rested her head against her warrior's chest. "I love you too." She shut her eyes. "This just really isn't our month."

"Nope." Xena rested her chin on top of the blond head. "Let's see... first Hope comes back."

"With Callisto and Ares to boot." Gabrielle sighed and opened her eyes again. "So after they all converge we go after them."

"You end up in a pit."

"Can't forget that part." The bard took a deep breath. "You end up in Chin with a bunch of fruity Amazons."

The warrior chuckled. "I come back and find you."

"And we find Hope again with her... son." The bard groaned. "No rest for the heroes."

"Never." Xena lifted her head up and smiled warmly.

Gabrielle lifted her head as well plus mirrored the smile back. "But I did get one thing out of all this."

The warrior arched an eyebrow in the sun's setting rays. "And that is?"

"You." The bard smiled warmly. "I'd do it again if it means I get you."

"I agree." Xena's right hand came up to brush back Gabrielle's blond bangs. She smiled with such appreciation for this other woman. And slowly she leaned down towards her bard.

Gabrielle closed her eyes as warm lips touched hers and her body began to warm extremely.

The warrior entered her bard's mouth with her tongue.

The Amazon Queen slipped her own tongue into the warrior's mouth as the kiss deepened.

Xena slowly pulled back from the long kiss and nuzzled her cheek against Gabrielle's. "I'm sorry I wasn't here."

"No." Gabrielle kept her eyes closed and her cheek resting against Xena's. "You're here now, that's what matters."

The warrior lifted her head with a warm smile. "Yeah." She placed another warm kiss to her partner's forehead. "I better get back to camp before Joan finds more dragons."

The bard snickered low. "And I'd better get the firewood." She sighed contently. "That was a nice sidetrack."

Xena chuckled and released her partner to walk back down and get the salmon. "Joan will like the salmon."

"How you figure?" Gabrielle straightened up from picking her staff up.

The older woman held the salmon and lifted them while staring at them. "They bring knowledge to the Celts."

"Really?" Gabrielle arched an eyebrow. "That's interesting... Celts sound interesting."

"They are." Xena lowered the fish and turned her head to her partner. "If you like boar crap."

"Why is that?" The bard leaned against her staff.

"Because some Celts will rub boar... waste on themselves to bring courage."

The Amazon Queen's head bobbed up and down. "Right... I think I'll go get some firewood now."

Xena laughed followed by turning her head to her mare. "Come on girl."

The horse came trotting up beside her owner.

The Warrior Princess walked up into the forest and glanced to her bard. "Be careful."

"I will." The small woman smiled. "See you in the camp and keep Joan away from any boar. I don't wanna be smelling that all night."

Xena chuckled to herself. "Don't worry." She walked towards the camp with the fish and Argo beside her.

~*~*~*~

"Well that wasn't to bad." Gabrielle came to sit down next to her partner and placed her staff close to her body.

"Not at all, thanks for the great dinner."

The bard arched an eyebrow. "Since when were you complimenting me on dinners?"

Xena grinned and scouted to the left and leaned back against the log in front of the fire. "Since now."

"Thanks." The bard smiled and leaned back against her partner's right shoulder. She stretched her legs out with her arms, dropped her arms, and leaned against Xena's shoulder again.

The warrior looked up at seeing the Celt come into the camp. "Settling down?"

"Yeah." The Celtic warrior came near the woman. "You two doing the watch?"

"I just am." Xena gave a serious look.

Gabrielle peered up at her partner and back to Joan. "Sleep well Joan."

"Yeah, you too lass." Joan stretched out in a bedroll. "Nice night at least."

The bard chuckled. "After today, we should have a good night."

"Really." The Celt sighed. "This Velasca sure does hatter you ay?"

"Hatter isn't even the word for it Joan."

The Celt dropped her head back to gaze at the two women. "True. She's just a plain obsessed chap."

Gabrielle quietly laughed. "Go to sleep Joan."

"Yeah, guidnight Xena and Gabrielle."

"Night Joan."

The warrior smiled. "Sleep well."

"Mmm..." Joan muffled through her yawn, "Thanks Xena."

"No problem, get some sleep Joan."

"Yeah." The Celtic warrior dropped her head as she curled up to go to sleep near the fire.

Gabrielle sighed and turned her head towards the fire again. She felt her warrior's right arm snake around her shoulders next came down to her side. Gabrielle reached with her right hand to grasp the larger hand while lacing their fingers together.

Xena smiled and turned her head to place a kiss to her partner's temple. She then turned her attention towards the fire again.

The bard's left hand came over to rest on Xena's right thigh. "I'm exhausted."

"Get some sleep, I'll be here."

"I know." Gabrielle sighed faintly. "But not yet."

The warrior chuckled at her stubborn partner.

"Who came and got you?"

"Solari."

The bard nodded a few times.

"By the way... what did you tell Ephiny about us?"

"Why?" Gabrielle looked up with furrowed eyebrows.

Xena lowered her eyes. "The entire ride over here I had Solari ask me, she's not going out with anybody?"

The bard's expression dropped. "Oh no."

"Oh yes." The older woman arched an eyebrow. "She told me she heard from Eph whom heard from Ephiny. And I know Ephiny saw us kiss."

The small woman groaned and dropped her head against Xena's neck. "Great." She sighed sadly. "I did tell Eph a few things."

"Like what?"

Gabrielle lifted her head with a shy smile. "Just a few things."

"Gabrielle."

"Well..." The bard chuckled out of tension. "I sort of told her about how we... got together."

"Oh?" The tall woman turned her head to her bard. "The entire story?"

"Pretty much."

Xena sighed very slowly. "Wonderful."

"But it's obvious Eph didn't say anything." Gabrielle tried to find an opening. "I mean, if Solari is asking you whom I am... going out with then Eph must have not

told whom."

"True." The tall woman gave a nod. "Solari said she found out during the party."

"The party." The bard's eyebrows creased together as she thought. "Oh!" She chuckled lightly. "Now I remember, Ep was hitting on me and Ephiny came up saying I was taken." She shrugged her shoulders. "Eponin must have said something to Solari later on."

Xena nodded. "Eponin was hitting on you?"

The Amazon Queen chuckled lightly. "That's because she was drunk." She laughed and added, "I thought I was going to be drunk off smelling the port on her breath."

The warrior chuckled deeply.

"Oh that reminds me... gods." Gabrielle glanced up to her partner. "You're not going to like this... but Solari and Ep have this bet going on."

"Oh no... how do I fit into it?"

The bard sighed. "I tried to stop Ep, but she made a bet saying she could jump you."

"In what way?"

"Just jump you."

Xena nodded. "Jump me sexually or just to knock me over?"

"Either."

The older woman took a deep breath and let it out. "That's it, when this is over we'll walk past the gates to the village and wave goodbye. We're not going inside."

Gabrielle chuckled and shook her head. "Xena, we can't do that."

"Yes we can and we will." The warrior sighed. "I'm not walking into that village to have Eponin jumping on me from my right, Solari on my left asking me, "Who's she going out with?" and Ephiny standing there gloating with laughter."

"Hey don't worry." The bard patted her warrior's leg. "I am the Queen."

Xena huffed at that.

Gabrielle shook her head and said with a light voice. "Then again..."

"It wouldn't matter," the two women said in unison.

The bard laughed with her best friend and leaned against Xena.

The warrior sighed while shaking her head. "It really wouldn't."

"I know, that's the scary part." Gabrielle sat up again with a sigh. "We'll... fix them."

Xena evilly grinned. "Oooh, you mean this?"

Gabrielle grinned at her partner. "Definitely, we'll get them for this."

The warrior chuckled evilly. "My imagination is already toying with the idea."

"I know." The bard grinned up to her warrior and sighed slightly. She dropped her head against Xena's shoulder again.

"Mmm, do your Amazons have to much time?"

"Why?" Gabrielle lifted her head.

"I was just noticing Solari's... words she used."

"What you mean?" The bard arched an eyebrow.

"Well for example..." Xena turned her head to Gabrielle. "Solari kept saying, hooked up."

Gabrielle nodded. "I guess that she meant in reference to me huh?"

"Yup." The warrior shook her head and lightened her voice to mimic Solari. "Who's she hooked up with Xena? Come on Xena, did Gabrielle hook up with somebody?" She huffed and rolled her eyes.

"That bad huh?"

"Yeah, that torturing."

The Amazon Queen quietly laughed. "Hooked up... I've never heard that. Heard of going out with."

"Me too but not... hooked up." Xena shook her head. "Your Amazons have to much time on their hands."

"They must." Gabrielle chuckled. "I'll have to inflict some more patrol time."

"Good." The warrior snickered low.

Gabrielle filled her lungs with the night air. "You know what I can't understand is why they all want to know about *my* sex life."

"What about sex life?" Joan lifted her head up. "I don't have one."

Both Xena and Gabrielle leaned forward laughing together.

The Celtic warrior shrugged her shoulders and dropped her head back down. "I know it's funny, but gee."

"It's not that." Gabrielle lifted her head back up with a calming breath. "That was just great timing."

The warrior glanced over to the Celtic one. "Sorry Joan."

The Celtic nodded. "I told you both, I see to many dragons." She sighed. "I'll go back to sleep, I just couldn't help but hear somebody say, sex life."

Gabrielle grinned. "Sorry Joan."

"S'alright, guidnight again." The Celt shut her eyes.

Xena shook her head. "For three women getting hunted by a god. We're getting a lot of laughs in."

The bard sighed and leaned her head back. "Thank the gods too. Last time we did this Velasca chaos it was to morbid."

"Mmm, it was." The warrior sighed. "Joan is a lot better than Callisto."

"Really." Gabrielle smiled and slowly her smile went to an evil grin. "I just came up with an idea to our Solari problem."

"What's that?"

"What if in front of Solari I kissed Ephiny?" The Amazon Queen lifted her head to her partner. "I'm sure Eph would go along with it and I know it would just get Solari's goat."

"It would." The warrior grinned but dropped it rapidly. "One problem?"

The bard peered up in puzzlement. "What's that?"

"I'm sure Eph will go with it... but I might not."

"Come on Xena." The bard squeezed her warrior's right hand. "It'll be fun... it'll just be a small kiss. Eph will be fine with it."

"I have no doubt in my mind she won't be."

"What you saying?"

"I'm saying, that entire village wants to know about your sex life because they wouldn't mind being apart of it."

Gabrielle suddenly went bright red while looking away. "That's true."

The warrior reached up with her left hand to turned Gabrielle's head back towards her.

"You're cute when you blush."

That just added to Gabrielle's redness as she went a shade deeper. She dropped her eyes.

Xena smiled and shifted her hand to glide over to Gabrielle's cheek. She leaned towards her partner and carefully kissed her. The bard slowly opened her eyes when her warrior pulled back. She smiled warmly and leaned in to nuzzle Xena's neck. "I like this."

"Mmm." The Warrior Princess kept her hand against the side of Gabrielle's head. She placed a gentle kiss on Gabrielle's head. "Me too."

"Sso... can I do the trick with Eph?"

The older woman sighed and put her hand under Gabrielle's chin again to lift her head up. She gazed intently into warm green eyes. "Just one?"

The bard chuckled. "Yes, just to floor Solari."

"Okay." The warrior grinned. "Just don't let Eph take it to far."

"You think she really would?"

"She's an Amazon and your incredibly sexy." The warrior nodded. "So yes." She lowered her hand to her lap again.

Gabrielle sighed. "Alright. You'll be there right?"

"Definitely." Xena grinned. "Make it all the better. I'll be off to the side warding Ep off me."

The bard closed her eyes and started to quietly laugh. "Oh gods." She opened her eyes again and took a deep breath. "I'll just give Ep two weeks of patrol duty to teach her a lesson to mess with... my girlfriend."

The Warrior Princess laughed and shook her head while looking away. "Great, now I'm your girlfriend."

"That's one for the Amazons."

"It is." Xena's lips shifted into a grin. "Don't tell them."

"No worries." Gabrielle chuckled lightly and leaned her head against the warrior's shoulder to shut her eyes.

"Get some sleep huh?" Xena reached up with her left hand to caress Gabrielle's cheek.

"Mmm." Gabrielle opened her eyes then peeked up. "Why don't you?"

"'Cause you're tired and I'll be fine."

The bard raised an eyebrow. "But you rode for an entire day."

"And you walked."

Gabrielle lifted her head. "I'll be fine."

"There's no options here Gabrielle." The warrior grinned.

The bard narrowed her eyes with a grin. "No there are no options... you sleep and I keep watch."

"Did you sleep last night?"

"Nnno."

The warrior narrowed her eyes. "Then you're definitely not keeping watch."

Gabrielle dropped her head back. "Fine... we'll both keep watch."

Xena sighed. "Stubborn."

"Takes one to know one."

"And birds of a feather flock together."

Gabrielle chuckled at her partner's words. "That too." Now she went serious. "Go to sleep Xena."

The warrior narrowed her eyes. "No, you need your rest."

"I'll be fine." The bard dropped her head back. "We'll both stay up."

The older woman sighed.

Gabrielle then grinned inside of herself. *I wonder...* She began to move her left hand along Xena's thigh in a calm relax movement.

Xena moan lightly. "That's relaxing."

The bard grinned but quickly rid it before Xena saw it. "Xena?" She continued with the movement of her hand.

"Mmm?"

"How was Cyrene?"

The warrior lifted her left hand to run through her hair. "She was well." Her hand came back down to her lap to rest there. Her eyes half-closed.

"What did you do there?"

Xena took a deep breath and tried to concentrate. "Worked on the stable's roof and I... fixed up my leathers."

"That's good." Gabrielle lowered her head against her warrior's shoulder. "Cyrene seen much of Toris?" She kept moving her fingertips over Xena's thigh seeing the effect it had on her best friend.

The tall woman shook her head in a no and to keep herself awake. "No, she hadn't seen him in awhile."

"That's weird."

"Yeah." Xena closed her eyes. "Oh gods."

Gabrielle grinned and soothingly whispered, "Xena, I love you."

"I love you too Gabrielle," whispered the warrior in retort.

The bard felt Xena's grip on her right hand begun to loosen. "Xena?"

"Yeah?"

"Want me to tell you a short story?"

"Sure." The warrior dropped her head back with her closed eyes.

Gabrielle took a deep breath and continued in her soothing tone with her hand still running along Xena's warm skin. "I told this to Iolus a long time ago. But, once man had two heads and four legs. Then the Zeus threw down lightening bolts and split everybody in two." The bard glanced up to see Xena's chest rising slower yet she continued the story. "Now everybody had one head, two arms and legs. Yet the separation left the halves yearning for the other half of their souls." Gabrielle studied her partner's relaxed face that looked so innocent. "So ever since then, man has spent all his life searching for the other half of his soul." The bard smiled up at Xena being asleep now and she leaned in to place a light kiss on the warrior's cheek.

Xena moan and whispered out, "Gabrielle?"

"Ssh, I'm right here." The Amazon Queen lifted her left hand to Xena's opposite cheek and she laid the warrior's head against her shoulder.

The older woman's left hand came up to grasp Gabrielle's hand on her cheek.

Gabrielle smiled as she felt the warm hand take hers and lower to the warrior's lap. "Sleep well Xena," she ushered and held onto the larger hand.

~*Part 7*~

The morning sun crept between the trees and slowly collected on the warrior's face.

Xena groaned lightly and reached up with her left hand to run it through her hair. Slowly her hand came back down to her lap to grasp Gabrielle's hand again. Then she realized and her eyes exploded open. "I didn't..." She turned her head to her partner still leaning against her shoulder.

"Morning." Gabrielle sheepishly smiled.

"Gabrielle," growled the warrior. "You let me fall asleep?"

"Well..." The Amazon Queen squeezed her warrior's left hand. "I just made you go to sleep."

The Warrior Princess sighed as she turned her head away to let the anger calm down. "You're going to be tired today."

"It was either you or me." The bard sighed. "I'd rather it be me. You're the warrior."

"I know." Xena turned her head back. "But I need you with me." She released the small hand to bring up her left hand to caress Gabrielle's cheek. She saw exactly how tired Gabrielle was by the way her eyes were half-open, dark, and unfocused.

"I'll be fine."

The warrior sighed knowing the reality of that statement. "Come on, Velasca has probably gotten out of that rubble and is hot on our trail."

"Yeah." Gabrielle slowly got up first.

Xena looked to her right to grab her partner's staff and she bounced to her feet.

The Amazon Queen ran her right hand through her hair. "Thanks." She took her staff back. "What's the plan anyway?" She leaned against her staff.

The warrior checked her sword on her back while speaking. "We're headed to the ambrosia cave."

Gabrielle furrowed her eyebrows. "To do what?"

"To hopefully trap her inside."

"Wait Xena." The bard shook her head. "You tried that with Callisto and it didn't work."

"That's because I didn't trap Callisto in the heart of the cave."

The young woman reached out to grasp the warrior's arm. "Xena... that means somebody is going to have to be all the way in that cave to lure Velasca in."

"I know." The Warrior Princess sighed. "Come on, we'll worry about that later."

The bard sighed herself and let go. "I'll get Joan."

"Good, I'll take care of Argo."

Gabrielle nodded and Xena went her own way while Gabrielle did. Within a quarter of a candlemark the group was ready to travel with only a dead fire left behind.

Xena stepped up to her partner. "Gabrielle, I want you to ride."

Joan glanced over to the two women and looked away. "I see dragons now," she whispered.

"Don't send them my way Joan." The warrior grinned and lowered her eyes back to Gabrielle. "You need to ride."

"No, I'll be fine Xena."

Xena's right hand came down to her bard's chin to lift her head up. "Listen to reason Gabrielle, your body is tired and I'll need you."

"I said I'll be fine."

"No you won't, you're sluggish." The warrior sighed and lowered her head close to Gabrielle's. "Please Gabrielle, get on Argo for me?"

The bard studied soft blue eyes. "As long as you help me up."

"Deal." Xena grinned then took Gabrielle's staff to lash it onto the side of the saddlebags.

The bard mumbled out, "I'm getting soft." She shifted over to the mare's side and soon was up in the saddle thanks to her friend's help.

"Okay?"

The Amazon Queen looked down to her partner and gave a nod.

The warrior nodded back as she took Argo's reins to lead the group.

~*~*~*~

Gabrielle's body shifted to the left and her hands quickly tightened around the saddle horn and she straightened up. With a shake of her head, she tried to focus on staying on the horse. Within a few seconds Gabrielle started leaning to her left again and suddenly a shot went through her body warning her she'd fall off soon. Quickly the bard sat back up and held the saddle horn tightly again. "Xena?"

The warrior stopped walking and glanced back to see what was happening. "Hades." She turned to Joan. "Can you lead Argo for me?"

"Sure thing." The Celtic warrior took the reins.

Xena briskly walked back to the war-horse and mounted the horse behind Gabrielle. "I'm here Gabrielle." She wrapped her arms around the small woman's midriff.

"Xena?" Gabrielle dropped her head back into her warrior's shoulder and leaned back into warm leathers.

"I'm here," whispered the warrior lowering her head close to Gabrielle's ear. "Go to sleep."

"Stupid idea huh?" The bard peered up with sleepy eyes.

Xena grinned a little. "Wasn't good one." She sighed. "Go to sleep please. I'll need your help later."

"You'll be here?" asked the bard.

"Definitely."

Gabrielle smiled and shut her eyes slowly.

The Warrior Princess felt her best friend's breathing lighten and her grip on the saddle horn loosened. She lifted her eyes to Joan and nodded.

The Celt warrior started walking again with Argo in tow. "You navigate?"

"Yeah." Xena gazed around. "You're fine now."

"Guid." Joan took a deep breath. "She always that stubborn?"

The tall warrior grinned. "You don't know the half of it."

The redhead warrior chuckled. "I don't think I want too."

"Mmm, I enjoy it." Xena smiled to herself and moved her right arm up a little to support Gabrielle better.

Joan glanced back to peek at the bard. "She doesn't seem like the patient one with certain things."

"Us both." The Warrior Princess grinned.

"Really?" The Celt looked ahead again. "Geesa break?"

The dark warrior chuckled. "Translate."

"Sorry, I forget about me dialect." Joan grinned as well as asked again, "You both run out of patiences in an argument?"

"Yup."

"For Teufates's sake, how do you two manage to work together?"

"I'm not sure." The warrior sighed and added, "We always work things out."

"That's guid." Joan nodded.

"Yeah." Xena's eyes lowered to her bard in her arms. She smiled to herself as she continued to sway slightly in the saddle.

~*~*~*~

"She's coming." Eponin landed on the tree branch next to her regent.

"Wonderful." Ephiny sighed and straightened up. "Archers ready?" Her head turned to the left.

"Yup." Solari nodded.

"Good." The regent grinned. "Alright girls, get down there and start bickering."

The weapons master grinned. "No problem." Her eyes shifted to the second in command. "I think Solari and I can do a little bickering." She winked at Solari and hopped out of the tree to land on the ground.

Solari chuckled.

Ephiny turned to her second in command. "Be careful."

"I will." Solari leaned towards her regent and lightly kissed her. "Be back." She hopped off the tree.

"Better be." Ephiny called back.

The weapons master turned to Solari. "I'm sick of your centaur crap Solari!"

"Me?" The second in command lifted her right hand to point at herself. "Me?" She sarcastically laughed while dropping her hand. "Screw you Ep, I don't know how in Hades I got stuck on patrol duty with you!"

"I'd bet you'd like for me to screw you!" Eponin stomped off and whirled around. "Especially considering you've screwed every Amazon in the village. And you're always up between Ephiny's legs!"

Ephiny cringed and whispered to herself, "Be careful there Ep with Solari."

Solari narrowed her eyes. "To Hades with you Eponin! I don't go around that village. You get between every Amazon's legs that you can find!"

Eponin's eyes went to slits. "I can't stand anymore of your centaur shit." She reached behind to unsheathe her sword.

"Oh what you gonna do Ep?" Solari lifted her hands and stepped back. "Run yourself through?"

The weapons master opened her mouth to respond but was cut off.

"No girls, we're all Amazons here."

Both Amazons turned their heads quickly to the newcomer.

"Velasca," Solari sneered. She reached behind to unsheathe her sword. "Didn't think you were really back."

Ephiny looked to her right to Teresa and nodded.

Teresa nodded back and glanced over to the ten archers and waved.

The archers reached behind to pull out arrows and string them. They aimed them directly at Velasca.

Teresa looked to the ground and waved at two Amazons hidden behind two trees.

The two Amazons on the ground nodded and unsheathed their daggers quietly. Each standing behind a tree that was across from Velasca on either side.

Teresa turned her head to the regent and nodded.

Ephiny grinned, lowered her sights to the two trees to see them cut at the trunks, and her eyes shifted to her second in command and Eponin.

Eponin stepped back.

"Well I can tell you missed me Solari."

The second in command stepped back as well. "I definitely did Velasca."

The god took a step closer.

Eponin glanced to the right and left of Velasca to see her lined up with the two trees on either side. "Velasca, sorry but Solari and I are pressed for time."

"I can see and your time has ran out." Velasca lifted her right finger.

"Now!" Ephiny screamed.

The ten archers let their arrows soar. The arrows quickly sped through the air and sunk into Velasca from all sides.

The god dropped her hand and shut her eyes. "Fools!" Her glowing eyes opened again.

"Time to bolt." Solari jumped into the trees. "No pun intended."

Eponin laughed and ran to flip up into the trees. "That was a blast."

"Now!" The regent yelled again.

There was a loud whack and followed by loud creaking. Those two trees came tumbling down on top of Velasca.

The god was crushed under them in the ground and a groan escaped her lips.

"Awesome." Solari chuckled. "Got her."

"But not for long enough." Eponin sighed.

The second in command shrugged. "Better then nothing." She turned her head to the weapons master. "Nice crap you pulled out of your ass there."

"Thanks." Eponin quietly laughed. "You didn't do a bad job yourself."

"I know." Solari snickered.

~*~*~*~

"Joan, turn to her left some and head straight that way."

The Celtic warrior complied and walked to her left some and went straight that way. She glanced back. "Wow, she's still asleep."

"Yup." Xena glanced down at her partner. "She'd sleep till tomorrow afternoon if I let her."

Joan looked ahead and chuckled. "I can imagine."

The warrior took a deep breath. "If we were to walk through a battle-zone right now she wouldn't stir."

"Guid god." The Celt looked back. "The hael way through a battle-zone?"

"Yup, whole way." Xena grinned and held back her laughter since it may wake Gabrielle... or it may not.

"That's amazing."

The tall woman grinned then lifted her blue eyes to the forest around. "We should be near the cave."

"Guid." The Celt sighed. "I'm beat after all the walking."

Xena chuckled. "Thanks for steering Argo for me."

"No problem." Joan flashed a smile back. "I know the lass was tired."

"Yeah, she got me to fall asleep last night."

"Really?" The redhead warrior chuckled. "She must eat a lot of fish."

"Why you say that?"

"Because fish just don't bring knowledge but secrets too." The Celt grinned back to Xena. "I'd say she knows some guid secrets."

"I think you're right." The warrior grinned.

Gabrielle's hand came up to grasp the warrior's arm lightly. "Xena?"

Xena looked down at hearing her partner mumbled her name in just a whisper. She noticed Gabrielle was still asleep and probably dreaming. "I'm here Gabrielle." She lowered her head close to Gabrielle's.

"I can't do it," mumbled the bard.

The Warrior Princess furrowed her eyebrows but replied in a usher, "Why not?"

The bard spoke with a fear. "Because... because I'm not good enough for you."

Xena closed her eyes and whispered back, "You know what?"

"Mmm?" Gabrielle's voice was still holding fear.

"You're too good for me Gabrielle." Xena open her eyes slowly. "You're perfect and you're safe."

Slowly a smile eased onto the bard's lips. "I love you Xena." Her voice was barely audible.

The smile mirrored onto Xena's face. "I love you too."

Gabrielle's hand slipped from the warrior's arm as well as her head rested back into Xena's shoulder.

Xena sighed sadly and lifted her head up.

"She always talk in her sleep?" Joan looked back.

"No." *Only when something really bothers her*, mentally added the warrior. She began to gaze around. "About another candlemark and we should be there."

"Guid." The Celtic warrior looked forward again.

The small group went on and Gabrielle never stirred again in Xena's arms. The warrior kept her senses alive while holding her best friend tightly. Joan's own senses were perked up to keep on warning. She liked these two women too much to let anything happen.

"Okay." Xena glanced around recognizing the area. "We're good."

Joan nodded and stopped walking. "Thank Teufates." She ambled up to Argo's side. "Where's the cave?"

The warrior nodded her head in the direction. "That way past a few trees or so."

The Celt looked that way and back to Xena. "Mind if I go check it out?"

"No." Xena shook her head. "We'll be here."

"Great, be back." Joan left the reins on Argo and walked through the clearing and into the other side of the woods.

The Warrior Princess watched her go for a second and she glanced to see the sun in the late afternoon horizon. She sighed and dropped her head to her partner. "Gabrielle, come on wake up."

"Mmm." Gabrielle mumbled something else and turned her head the other way to rest her cheek on Xena's chest.

"Come on, I need your help." Xena brushed her lips over Gabrielle's soft ear.

"Not yet." Gabrielle's breathing picked up faintly. "That was good dream."

"Sorry." The warrior rubbed her thumb over her bard's stomach lightly. "What was the dream about?"

The Amazon Queen opened her eyes slowly and looked up sleepily to Xena. "What was what about?"

Xena grinned. "Your dream?"

"Oh." Gabrielle suddenly started to blush. "It was... just a dream."

"Mmm." Xena's eyes twinkled. "Erotic dream?"

"Sort of." The small woman chuckled lightly and stayed red.

"With who?"

Gabrielle only went a shade redder. "You."

The tall woman's voice came out low now. "Let's hope it comes true."

"Oh... I'm sure it'll be better then the dream."

"I know it will be." Xena grinned plus lifted her head up a little.

"That was a really nice dream." Gabrielle chuckled as she realized her breathing went from slow to heavy in a span of a few seconds.

"I'll take that as a compliment."

The younger woman glanced up. "Well... have you ever had any erotic dreams about me?"

Xena shrugged. "I forget."

"Xena!" The bard narrowed her eyes with a grin. "That's not fair."

"Mmm... maybe a few." The warrior dismounted her horse.

"Really?" Gabrielle chuckled. "That's more then me." She grinned down to Xena. "Thanks."

The older woman broke out laughing and leaned against Argo with her legs out in

front of her.

"I'm serious though." The bard hopped off the horse. "That was a good dream." She shifted to straddle her best friend by her upper legs. "It seemed so real."

"How's that?" Xena rested her arms on her stomach while leaning against her mare.

"Well, your hands were on my shoulders, legs, arms... everywhere."

"I can imagine." The dark woman grinned.

"That's not my point." Gabrielle chuckled. "It's just it felt like you were really touching me and your touch was like fire."

Xena lifted her hands to Gabrielle's sides. "What's that feel like?"

"Fire." The bard's lips shifted into a smile.

The tall woman's right hand moved to press against Gabrielle's stomach. "And this?"

"Like fire too but..." The bard closed her eyes at feeling her heart pound.

"Like you're going to have a heart attack?" Xena suggested.

"Yeah." Gabrielle chuckled and sensed her friend's hand going to her side again. Then she sensed Xena standing up. She felt warm lips claim hers in a light kiss but the bard made it go stronger.

The warrior slowly pulled back and opened her eyes. "And that?"

The Amazon Queen's eyes drifted open with a smile playing on her lips. "Life."

"I like that." Xena smiled too. "Was never able to put a description to that feeling."

A grin took over Gabrielle's mouth. "It's the bard thing."

The warrior laughed lightly and leaned in to take Gabrielle's lips again.

The bard moaned into the kiss and lifted her right hand to the back of Xena's head to deepen the kiss. Her left arm went around the warrior's waist. She slipped her tongue into the warrior's mouth and Xena's come into hers. Slowly she pulled back with a grin. "I love kissing."

"I've noticed." Xena grinned. "Wait till later."

"Only gets better huh?" An evil smile was in Gabrielle's expression.

"Oh yeah."

"Good." The small woman pulled Xena's head back down as she strongly took Xena's lips into a third kiss.

Xena moaned into the kiss then when that third kiss ended she only began a fourth long one.

A twig snapped loudly.

Gabrielle jumped back from Xena's embrace and chuckled. She turned her head to the left and saw Joan reappear. "How was the cave?" Her heart pounded like she was a kid caught in a candy jar.

The warrior grinned and turned to the saddle to unlash her friend's staff.

"Was rather glum lass." Joan ducked under a branch and rose back up to come up to the two women. "Why you so red lass?" She put her hands on her hips with an arched eyebrow.

"Because I'm really hot." Gabrielle raised her hand behind the back of her neck. "It's hot out."

"Not really lass." Joan shook her head. "Feels guid out."

Xena turned around with the staff. "Well it was hot on Argo, big horse." She spun the staff and handed it to Gabrielle.

The Celt glanced over to the mare. "True." She nodded in accepting that explanation.

The warrior turned to the mare's rump again to remove the saddle. "Can you do me a favor Joan."

"Sure Xena, which you need?"

"Can you untack my horse for me?" Xena turned around and dropped the saddle into the Celtic warrior's arms. "I trust you."

"Yeah." Joan nodded and shifted the saddlebag in her arms. "I'll set camp up too."

"Thanks Joan." Gabrielle smiled while leaning against her staff.

"Now lass... you gotta make sure to bring back dinner."

The Warrior Princess grinned. "No problem."

Gabrielle walked over to the clearing's edge and into the woods but waited.

Xena came over and glanced back to Joan. "Stay away from the dragons too."

"Right." The Celtic warrior chuckled. "I'll try to smack into some horses."

"What horses symbolize Joan?" Gabrielle glimpsed back to her friend.

Joan evilly grinned. "Fertility."

Gabrielle's eyes widen and she fell into a load of laughter and she stumbled forward into the woods.

Xena bit her lower lip.

"Gee, I know that can be funny but never like that." Joan shook her head.

"Long story Joan." The warrior smiled. "Thanks, see you later."

"Bye and watch out for them dragons." The Celt listened to the echo of Xena and

Gabrielle's laughter through the woods. "I definitely am missing something guid here."

"Oh gods that was so funny Xena." The bard felt herself begin to calm with her deep breaths. "That was ironic."

"It was." Xena kept walking through the woods and she stepped closer to her friend.

"Sso... is that why you ride Argo so much?"

The warrior went red at that question. "Gabrielle," she growled.

"You're cute when *you* blush." The bard grinned and stepped closer to her partner to wrap an arm around her warrior's waist.

Xena sighed then she draped her left arm over Gabrielle's shoulders.

"Maybe I'll have to ride Argo more often."

The warrior snickered. "Only with me there."

"Deal." Gabrielle grinned but lost it as she saw the mouth of the cave.

The older woman's back stiffen as she went stoic. "Let me go first." She released her best friend and walked ahead.

"Yeah." The Amazon Queen stepped behind her partner and entered into the cave behind. "I hate caves," she whispered.

"Watch the steps."

"I remember." Gabrielle reached forward to rest her right hand on her friend's shoulder. "I've always hated caves since..."

"I know." The warrior came to the ground floor and felt her partner beside her. "I made it back though huh?"

"Yeah." Gabrielle smiled to herself and she shook her head. "Why are we standing in the dark?" She lifted her hand in front of her face. "I can't even see my hand in front of my face."

A small chuckle came from Xena but she was serious again. "I'm trying to remember where that torch and flint stones are."

"I remember." The small woman grasped her partner's arm. "It was somewhere near here." She walked over to the left and felt the wall. She released Xena's arm after bending down to one knee with her staff. Her hands began to feel around and they scrape over two rough rocks. "Bingo."

"Let me find the torch." Xena leaned forward over her friend. She felt around at the top of the wall.

Gabrielle slowly began to rise up but her head lightly bumped into armor. "Hi."

The tall woman chuckled and felt the torch. "Found it, how about those stones?" Xena

lowered her right hand to her partner's shoulder.

The young woman lifted the stones to Xena's hands and handed them over.

"Thanks." Xena lifted the two stones over the torch and smashed them together. Sparkles flew and landed on the torch to light it. "There." She lowered her head to see Gabrielle still tucked under her and that made the warrior chuckle.

Gabrielle sheepishly smiled up at her partner.

"Armor get in the way?"

"Not exactly the armor." The bard evilly grinned.

Xena put her right hand over her breasts. "Knew they were to big."

Gabrielle started to laugh and she shook her head to stand up between the wall, Xena's arms, and her partner. "Nah, perfect."

"Good." The warrior leaned in to lightly kiss Gabrielle. "Come on before Joan and her dragons show up."

The younger woman snickered and started walking beside Xena to the end of the corridor. "Wahoo, forgot about that." She stepped back at the edge and glanced down at the spikes at the bottom.

"Stay back." Xena held her arm up to keep the smaller female back.

"Yeah." Gabrielle lifted her eyes to the ropes over head. "Skewered bard isn't on my list to do."

"Nor mine." The dark woman lowered her arm in addition to lifting her narrowed eyes to the ropes.

"What you think?" The bard turned her head to Xena.

The Warrior Princess brought in a deep breath. "We can use these ropes."

"She'll break those in a second."

"I know... but it'll give us a few extra seconds we may have not had." The tall woman turned around to gaze back at the entrance.

"Xena?"

"Yeah?"

"What if..." Gabrielle took a deep breath. "If we some how got Velasca skewered on these spears and get the ceiling to cave in on her?" She turned her head to her partner. "Would that work?"

"Yeah." Xena nodded. "Then I think I can get the entrance to cave in as well."

"But."

"But we need to figure out how to get the ceiling to cave in." Xena sighed and turned

back around to peer up to the ceiling. "Stay here." She jumped to grasp a rope and she climbed up.

The Amazon Queen watched for a moment and then lowered her eyes. She stared at the torches lining the circular room. "I love how these torches self light," she mumbled to herself. She furrowed her eyebrows. "Light... fire." She looked up. "Xena?"

"Yeah." The warrior gazed down.

"Is there any ambrosia left up in that hole?"

"Why?" Xena swung faintly on the rope. "I'm not in the mood to live forever."

Gabrielle chuckled but went serious. "Remember when we got that Sumerian treasure and we found that ambrosia then?"

"Yeah sure."

"Remember how it exploded in that lava pit when you threw it in?" Gabrielle shook her head. "What if we took some ambrosia and tossed it on some fire to explode the cave. It might work."

The warrior didn't say anything while she swayed on the rope. "Hold on." She kept climbing up the rope and jumped over to the center rope.

The bard glanced down to the bottom to the spears. "That would be perfect." She grinned to herself.

The Warrior Princess went up a few more on the rope and came right under the open hole. She wrapped her right leg around the rope then with her right hand she reached up into the hole. She felt an edge yet she moved her hand around to touch a jiggly cool object. "We're in luck."

"Sweet." Gabrielle grinned. "Is there enough."

"Oh yeah." Xena grinned. "We're going to have to run when this place goes up."

The bard laughed and gazed down to the spears. "You think we should some how light the bottom? So then we only have to toss the ambrosia into the fire and run."

The warrior nodded. "Yeah." She came down the rope a little. "Hey, I'm going to cut a few ropes first and then get the ambrosia."

"Sounds good." Gabrielle walked over to the wall and propped her staff there. She came back the edge and looked up.

Xena was over to her side cutting a rope with her breast dagger. She cut it loose and swung it near Gabrielle.

The smaller woman snatched it to begin to coil the rope up.

The warrior and bard did the same thing over again with two more ropes.

Gabrielle was coiling up the last rope. "Xena, how are we going to light the bottom?"

Xena came under the ambrosia hole again while reaching in. "Wine."

"We have enough."

The older woman pulled out an armload of ambrosia and she tucked it into her left arm. "Definitely, I have three skins."

The Amazon Queen quickly looked up. "You're kidding me?"

Xena grinned and came down the rope slowly. "Nope."

"Xena... since when did we start traveling with four wineskins?"

"Since I stopped at mother's." The dark warrior took a deep breath, tightened her hold on the ambrosia, and began to swing. "Gabrielle, move over."

The small woman stepped over to the wall near her staff with the three coiled ropes. "Xena you could..."

The warrior's war cry echoed through the cavern as she let go of the rope to go spinning down towards the open doorway of the corridor. She rolled in midair and landed on her feet near the edge.

"Or not." Gabrielle shrugged her shoulders.

"That would have been too easy." Xena smirked lightly.

The smaller woman arched an eyebrow. "Showoff."

"Here." The warrior tossed the ambrosia over.

The Amazon Queen moved quickly to catch it. "Gee, thanks."

Xena chuckled and bent down to pick up the three ropes. "Was getting bored carrying it."

"Yeah I can see why." Gabrielle felt it jiggle in her left arm. "Nasty." She grabbed her staff. "So what's left?"

"We'll put the wine in tomorrow."

"Sounds good." The bard began walking through the cave. "Dinner?"

"Yup." Xena came up into the light of the sunset.

Gabrielle came out next from the glowing cave mouth.

There suddenly was a howl of wind from the cave.

Both women spun around to see the cave's mouth black again.

The younger woman peered up to Xena. "Self lights and self unlights."

Xena laughed. "Truly."

"Xena?"

"Yeah?" The warrior glanced down.

"If we ever settle down..." Gabrielle stared at the mouth of the cave. "We need to get torches like that." She glanced up.

The warrior chuckled quietly and started walking. "Come on." She shifted the ropes over her shoulder plus continued walking back to the camp.

The pair came into the camp. Xena dropped her ropes and disappeared back into the woods to hunt dinner.

"Where's she going lass?" Joan glanced over to the bard.

"To get something to eat." Gabrielle walked up to her friend and saw the fire going.

"What's that?" The Celt stood up then walked over as she peered down at the huge red thing in the bard's arm.

"Ambrosia."

Joan's eyes averted to Gabrielle. "Seriously?" She poked at it with her index finger to see the ambrosia sway back and forth. "Lass, that's food of the gods?"

The bard peaked down at the red jiggling sticky stuff. "Yup... impressive huh?"

The Celt laughed. "Right." She shook her head. "That's sad for food of the gods."

"That's what I say." Gabrielle chuckled and kept walking into the camp with the ambrosia tucked under her arm.

The Celtic warrior walked over to the ropes and lifted them up. "Tie Velasca up?"

"Yeah." Gabrielle dropped the ambrosia on the ground and turned to her friend. "Just put them here."

Joan nodded and dropped the ropes down with the ambrosia in the center.

"Joan?"

The Celtic warrior looked up with a smile.

"Thanks for everything."

Joan chuckled. "No problem Gabrielle." She sighed slightly. "This has been a great caper."

"Well, let's hope we survive it tomorrow." The Queen sighed and leaned against her staff. "I don't know what you're planning to do after this but..." She smiled warmly now. "You're more than welcomed to stay with the Amazons." She paused. "I'd love to have you for one of my Amazons."

The Celtic warrior looked away and turned her head back. "I'm honored... despite the constant criticism from your friend."

Gabrielle's face held a grin. "But you're understanding it."

"I am." Joan chuckled. "I'm not sure yet." She was serious again. "I'd love to stay... but..."

"Think about it." The Queen shrugged her shoulders. "It sounds like you don't belong with that clan."

"No." The warrior shook her head. "Maybe... this will be my new clan." A grin tugged at her lips.

"I hope so." The bard smiled warmly. "It would be an honor to have a Celtic warrior in my Nation as an Amazon."

Joan quietly laughed. "I'd say I'd fit right in."

"Trust me." Gabrielle shook her head. "You already have."

"Should I be worried?"

"Very Joan." The small woman straightened up and walked over to the saddlebags.

"Now I'm not sure." The Celt laughed and walked over to sit down in front of the fire again.

Gabrielle placed her staff down by the saddlebag and began to pull out her cooking supply.

~*~*~*~

Joan lifted her head to the bard. "Gabrielle, where'd you learn to cook?"

The bard glanced over to her friend. "My mother taught me the basics... the rest I sort of just learned on my own."

"You're good." The Celt nodded and went back to eating her spiced quail.

"So I've heard." The cook grinned. "But I only do half the dinner."

The Celtic warrior raised an eyebrow.

Gabrielle chuckled. "Xena does always get the dinners."

The warrior's eyes flickered over to her partner then back to her food.

"That's true." Joan nodded in agreement. "You look better since this morning."

The Amazon Queen groaned. "Don't remind me."

"Mmm." Joan looked to both women. "That reminds me, how about I take the watch tonight? I haven't yet and it'll give you both the chance to catch up on your sleep."

"You sure?" Gabrielle looked up. "I mean I-"

"No!" both warriors said in unison.

"Okay... or I can't." The bard chuckled. "Gee sorry."

Joan started laughing. "Isn't that lass. I just think Xena wants you focused for tomorrow."

Gabrielle turned her head to Xena. "Is that it?"

Xena turned her head to her partner on her left. "Yup." She winked.

The bard raised an eyebrow. "Alright," she said as a grin spread across her lips. The grin was wiped away when she turned her head to Joan. "Sounds good to me."

"Guid." Joan smiled.

~*~*~*~

"Do you two always sleep like that?"

Gabrielle looked up into green eyes and she sheepishly smiled. "What you mean?" Her voice was innocent.

Joan tapped her boot on the ground. "In each other's arms?"

Xena bit her lower lip letting her partner take this one.

"Oh." Gabrielle chuckled. "Yeah... well you see... um... Xena and I always sleep like this when we're being hunted by obsessed gods." She shrugged her shoulders. "It's safer this way." She took a deep breath. "When we first started traveling Xena told me we had to do this when we'd start to get hunted." She smiled innocently. "It's just for protection purposes."

Joan nodded a few times. "Sso... if say I wanted to sleep tonight do I get to sleep between you guys?"

The bard's eyebrows shot up. "No... no." She smiled warmly again. "You see, it's a buddy system." She could now feel her warrior's frame shaking from the silent laughs. "Only works with two people."

The Celtic warrior nodded a few times while studying sea green eyes. "You see in me clan we'd sleep back to back. Not in each other's arms."

"Yeah well... this is Greece it's different here." The Queen shrugged her shoulders. "Besides... I'm not a warrior and Xena is, so she has to protect me."

"Lass, I saw you. You were guid with that staff."

"I know." The bard sighed dramatically. "I sleep hard and never wake up when danger is around. Xena though can hear an ant crawl by sso..."

"Now that makes sense lass." Joan nodded. "Okay... well guidnight."

"Night Joan and thanks."

The Celtic warrior walked back to the other side of the fire but called back. "Guidnight Xena."

Xena lifted her head after taking a deep breath. "Goodnight Joan, thanks again, and

stay away from the dragons tonight."

"Yeah, yeah I'll try." Joan huffed. "Go to sleep you two."

"We're trying." Gabrielle yelled back.

The Celtic warrior shook her head and sat down in front of the fire to fall into her thoughts. A sad sigh escaped her lips while she plucked at some of the grass.

The warrior's blue eyes lowered to Gabrielle. "I never told you that," she whispered.

"Yeah well... what you expect?" The bard grinned and scouted back into her partner's arms more. "You weren't helping me."

"Well you laughed and brought Joan over here."

Gabrielle narrowed her eyes. "Well if you weren't making the funnies I wouldn't have laughed."

Xena narrowed her eyes. "Well if you could control your laughter maybe she wouldn't have come over here."

The Amazon Queen quickly ducked under the furs and tried to muffle her laughter.

The older woman sighed and shook her head while holding her partner.

Gabrielle's head popped back out with a grin. "Why am I so giggly anyway?"

"I don't know." Xena grinned. "It's nice to hear though."

The small woman took a deep breath. "Yeah... feels good to laugh." Gabrielle shook her head. "You know..." Her eyes locked with Xena's. "The both of us have been giggly since we..."

"Hooked up?"

"Yeah, hooked up." The bard snickered. "Why is that?"

Xena took a deep breath and went serious. "Something new huh?"

"Yeah." The bard's eyes suddenly went sad. "Xena..." Her head started to shake. "I hope this doesn't end up being... a trend thing with us. Where the emotions wear off."

"Gabrielle, I doubt that." Xena's hand came up to brush back some of Gabrielle's hair. "Do you really believe that?"

"No." Gabrielle's voice was pure serious. "Not after the way I felt like I was going to shatter apart when you died. How desperate I became to make it out of that pit to find you."

"Exactly." The warrior smiled warmly. "Two many things have happened that should have kept us apart but they haven't."

The bard smiled sadly. "True." She leaned in to nuzzle her partner. "So... I'm giggly because I'm excited?"

"Something like that." Xena grinned then pressed her lips against her best friend's forehead. "Besides, we've been to serious the past year."

Gabrielle's head came back up in a flash. "Don't remind me."

"Don't worry, I want to move on anyway."

"Yeah." The Amazon Queen tucked her head under her warrior's chin.

The pair was silent for a moment.

"Xena?"

"Mmm?"

"Speaking of protective." Gabrielle lifted her head back up with a lifted eyebrow. "Why are you so protective of me lately?"

"I always have been." Xena grinned a little.

"No, not like this." The bard narrowed her eyes in suspicion. "You're definitely more protective then what you were earlier."

The warrior shrugged her shoulders. "I always have been Gabrielle... maybe I'm showing it more now."

"Why you showing more now?" Gabrielle paused. "Don't get me wrong I love it... it's just peculiar."

Xena chuckled. "Maybe because you're letting me."

Gabrielle opened her mouth to reply to that but nothing came. She closed her jaw to stare into twinkling blue eyes. "Hades."

The Warrior Princess chuckled and brought her right hand up to bring Gabrielle's head back under her chin. "Go to sleep."

The bard closed her eyes. "I love you."

"I love you Gabrielle." Xena gradually closed her eyes. "Gabrielle?"

"Yeah?"

"And I don't hear ants crawl by."

Gabrielle broke out in a fit of muffled laughter.

Section 3

~*Part 8*~

Xena's eyes lifted to the woods then lowered back down to Gabrielle in the furs. She bent down to one knee and brought her right hand to caress her friend's cheek. "Gabrielle," she whispered.

"Xena?" Gabrielle's eyes opened.

"Velasca is coming."

The bard's eyes widen with fear.

"Ssssh, it's okay." Xena smiled a little. "Listen to me. Joan went to the cave to pour the wine all over." She paused. "Now we're going to pretend that you just woke up when Velasca gets closer. I'll tell you to go to the cave, do that, leave your staff, and I'll stay here and slow Velasca. Got me?"

The Amazon Queen nodded and was serious at seeing Xena shift into warrior mode. "What else?"

The warrior's hand went to Gabrielle's shoulder. "I'll try tie Velasca up to hold her for a minute or two. I'll meet you in the cave and climb up on one of the ropes out of site from Velasca and with a torch." She took a deep breath. "You get near that edge and get Velasca to charge you and you jump up to me."

"Okay." Gabrielle furrowed her eyebrows. "What about Joan?"

"As soon as we get to the ground from the ropes she'll be there to toss the ambrosia into the pit with Velasca."

"After that, just run like bats out of Hades."

"Yes and don't stop running until that explosion settles. Gods only know how big it will be." Xena smiled confidently. "You ready?"

"Never have been, I just go." Gabrielle chuckled but went serious as she felt her skin crawl. "She's here."

"Yess." The warrior lifted her eyes and narrowed them. "Get up." She stood up. "Now."

"Morning Xena and Gabrielle." The god came stomping in. "Pleasant morning isn't it?" Velasca smirked with white eyes.

Gabrielle stood up and glared at the god.

Xena stepped between her partner and the god while drawing her sword. "Get out of here Gabrielle."

"Xena?"

"Gabrielle," growled the warrior. "I'll slow her down."

Velasca turned her head a little and laughed. "Right."

The bard took a deep breath and broke out into a run.

The god narrowed her eyes then her right hand shot up to shoot a bolt at Gabrielle. She clearly missed.

Gabrielle ducked, disappeared into the woods and she heard Xena's warrior cry echo. She ushered while running, "Be careful Xena." She came up to the cave.

"Ready lass?" Joan stood by the mouth with three wineskins and the ambrosia in the other hand.

"No." Gabrielle chuckled. "Go hide Joan till its time."

"Right lass." The Celt smiled confidently. "Be careful Gabrielle, this is the scary part of the caper."

"Tell me about it." The bard grinned however went stern. "Go Joan, she'll be here."

"Right." Joan winked and turned to hide in the woods.

The bard sighed but jogged into the already lit cave. She jogged down to the edge and looked down to see the floor soaked with wine. "Artemis, please let this work," she quietly prayed.

"Ahhh!" Velasca charged the Warrior Princess.

Xena laughed as she jumped to disappear into the trees.

The god now found a lasso around her that went taut. "This won't hold me Xena." She began to break the rope.

The warrior dropped two more of the thick lasso ropes to slow Velasca down. She grabbed all three ropes and dropped to the ground to lift Velasca up. Xena laughed evilly and ran over to a tree branch to tie the three ropes. "See you Velasca." She broke off running towards the cave.

The god closed her eyes to begin to work against the ropes.

Xena came running into the cave, down the steps, and she grabbed a lit torch. "She's coming Gabrielle." The warrior came up to her best friend. "You got this?"

The Amazon Queen nodded. "Yeah, now or never." She smiled. "Just catch me."

"Don't worry, I will." The Warrior Princess put the torch's end between her teeth and leapt to grab onto the close rope. She climbed it a ways knowing the god wouldn't see her from here and grabbed the torch with her left hand while wrapping her feet around the rope.

Gabrielle spun around at hearing footsteps. She narrowed her eyes and lifted her arms. "Xena?"

"Afraid not." Velasca came down the steps quickly. "How fitting, you'll die where I did." She walked up near Gabrielle. "Are you prepared to die Gabrielle?"

"Didn't we do this last time Velasca?" The Amazon Queen smirked. "I just keep noticing how stupid you are." She laughed lowly. "At least I'll die knowing that truth."

Velasca narrowed her eyes. "You bitch."

"Takes one to know one Velasca."

The god screamed and charged towards the Amazon Queen. As she charged her eyes had widen at seeing Gabrielle turn and jump up. "No!"

"Xena!" The bard screamed and reached for her warrior.

Xena reached out while swing forward and her right arm came around Gabrielle's waist pulling her in. Simultaneously, Xena dropped the torch in her left hand to let her hand freely grasp the rope tightly. It was all timing.

Gabrielle wrapped her legs around Xena then dug her head between Xena's breast as she heard a large surge and the heat of the fire rise.

Velasca's scream echoed through the cave and out the entrance.

"Hold on to me." The Warrior Princess swung, balled up to soar through the air, and land in the corridor.

"Move, move!" Joan yelled.

Xena and Gabrielle moved out of each other's arms as they started running down the corridor.

Joan threw the ambrosia at the fire pit and turned to run.

The three women bursted from the cave's mouth as a loud wave of fire came flying up behind.

"Run Gabrielle!" the warrior yelled.

The bard was ahead and she ran forward breathing heavy and she felt the eruption to sped her pulse up.

Joan was right behind Xena and she felt herself being lifted off the ground tofly through the air form the eruption. She hit the ground hard then went unconscious.

Xena came right up behind Gabrielle and scooped her partner up into her arms. The adrenaline pumped through her veins causing her head to buzz.

"Xena!" The bard could hear the eruption coming closer to them as her heart pounded.

The Warrior Princess took a few more running steps, jumped up, tucked, and hit the ground to roll. She came to a stop and she kept her body over top of Gabrielle's small form. She dug her head down as she felt bits of stone hit her body.

Gabrielle had her eyes closed tightly as she felt the air heat up and then suddenly go cool. A little dust filtered by and everything went dead quiet other then her and Xena's breathing. "By the gods."

Xena slowly opened her eyes put kept her head buried down. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." The small woman took a deep breath. "Are you?"

"Oh yeah." The warrior grinned. "Loved every moment of it."

Gabrielle chuckled but stopped as she remembered her friend. "Joan."

"Hades." The warrior lifted her head to gaze around. She saw the dust settling and she looked around to see Joan unconscious behind a large rock. "She's okay."

The bard lifted her head up and looked over to see her Celtic friend peacefully asleep. Her shoulders slumped and she saw Xena sit up so she did the same. "That... was an explosion."

Xena chuckled. "Just a small one."

The younger woman sighed and shook her head. "Thanks Xena."

"Hey anytime." Xena leaned towards Gabrielle and kissed her lovingly. She pulled back with a smile. "Let's go check on Joan."

Gabrielle nodded in agreement while standing up with her partner. She walked over to Joan and bent down. "Joan?" She shook the Celt's shoulders gently.

Xena gazed over at the rubble to see nothing left but a huge heap of rocks in a small pile. The mouth of the cave gone along with the small mountain the cave was held in.

Joan coughed and opened her eyes. She rolled onto her back and peered up into sparkling green eyes. "Did we get her?"

The bard smiled warmly. "Yup."

Xena lowered her eyes plus grinned to Joan. "Consider the dragon buried for eternity Joan."

The Celtic warrior groaned, rolled onto her side, and mumbled something in her dialect.

~*~*~*~

"So Joan, what you think of our Queen and her partner?" Ephiny stood with her hands on her hips and a smug look.

The Celtic warrior's eyes widen. "For Teufates's sake, this two women know how to have a guid adventure." She shook her head. "Never again."

Gabrielle chuckled at her friend and patted Joan's back. "Wasn't all that bad of a caper Joan."

"Lass..." The Celt turned her head to the Amazon Queen in the middle of the village. "I've never been that close to death in a long time." She grinned a little. "Nor have I ever seen so many dragons."

"Don't forget about being hunted by an obsessed god."

Joan laughed at Gabrielle's words. "That too." She shook her head and gazed back to the regent. "I've never learned so much about two peoples' lifestyles either."

Ephiny corked an eyebrow. "What you mean?"

Xena leaned towards her partner and whispered, "This is going to be bad."

Gabrielle groaned.

"Well..." Joan chuckled and continued. "I learned that Greek warriors sleep in each other's arms." She shrugged her shoulders. "In me lands we sleep back to back."

The regent slowly lifted her eyes up to the two partners. "Sleep in each other's arms huh?" She smiled back to Joan. "Yup... we do that here, especially Amazons." She winked.

The Celtic warrior laughed and glanced at Gabrielle. "Is that true?"

The bard lifted her right hand to her neck. "Um... yeah." She nodded and lowered her hand. "Ancient Amazon tradition."

Joan nodded. "I know how those traditions are, very serious."

"Exactly." Gabrielle smiled with innocences but went serious. "Why don't you go get some sleep Joan."

"I was thinking the same thing lass." Joan dropped her shoulders and ran her right hand through her red curly locks. "I'm going to sleep the hael day." She started walking towards her guest hut. "See you Xena and Gabrielle." She smiled.

The warrior and bard smiled back and gave a quick wave.

"Sleep in each other's arms?" Ephiny raised an eyebrow while crossing her arms against her chest. "I gotta hear the explanation for this one."

"Later Eph." Gabrielle grinned.

"Later then." The Amazon gave a grin back but went serious. "So are you *both* staying till these treaties are done?"

The bard groaned. "Oh no, I completely forgot."

The warrior shifted the reins in her hand and gazed at the regent. "How long will it take to do them?"

Ephiny shrugged her shoulders. "How ever long the Queen wants it to take."

Xena nodded and gazed down at her partner. "Tomorrow?"

"Definitely." Gabrielle looked up to her best friend. "I wanna catch up on sleep."

The warrior nodded in agreement.

"Eph?"

"Yeah?" The regent smiled to her Queen.

"Thank you." The Queen stepped forward and pulled her friend in for a tight hug. "You were a huge help."

"No problem." Ephiny pulled back with a warm smile. "It was great fun." She then creased her eyebrows together. "What happened to Velasca anyway?"

"We basically blew up the ambrosia cave with her in it."

The regent nodded at Gabrielle. "Naturally." She chuckled. "Tell me more later too." She took a deep breath. "Well there should be a hot bath ready for you both. Figured you wanted time to relax."

"Yeah, thanks Eph." The Queen smiled warmly and shifted her weight to her other foot while leaning against her staff. "One last thing, did you tell Solari anything about Xena and I?"

The Amazon had a confused look and gazed between Xena and Gabrielle. "No... why?"

"She constantly asked me who Gabrielle... hooked up with."

Ephiny looked up to Xena and chuckled. "That's Solari for you. I didn't say a word other than to Ep." She shrugged her shoulders. "Just when Ep was hitting on Gabrielle, said she was taken."

Gabrielle chuckled at the memory yet sighed sadly. "Good, make sure you don't say anything."

The regent evilly grinned. "I'll try not too."

"Eph." The bard's eyes narrowed. "I don't mind putting my regent on patrol duty."

Ephiny laughed with a sigh. "Alright... alright, you got me." She smiled warmly. "Go get some rest."

Gabrielle straightened up. "Talk to you later Eph and thanks again."

"Anytime." Ephiny watched the pair walk off in mid afternoon.

~*~*~*~

Gabrielle shifted around the tub as Xena slipped in next. The bard moved next to her partner in the warm water. "Smart regent."

"Yeah." The warrior shifted her shoulders a little against the back of the tub and dropped her head back. That's when she noticed her back. "Hades."

"Mmm?" The small woman glanced up. "You alright?"

"My back." Xena lifted her head up. "Aches from those rocks."

"Damn," whispered Gabrielle. "Why don't you lean forward against the tub and I'll massage your back."

The older woman arched an eyebrow. "You sure?"

The Queen raised an eyebrow back. "Yesss, come on."

The warrior grinned and shifted across the tub and lifted her arms up onto the top of

the tub. She crossed her arms there then rested her chin down on her arms.

Gabrielle slowly came up behind and brought her small hands to the warrior's back. She slowly began the massage at the top of Xena's back. "How's that?"

"Perfect." Xena's eyes gradually closed. "Thanks."

"No thanks." The bard smiled. "You saved me, the least I can do."

"Mmm it's worth the aches."

"Thanks." Gabrielle smirked behind her partner's back.

The warrior went a bit serious. "You know I'd do it again."

"I know." The bard sadly smiled in addition to whispering again, "I know."

The older woman's eyes opened. "Gabrielle?"

"Sorry." The small woman's hands went farther down Xena's back. "It's just... sometimes I don't like how much you put on stake for me."

"And I don't like that you put your life on the line so you can just be with me."

"Just?" Gabrielle shook her head. "That's... that's all I want to do. Is be with you." She paused feeling her bard side come to life. "Life is a road that I want to walk down only with you and love is a river I want to flow on with you."

Xena's lips slowly formed into a warm smile. "Thank you." She paused trying to collect her thoughts. "Never had anybody so determined to stay beside me."

Gabrielle had a confident smile while her hands were on Xena's lower back. "That's because I'm madly in-love with you for eternity."

The warrior's eyes slowly drifted shut. "I know the feeling."

"Oh?"

Xena chuckled lightly. "Since the grove." She grinned. "I did a double-take when I saw you."

"Really?" Gabrielle furrowed her eyebrows as she brought her hands up to work Xena's shoulders.

"You didn't see me get knocked over?"

The bard was silent for a moment while she tried to think back to that day. Her face took on realization. "I do remember. I thought you were just unfocused."

"I was, by you."

Gabrielle chuckled quietly. "I can't believe that."

"It's true." Xena smiled to herself and felt warm hands leave her shoulders. Now she sensed Gabrielle's arms wrapping around her waist. Then the bard's warm hands were gliding up her stomach and Xena let out a moan. "Gabrielle."

The younger woman kissed her partner's shoulder plus continued to bring her hands up Xena's smooth stomach. She went increasingly warm as her fingertips glided right under Xena's breasts. Her heart pounded knowing she'd never gone this far with Xena.

The warrior moaned lightly and whispered, "Oh gods."

Gabrielle evilly smiled to herself at the reaction and her fingertips glided over the warrior's nipples feeling them hard.

"Gabrielle."

The Amazon Queen brought her lips close to Xena's lips. "Turn around."

Slowly Xena turned with her back against the tub.

The bard shifted to straddle Xena at the hips. Her hands came back up out of the water to take Xena's breasts again.

Xena's arms were up on the tub with a death grip. Her head dropped back while her eyes closed as her breathing became heavy.

Gabrielle slid her hands back down her warrior's sides and she leaned into bring her lips over Xena's right breast.

The taller woman moaned lightly and brought her right arm down to encircle Gabrielle's waist. Her body wanted to press everything on but she knew that would be crossing the line. So she let herself fall into Gabrielle's touch.

The bard's tongue came out to swirl around her partner's nipple then her mouth began to suck. Slowly she brought up her right hand to take Xena's left breast.

The warrior's back arched into Gabrielle's body.

Gabrielle could feel the fire roaring in her body yet she knew she never felt something so powerful. Shifting her lips across, she brought her mouth to take her warrior's left breast.

Xena whimpered faintly and spoke with plea. "Gabrielle." She knew if this kept going she would be built up. So she averted her right hand to her bard's chin to lift her head up. She claimed Gabrielle's lips in a passionate kiss.

The Amazon Queen quickly understood and pulled back from the kiss to wrap her arms around Xena. She leaned into the taller woman and dropped her head against Xena's chest. She could hear the warrior's heart pounding while her head rose high.

The older woman drew Gabrielle more in with her arms however she kept her eyes closed.

The small woman closed her eyes and tried to steady her breathing. "That was different."

Xena quietly laughed, opened her eyes, and lowered her head to kiss the top of her partner's head. "Felt..."

"Erotic?" Gabrielle suggested.

The warrior grinned to herself and rested her head on top of Gabrielle's. "Not even that, more."

"I guess you'll just have to try it on the bard." The small woman lifted her head up with a grin.

The dark warrior's eyes twinkled to her partner. "Maybe." She leaned into lightly kiss Gabrielle. "Let's get cleaned up."

Gabrielle shifted back in the tub and felt an internal shiver at knowing Xena would do the same to her at some point. The waiting part would get to her.

Within the next few minutes the two women were bathing and learning more parts of each other's bodies. Both finding each other's bodies a perfection of muscles and smooth skin. By the end Gabrielle hopped out of the tub quickly to grab some towels.

The warrior's eyes were twinkling and she whispered to herself, "Bard on the loose." She slowly rose up in the water to her full height when Gabrielle came back in.

The Amazon Queen came in and stopped walking at seeing Xena.

Xena corked an eyebrow while slowly climbing out of the tub. "Nice scenery?"

Gabrielle lifted her eyes to lock with Xena. "Nice isn't even the word for it."

The warrior chuckled and came up to her partner. "Gabrielle?"

The bard shook the dreamy look on her face. "Yeah?"

"I'm all yours."

The Amazon Queen's lips shifted into an evil grin. "I know." She lifted one of the towels and lightly slammed into the warrior's chest. "Your towel." She turned around with her own and put some space between them. Slowly she dried herself off.

Xena's tongue ran across the back of her molars. "She's good." Unfolding her towel she began to dry herself off. After she was done in a minute, she ran her right hand through her wet bangs and tossed the towel to a chair.

Gabrielle lowered her towel then lifted her head up while running her hand through her bangs to brush them back. She turned her head to see Xena coming towards her and she arched an eyebrow.

The warrior came right up while putting one arm around Gabrielle's shoulders. "How are you?"

"Dry." The bard peeked up with suspicious eyes. She started to move. "I'm going-"

"No, not yet." Xena shifted her arm around Gabrielle's waist to pull her back. She grasped Gabrielle's towel as well as tossed it onto her towel. "Come here." She lowered her lips to seal with Gabrielle's.

The small woman moaned in the warrior's mouth then pulled back with dark eyes.

"Maybe not yet."

"Well what comes around goes around." Xena's lips trailed down Gabrielle's neck and shoulders. "Tell me if you want me to stop," Xena whispered.

"I doubt if I will." The bard's head dropped back. She felt the warrior's hands come to her shoulders which caused her eyes to close. She sensed Xena bending down some and along with those large hands traveling down her chest, over her breasts, over her stomach, and to finally hold her sides. "Xena."

"You'll like this."

The bard chuckled for a second but quickly stopped as a hot mouth took her right breast. She brought her hands over to grasp Xena's shoulders tightly in control.

The older woman worked the breast showing her partner what she had done earlier to her. After she'd teased the right breasts her intoxicating lips traced across between Gabrielle's breasts to take the left one strongly.

"Like isn't the word... for it." The bard was just able to say that as she felt Xena's teeth nip at her. "Xena," she quietly hissed.

Xena grinned and slowly stood back up to take Gabrielle's lips while her hands shifted up to massage the full breasts.

Gabrielle was fiercely kissing the warrior.

The dark warrior lowered her hands from Gabrielle's breasts to capture her hips again and she kissed Gabrielle lightly this time. "Sssh."

The bard sucked in a deep breath then dropped her head down on Xena's chest. "Elysian fields?"

"Not even that." Xena grinned yet circled Gabrielle with her arms.

"That's the closes I can come." Gabrielle chuckled. "Still isn't the best description."

"You won't find one."

"I know." The Amazon Queen's eyes gradually closed.

~*~*~*~

The bard sighed and rolled to her left, which caused a shot to go through her body. "Hades."

"Got you." Xena tightened her arms around her friend. "Don't roll off."

"Explain to me why I chose to roll near the edge?"

"Bad dream?"

Gabrielle closed her eyes. "Yeah." Her eyes opened again. "Dreamed about falling down the pit... again."

"That would explain the edge of the bed."

The small woman quietly laughed. "You're probably right." Her eyes studied the wood floor. "This is really uncomfortable."

"Let's try this." The warrior's arms tightened, next she rolled to her left onto her back. "Turn over Gabrielle."

Gabrielle slowly turned over to face Xena. "That's better." She snuggled into the warrior's body.

"Comfortable?"

"Incredible." The Amazon Queen contently sighed but lifted her head off Xena's chest. "What time is it?"

Xena turned her head to the right to gaze out the window. "About two candlemarks before sunset." Her head came back towards Gabrielle. "Go back to sleep."

Gabrielle nodded in agreement then dropped her head back down with a content sigh. Her arms shifted to tighten around Xena. "Xena?"

The warrior's eyes were closed but she responded, "Yeah?"

"I love you."

The older woman lifted her head up to kiss Gabrielle's head. When her head came back down she answered with a deep tone. "I love Gabrielle."

~*~*~*~

"Who's she hooked up with?" Solari put her hands on her hips.

The warrior's eyes suddenly narrowed at the second in command. "Solari-"

"Solari."

The second in command felt to small but strong hands grasp her shoulders. She slowly turned around to see her Queen. "Hi Gabrielle."

They were in the middle of the food hut at the first ray of darkness.

"I've heard you been bugging Xena about whom I am going out with." Gabrielle dropped her hands from Solari's shoulders. "Go to the source. Why don't you try asking *me*?" She gave a frustrated smile.

Solari smiled sheepishly. "Well..."

Gabrielle arched an eyebrow and crossed her arms against her chest.

"Gabrielle," The Amazon whined to her Queen.

The Queen narrowed her eyes while leaning towards the Amazon. "Ask *me* or don't ask anybody."

"But... but... Eph said you're 'taken' and I thought Xena would know."

"Look Solari." Gabrielle dropped her arms. "I don't know what Ephiny is talking

about but I'm not going out with anybody."

"Nnno." Solari shook her head. "Xena said she knew." She narrowed her eyes. "Somebody around here is lying."

"Are you calling me a liar?" The Queen pointed to herself.

"No, no." The second in command smiled. "It's just somebody is talking smack around here. But you're really not going out with anybody?"

"No." Gabrielle smiled with fakeness. "Not going out with somebody." She then went serious. "Maybe somebody is talking... smack around here to get you geared up. We both know Xena has that evil spot."

"Gabrielle." The warrior arched an eyebrow behind Solari.

The bard lifted her eyes up. "Well you do." She grinned.

Xena's lips slowly spread into an evil smile. "Never."

The second in command spun around to catch the remains of Xena's evil smile. "Uh huh." She shook her head. "I will figure this conspiracy out." She looked between Gabrielle and the warrior. "Check you guys later." She stomped off.

Gabrielle watched her Amazon go then started to chuckle. "Poor Solari."

"Poor nothing." Xena faced her partner. "She deserves it after annoying me."

"Thanks for not making her smaller than she already is." The Queen peered up.

"She's lucky." The Warrior Princess huffed but smiled to her best friend. "Let's get something to eat."

"Sounds good to me." Gabrielle started walking through the hut to the food area.

Xena followed behind.

Soon the pair had plates of food and mugs of drinks so they sat down. Joan soon was joining them with Ephiny.

Gabrielle munched on her pile of mixed vegetables. Her eyes shifted to her partner, which made her evilly grin. With her right hand she reached up to push the warrior's plate away.

Xena turned her head to Gabrielle with a puzzled look.

The bard looked away with a low snicker. Her eyes lifted to Joan across the bench table. "Rested?"

The Celtic warrior smiled. "Yes, well rested. How about you both?"

Gabrielle nodded. "Oh yeah." She let in a deep breath and slowly let it out. "Have you thought more about my... offer?"

Joan chuckled and shook her head. "Not yet."

"Offer?" Ephiny glanced between her Queen and Joan. "What? We hired Joan to do the Velasca Chaos?"

The Queen laughed. "No Eph." She sighed and explained quietly. "I offered Joan to become an Amazon."

The regent now smiled warmly and turned her head to the left towards Joan. "You'll fit right in."

"So I've been told Ephiny." Joan grinned at the Amazon. "I'm not sure though yet." Her grin dropped.

"You will." Xena grinned.

The Celtic warrior turned her head to the Greek warrior. "How you know?"

"Let's put it this way Joan." Xena's face was masked with smugness. "Not even I can say no to Gabrielle."

"What?" The bard narrowed her eyes at her warrior. "You've said no to me before."

The older woman turned her head in Gabrielle's direction. "Name one time, just one."

The small woman opened her mouth to respond but... well nothing had come.

"Hades... I'll come up with a time."

"No you won't 'cause I've always said yes." Xena grinned evilly.

The Amazon Queen narrowed her sparkling eyes but turned her head quickly to Joan with a smile. "It's up to you."

The Celt nodded seriously. "We'll all see."

"I heard somebody is talking shmack around here."

Gabrielle raised an eyebrow at her regent. "Solari tell you?"

The regent chuckled and gave a nod. "Yeah, before I sat down here she came up to me all in a huff." She shook her head. "What you doing to my woman?"

"Me?" Gabrielle corked an eyebrow. "You got this whole thing started."

"What's that?" Joan glanced between the Queen and regent.

"Long story Joan." The warrior grinned to the Celt.

The Celtic sighed. "I keep getting that 'long story' explanation all the time. I know I'm missing out on some guid balderdash here."

A laugh came from the Queen but she sighed at the end. "We'll tell you sometime Joan... but not now."

The Celtic frowned. "Well... later is better then never."

"Very true." Gabrielle gazed back at Ephiny. "Shmack?"

"I agree." The Celtic warrior turned her attention at Ephiny. "What's that mean? I know I have a dialect but my god."

Ephiny sighed very long. "I know." She shook her head. "Solari and Ep keep making up these words and phrases." She creased her eyebrows together. "Last week's was... break out a can of whoopass."

Xena started laughed quietly, which made her stop eating. She calmed down and gazed at Gabrielle. "I should try that on somebody I fight next time."

"Oh I can see this now." Gabrielle faced her best friend. "You standing there with your sword and some thugs on the road." She switched her voice to sound deeper. "Look boys if you don't run along, I'm gonna break out a can of whoopass on you." She started to laugh with friends. "Xena, you're liable to kill them from laughing."

"True." The warrior turned her head back and forth. "Or make them think I'm insane."

"Really." Gabrielle glanced back to Ephiny. "So what does smack mean? Like crap?"

"Basically yeah." The regent nodded. "You're talking a lot of smack... you're talking shit." She shrugged her shoulders. "I can't figure out where they find the time to come up with this stuff."

The Amazon Queen leaned towards her regent. "You're telling me that I have my second in command and weapons master finding time to make up words and phrases like this?" Her eyes narrowed a little. "Do my Amazons need some education here?"

Ephiny snickered. "Oh they changed the word education to... edchamacation or something like that."

Gabrielle groaned and mumbled out, "Hooked on phonics didn't work for Solari and Ep."

"Is that an Amazon tradition?" Joan questioned the Queen and Ephiny.

"No." Gabrielle looked up with an annoyed look. "Sounds like its becoming one."

"Ah, just make fun of their talking Gabrielle." Ephiny evilly grinned. "That'll get them to stop. Trust me I did it to Solari for a week and she stopped for a few."

"I hope you're right." The bard sighed and went back to eating.

Within a half a candlemark Xena, Gabrielle, and Ephiny headed out of the food hut together. Gabrielle deciding to go to Ephiny's hut to talk to her about some plans and the treaties. The group came to the hut, Ephiny went in first, but the partners stayed outside for a moment in the dark village.

"Hey you sure?" Gabrielle peered up to her friend.

"Only if you don't take to long." Xena grinned.

"I shouldn't be." The bard shrugged her shoulders. "I'll talk to Eph about that kiss."

The warrior sighed. "Alright."

"Hey." The small woman smiled warmly. "I won't do it if you don't want me to."

"No." Xena smiled reassuringly. "It'll be fun just be careful for my sake."

A small grin tugged at Gabrielle's lips. "Don't worry." She reached up to bring her friend's head down and kiss her lightly. "See you in the hut."

"Yeah." The warrior smiled. "I'll have some tea ready." She smiled and started walking off but called back. "Spicy or honey?"

"Spicy." Gabrielle evilly grinned. "I'm hurting for some spiciness." Xena's laugh echoed back to her as she went into the hut.

"What took you?" Ephiny arched an eyebrow with her arms going against her chest.

"I was talking to Xena." Gabrielle walked over to her regent's desk and sat down.

Ephiny came over and sat. "Talking huh?"

"Yeah... we talk." The Queen had a hidden annoyed look.

"Sorry." The regent's expression was apologetic.

"It's alright." The bard sighed and sat back into her seat. "It's just I'm getting sick of everybody."

"What you mean?"

"Come on Eph." Gabrielle shook her head. "Since I got here, everybody has been wanting to know what's going on with Xena and I. It's getting a little personal."

"Yeah." The regent nodded with a sad face. "I'm sorry, I had a hand in it." She brushed back her curly hair. "I shouldn't have said anything to Ep the other night."

Gabrielle shrugged her shoulders. "You were drinking then... I'd done the same."

"Still." The Amazon sighed. "I'll be more careful."

"Maybe you could help me out." The Queen went serious.

"Sure, what you need?"

A small grin slipped over the bard's face. "I want to play a trick on Solari to teach her a lesson."

"As long as it doesn't get me into too much trouble." Ephiny crossed her arms in her lap. "I do love her."

"I know." Gabrielle's head moved in understanding. "Otherwise I wouldn't ask you."

"Lay it on me."

Gabrielle chuckled and began to explain her idea.

~*~*~*~

Xena lifted her eyes at seeing her best friend come in. "How'd it go?"

"She went for it." Gabrielle faced Xena, whom was only in her leathers.

"Good." The warrior stood up from the lit fireplace. "How you feel?"

"Still a bit tired," Gabrielle answered truthfully. "How's the tea coming?" Her arms rested against her midriff now as she leaned against the door.

"Almost done." The older woman moved to stand in front of Gabrielle. "What's going on with the treaties?"

"Eph seems to think I can get them ready tomorrow." The bard closed her eyes. "Then the next day they should be rewritten and ready for me to sign."

"Good."

"Yeah." Gabrielle opened her eyes again and straightened up then moved to enfold Xena with her arms.

Xena's lips corked with a smile while she was pulling Gabrielle more in. "Think you can get your boots off?"

"Yeah sure." The small woman lifted her head. "What's the plan?"

"To relax... in each other's arms."

"Oooh." Gabrielle grinned. "Amazon tradition."

The tall woman quietly laughed and lowered her head down to Gabrielle's. "No, our new tradition."

"Mmm... more like lifestyle." The bard suddenly tightened her arms giving Xena a tight squeeze.

The dark warrior coughed. "I need to breathe."

Gabrielle chuckled and released her warrior. "Come on, you're tough." She walked over to the bed to sit down and untied her boots by bending forward.

"Yeah... but I'm getting old."

The bard's hooded eyes came up. "Right." She pulled off one boot next soon came the other.

"Well... older then you at least." Xena said that a matter a factly.

"Now that's true." The small Queen stood up with her boots. "But you're still tough." She ambled over to the saddlebags to put the boots there.

Xena chuckled. "Maybe." She padded over to the fireplace. She bent down and pulled the kettle out to pour to hot water into two mugs.

Gabrielle sighed and came up to her warrior when she stood up with mugs. She was offered a mug and her small hands took it. "What... spice?"

"Ginger."

The bard at that point could smell the fine scent of ginger. "Oh yeah."

The warrior smiled to herself and walked over to the bed and sat down on the floor then leaned against the bed. Her mug settled down on the floor as she looked up. "Come here."

Carefully Gabrielle sat down with a smile. Her back molded into her warrior's warm body. "This is nice."

"Definitely." Xena lifted her legs on either side of Gabrielle.

The bard lifted her mug up with both hands, she swallowed some of the hot ginger tea. She felt it travel down through her throat and into her stomach. "That's really good."

"Yeah?" The warrior grasped her mug trying it herself. "Not bad."

Gabrielle's right currently held the mug by the handle. Her left hand came down to Xena's calf and rested there. "Gods, since when did we start drinking tea?"

"Now." The warrior had a grin and slid her left arm around her bard's warm stomach.

"Gods, I'm not in the mood to do those stupid treaties tomorrow."

"I know." Xena drank a little more of her tea but put the mug back down on the floor. "They need to be done."

"Yeah I know." Gabrielle sighed. "Where we going after here?"

"To mother's, I know she's worried about us both."

"I love your mother." The bard started to giggle lightly while drinking her tea.

"That's because you both love to trade stories about me." Xena was drinking her own tea.

"Come on." The bard sighed contently. "You know you love us talking about you."

Xena grunted quietly while drinking more tea. "Especially when I don't know about what."

Gabrielle laughed then settled her mug onto the floor. "I love hearing stories about you." Her left hand started to idly run up and down Xena's calf. "Then there's my family." The bard groaned.

"Ah, your parents just don't... take a liking to me."

"Xena?" Gabrielle shook her head. "You get more daggers thrown to you by my parents then you do by your enemies."

The older woman chuckled and responded, "Nah." She sighed. "I can understand their perspective. They think I stole their daughter."

"Hardly." The bard huffed. "More like I forced myself on you."

"Gabrielle, ever hear of the expression it takes two to tango?"

Gabrielle chuckled, lifted her mug, answered "Yes," and drank a little tea.

"You may have forced your friendship on me but I had to agree to it."

"Yeah I guess." The bard's mug came down again while she kept idly running her fingertips up and down her partner's calf.

"You know I'm right." Xena grinned and drank her tea to the bottom.

The small woman chuckled to only shake Xena's frame. "Yeah." She finished her tea now and placed it beside Xena's. Gabrielle leaned completely back into Xena.

Xena smiled plus snaked her other arm around Gabrielle's stomach. "Say if you had a eighteen year old daughter and Joxer came along. Your daughter found something great about Joxer and snuck off to travel with him."

"Xena?"

"Yeah?"

"That's not even funny."

The warrior started to laugh and dropped her head against her partner's head. "Now you understand."

Gabrielle groaned. "You make us sound bad. Like you're a bad warrior and... and I have no sense of self respect."

The tall woman sighed and raised her head back up. "Just a means of comparison."

"That was wwwway off comparison Xena." The small woman sighed and said, "My parents just don't take the time to understand my side. That's all there is to it."

"They were better last time."

"Oh yeah, my father only threatened you to leave."

"Gabrielle, he was protecting what he thought was you."

"Exactly." Gabrielle groaned. "It doesn't matter anyway."

Xena sighed a little. "It does."

"Yeah it does." The bard frowned. "Maybe they'll understand later on... time mellows people out."

"Oh?"

Gabrielle quietly laughed. "Most people anyway."

The warrior grinned to herself.

"Xena?" The bard's voice was coming out low.

"Yeah?"

"Does it..." Gabrielle sighed as she continued with her leisured hand movement on her warrior's leg. "Does it bother you at all about the age difference between us?"

"No," was Xena's quick response. "Why?"

"I don't know." The small woman was quiet for a moment. "I mean I'm twenty-seven years and you're thirty years..."

The warrior leaned her head forward. "And you're making it sound like ten years difference."

The younger woman chuckled lightly. "True." She paused while a grin slipped across her lips. "Besides, it's always me trying to keep up with you."

Xena laughed and leaned back again. "You keep up fine."

Gabrielle sighed contently. "Gee, thanks."

A knock came at the door. "Hey lass, its Joan."

The Queen sighed. "I'm coming Joan, give me a sec."

The warrior released her partner. "Hey Joan, you can't come in with any dragons." She got a laugh from behind the door.

Gabrielle chuckled then got up to go to the door and open it. She leaned against the doorway with a smile. "What's up Joan?"

Joan smiled warmly and took a deep breath. "Is it to late to become an Amazon lass?"

The Amazon Queen's face brightened up. "No." She jumped and pulled the Celtic in for a huge hug. "This is great."

The Celtic warrior laughed and hugged back. She pulled back saying, "Thanks lass."

"What made you decide?"

"Um well lass..." Joan's face was covered with shyness. "Two things."

Gabrielle perked up an eyebrow in question.

The Celtic laughed with uncertainty. "Well one 'cause I want to start a new life here. The other..." She sighed with a smile. "I met one of your Amazons here... Aster."

"Oooh." Gabrielle nodded. "I see." A grin spread across her lips. "She's real nice."

"Uh huh." Joan smiled warmly. "So what do I have to do to become a guid Amazon?"

"Well, you have to go through a ritual." The Queen shrugged her shoulders. "Nothing scary and Eph will get your prepared." She leaned back against the doorway. "How about doing it in two days?"

"Really lass?" Joan's smile held glee. "That would be guid lass."

"Alright, I'll tell Eph and we'll do it in two days. Eph is going to need a little time to prepare everything."

"This is extraordinary." The Celt chuckled. "Okay, I better leave. Thank you Gabrielle."

"Thank you Joan." The bard smiled pleasantly. "Go tell Aster."

"I will." The Celtic was grinning. "Oh, does this mean I get to do that Amazon tradition with her?"

Gabrielle's face was in bewilderment then she realized with a laugh. "Oh yeah, you can as long as Aster agrees. I had to get Xena to agree."

"I thought you and Xena only did it when you're being hunted."

"Oh we do." Gabrielle was turning a bit red. "Well you see, we do this every night because... because I'm a big baby."

"Right lass." Joan arched an eyebrow. "There's something you're neglecting to tell me." She put her hands on her hips. "But I'm sure I'll catch soon."

The Queen dropped her head and looked up with a grin. "Maybe Joan. It's just a long story."

"So I've been enlightened." Joan evilly grinned. "Well... I'll let you two carry on with your Amazon tradition."

"Night Joan."

The Celtic smiled and started walking off. "Guidnight lass." She disappeared in the dark village.

Gabrielle groaned while leaning against the closed door. "I do it to us."

Xena had an amused expression.

"Don't say a word." The bard chuckled and slowly strolled over to Xena.

"Not a word."

"Good." The small woman laid down into her partner's body on her side. She rested her head against her warrior's chest. "She's a sweetie.... Joan."

"Yeah she is." Xena lifted Gabrielle more up into her arms. "Tired?"

"Mmm, yeah." The younger woman's eyes slowly closed. "Going to fall asleep on you." She quietly laughed.

"In both ways." Xena grinned while lowering her head down closer to Gabrielle's.

"Xena, remember when you fought Draco in Amphipolis... with the staffs?"

"Yeah, why?"

Gabrielle shrugged her shoulders. "Was just reminiscing... seemed like a long time ago."

"It was." The warrior could feel her partner's breathing easing. "What else you thinking about?"

The bard shifted her head a little. "The time with the Titans." She chuckled. "I got us in a real mess."

"Could have been worse... we made it through."

"Yeah." Gabrielle lips tugged with a smile. "How about when we had to deal with Garith?"

"Oh gods." The Warrior Princess sighed. "That was a day."

"Just an average one." The bard tightened her arms around Xena's body. "I don't think we teased each other more then on that day."

Xena laughed and kissed the top of her bard's head. "True."

"Howard."

The older woman groaned quietly. "Bad memory."

Gabrielle chuckled faintly. "Xena?"

"Yeah?"

"You wouldn't let me take the wooden horse."

The warrior tried to remember what she said after Troy. "Nnno... I said you could take it... you just had to pull it."

"Hades." Gabrielle went silent after that followed by her breathing lightening.

Xena pressed her lips against Gabrielle's head for a moment and slowly stood up lifting Gabrielle in her arms.

The bard's eyes slowly opened with tiredness. She curled her body closer against the warrior's as she felt herself lifted in the air.

"Go to sleep," the warrior whispered.

The Queen faintly nodded then closed her eyes again.

The tall woman carried her bard over to the bed with warm eyes. She bent forward and gently lowered Gabrielle into the bed. Xena next pulled the covers over the small woman carefully. She walked over to the foot of the bed again to get the mugs and put them in the washroom. After that she found herself leaning against a windowsill thinking.

Slowly green eyes opened to stare at the warrior's back. Gabrielle studied her partner in the faint moonlight. Silently she slipped out of bed and came up behind Xena with arms going around Xena's waist. She leaned against the warrior's warm back.

"I thought you went to sleep."

"I did for two seconds until my body realized you weren't there." The bard kissed the warrior's back. "What you thinking about?"

"About us." Xena's eyes stayed pinned on the outside world.

"Yeah?" Gabrielle's arms tightened.

"Just worried something will go wrong." The warrior sighed. "Getting paranoid."

The bard sighed for a second. "It won't be perfect, something is bound to happen bad." She paused for a moment. "But we'll get through that stuff... we always do even when we were friends."

"Yeah." Xena slowly turned in Gabrielle's arms. She placed her hands on her bard's upper arms.

"Besides." Gabrielle looked up with a smile. "As we keep going we'll... understand each other more and more." Her face was a little serious. "Our friendship is strong... so will our love relationship."

Xena smiled warmly and lowered her head to rub her cheek against Gabrielle's. "Thank you," she whispered.

"No problem." The bard sighed happily. "We're perfect for each other."

The warrior quietly chuckled. "That's what mother said."

"Your mom knows?"

"She figured it out." Xena kissed Gabrielle's cheek.

The small woman was now giggling. "You're mom is good."

"Uh huh." Xena lifted her head back up with a grin. Her hands came down to Gabrielle's waist. "Let's get some sleep."

"Yeah." That tired look came over the younger woman again. "I love you Xena."

The warrior smiled with such warmth that it lit her face. "I love you with my soul Gabrielle."

Gabrielle fell into the words as her heart pounded. Without warning, she jumped to wrap her legs around Xena's waist while her hands came behind Xena's head to force a kiss on.

Xena's natural instinct was holding Gabrielle with one arm around the back and the other under Gabrielle supporting her. The warrior was kissing back just as strongly.

The bard pulled back with dark eyes. "Say those sort of words and you'll drive me crazy."

The tall woman grinned and lightly kissed Gabrielle. "Not yet."

"I know." Gabrielle suddenly felt the warrior shift her body to carry her again. "You

like doing that."

The older female laughed and carried her partner to the bed. She lay Gabrielle down with her cat grin. "So it takes the right words?"

The bard arched an eyebrow. "Words... or looks."

"Touch?" Xena began to crawl onto the bed towards her partner.

Gabrielle was sitting on her knees with her hands resting in her lap. "Depends." Now her face was covered with an evil grin.

"Oh?" The warrior's eyes narrowed as they began to twinkle. She came right up to Gabrielle then placed her right hand to the bard's sides. Her lips brushed along Gabrielle's collarbone. "Does it really depend?"

The small woman shivered and frantically grasped Xena's hands on her waist. "What happened to the not yet?"

Xena held her best friend's hands tightly. "Its still not yet... just playtime." Her lips were grazing along Gabrielle's neck.

Gabrielle whined and whispered, "Xena, I want you."

"I know." The warrior lifted her head and desperately kissed her partner. When she pulled back she had a grin but her eyes were serious. "And I want you." Her arms went behind Gabrielle's back with the small hands. "But it's not the right time."

The bard whimpered "Gods... when?"

Xena chuckled and placed a feather kiss on her bard's neck. "We'll know." She brought her arms forward again and lowered Gabrielle onto her back. "Let me show you something."

Gabrielle nodded while her eyes shut. Her heart was pounding while her chest rose heavily.

The warrior shifted to straddle her partner's hips. She leaned forward to capture Gabrielle's lips again as she kissed the bard her large hands came down to untie Gabrielle's top. When she pulled back she had an evil grin on her lips. "Trust me?" She knew Gabrielle had never been in a relationship with another woman. So there were things the bard lacked experience in.

"Yes." The bard's eyes open gradually and she sat up to take Xena's lips.

The older woman smiled into the kiss while pulling the top off Gabrielle's body. It was soon on the floor.

Gabrielle lay back down and felt herself turning faintly red because she was still getting use to exposing her body to the warrior.

Xena grinned and leaned back down. "You're beautiful."

The bard didn't know what to say she simply nodded but did whisper, "But nothing like you."

The warrior quickly kissed her friend from the words. Her hands came down to the skirt and she began to slip them off. Xena pulled back from the kiss and sat back to completely take the skirt off.

Gabrielle's body was extremely hot and only enflamed wherever Xena's skin went. "Xena, I want to feel all of your body."

The tall woman nodded. She shifted out of her leathers and threw them on top of Gabrielle's clothes. She brought her body back down with her bare skin pressing against Gabrielle's.

The bard groaned as Xena's breasts pressed into her own. "Xena."

"Ssh." Xena grinned and brought her hands to her bard's sides. "You'll love this."

The Amazon Queen chuckled. "I can only imagine."

"Then stop and feel it now." Xena kissed Gabrielle quickly then moved her body down. Her lips soon came to Gabrielle's center.

The small woman lifted her head up to see Xena's mouth come over her center. "Oh gods." Her eyes rammed shut and her breathing kicked in higher.

The warrior carefully began to suck her bard's center while holding her.

The younger woman's head dropped down and she moaned deeply.

Xena continued sucking for a few seconds but eventually slipped her tongue out. Her tongue went directly between Gabrielle's folds.

Gabrielle was breathing rapidly. With natural instinct she arched her back. "Xena." Her voice was loud.

Xena grinned while she kept working Gabrielle to a small release.

The small woman felt her body built up and she didn't know how to stop it. So she went with it.

The warrior carefully slipped her tongue inside of Gabrielle knowing that would take Gabrielle.

The bard's body exploded with warmth and she arched her back high and screamed, "Xena!"

The older woman slowly slipped her tongue out and listened to Gabrielle's heaving breathing. She brought her body up to Gabrielle's and rested on her side to study the bard.

Gabrielle's eyes drifted open and they were unfocused. "What... was that?"

Xena chuckled and brought her right hand over to rest on the bard's stomach. "A small release."

"That was small?" The younger woman glanced up to her partner. "Small?"

"Yeah." The warrior grinned.

"Gods... how am I going to make it through the whole thing when I almost died from this?"

The tall warrior chuckled and idly moved her hand up and down Gabrielle's stomach. "Trust me, your body can handle a lot."

"Good." Gabrielle paused to breathe. "This is different then with a guy."

"It real is." Xena moved her head in agreement. "Good difference?"

The small woman didn't respond right away and really did a comparison. "Yes." Her eyes lifted to Xena. "So much more depth to everything. The touches, emotions and... looks. It's amazing."

"Good." The older woman leaned forward to kiss Gabrielle.

The bard moaned at tasting herself. It only made her deepen the kiss to slip her tongue into the warrior's mouth.

When Xena pulled back she chuckled and grinned. "Like that huh?"

"Yeah." Gabrielle grinned. "Really like that."

"So do I." Again the warrior came down to kiss Gabrielle lovingly. She slowly pulled back with warm eyes. "Let's get some sleep."

The bard nodded. "Sort of forgot about that." Gabrielle chuckled and felt her partner grab her and lift her on top. Gabrielle sighed contently at settling on Xena's body. "I love sleeping here... why didn't I do it sooner?"

Xena laughed and encircled her partner. "I don't know."

"To scared," The bard said. She slipped her hand between her body and Xena's. Slowly her touch moved down the warrior's smooth stomach.

"Gabrielle." Warning from the warrior.

"Sorry... it's just I love feeling you."

"I know," the warrior ushered. She felt her pulse picking up. "You're causing trouble."

The bard lifted her head up while pulling her hand back out. "Difference between trouble and play?"

"Oh yeah." Xena chuckled and lifted her head to kiss Gabrielle. "Get some sleep huh?"

"Yeah." The Queen dropped her head back down and closed her eyes. "Thanks Xena."

The warrior grinned and responded, "Thank you."

Gabrielle lifted her head with confused eyes.

A warm smile was covering Xena's lips. Her eyes spoke everything.

The smaller woman easily understood and scouted up her partner's body some so that now her head rested under Xena's head. "I love you."

"I love you too Gabrielle."

~*Part 9*~

Gabrielle slipped out of her warrior's arms in the early dawn. She held back her yawn that wanted to come. She wanted to be up early and get the treaties done faster. Then that would allow her to spend more time with Xena since she figured her best friend didn't want to sit through the treaty work.

She walked over to her clothes that had Xena's leathers on top. She lifted the warrior's leather and it made her chuckle quietly. Her senses filled with the leather's scent that reminded her of Xena. She loved the way Xena's scent was a mix of leather and spice. She gingerly placed the warrior's leathers on the bed and took her own clothes. Turning away from the bed, Gabrielle slipped on her skirt then adjusted it. Without hearing or seeing, she felt warm arms come around her breasts. Gabrielle moaned silently and leaned back into a warm body.

"You're up early."

"I know." Gabrielle's eyes gradually shut. She felt Xena's warm stomach and breasts press into her back. "Oh gods."

Xena lowered her head close to Gabrielle's. "Depends on the touch still?"

"No." The bard sighed deeply. "I wish I could disappear into you."

"Only if I could into you." The warrior grazed her lips over the back of her partner's neck.

The Amazon Queen shuddered. "I can't do this, gotta get those stupid treaties done." She turned in her warrior's arms. "I'd rather stay right here."

"I know." Xena's chin lowered down on top of her bard's head. "I'll come with you."

Gabrielle peered up to her partner. "Xena, no. It's going to be really boring. Two of us don't have to go through the insanity."

The warrior chuckled and smiled. "I'll be fine. Besides maybe I'll be able to help with the boredom and... make the time go by faster."

The Queen grinned. "Or really distract me."

"That too." Xena now had an evil smile. "Good time to learn how to put space between each other."

The small woman corked an eyebrow. "Yeah right."

"I can at least help with the treaties."

"That's true." The small woman kissed her friend's chest. "You sure?"

"Definitely." Xena released Gabrielle.

The bard still had her green top and she reached over to get Xena's leathers. She tossed them to her warrior and grinned. Walking off she slipped into her green top and into the washroom.

Xena slowly raised an eyebrow as her eyes stayed pinned on her bard. She sighed contently and began to put her leathers on.

Gabrielle soon came out of the washroom with her bangs faintly wet from water. She strolled over to her boots to put them on.

The warrior was finishing with her armor after that came her weapons since she already had her boots on. She walked over to the wall and grabbed Gabrielle's staff, turned towards her partner, and leaned against the staff. "Do I look like you?"

Gabrielle lifted her eyes as she sat on the edge of the bed. "No, you're to tall."

"Just to tall?" Xena bent her knees to look shorter.

The bard chuckled lightly. "To dark."

"Hades." The warrior grinned. "Can't fix that." She stood up fully and still leaned against the staff. "This is how I know you're pressing patiences."

"Because I lean against my staff?" Gabrielle stood up.

"Normally, yes." Xena grinned. "Or you're bored."

The bard chuckled. "Definitely when I'm bored or even tired."

"No no." The warrior dropped her head against the staff. "Now this is tired."

Gabrielle laughed and strolled up to her partner. She put her hands on her hips. "What I look like in my fighting stance?"

"First you..." Xena twirled the staff once. "Twirl it." She brought her right foot forward with her left back. "Footing." She then lifted the staff so that the right side was a little higher than the left. "Staff." She slightly bent her knees. "Bend the knees." She grinned a little. "Then you get this lopsided grin I can't do."

"I don't have a lopsided grin."

"Yes you do." Xena evilly grinned. "Not at first but after you got use to your staff you did."

"You're kidding me?"

"Nope." The warrior then shifted her stance to bring her left foot forward and her right back. Now the staff was just in Xena's right hand and moved her arm back with the staff going up and down the length of her arm. Her left arm however came forward and she bent her knees a little more. "This is the stance you use when you've taken your enemies down. Then you have a huge satisfied smile on your face." She was stiff in her stance

"Xena, do you always watch me?"

Xena grinned and rapidly brought the staff forward to spin it. She slammed the butt end in front of Gabrielle and locked eyes with her best friend. "Always, like you do with me." She winked.

Gabrielle raised an eyebrow, with a blush she reached forward to take her staff. "Right, you caught me."

"How couldn't I notice hot green eyes on me?" The warrior's eyes twinkled then she spun around on her heels to open the door and go out.

The bard mumbled to herself, "Hot green eyes?" She shook her head with a chuckle. "I like that." She headed out of the hut closing the door behind.

~*~*~*~

Gabrielle dropped her head back over the chair at listening to the non-stop yammering of Ephiny.

"Gabrielle, I knew you could talk but Ephiny gods."

Ephiny stopped in mid-sentence and glared at the Warrior Princess. "Well what's your idea Xena?"

Xena evilly grinned and leaned towards the regent. "How about you let Gabrielle and I take care of the treaties on our own?"

The Amazon glanced over at her Queen whom was intently looking at Xena. "You two would never get them done."

Gabrielle quickly turned her head to her regent. "Are you trying to say something?"

"I'm saying you two will distract each other like crazy." Ephiny sat back in her seat with a smirk and crossed her arms against her chest.

"Really?" The bard narrowed her eyes. "Alright, we'll make a deal."

Ephiny laughed and brightened up. "What's the bet?"

Xena inwardly groaned. Not good.

Gabrielle evilly grinned. "If Xena and I get these treaties done by sunset... you and Solari have to stay away from each other for... two days."

"And if you and Xena don't, the next two days you and Xena have to stay away from each other. And I mean sleep in separate huts."

"Alright, deal." Gabrielle held her hand out.

"Wait, Xena you agree?" The regent glanced over to the warrior.

The Warrior Princess's lips spread into a devilish grin. "Definitely." She knew that these treaties would be a breeze knowing they were something she'd done in her past.

"Great." Ephiny took her Queen's hand and shook. "Well, this will give me time to prepare Joan's ritual. Later ladies." The Amazon stood and sauntered out the door.

Gabrielle turned her head to her warrior. "Two days without you... a candlemark is getting hard enough."

Xena chuckled then shifted her gaze to the table with the treaties. "Don't worry. Treaties are easy."

"One of your many skills?"

The older woman chuckled. "Sort of." She stood up and stepped towards the desk. She opened up one treaty.

Gabrielle stood up next to her partner. "Let's get these done. Think we can focus?"

"Sure." Xena lifted her eyes up. "Let's just be serious." Her eyes were already stoic.

The Queen nodded and lowered her eyes to the scrolls. She placed her right hand on the table. "We better skim over these."

"Yeah." The tall woman's eyes averted to the scroll again. She felt herself begin to focus on the project at hand.

~*~*~*~

"No, Neapolis is cheating the Amazons out of food." Xena straightened up. "Just make the amount double."

"Xena, that's a lot." Gabrielle glanced up. "You're serious?"

"Yes." The warrior nodded with her attention on the treaty between the Amazons and city of Neapolis. "They won't refuse the treaty, I promise." Her eyes went to Gabrielle. "They get loads of food from trade... victories and their local villages. They're suckering the Amazons." She huffed while looking at the treaty. "I can't believe Melosa didn't know."

Gabrielle glanced at the scroll. "What about the expiration date on the treaty?"

"Knock it up five years." Xena shrugged.

"They won't notice huh?" The bard leaned forward to start scratching in the new numbers for the treaty to be written with.

"They will for a second but just sign anyway. They have two many treaties coming in from around the world. They won't make a huge hassle."

"I know Neapolis is a huge port." The Queen stood back up with scroll rolling it up.

"Yeah." The warrior bent forward filtering through the scrolls noticing there were ten left. "Not bad."

Gabrielle moved her head in agreement. "We're doing good." She placed the scroll down on the desk and grabbed another one.

Xena kept staring at the scrolls but shifted her right hand to graze over her best friend's left arm.

The small woman quickly turned her head to Xena.

A grin crept along Xena's lips and she turned her head to Gabrielle. "Distraction?"

The Queen chuckled. "Nothing I can't handle."

"Oh... okay." The Warrior Princess was evilly smiling for a second then it disappeared without a trace.

Gabrielle felt her stomach turn knowing her warrior was up to something. She turned her head away and she began to read the next treaty. Her arms crossed against her chest.

The older woman read a little ways but shifted behind Gabrielle and snaked her arms around Gabrielle's waist.

"Xena?"

"Try to read the rest of it," the warrior urged.

Gabrielle took a shaky breath however continued skimming along the treaty. When she was done she leaned back into her partner.

"Done?" Xena lowered her chin on her bard's head.

"Yeah."

"Let's take a break huh? Go for a walk or something."

Gabrielle quietly laughed. "I did that last time and look what happened."

The Warrior Princess grinned. "Don't worry, you'll have your warrior with you."

"Now that's true." The bard smiled and brought her hand up to lower Xena's head.

The tall woman sealed her lips with Gabrielle's.

After the sensual kiss the pair left the hut to head out of the village. Gabrielle leaving her staff behind figuring she didn't need it.

Xena walked close to her partner as they went deep into the woods.

The smaller woman reached over with her right hand to grab her warrior's hand.

The older woman quickly looked over with surprise.

Gabrielle smiled warmly up and squeezed Xena's hand.

A loving smile eased across the warrior's lips.

The pair both looked ahead again while silently walking together.

The warrior slowed down. "Let's sit down for a second."

"Sure." The bard followed her partner to a huge rock.

Xena sat down with a sigh.

Gabrielle sat beside Xena while holding the larger hand.

The warrior brought her free hand to Gabrielle's chin and tilted her head back to lower her lips.

The bard moan into her friend's mouth. When the kiss ended her eyes went to a forest green. "Xena?"

"Yeah?" Xena's fingertips were brushing over the smaller woman's lips.

"I want to do to you what you did to me last night."

The warrior grinned a little. "Your patrol Amazons will hear me."

"Then you'll just have to be quiet."

Xena evilly grinned. "I guess so." Her head came lower and she whispered, "I'm all yours."

"Good." Gabrielle passionately kissed Xena then stood up. She released Xena's hand carefully.

The older woman's hands moved to go to her knees.

The bard knelt down and placed her hands to the sides of Xena's knees. She pushed them open.

Xena easily followed through by widening her legs open.

Gabrielle leaned forward then brought her right hand up to the warrior's lower stomach. She gave another small push for her to lean back.

The warrior complied by leaning back and thankfully her back hit a tree. Now the anticipation kicked in strongly for her.

The Amazon Queen had moved the leather skirt part out of the way. She leaned in more and brought her mouth directly to Xena's center. Her hands lay resting on Xena's leather clad stomach.

Xena sucked in her breath. Her eyes closed.

Gabrielle carefully sucked on the warrior's center still trying to plot out a mental plan. Yet she gave up on a plan and went with pure instinct. Trying to do what she knew would feel good to her. So that led to her tongue coming out and slipping between Xena's folds to find the incredible moisture.

The warrior's head dropped back against the tree. "Gabrielle," she whispered in a plea.

The small woman grinned at the effect. This led her tongue to sliding up and down between her warrior's folds. She brought her tongue back in and started sucking on Xena's center again.

Xena's hands fisted up feeling her body about to release from the small climax but she

knew the end result would leave her dying for air. For her breathing was already picking up heavily including her leathers sticking to her skin.

Gabrielle slightly nipped her partner's center and thrust her tongue between the folds and into Xena. She felt the warrior's body convulsed and she knew.

Xena's eyes were tightly closed, her teeth clamped shut to hold back the scream that want freedom.

Gabrielle quickly moved to help her partner. She slipped her tongue out, stood up and straddled Xena at the hips. She leaned in to take her warrior's lips. And she felt the warrior's scream fill her mouth.

The taller woman pulled back and struggled to breathe. She opened her hazy blue eyes.

"Breather huh?" Gabrielle had a grin.

The warrior nodded and kept her eyes closed with her heavy breathing. Slowly she brought her arms around Gabrielle.

The bard rested her head down on the warrior's chest. "You're okay?"

"Oh yeah." Xena smiled and opened her eyes. "That was perfect."

"Good." That same smile was caught on the bard's lips. She pressed her body against her warrior's.

"Come here." The older woman brought her right hand under Gabrielle's chin to lift her head. Xena claimed the smaller woman's lips and tasted her essence in the bard's mouth.

Gabrielle pulled back with warm eyes.

Xena's hand caressed her partner's cheek. "Like that?"

"Loved it." The younger woman's expression was evilly crossed by a grin. She went serious though. "Why is this so different?"

"In what aspect?" Xena's hand moved to brush back Gabrielle's hair.

"I don't know really." Gabrielle shook her head with confusion. "Everything is so intense. Has it every been like this for you?"

"No." The Warrior Princess was smiling with love. "I don't recall ever wanting somebody so strongly. Let alone needing them."

"Yeah, I agree on that one." Gabrielle chuckled and leaned forward to kiss her warrior.

Xena's right hand came up behind the bard's head to deepen the kiss.

The Amazon Queen whined quietly as she felt her tongue pass over Xena's. She just loved this. Soon she her hands resting against Xena's breastplates. When the kiss ended, she began another with her head moving a little to try take Xena.

The warrior's left hand was moving to her bard's side to hold her. She finished the

kiss to breathe and she grinned up to Gabrielle. "Enjoying this?"

"Nah, loved it." Gabrielle's eyes sparkled. "We should get back huh?"

"Should." The tall woman watched as Gabrielle sat back up. So she did the same but still had the smaller woman in her lap. "One more."

"Definitely." Gabrielle's right hand was going through the back of Xena's hair while she leaned into kiss the warrior. Her left hand came down to search out Xena's right hand and lace their hands together.

~*~*~*~

The bard leaned forward to scratch something down on the scroll with her quill. She leaned back into warm leathers and brass armor.

"What you think about this part here?" Xena leaned forward to pull her right hand away from her partner's stomach to point at a spot on the scroll. However her left arm stayed around the bard.

Gabrielle glanced down and read the small section of the treaty. "You mean the agreement on protection?"

"Yess." Xena shook her head and brought her arm back around Gabrielle's waist. "That ridiculous that more Amazons are demanded for help and not the same amount of Athenians."

"Xena, this is the Athenian League here."

Xena huffed. "Exactly, they can send more soldiers if the Amazons are ever in need."

"You're serious." Gabrielle gazed up to her partner.

"Very." Stoic blue eyes lowered to Gabrielle. "I've met the general of the League. He's a good man and will understand the increase."

The Amazon Queen turned her head back to the treaty. "Is it just me or did Melosa do a bad job with these treaties?"

"Probably wasn't her area." The warrior sighed. "Besides, the Amazons were to busy fighting with the centaurs."

Gabrielle nodded and leaned forward to write the new amount. "I think everything else looks fine."

Xena moved her head in agreement. "Yeah, that covers it."

The door to Ephiny's hut swung open and the regent came in. She glanced over to the pair and her eyes bugged out. "You two are done?"

"Yup." Gabrielle smirked and rolled up the Athenian League treaty while standing in Xena's arms. She didn't look to the regent until she finished rolling the scroll up.

"Amazing huh?" She leaned back into her warrior.

Ephiny narrowed her eyes. "I can't believe it." Her hands went to her hips.

The Queen dropped the scroll to the desk. "Check the scrolls yourself Eph." A smug look went over her expression.

The Amazon huffed. "I believe you. I just can't believe you could get it done." She paused. "And even when you're both... both like that." She held her hand out and shook her head. "Great, Solari is going to kill me." Ephiny came over to her desk and opened a drawer to pull out a scroll. She glanced up to the pair. "I'll get the treaties rewritten by tomorrow." Straightening up she walked out of the hut in a huff.

"Think we should really make them do it?" Gabrielle peered up to her best friend. "The bet?"

"Nah." Xena grinned. "I'm satisfied just winning." She chuckled. "We'll just rub it into her face once more."

Gabrielle snickered. "You're bad." She dropped her head back into Xena's chest. "Thank you." She smiled up to her warrior.

The tall woman smiled right back. "No problem."

"You know, you help me too much."

Xena grinned and brought her head down lower. "That's because I love to."

The bard's hand came up to brush against the warrior's arm. "I know... it's just after everything."

Xena knew what the 'everything' meant, which only made her tighten her arms. "Gabrielle, it's all over with."

"Yeah but not the memory... the pain." The young woman shook her head. "I look back on it all and feel like such an idiot. I ruined our friendship, our dreams, got people killed, and hurt you."

Xena slowly turned around Gabrielle. "I told you Gabrielle, it takes two." Her eyes held her worry and desperation to help Gabrielle. "I didn't have to go fight Caesar."

Gabrielle shook her head. "I wanted you to stop him." She ran her right hand through her hair. "I let Hope live."

"Only because I pressured you instead of talking to you."

"Yeah but I trusted Kraftstar instead of you."

"Because I let you trust him."

"But I got Solan killed."

"No Hope did and I never supported you Gabrielle."

Gabrielle dropped her head against Xena's chest. "I betrayed you."

"And I betrayed you Gabrielle." Xena lifted her partner's head up. "I would have killed myself if you drank that poison."

The bard's eyes furrowed together. "You saw?"

"I was there, yes."

Gabrielle's eyes lowered as she tried to think. "I don't know why I didn't drink the poison. I wanted to end everything." She sighed. "I think what kept me going was I thought I should be tortured for what I did. By staying alive I'd feel that pain." Her eyes lifted up. "Didn't let myself even dare hope for our friendship to come back."

Xena studied her partner's eyes before saying anything. "It took me awhile before I realized it wasn't your fault for Solan's death." She paused. "At first I was angry at you for that but what I was truly angry about was losing you."

"What?" The bard shook her head.

"I know, it sounds weird." The warrior paused. "I was angry I lost you plus it felt like you took our friendship away when it was me. I was angry at you, myself, and Hope but I piled it all on you."

Gabrielle nodded slowly and closed her eyes again as she dropped her head on Xena's chest. "I thank Solan each living second for Illusia." Her eyes opened again as she gazed up to Xena. "And apologize for getting him killed. He had his whole life ahead and you as his mother."

"Gabrielle." Xena knelt down now with her hands holding Gabrielle's arms. "Listen to me, Hope robbed him, not you."

"She was my child." The bard started to cry and she looked away. "Hades, she looked exactly like me."

"That was Dahak's child." Xena grasped her partner's hands. "Dahak used you and used us." She started to feel her past angry bubbling up. But not anger at Gabrielle but at Dahak for doing this to them.

Gabrielle still didn't look to her partner while her tears came down. All she could do was remember when Dahak raped her in the temple. It came back strongly and caused her to shut her eyes tightly.

"Gabrielle, I'd give anything, anything to be able to go back and save you from it all." Xena squeezed Gabrielle's hands. "I wouldn't care if it cost my life, my soul, or our relationship, I'd just want to see you happy and never hurt."

"I wouldn't want you to." Gabrielle turned her head back to reveal her red eyes. "I want to be happy yes but I'll go through the pain if it meant having you in any fashion." She paused. "You are what makes me happy." Suddenly her grip on Xena's hands was powerful making her hands white as Xena's. "Please Xena, I only want you. I can't lose you... never."

"I know, I know." Xena smiled sadly. "I'm not going anywhere, inside of you is home for me."

Gabrielle released her warrior's hands and moved in for a powerful hug.

The warrior stayed kneeling as she held the smaller woman.

Both women had their heads buried into each other's necks with emotions rolling out in forms of tears. The past can hurt at times and sometimes the past can lose its power over people.

~*~*~*~

Xena slowly walked out of the stable after feeding her mare a few apples. As soon as she came out she spotted her partner talking to the regent. Turning her head to the right she saw Solari come walking and it made a grin spread across her lips. The warrior walked out into the open more and closer to Gabrielle with Ephiny.

Ephiny lowered her eyes to Gabrielle. "She's coming."

"Xena is here?"

The regent nodded. "She's right behind you."

Gabrielle grinned. "Ready?"

"Yeah, I'm going to get beaten for this." Ephiny chuckled while placing her right hand on Gabrielle's side.

Solari smiled to Xena. "Hey Xena."

"Hey Solari." The warrior's eyes flickered to Gabrielle then back to Solari. "Wanna find out who Gabrielle is going out with?" She nodded her head towards the regent and Queen.

The second in command turned her head to the right and saw her lover holding Gabrielle. She narrowed her eyes. "I don't think so."

"She's looking at us." Ephiny sighed and leaned in towards Gabrielle.

The bard closed her eyes slowly at feeling her Amazon's lips take hers.

Xena narrowed her eyes and sucked in a breath. Her mouth clamped shut tight while she watched Ephiny kiss her bard.

"She's dead," Solari growled. She went stomping towards her regent. "Ephiny?" she yelled.

"Later Eph." Gabrielle winked then quickly strolled off to catch up to her partner. She came up to Xena with a chuckle at hearing Solari talk to Ephiny.

Xena grinned while turning to walk off with her partner. "You'll hear about it later."

"I know." Gabrielle sighed. "Getting out of here while I can."

The warrior nodded and lifted her left hand to Gabrielle's back.

"Xena?"

"Mmm?"

"I'll tell you one thing." The bard glanced up with an evil grin. "Eph does not know

how to kiss."

The tall woman quickly looked down with a partially shocked expression. But slowly a grin crossed her lips. "She's only bad because you have the best."

"Now that's true." Gabrielle winked up to her best friend.

~*~*~*~

"What?!" Solari's arms crossed against her chest. "Hold on, explain to me why you and I have to be separated for two days?"

Ephiny scratched the back of her neck. "It's... complicated Solari."

The second in command stepped towards her regent. "Okay first I caught you kissing Gabrielle and now you're telling me you made a bet with *somebody* and you lost so we have to be separated for two days." She narrowed her eyes. "What's going on?"

"Solari."

Solari felt two strong hands grab her shoulders. She mumbled, "Not again." She whirled around saying, "Gabrielle-Gab..." A sheepish smile came over her lips when she noticed it wasn't the bard. "Hi Xena." Her eyes wavered to the right to see her Queen with a smirk.

Xena's hands dropped. "We have some good news."

Ephiny arched an eyebrow. "This will be good." She stepped closer to Solari.

Gabrielle took a step closer to Xena. "The bet is off."

The second in command turned her head towards Ephiny. "You made a bet with them?"

The regent gave a shy smile. "Yeah."

Solari sighed and stomped off.

Ephiny sighed in the middle of the food hut. "This isn't good."

"She'll stay mad at you for awhile?" Gabrielle was worried now.

"Nah." The Amazon shrugged her shoulders. "I told her you and I weren't really going out."

"Good." Gabrielle nodded.

Xena glanced at Gabrielle.

The bard looked up and read her friend's eyes to only nodded in understanding.

The warrior smiled and ambled off in the food hut.

"What just happened there?" Ephiny had a confused look.

The Queen gazed back to her regent. "What?"

Ephiny opened her mouth for a second, closed it, opened again, closed it again and shook her head. "Never mind." She chuckled.

"How's it going with getting Joan ready for the ritual?"

"Perfect." Ephiny smiled and crossed her arms against her chest. "Her sword is ready and we're getting a mask prepared now."

"What about leathers and feathers?" Gabrielle grinned.

The regent chuckled and answered, "She wants to keep her leathers so we're going to give her some feathers."

Gabrielle nodded seriously. "Good. So the ritual is tomorrow night?"

"Yes." Ephiny went serious herself. "And you're going to do the ritual. I'll brief you and make sure to wear your Amazon leathers."

"Sure, I know." The Queen chuckled and sighed. "Have you seen Ep? I haven't and I need to make sure she doesn't jump Xena."

"I did earlier." Ephiny turned her head to scan the food hut. A grin spread across her lips. "I'd say that's Ep there."

Gabrielle looked to her right to see Eponin dangle by her left ankle by Xena's hand. "Right." She ran her tongue along her molars. "Is there any sort of penalty I can give Ep for harassing a guest?"

"Definitely." Ephiny grinned. "Teach her a lesson too."

"I think I might." Gabrielle slowly strolled up towards her partner holding Eponin. Her hard green eyes lifted to Xena. "Drop her please."

Xena simply nodded and just let go of Eponin. Her hands crossed against her chest with a smirk forming. She knew her partner was about to inflict something on the weapons master.

The Queen took a step closer to the weapons master whom was on her butt glaring. "Eponin, try to jump the Nation's guest?"

Eponin's eyes widen. "I... it was a bet. You know that Gabrielle."

Gabrielle crossed her arms against her chest. "I don't care. Next time you make a bet make sure it does not include any guests of the Nation." She bent down to one knee to lean towards Eponin. "Nor my... best friend. Two weeks of patrol duty Ep." Gabrielle stood back up.

Eponin grumbled and slowly stood up. "Servers me right." She faced the poised Warrior Princess. "Sorry Xena." She held out her right arm.

A fine smile creased the warrior's lips and she took the offered arm. "It's alright. Amazons make to many bets."

"Tell me about it." Eponin chuckled still had her smile. "Check you later." She strolled off in the hut.

Gabrielle came up to her partner. "Sorry."

The older woman smiled down at Gabrielle. "Not your fault." Her left hand came up to the bard's shoulder. "Let's get something to eat, I'm starved."

"Amen to that." The bard laughed.

~*~*~*~

Gabrielle's eyes flew open while her heart pounded. She found herself extremely warm, practically on the brink of sweating. Carefully she slipped out of Xena's arms then she was off the bed. With a deep breath, she made her way to the saddlebag. Her mouth was increasingly dry. So reaching down she extracted a water skin and had a few sips. After the re-corked skin was in the saddlebag, she was making her way to the window.

The bard's arms crossed against her chest as she shaky breath escaped her lips. She stared out into the night of village. It was over three candlemarks since her and Xena had gone to bed. Her head was still a bit fuzzy from the effects the dream had on her body and mind.

Xena silently moved through the room to stand beside her partner. She just reappeared out of the darkness in only her leathers. "Dream?"

Gabrielle nodded. "Yeah." She ran her hand through her hair. "Hate dreams anymore."

"What was it about?" The warrior kept her gaze to the outside world.

"About me, being perfect enough for my family." The bard sighed and dropped her head. "I don't remember much." She lifted her eyes up again. "But I remember at the end of the dream I had to prove my beauty to father and Lila." She paused while still trying to recall the dream. "I had on this navy silk dress with white flowers all over, really pretty. And I came walking out over this green grass in front of father and Lila trying to look beautiful. That's when I woke up." She shook her head again. "I hate how mom and dad would always make me feel like I had to prove myself to them. By the way I dress, act, look, what I do... did you ever have that?" Gabrielle peered up to Xena.

"Yeah." Xena gave her attention to her partner. "Especially when I was younger. Toris every now and again would get angry with me. He'd try to hurt me back by saying I was too masculine. Girls shouldn't have so much strength, ride, know how to use a sword, or fight." She laughed low in sadness. "Toris would get so angry he'd just by the end call me a freak of nature." She shrugged her shoulders. "Fortunately Lyceus was always there to comfort me but eventually I wouldn't even go to Lyceus for help." Her eyes went back to the scene outside. "Mother, she never had time for any of us, so none of us got attention. I'd get so desperate for her attention at times that I tried proving myself to her. Yet she'd never notice."

The younger woman shifted closer to her warrior. She placed her right arm around Xena's waist. "I like you with the masculine side... it's not even that."

Xena's left arm came over Gabrielle's shoulders. She gazed down with confusion in her eyes.

Gabrielle smiled with her explanation coming out. "Toris was talking... smack."

The warrior chuckled with her partner.

The bard went serious again. "You're not masculine. You're just powerful." Gabrielle shrugged her shoulders. "Powerful... strong which isn't typical of women." She grinned a little with a roll of her eyes. "Typical being washing clothes and cooking." Her grin disappeared. "You're a warrior." She smiled warmly. "And to me you're perfect. A perfect contrast physically with muscles and smooth skin. And perfect mental contrast of being powerful but passionate inside." Gabrielle chuckled a little. "Wish I could have been there when Toris said those things to you. Would have loved to yell at him for it. But who wouldn't be jealous over perfection."

Xena quietly laughed. "You're bad." Then a warm smile eased its way across Xena's lips. "Thank you." She paused while collecting her thoughts knowing she was never good at this thing. "Only you Gabrielle, will I have accept everything about me."

"Like I said." Gabrielle smiled confidently. "Because I'm madly in-love with you, everything about you. Dark, light, and in between alike."

The warrior leaned over to kiss her best friend very gently. "Thank you." Her smile went a little sad. "What about your family?"

The small woman shrugged her shoulders. "I'll never win them over." Gabrielle sighed sadly. "I think it's gone from bad to worse since I left with you." Her eyes blurred out while she talked. "Now I travel with my midriff bare, a weapon, a Queen, a bard, all along with a dangerous ex-warlord." Her eyes raised up to Xena. "I've got a lot to prove." She sighed.

"Or none at all." Xena locked eyes with Gabrielle. "Who said you had to prove anything to your family? Your guilty conscious is about it." She grinned faintly. "You're too worried about proving yourself to people instead to yourself huh?"

The younger woman gazed away but back to Xena. "Yeah." She chuckled a little. "I thought I do the sensitive chats?"

"Yeah well, you're rubbing off on me." The tall woman was grinning but went serious. "And will you stop trying to prove yourself to me? You never had too."

A bashful smile was in Gabrielle's lips. "I'll try."

"Hey, if I wanted you to prove yourself to me you think I'd be in-love with you?" Xena arched an eyebrow as well.

"True." The bard corked her own eyebrow. "But I'll only stop if you do. I know you, you think you have to prove yourself to me too." She grinned. "At first I knew you weren't but after the first year I picked up on it."

"Yeah well, I can't help but prove myself to the best." Xena grinned. "I love a good challenge."

The Amazon Queen huffed while rolling her eyes. "We could be at this forever." She turned her body to Xena. Her right hand came up to Xena's chest. "Stop proving yourself to me because I want you to be yourself." She grinned. "You've got my

attention and love."

"Good." The warrior's eyes were extremely warm. Her hands came up to grasp Gabrielle's shoulders. "Gabrielle it comes down to, I own you so you have nothing to prove to me. Got me?"

"Yeah, I got you." Gabrielle grinned with her partner. "Gods, I'm loving this." She shook her head with a smile now. "Loving you more and more."

"I know the feeling." Xena leaned into to capture Gabrielle's lips in a loving kiss. She slowly pulled back. "Let's get some sleep huh?"

"Great idea." The bard walked over to the bed with her best friend.

Xena was in first on her back.

The younger woman crawled into the bed and on top of Xena. She settled there after placing a kiss to Xena's chest. Her eyes eased shut.

The warrior contently sighed and closed her eyes.

The dreams after that were peaceful to no extent.

Section 4

~*Part 10*~

"Hey lass? How I look?"

Gabrielle put her hands on her hips. "Good Joan, Amazon is you." She grinned and looked up a down her soon Amazon's length. "Very good."

Joan blushed faintly. "You think Aster will like this?"

"I'm sure she will." Her arms crossed against her chest. She shifted her wait to her right foot.

"Are you going to go get ready my Queen?" Ephiny glanced over to the bard.

"I was considering it." The Queen smirked. She was in the middle of the same hut she'd received her Amazon garb for Queen. It brought back bad memories.

The regent sighed and shifted the gauntlet over Joan's arm. "The ritual is going to be in like fifteen minutes. You need to get into your leathers."

Joan quickly corked an eyebrow. "Lass, I didn't know you had leathers."

Gabrielle chuckled lightly. "Yeah, I do." She sighed a bit sadly.

"You okay Gabrielle?" Ephiny gazed at her friend with a worried look.

"Yeah... yeah." The bard shrugged her shoulders. "Hut brings back old memories

huh?"

The regent studied her partner and she suddenly realized what memories those were. "They were a long time ago." Her eyes lifted to Joan. "What color feathers?"

"How about green? Bright green?"

"Something to match your eye color." Ephiny nodded and shifted through the hut to find those sorts of feathers. "Gabrielle?" She turned her head to her friend. "Did you and Xena ever talk about that time?"

"A little." Xena came in then put her hands on her partner's shoulders. "Unfortunately."

The Amazon Queen gazed up into warm blue eyes. "Have plenty of time now."

The warrior smiled. "Definitely." She squeezed her best friend's shoulders yet gazed over. "Joan, look good."

The Celtic warrior chuckled. "Thanks Xena. I try."

Gabrielle grinned a little. "It's the green eyes."

A quiet laugh came from the Celt as Ephiny came up behind to put feathers into her hair. "Green eyes are the best."

"They are." Xena smiled warmly.

Gabrielle peeked up to her warrior and she whispered, "Blue is better."

The Warrior Princess's blue eyes lowered to Gabrielle. "Don't be so sure."

"Gabrielle, you need to get ready." The regent gave a warning look.

"Alright, alright." Gabrielle sighed. "I'll go hop into my Amazon ruckus."

Ephiny glared now. "Ha, ha. Those are nice Amazon ruckus."

"Yeah yeah." The Queen smirked and turned to face Xena. "Hi."

Xena grinned. "I'll come help you." She turned to head out of the hut.

"Great." Gabrielle followed. "See you soon Joan."

"I can't wait lass." Joan smiled as Ephiny continued to feather her up.

~*~*~*~

Gabrielle reached over to get her mask she came over to the door. "Oh Hades, my necklace."

The warrior turned around. "Got it." She went to the table where her friend left it. She came up to Gabrielle. "Turn around."

The Amazon Queen turned her back to Xena. She felt cool metal fall against her chest.

Xena brushed her bard's hair out of the way and began to tie the necklace on.

"Okay... I gotta remember how to do this right." The Queen was trying to breathe calmly. "I know I'm going to forget something."

"No you won't." The warrior finished tying the necklace on. She brought Gabrielle's hair back and walked around to the front. "You'll be fine. I'll be right there beside you." She reached forward to adjust Gabrielle's necklace to lay perfect on her chest. "I promise."

The bard smiled warmly. "Thanks." She reached up to grasp Xena's larger hand. "I look fine."

The tall woman grinned. "The Queen has to look her best."

The Queen shook her head and sighed. "I don't know if I can handle not touching you tonight."

"You'll be fine."

"No I won't and you know it." Gabrielle cocked an eyebrow.

Xena sighed sadly. "Yeah I know, I won't survive the celebration either."

"So, meet you in the bushes a candlemark after the celebration begins."

Both the older woman's eyebrows shot up. "Gabrielle."

"I was kidding." The bard grinned. "Kinda."

The warrior sighed and brushed back Gabrielle's hair. "Come on, we can't be late."

"Right." Gabrielle went out of the door with her partner in a jog.

~*~*~*~

"Ready?" Ephiny slipped the mask over her head. In her left arm was a mask. She held up her right arm to Joan.

Joan let in a shaky breath. "Yeah." She took the regent's arm. "Let's go."

The regent nodded and walked out of the hut escorting the Celtic warrior. She came around a bend and into what was normally an open area. There in the sunset-lit area was the village of Amazons and a podium. On the podium stood the Amazon Queen, second in command, and the Warrior Princess. Between the podium and Ephiny with Joan were piles of Amazons.

Joan turned her head to the regent after seeing Gabrielle, she whispered, "She's beautiful."

"Gabrielle?"

The Celtic warrior nodded. "Yes."

Ephiny studied the sight of Xena's twinkling eyes on the Queen. "You're not the only

one that thinks so," she ushered.

The Celt chuckled and kept walking with her stomach turning.

As the pair walked through Amazons, the crowd would easily step out of the way.

Gabrielle's chest rose high while her hands went to her hips. She felt the feathers on her mask blowing in the wind. Her mask was over her face as was Solari's.

Xena stood a little off to the side with her arms against her chest.

"Why is Xena up there?" Joan glanced to Ephiny then back to the podium. "I know she's Xena partner but she isn't an Amazon."

"Well..." Ephiny took a deep breath. "She's Gabrielle Champion... protector. Besides..." She was grinning under her mask. "The Queen would kill me if I said her partner couldn't be up there with her."

The Celtic woman chuckled however went serious when they came to the steps of the podium.

Ephiny led Joan up the steps then in front of Gabrielle. She released the Celtic warrior there in front of Gabrielle. The regent after that walked over to Gabrielle's left side with the new mask still in her hands.

The Queen lowered her hands from her hips. She spoke loudly. "Joan of Gaul, you've come to this Nation as a stranger." She smiled under her mask. "You've lived with us for a time as a guest. In the process you only ended up in a... caper with the Queen." She saw Joan's grin. "Which I will always remain grateful for. In return I have offered you a caste as one of my Amazons and you've accepted it. So now I will bestow upon you with Artemis's approval the caste of an Amazon." She paused to breathe. "Now stand tall and proud Joan of Gaul for you will remain for eternity as one of my Amazons and as an Amazon of Artemis. Embrace your sisters as they will embrace you." The Queen face Ephiny.

The regent faced her Queen and held out the mask.

The Amazon Queen carefully took it and turned back to Joan. She held the mask high over Joan's head.

A roar of Amazon approval filled the air then went silent.

Slowly the Queen placed the mask over the Celtic warrior's head with a perfect fit.

The Amazons began to cheer.

Gabrielle reached up to push her mask back with a radiant smile.

Joan pushed her mask back with her excited smile. "This is great lass... I mean my Queen."

The Queen laughed and pulled her new Amazon in for a hug.

Joan hugged tightly back with a chuckle. When she pulled back she still had that huge smile. "I've got the jitters now my Queen."

The bard sighed with a smile. "Keep it as lass Joan." She winked and stepped back for Ephiny.

The regent pulled the new Amazon in for a hug. "Welcome home Joan."

Gabrielle nodded and ambled over to her partner. "This is wonderful."

"It is." Xena smiled and glanced back to Joan. "Be right back." She stepped up to the new Amazon.

~*~*~*~

"Hey want any port or wine?" Gabrielle bent down in front of her partner whom was sitting.

"No." Xena shook her head as she smiled. "Don't want to drown out my feelings."

It was night now and the celebration for the new Amazon had begun in full force.

The bard smiled. She still wore all of her Amazon garb including her mask on top of her head. "Alright. I think I may get some water. Want any?"

"I'll just have some of yours." The warrior evilly grinned.

Gabrielle quietly laughed. "Be back." She strolled away.

Xena watched with dark eyes. She smiled to herself and turned her gaze over to the dancing Amazons when Gabrielle disappeared.

Ephiny came over to sit beside Xena. "How's it going Xena?"

"Not bad." The warrior smiled and noticed the regent drinking wine. "How are you and Solari doing?"

"She's still a little peeved at me." The Amazon sighed. "She'll be alright in a few days."

"Good." Xena looked up and saw her best friend coming with a mug.

"Hey Eph." Gabrielle smiled warmly. "What you doing over here?"

The regent evilly grinned. "Talking to your woman." Suddenly her expression dropped as she realized what she said. She groaned and mumbled out, "I did it again."

The bard looked intently at her regent. She held her mug out to Xena. "Hold this for me for a sec."

The warrior took the mug and corked an eyebrow wondering what her bard was about to do.

Gabrielle took a step closer to the regent. She bent forward with her hands going to Ephiny's knees with a tight grip. "Ephiny, it's alright." She paused as a grin crossed her lips. "And Eph?"

Ephiny looked up into sparkling green eyes.

"She's not my woman. Xena is my... soulmate." Gabrielle patted the Amazon's knee and stood up again. She turned her head to Xena. "Feeling like dancing? I have some energy." She noticed the slow beat of music.

Xena stood after placing the mug on the ground. "Definitely." She'd heard the whole conversation and it caused her to shake.

The Queen walked out towards where the Amazons were slow dancing. It made her grin despite how shaky she felt. She turned around to face Xena.

The warrior smiled warmly, placed one hand on Gabrielle's waist, the other hand grasped Gabrielle's small hand.

Gabrielle placed her her free hand on the warrior's shoulder as they begun to move to the slow music. "I never had slow music for my ritual."

"That's because I asked for it lass." Joan grinned as she came around with Aster in her arms.

Gabrielle laughed and peered over to her Amazon. "You're great Joan. Good thinking."

The Celtic Amazon grinned. "Lass, I didn't know you and Xena danced together."

The bard shrugged her shoulders. "It's in our partnership."

"My lass." Joan chuckled. "You sure do have a lot to that partnership. Sounds like a real guid one."

Xena cut in now. "Trust me it is." She grinned with mischief to Joan and swirled away to get distance. "A true Amazon."

Gabrielle sighed. "I know... bothersome."

The warrior was still grinning. "Very."

The small woman sighed contently. "Well... we only have two more candlemarks to go."

Xena groaned quietly. "Don't remind me."

"I told you, the bushes."

"Gabrielle." The warrior's voice was deep.

"Or wait." Gabrielle chuckled with a warm smile.

The tall woman's lips crept into a smile. Slowly her head began to lean down close to Gabrielle's as the smile disappeared.

The bard had her eyes locked with her warrior's twinkling sky swirled eyes. Why was this feeling like the first kiss to come between them? She wasn't even sure if Xena was about to kiss her even though her pulse raced.

Xena's lips tugged with a smile. "I want too."

"I know." A fine smile was on the bard's lips. "Darn Amazons."

The warrior grinned but went a little serious. "Soulmate?"

"Yeah." Gabrielle's hand squeezed Xena's tightly. "Is that okay?"

"It's perfect." Xena's eyes warmed with depth. "Feels that way."

"It doesn't just feel that way. I know it's that way Xena." Gabrielle's radiant smile was on her lips for the second time. She whispered, "I love you."

"I love you too, forever." Xena closed her eyes and brought her head lower again.

The smaller woman closed her eyes with anticipation.

The music stopped.

Gabrielle opened her eyes to peer into amused blue ones.

Xena started to chuckle.

The bard laughed and shook her head. "Bad timing."

"Come on." The warrior stepped back to release her partner.

The pair walked back to the campfire they came from.

"Did you see that Eph?" Solari glanced to her regent. "I swear they almost kissed."

"You're seeing things Solari." Ephiny raised her mug to drink more wine.

The second in command huffed and walked off. "My bad."

The regent looked up with a hurt expression. "Solari?"

"I'm going to go find Ep." The second in command disappeared.

"Hades." Ephiny sighed sadly and brushed back her curly hair.

"What's going on?" Gabrielle looked to her regent with a worried expression.

"Solari just got mad at me again." Ephiny stood up. "I need to get her."

The Queen stepped in front of her friend. "Let me talk to her Eph." She let her breath out slowly. "I owe her an apology too. Okay? Just wait here and she'll be back." She smiled. "I guarantee."

"Alright, I trust you."

Gabrielle glanced up to her soulmate. "Keep ahold of her."

Xena grinned. "No problem."

The Queen strolled off to find her second in command.

Solari shook her head. "I don't know Ep. I'm really angry." She sighed. "Eph wouldn't tell me why she kissed Gabrielle."

"She didn't?" Eponin raised an eyebrow. "Why not?"

"I don't know." The second in command sighed and drank more of her wine.
"Confusing."

"Let me shed some light on it." Gabrielle reappeared in front of her two Amazons.

Solari narrowed her eyes slightly. "Come to kiss me now?"

The bard sighed sadly. "No Solari, we need to talk." Her eyes flickered over to her weapons master. "Eponin."

Eponin nodded and stood up. "See you Solari and Gabrielle."

"Bye Ep."

"Thank you Ep." Gabrielle crossed her arms against her chest. "I'm sorry Solari for everything."

The Amazon peered down into her mug. "What's going on?" She looked up with vulnerable eyes.

The Queen sighed and took a step closer. "You want to know why you're fighting with Eph?"

"Yesss." Solari shook her head. "I love her."

"I know." The small woman took another step and bent down before her Amazon.
"It's because I was a little angry you harassed Xena about whom I'm going out with." She sighed, dropped her eyes, but looked back up. "I should have talked to you instead of playing a trick. I asked Ephiny to kiss me to gear you up." She shrugged.
"Get you back for bothering Xena so much."

"For two people that aren't going out you two sure protect each other."

Gabrielle chuckled lightly. "Yeah, we do huh?"

"You sure you and Xena aren't..." Solari stopped herself knowing this is what got her here in the first place.

"Look." The Queen brought her hands to her second in command's knees. "Xena and I may be... we may not. Neither Xena nor I want to say yes or no right now. We're both trying to get things straightened out after what's been happening with Dahak." She paused. "Everybody will know what's going on when Xena and I are ready... maybe tonight... maybe next year. Whatever." She shrugged her shoulders. "We just want privacy to understand things."

"Sso, you both are... experimenting?" Solari arched an eyebrow.

The bard chuckled. "Yes, no, maybe so."

The second in command sighed. "Alright alright... I'll lay off."

"Thank you." Gabrielle smiled warmly. "And I apologize again about what happened with Ephiny. She's really upset but if I know Eph... she thinks she deserves it."

Solari shook her head. "Great, I need to talk to her."

"Definitely." The bard smiled while giving an innocent look. "So you forgive me?"

The Amazon laughed and nodded. "Yeah, sorry about bothering Xena."

"It's okay, but tell Xena. Trust me, she forgives easily."

"If you say so." Solari grinned.

"Yeah." Gabrielle sighed. "Come back with me and see Eph, please." She grinned.

"It's not everyday you have your Queen on her knees begging you."

The second in command laughed again and nodded. "Alright." She stood up with her mug and walked beside her friend. "Did Ep jump Xena?"

"Yeah but she didn't make it." Gabrielle grinned. "And she has patrol duty for two weeks."

"What? Why?" Solari arched an eyebrow.

"Because she harrassed my Champion and the Nation's guest."

Solari snickered. "Basically Ep was screwed from the beginning."

"Yup." Gabrielle grinned and turned her head away. She soon found twinkling blue eyes on her. She smiled warmly as a blush took over. She felt exedling hot now.

"Xena, when was the last time someone slept with you?"

The warrior slowly turned her head to the weapons master. "Awhile and no you can't." She narrowed her eyes.

Eponin laughed. "I was just joshin."

Xena raised an eyebrow. "You-"

"Better move away from my Champion Ep." The Queen stood with her hands on her hips. "Or you'll have three weeks of patrol duty."

The weapons master's mouth dropped. "I was just having a... friendly conversation with Xena."

"Right." Gabrielle smirked. "I heard the conversation."

Eponin sighed with a grin and scouted down the log. "You like threatening patrol duty."

The bard sat beside her soulmate. "Because I know how much Amazons hate it."

"Now that's not true, Teresa loves patrol duty." Eponin drank more of her wine.

"Really?" The Queen grinned. "I'll make sure you do patrol duty with Teresa so she can teach you to enjoy it."

The weapons master laughed. "Hey, never know."

"Xena?"

The warrior lifted her eyes to the second in command.

"Sorry about bantering you about Gabrielle." Solari held her hand out.

Xena took the offered hand and shook. "It's alright and thank you." She released the Amazon's arm.

Solari nodded and walked over to Ephiny. "Hey."

The regent smiled up to her second in command. "Hey."

"Seat taken?" Solari's lips tugged with a grin.

"Nope." Ephiny patted the spot beside her. "Pop a squat."

The second in command chuckled and sat down. "Thought you hated that phrase?"

"Nah." Ephiny grinned and drank a little of her wine. "Sorry about everything."

"S'alright." Solari sighed. "I had a hand in it."

The regent nodded and leaned forward to place a kiss on the other Amazon's cheek.

~*~*~*~

Joan laughed hard and sighed contently. "That was a guid caper lass."

Gabrielle nodded. "Tell me about it." She grinned a little. "You have to admit it was boring a little."

The Celtic's eyes widen. "Lass, you're kidding me right?" She was grinning now. "I will admit this Velasca woman was a little stupid but... hey she still threatened me life."

"Now have you all heard about Joan's dragons?" Gabrielle glanced to her Amazons in the group.

The group was comprised of Ephiny, Solari, the Queen, Joan, Aster, Eponin, and Xena.

Solari raised an eyebrow intently. "What about dragons?"

"Well..." The Queen's eyes averted to Joan. "Ask Joan about her dragons."

The Celtic Amazon soon found everybody's eyes on her. She sighed with a smile but went into her explanation.

Gabrielle lifted her eyes to her warrior. She whispered, "I'm having a hard time."

"I know." Xena didn't gaze down at her soulmate. "Those bushes are sounding-"

"Xena." The bard quietly laughed. "Mmm, are we risk takers?"

The warrior evilly grinned now. "Us, definitely."

"I'm gamed for public." Gabrielle grinned. "Definitely at this point." She'd been feeling warm all night due to her soulmate's presence.

"Same here." Xena grinned.

Joan was in the middle of her conversation when this happened. When it happened she stopped talking and gazed up to the soulmates. Everybody else in the group did with wide eyes.

Gabrielle was straddling Xena and leaned in to passionately kiss her warrior.

Solari laughed. "Well, that takes all the fun out of my bantering."

Joan sighed with a smile. "That's one good partnership."

Gabrielle pulled back with a smile. "Wanna try that dance again?"

Eponin sighed. "I need a woman." She chuckled.

Xena grinned. "Yesss." She stood up with Gabrielle.

The Queen took her soulmate's hand while walking through the group.

Aster smiled with a sigh. "Too cute." She glanced over to Eponin. "Ep, I suggest you visit Teresa." She winked and gazed at Joan. "Let's go make use of that slow dance."

Joan stood up. "I'm up for it lassie." She smiled.

The regent stood and held her hand to her second in command. "May I have this dance Solari?"

Solari actually felt herself blush. "Yes." She took the offered hand and was escorted to the dancing area with the slow beat.

The weapons master groaned. "Teresa?" She stood and went to search out the Amazon.

Xena's smile was one of her rare ones. She lowered her head closer to Gabrielle's. "How you feel?"

"Incredible. You?"

"Quite the same." The warrior squeezed Gabrielle's hand and released it. Her arms circled the Queen's hips. "Relax into me."

The bard took a second but stepped closer and dropped her head onto Xena's chest. Her arms shifted to wrap around her soulmate's stomach. She gazed around in the dancing area to see Solari with Ephiny and Joan with Aster. Her eyes slowly closed. "Why didn't we do this sooner?"

Xena carefully placed the side of her head on Gabrielle's head. "Waiting for the right time." Her eyes closed.

The soulmates continued to shift with the slow music becoming lost in it and each other.

Gabrielle sighed happily. "I'm glad we took this slow."

"Me too." The warrior smiled and slowly opened her eyes. "Take a look at this."

The small woman opened her eyes and started to chuckle. "That's really cute." She studied her weapons master dancing with Teresa. "They fit well."

"Yeah." The older woman closed her eyes again. "One thing left."

"Mmm, yeah." Gabrielle's drifted close. "We own each other's souls, hearts, and bodies."

Xena grinned and lifted her head. "Just have to take each other."

Gabrielle lifted her head and smiled. "That's the fun part." She pulled Xena's head down for a long kiss.

~*~*~*~

Gabrielle felt herself hard pressed against the hut's door. "Xena," she pleaded.

Xena leaned down to kiss her soulmate deeply. She lifted her head back up slowly with a grin and dark eyes.

The pair were still outside and the party had just ended.

The bard's eyes went dark as well. She opened the door and went inside with her partner. She took a her mask off and placed it on the table.

Xena closed the door, turned around, came up to her soulmate and grasped her sides. She pressed the smaller woman against the wall. She brought her lips down to Gabrielle's neck.

The younger woman dropped her head back. "Oh gods." She closed her eyes and whispered, "It's the right time."

The warrior lifted her head up with a grin but serious eyes. "Does it feel like it?"

"Gods yes." Gabrielle grinned. "You?"

"Oh yeah." Xena leaned down to seal her lips with Gabrielle's.

The bard slipped her tongue into the warroir's mouth. Her tongue grazing over Xena's. When she pulled back she tried to breathe. "You're... in control."

"You sure?" The older woman's hands came to Gabrielle's stomach .

"Yesss." Gabrielle pulled Xena's head down. "Take me Xena. I'm yours." She kissed the warrior. And Xena's searing kiss was life being breathed into her. Gabrielle only wanted to take all of Xena.

The dark woman pulled back and moved her hand to press against the bard's center.

Gabrielle's eyes shut tightly. She soon was disappearing into her soulmate's touch and world.

But it never stopped there for Xena followed suit. She never felt this before between her and another lover. She then knew at that point there was no going back. She would find only the most perfect acceptance from Gabrielle.

Gabrielle herself would never find another place of perfection, only in Xena. This was her soulmate she'd give anything to protect and love. She would be left always desiring her soulmate.

~*Part 11*~

"Lass, let me know if you want another partner for those capers." Joan's lips shifted into a smile.

Gabrielle nodded. "I will." Her eyes lifted to her soulmate. "But, I think I've got everything right here." Her left hand patted Xena's stomach.

The warrior arched an eyebrow. "To say the least," she whispered. She sensed Gabrielle's hands squeezing her stomach in answer before it left.

"Yes I can see you have a guid partnership." The Celtic Amazon grinned. "I'm hoping Aster and I will too."

"What's this about me?" Aster came strolling up with her hands on her hips.

"Notten." Joan grinned and hugged Aster.

Aster chuckled and released the Celtic Amazon. "Uh huh." She turned her head to the Queen and warrior. "Leaving?"

"Afraid so." Gabrielle sighed. "Back to the old grind."

"I highly doubt it will be... quite the same." Ephiny walked up with a smug look.

Xena crossed her arms against her chest and asked, "Are you trying to insinuate something Ephiny?"

"Not a thing Xena... not a thing."

Solari came up behind her regent and brought an arm around Ephiny's waist. "You two migrating out?"

"Yup." The Queen grinned.

The second in command raised an eyebrow. "Got the treaties done and signed?"

"Yup, did that yesterday." Gabrielle nodded. "Eph made sure of that."

"Hades yes." Ephiny shook her head. "I don't wanna hear from our allies about not having the treaties renewed... especially the centaurs."

The bard chuckled. "They would have lived." She sighed. "Okay, Xena and I wanted to get out of here."

Ephiny arched an eyebrow. "Got ants in your skirt Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle went really red.

"Nothing like the ones you and Solari have." Xena gave a death look to the regent.

The regent's eyebrows went up high. "Wahoo, if looks could kill." She gazed at her Queen. "I knew she was protective but gods."

"Ah yeah." Gabrielle grinned. "Asked her to be around you guys." She snickered and leaned back into her warrior.

Xena brought her right arm around Gabrielle's waist. She had stoic expression while standing around the Amazons.

Joan chuckled. "Maybe not a guid partnership more like imposing partnership."

Xena chuckled with her soulmate. "Just a little Joan."

Argo whined and nudged her owner. She moved her head sharply to jerk the reins in Xena's hands.

"I agree Argo."

Gabrielle laughed and stepped away from her partner. "Okay, we're out of here." She went to Ephiny to hug her first. After that she made her rounds on the hugs. "Now where is Ep?"

"Coming!" The weapons master grinned. "I can't miss out on one of the Queen's hugs."

The Queen laughed and stepped forward to pull her weapons master in for a hug. She pulled back and gazed around at her Amazons. "See you guys later."

Joan sighed. "Come back soon huh?"

"Of course, I can't stay away to long."

Xena started walking with Argo and glanced back. "Come on Gabrielle."

The bard chuckled and jogged up to her lover. "Bye, take care!"

"Bye Gabrielle!" The Amazons all laughed after saying it in unison.

Joan waved. "Bye Xena!"

The warrior flashed a smile back. "Take care Joan. Thanks for taking care of Gabrielle."

"No problem." Joan smiled.

"Bye Xena." That came from the rest of the Amazons.

"Hey Joan!" Gabrielle gazed back as she got farther away. "Stay away from the dragons!"

Celtic Amazon laughed hard. "I'll try my Queen!" She evilly grinned now. "And you watch out for them horses lass!"

The Queen's eyes widen and she went bright red. She started to fall into her laughter.

Xena laughed with her and pulled her partner in close.

Solari sighed happily and studied the soulmates. She turned her head to Ephiny. "They're just two flowers blossoming in the sun."

Ephiny groaned. "Come on poet." She grabbed the second in command's hand.

Solari laughed.

Joan sighed. "That really was a guid caper with that lass and her partner."

Aster chuckled and wrapped her arm around the new Amazon's waist.

The young woman sighed with happiness. "That was a fun."

"A regular riot." Xena grinned down at her soulmate.

The bard quietly laughed and stopped walking to face her soulmate.

Xena did the same and smiled warmly to her partner. "Seems like only a dream."

Gabrielle smiled warmly while bring her hands to her warrior's hips. "Nope, only reality." She brought Xena's head down for a soul-filling kiss.

The two soulmates became lost into each other's worlds. Neither would ever know a greater need or desire then each other.

The End

Section 2 End Note:

I wrote this story during my vacation. And the point between where Xena convinces Gabrielle to ride Argo to the point where Gabrielle gives Xena the flint stones in the cave, I lost. I lost around five real good pages on my Word97. It was heart breaking and I almost cried in upset and frustration in the middle of my vacation. *laugh*

So if there is ever a bard that goes through something like that, you have my deepest sympathy . It's heart breaking to lose five pages with no back up. And I apologizes deeply to any of my readers if that part of my story seems a little out of funk. It's not my original and I tried to type it out of memory but it isn't exact. So I'm sorry about that and thought I better let that be known.

Red Hope