

~ Love Sick ~

by Red Hope

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Subtext ~ Yes, but it's the main topic of story here.

Violence ~ None planned.

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"Come on, get in there," ordered the warrior.

"I'm movin', I'm movin'," called back the bard as she raced into the cave with her pack.

The lightening flashed brightly while the thunder sounded across the lands.

Xena rushed in next with a pack but stopped directly under the overhang of the cave.
"That's a mean storm."

Gabrielle brushed back her soaked bangs, stood still in the dark cave, but finally moved to her best friend when the lightening lit things up. "What we going to do about firewood?"

The Warrior Princess turned around and stared into the black cave. "Let's hope there's... some in here," she whispered. "We need to get you out of those wet clothes... especially with how cold it is."

"I second that." The bard folded her arms and felt her body going cold despite she'd just been running earlier.

The lightening exploded.

"There's some," confirmed the warrior when she saw the dry wood over to the right.
"Stay here."

The Amazon Queen stood in front of the entrance but the cold wind blew on her back and she shivered. "Xena, it's really cold," she whispered.

"Just hold on," promised the older woman. She quickly piled an armload of wood into her arms and carried it more to the center of the cave.

Gabrielle watched Xena put the fire together in small increments from the lightening.

Suddenly, sparks reappeared in the dark cave and landed on the firewood, then the sparks grew into flames and a low fire had begun.

"Come on." Xena held her hand up as she squatted next to the fire.

The bard shuffled over and took the larger hand.

Xena helped her partner sit down beside the fire but she couldn't help but notice the faint blue tint in Gabrielle's lips. After an inward sigh, she went behind her friend and removed the pack. "Just warm up huh?"

"All our stuff is soaked?" inquired the smaller woman.

"Let me look... maybe we'll be in luck." Yet the warrior knew, considering how hard it was raining while they were running, she doubted that any of their stuff was dry. She placed her pack along with Gabrielle's against the cavern wall. She started pulling things out- she checked them.

Everything had been swimming in water, they might as well have been in an ocean.

The Amazon Queen glanced sidelong and watched as Xena lifted up a pouch of herbs.

The warrior turned the herb pouch up side down and green, leafy water just poured out. "Damn it," she snarled and squeezed the leather pouch with all her arm strength.

Gabrielle sighed and came over to her friend. "So, our packs are water skins huh?" she joked in prayer to lighten the air.

Xena sighed and shook her head. "Pretty much." She slipped the leather pouch back into its pack but untied the two bedrolls and furs from both packs. "Lay these out close to the fire; hopefully they'll dry by later."

The younger woman took them and strolled near the fire. She unrolled them and placed them close by. "What you think we should do about dinner?"

"Feel like being a fruit-atarian tonight?" The Warrior Princess now laid out all the items from inside the packs in rows of lines. Hopefully all the stuff would dry out sooner than later.

"Is that about it?" inquired the bard.

Xena held up a block of cheese. "Plus a cheese-atarian."

Gabrielle shrugged. "Better than nothing." She stood, facing her friend, and her back to the fire. "What we going to do about our wet clothes?"

The Warrior Princess peered up at her best friend- she grinned. "Have you ever been to a nude colony?"

Gabrielle gaped.

Well this wasn't quite what the bard had in mind, it was a bit nerve racking at first. Here she was, sitting under one dried fur, near the fire, and in the nude. The pure stark naked buff with notta strip of cloth on her. She was happy to have the fur covering her.

Just earlier Xena had been moving around in the nude as if she did it on a daily basis in a town. But thankfully, for the bard, Xena's leathers had dried and she'd put them back on. The warrior now sat a bit away sharpening her sword.

The bard peered out towards the mouth of the cave and watched the lightening flash. "Stupid rain," she muttered and sighed. She peered down at her hands in her lap and just wished she had her quill and scrolls to write. She lifted her eyes and stared into the fire.

A tiny bead of sweat developed on the bard's brow. It grew larger then it slowly rolled down the smooth temple, across the cheek, and fell off her jaw. Another little bead grew on the other side of her brow and begun the same journey. Then a third, followed by a fourth, a fifth even, sixth... eighth, ninth, tenth...

The Amazon Queen was about to pull the fur away but recalled her... dilemma. "Xena?"

The warrior peered up in question.

"Come here for a second."

Xena put her sword and whetstone aside. She walked over to her friend. "What's up?"

Gabrielle closed her eyes as she felt the inside of herself go into a low roast sensation. "Touch my forehead," she whispered.

The older woman had already noted the beads of sweat. Carefully, she pressed the palm of her hand against her partner's forehead. Her eyes widened. "You're burning up."

"That's what I thought," whispered the bard. "I feel like I'm in the fire now," she added.

"Damn it," growled the warrior for the second time of the evening. "You're getting a fever."

"Wonderful," muttered the bard. She opened her eyes and felt herself faintly go lightheaded. "This is going to be bad," she whispered by the way she had begun to feel.

"Let me see if a bedroll is dry enough. You need to lie down." Xena walked over to the opposite side of the fire and touched both bedrolls and found one fairly dry. She picked it up and strolled back over.

Gabrielle got onto the bedroll once her partner laid it out close to the fire.

The warrior knelt beside her best friend. "Get some rest huh?"

"Yeah." The younger woman smiled reassuringly. "It'll probably be gone tomorrow morning."

"Let's hope so." Xena brushed back her friend's now sweat soaked bangs. "Are you too hot?"

"No, I'll be fine," uttered the bard.

"Just get some sleep, please." Xena leaned forward and kissed softly her companion's flushed cheek. "You don't need to get sick."

"I'll be fine," promised the bard.

"Go to sleep," ordered the older woman with a smile. She got up to her feet but muttered, "Musta been the fruit-atarian night." She went back to her sword and whetstone.

"It was the cheese-atarian," Gabrielle joked back.

"Go to sleep," called Xena.

The Amazon Queen chuckled and closed her eyes slowly. It didn't take her long to fall asleep since she was exhausted between today's traveling and running through the rainstorm. And well, the fever itself was draining her.

Xena sat up and glanced at her friend next to her. She noted how her friend was curled up in a ball. She glanced at the fire, which was almost dead. She growled at herself, got up, and put wood in the fire.

The fire came back to life in good time.

The warrior guessed it to be about five candlemarks before dawn. She was hesitant about getting back under her fur and bedroll.

Gabrielle's eyes gradually opened and peered up at the warrior. "Xena?" she whispered.

"Hey, I'm right here." The tall woman bent down. "How you feeling?"

"I'm really cold," replied the bard.

But when Xena touched her friend's forehead, she found it still hot yet Gabrielle laid there shaking and shivering. "Want me to sleep with you?" she asked quietly not completely sure if her friend would agree; especially since Gabrielle still wore nothing.

The small woman nodded before she asked, "What time is it?"

"Real early," answered Xena as she stood up. She grabbed her other fur and came back over. She placed it on top of her friend then carefully crawled under the two blankets. As cautiously as she could, Xena wrapped her top arm over her friend's stomach.

Gabrielle followed with the signs; she rested her head on her friend's bottom arm and pressed her back into the warm leathers. One last big chill rolled up and down her spine then left her.

"How's that feel?"

"A lot better," answered the Amazon Queen.

"Good, try going back to sleep." Xena remained calm as possible despite how much every fiber was triggered by the nude body so close to hers. My own nude idea coming back on me, mentally joked the warrior. At least she had her leathers, which blocked the warm skin from touching her stomach or breasts fully.

Gabrielle suddenly pressed her butt hard in Xena's center.

The warrior clamped her jaw down as her eyes widened. Okay... this was a bad idea. Now what was she suppose to do with a butt sticking out bard? Absolutely... nothing. She could only pray that sleep would take her soon, real soon.

Xena gradually opened her eyes and looked out of the cave; she noted it was early morning. She sighed and considered if she should get up or not. But then she looked down when she heard Gabrielle lightly moan and rolled over.

The bard now faced Xena and started to snuggle into her.

The warrior just lifted an eyebrow at this and instead of pulling back; she carefully tightened her arms around her best friend. After a heavy sigh, she decided to sleep longer knowing it was best for Gabrielle.

It wasn't for another three candelmarks until the warrior woke back up. When she had finally fully awoken, she took a look down at her friend.

Gabrielle had moved again and was now on her back, legs sprawled, and mouth open. She wasn't snoring, which was rare to even begin with so Xena knew it was because she couldn't breathe from her nose.

The Warrior Princess lifted her left hand and brought it over her friend's nose. She couldn't feel any heat or breathing but could from her mouth. "Head congestion," she grumbled. She then moved her hand up more and brought it close to Gabrielle's forehead but without touching her. She couldn't sense anymore heat radiating off Gabrielle's forehead like last night. She sighed in relief.

Xena now looked back at the cave then over to the now dry bags. She sighed knowing she needed to find something for breakfast. She carefully slipped out of the furs and went to put her armor on quietly. Within five minutes, the warrior was heading out of the cave with her sword unsheathed.

The Amazon Queen rolled onto her side and opened her eyes slowly. She felt nice and warm under the furs except for her right leg, which was sticking out from under the furs. She grumbled and pulled her leg back under the furs. She then scanned the cave and realized Xena had left, probably to get food.

"Means I have fifteen more minutes of sleep," decided the worn bard. She closed her eyes but soon realized her mouth was pretty dry. She licked her lips and closed her mouth yet her nose didn't bring in any air. She quickly opened her mouth again to breathe and also grumbled. "I rather be feverish than not breathing out of my nose," she partially growled. With a big huff, she closed her eyes and tried to sneak in a few more minutes of sleep before Xena showed.

The Warrior Princess did return within about fifteen minutes with three cleaned quails and a couple of apples. She had a feeling her partner wouldn't be too hungry but still would want something. She decided not to bother her friend now and knew a better technique to wake her. So she skewered the quails then leaned the skew against the cavern wall while taking a minute to restart the fire. After the fire was going, she placed the birds over it to cook.

After she'd done so, she already saw her partner moving some in the bed. Xena glanced over while kneeling beside the fire.

Gabrielle had pushed her furs around some and had mistakenly moved them down to almost reveal the top of her breasts.

The warrior chuckled some and shook her head while turning her head away. Standing back up, she started for the leather packs but stopped midway and glanced at the bard when she moaned some. She knew her friend would wake up any second.

The bard rolled back onto her side again, facing Xena and the cave entrance.

The warrior quickly moved to the bags and bent down, her back now to Gabrielle.

The Amazon Queen opened her eyes and stared at her friend's back. She smiled at Xena's return and she closed her eyes tightly then stretched her legs out and her arms.

"Good morning," greeted Xena. She finally turned around and smiled at her.

"Mornin'." The bard took a deep breath and faintly picked up the scent of quail even with her nose mostly congested. "Are you cooking something?"

The warrior grinned immediately then replied, "Yes, some quail. Are you hungry?"

"Yeah, I think so." Gabrielle was starting to sit up but stopped midway when she remembered she had no clothes on still. She quickly pulled the fur up to her neck and

a blush crept up her neck.

The Warrior Princess chuckled deeply and said, "Hold on." She stood up and went over to where Gabrielle's clothes rested near the fire. She carefully picked them up and crossed over to her partner. "Here."

The bard coughed some and took the clothes with her right hand. "Thanks."

Xena thought for a moment then said, "I'll just... go check on the quail." After Gabrielle's sheepish nod, she went to the fire with her back to Gabrielle.

The bard sighed in relief and slipped out of the furs, she felt the chill rise up her back. She quickly slipped her skirt on, adjusted it, then put on her green halter top.

The warrior timed it mentally and knew the halter was laced up to about the middle. So she stood up and came over to her friend while saying, "Quail are almost finished."

Gabrielle peered up from her halter to her partner. "Sounds good." She glanced past the warrior and saw the two apples on the ground. "Found some apples too?"

"Yeah but I think they're still a bit ripe," replied the warrior. She folded her arms over her chest and leaned against her right leg. "How you feel?"

Gabrielle laced the string two more times then tied it off. She finally answered back, "Better, I think." She did a mental check and realized she could breathe a little better out of her nose but just the right side. She took a deep breath and found it pretty easy. Then she swallowed but suddenly she felt her throat tighten. Awe Hades a sore throat, she mentally complained. "A lot better," she half lied.

The warrior raised an eyebrow then said, "I'll be surer after you eat."

The bard almost whined but stopped herself, not wanting to worry her friend. "Not a problem." She gave a bright grin.

Xena raised an eyebrow but turned around to check the birds again.

Gabrielle's grin suddenly fell and her shoulders slumped. I suck at lying, especially to Xena.

Once the birds were cooked enough, the pair sat down quietly together and ate their breakfast.

The bard mainly picked at her bird and ate very small pieces. She then noted Xena's very curious look on her so she quickly shoved a huge piece of meat into her mouth.

The warrior just stared at her, watching very intently.

Gabrielle smiled and chewed the meat; she then forced herself to swallow it despite the pain. After she had it down, she held back her cough and said, "Good quail."

"Uh huh." Xena returned her attention to her quail, it was the second one and it'd only

taken her half the time to eat two birds than it took Gabrielle to eat one. After her partner was finished her quail, she picked up the two apples. "Want one?"

Gabrielle quickly shook her head knowing the stiff fruit would really hurt her throat. "No, no... quail was plenty."

Xena held an apple in each hand. She tossed one up then caught it. "Save 'em for later. You think you can travel?"

"Oh yeah," promised the bard. "I know you want to get to the village to get Argo and our stuff."

"Yeah," agreed the warrior. "We'll take it slow because the village isn't too far. If you want, we can stay the night there."

"We'll see...." Gabrielle shrugged then patted her friend's leg. "Let's get going, kinda late as it is." She stood up and went to the packs where her staff was too.

Xena watched intently and a bit surprised about her friend's persistence. She stood up too then joined her friend in getting ready.

After about a candlemark, they were about halfway to the village that Argo was being kept. Their packs were pretty much light now since most of it was ruined from the storm. The walk to the village was a lot slower than normal for them but neither minded it either.

"I guess we'll need to stop in the market for food huh?"

"Yeah since the storm ruined our supplies." Xena glanced at her friend then back at the road. "They have a small market, hopefully what we need." She paused then asked, "How you feel?"

"I'm okay," reassured the bard.

Xena slightly bit her lower lip then quietly said, "You were pretty worn out last night between yesterday and that fever."

"Yeah I know, but the good night's rest helped."

"Mmmm." The warrior wasn't satisfied because she knew her friend was still sick and didn't care to admit it.

Gabrielle knew her friend didn't believe her so she suddenly stopped and grabbed the warrior's arm, making her stop.

Xena curiously looked at her friend.

"Xena, I'm okay... honestly." The bard smiled warmly, released the strong arm, and dropped her head against her staff. "And I appreciate everything you did last night."

The Warrior Princess now folded her arms and tried to act stoic.

"I'm serious," urged the bard, "it meant a lot you stayed with me last night." And without another word, she stood up on her tiptoes and leaned in to her friend. Gabrielle gently placed a kiss to her friend's left cheek then lowered back down flat on her feet and continued traveling.

Xena blinked as she felt her cheek suddenly warm up in the formation of Gabrielle's lips. She cursed herself if she was blushing at this point. She forced the shiver away then urged herself to turn and followed after the bard. Once she came along side the bard, she thought of what to say and all she could say was, "You're welcome."

Gabrielle smiled at the response yet remained quiet.

It wasn't long before they made it into the village. They went directly to the stables that Argo had been staying in for the past four days. When they arrived at the stable, they found the young man that attended the stables. Xena paid him the other half of the dinars then requested for her saddlebags.

The young man had disappeared back into the stable where there was a locked room. He soon returned with the heavy saddlebags.

Gabrielle was about to take them but Xena had stepped ahead of her and took them. She mentally cursed her stubborn partner for being so protective yet deeper inside; she truly enjoyed that about Xena.

Xena then led the way to the stall where Argo waited patiently.

Argo greeted her master with a very happy whine.

The warrior couldn't hold back her smile at seeing her mare. She pushed her way into the stall and quickly began tacking her up after she'd placed the saddlebags onto the stall door.

The Amazon Queen however remained off to one side, not in the stall and leaning against her staff. She felt rather exhausted from today's walk and she rested her head against her staff. She closed her eyes and took a deep swallow but quickly stopped when her throat ached. She sighed and tried to swallow more carefully this time.

The warrior was busy tacking her horse but not busy enough to see Gabrielle's troubles. She made a mental note to discuss it later. "So you think you can travel a little more or want to stay for the night?"

Gabrielle didn't open her eyes but did reply, "I think travel another candlemark."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, positive."

Xena licked her lips and thought they could get further if she got Gabrielle on Argo. Although she knew just how hard that would be between riding the mare and not letting Gabrielle think it was because she was still sick. She carefully chose her words before

she spoke them. "Would you like to ride Argo?"

The Amazon Queen opened her eyes gradually while she considered the offer. "No... I think I'm fine."

The warrior looked away and continued tightening up the crown on the mare's face. "I meant, you and me, Gabrielle. Then we could cover a little more ground."

Gabrielle hadn't realized the ride meant Xena in the saddle too. Those types of rides were few and far between. "Can I sit in the front?"

Xena bit back her grin at how her offer completely changed the bard's decision. "If that's where you'd like to sit, that's fine." She now looked up with a very serious expression even though she was grinning on the inside. "Sound okay?"

Gabrielle nodded then smiled.

The Warrior Princess took Argo's saddlebags and lashed them to the saddle. "Hand me your pack."

The bard swung off her pack and scooted closer to the stall door. She held it out to her best friend.

Xena snatched it and took out the contents, putting them in their various places. She then rolled up the pack and lashed it to the saddlebags. After that, she did the same with her own pack but also had to tie down the furs and bedrolls not wanting to really bother with them right now. Then she and Argo came out of the stall and headed for the exit of the stables.

Gabrielle followed a little ways behind. Once they were outside, she went up beside Xena and question, "Ready?"

The warrior stopped beside the stable and grinned at her partner. "As soon as I get the supplies."

"Oh Hades, almost forgot." The bard laughed at herself. "Sorry."

"It's okay. Why don't you wait here and I'll get them. It won't take me long."

Gabrielle faintly nodded. She was a bit relieved she could take a slight break. "You sure though?"

Xena had already started walking off but called, "Positive."

The bard stood there and watched her friend slowly disappear ahead down the dirt street. She then peered up at the mare. "I missed yah, girl."

The mare whined in laughter.

"I did to," argued the bard. "I'm being honest."

Argo huffed and nudged the smaller woman at her shoulder.

"Yeah, I know you're kidding."

The mare showed the front of her teeth in a sort of smile. She then sighed and looked at the spot where her master had disappeared.

"You know... its nice being sick around her."

Argo quickly looked back at the bard, question in her eyes.

"Haven't you been sick around her, Argo? She gets all worried and extra sweet." The Amazon Queen started to snicker some. "It's so rare."

The mare snickered in laughter and shook her head.

"Yeah... it's nice." The bard sighed contently and dropped her head against the staff. She then suddenly coughed but it only hurt her throat more and she actually heard some mucus in the cough. "Oh gods not good," she grumbled.

The mare lifted her head up quickly and took a side step away.

"Ooooh come back over here... I'm not going to make you sick." The small bard waited but Argo didn't move back any closer. "Hey, horses can't get a human cold."

The horse puckered her lips out in seeming thought then she stepped back into her original spot.

"Thanks," deadpanned Gabrielle. She sighed and lowered her head back to her staff. She closed her eyes and slowly began to doze off without knowing it.

Xena hadn't taken very long, as planned she was returning in ten minutes. In her right hand was a bag of various food supplies. She then started to slow down once she came closer and realized her best friend had actually fallen asleep standing up. "Gods she must be exhausted," she muttered. She took a deep breath then decided to let the bard think she hadn't got caught so she called, "Hey Gabrielle, I got something good for you."

The young bard instantly lifted her head at hearing her friend's words. "Oh... uh what'd you get?"

The Warrior Princess approached while she shifted through the bag and pulled out an item that had cloth over it. She handed it to her partner.

Gabrielle took it and carefully unfolded it to find nutbread. "Oh gods, Xena..." She looked up with the largest smile on her face. "Thank you." She then almost frowned at realizing her throat problem. She held back her disappointment as she quickly stepped forward and hugged the warrior.

Xena was surprised by the response yet didn't hesitate to hug back. "Come on," she said after the hug, "we should get going." She quickly put all the items away along

with the nutbread on the top for tonight. She then mounted the mare with ease, took the reins, and then held her hand out to the bard.

Gabrielle offered her staff.

The warrior turned in her saddle and reached back to tie the staff down for now. She then turned back to her partner then helped her up into the front of the saddle. "Comfortable?"

The Amazon Queen shifted a little each way to get situated then finally answered, "I am now."

The grinning warrior chuckled and checked her boots in the stirrups. Happy with everything being right, she tapped Argo's sides and went to the exit of the village.

Gabrielle sighed happily in her comfortable spot. She slightly shifted again and became even more comfortable. She swayed in the saddle and the warmth from Xena started to relax her a great deal. "Thank you again for the nutbread."

"You're welcome... thought it'd be nice for tonight."

If I can swallow it, mentally added the bard. "Yeah it will be." She then realized she was a bit thirsty from still partially breathing from her mouth on occasions. "Xena, is there a waterskin handy?"

"Yeah hold on." The warrior waited until they were out of the village. "Take the reins for me."

The bard brought her hands close to Xena's on the reins but not without her lower palms brushing against Xena's fingers.

The Warrior Princess slightly turned in the saddle and pulled out a skin from a side pocket. She uncorked it and held it out in front of the bard. She made a quick trade for the reins.

Gabrielle took a long drink and paused for about a minute then took another yet quick drink. "Thanks." She corked the skin back up and held it out towards her friend's hands. She made a trade for the reins now.

The warrior quickly replaced the skin and finally took control of Argo once more. "So... do you feel like visiting the Amazons?"

The small woman suddenly smiled at the offer. "Yeah, that'd be really nice. I kind of thought we were heading in that direction."

Xena chuckled quietly to herself. "Yes, we are."

"Mmmm... be nice to see Ephiny," mentioned the Amazon Queen. "I really miss talking with her."

"I know... I'm not much for conversation huh?"

Gabrielle shook her head and replied, "You've gotten better over the two years, Xena." A huge grin spread across her expression. "You've been managing to give me full, complex sentences versus those one word sentences."

Xena just grunted in response.

"Or those too."

The warrior felt a grin tug at her lips. "After so many years of silence it's hard to talk again."

"But you'd think you'd have plenty to talk about with so many years," reminded the bard.

"True but then again, those years are not exactly entertaining."

Gabrielle shrugged then countered, "Who said they had to be entertaining?"

The warrior didn't really respond but did consider her friend's words.

The bard moved her right hand from the saddle horn to Xena's right leg. "I enjoy it when you talk... no matter what it's about."

"Thank you," whispered the warrior.

Gabrielle squeezed the leg tightly then loosened up. "I mean, you have to get sick of my rambling."

As if on cue, Xena's devilish grin appeared. "You said it... not me."

The bard immediately rammed her partner with her left elbow. "You're a brat, you know."

The older woman gave a deep laugh and stated, "I learned it from the best."

"Whatever," grumbled the bard. "You know what though?"

"What's that?"

Gabrielle dropped her head back, her head resting back against her friend's chest.

Xena found this a curious position but looked down nonetheless.

"You see, you might not talk a whole lot but..." The bard trailed off as a sly grin creased her lips. "But I can read your facial expressions so well and that says so much right there."

Xena shook her head and looked down but a grin did form. "Can't say I have too many people that can read me that well, Gabrielle. I guess after two years, you've come to figure me out pretty well."

"Yeah well, that's pretty much it," agreed the bard. "I think your mother is the only other one."

"Mmmm," agreed the warrior.

Gabrielle closed her eyes slowly but she still had her head resting back against her partner's chest. "I've enjoyed the past two years with you," she whispered.

"And so have I," warmly whispered back Xena. For emphasis, she lowered her head back down and softly kissed her friend's forehead.

Gabrielle's eyes flew open to stare up into very rare warm sky eyes. She couldn't control the smile that developed on her face.

Xena slowly mirrored back that same smile and she felt almost ready to hug her friend tightly but resisted.

The bard contently closed her eyes and decided not to move her head especially since it didn't seem to bother her partner. She felt so at ease that she was starting to slip away into her sleep. Suddenly she started to slide off to her right and she jumped back into her position, her heart pounding.

"Hey, hey relax," soothed Xena. "Come here." She freed her left hand and pulled her friend in closer. "Why don't you sleep for awhile huh?"

"No... no I'm okay," brushed off the bard. "Besides I'll really fall off next time and make a complete ass out of myself."

The older woman couldn't help but chuckle some. "I'll hold on to you, you'll be fine."

"No, don't want you worrying about me like that," argued Gabrielle. She grasped Xena's arm and was trying to pull it back in protest and it was not working. "Xena, please... its okay." For a response, the strong arm tightened even more against her, which only caused her to push back into Xena tighter. Well this can't be all that bad, she considered, I pull and she pulls me in closer. She had a devilish grin and she tried even harder to pull Xena's arm free.

"Gabrielle, stop." The Warrior Princess forced her partner in closer until their bodies were pressed tightly together.

"Fine," hotly stated the bard when she was only pretending to act annoyed. "But I'm not going to sleep."

"Yes you are."

Gabrielle huffed and folded her arms over her chest.

Xena licked her lips slightly then took a moment to decide on a tactic. She took a deep breath and growled, "Go to sleep."

The bard's eyes widened at not only hearing her partner growl but felt the growl shake her body. "Um... I feel tired; I think I'll sleep a little."

"Good idea," agreed the smirking warrior. "I won't let go either," she promised and squeezed Gabrielle's stomach for reassurance.

"Thank you." Gabrielle finally relaxed and let the swaying calm her and Xena's warmth surrounded her. It was not long before she fell asleep, her head turning to the right and falling against Xena's shoulder.

The warrior just smiled at that as she'd been watching her friend slip away. But after she felt Gabrielle was well asleep, she decided to do some inspection. She carefully slipped the reins into her left hand that was holding onto Gabrielle. She then slowly lifted her right hand up towards Gabrielle's throat.

Gabrielle now turned her head so that she faced forward but her head rested directly between Xena's breasts.

Xena bit her lower lip and sucked in her breath. She relaxed herself and then gradually placed her hand against Gabrielle's throat. She didn't squeeze knowing it would quickly wake her friend. So she had to keep her hand pressed close enough but not too tightly. Now she had to wait until her friend would swallow in her sleep. She didn't have to wait too long for Gabrielle to swallow and she noted how hard it was for the bard to swallow.

"Sore throat," she whispered, her eyes narrowed. "I wonder...." She licked her lips as she pulled her hand away. She lifted her hand until she came to Gabrielle's mouth. She kept her fingers tightly closed as she felt her friend exhale. Then when she knew Gabrielle was about to inhale, she covered Gabrielle's open mouth. She waited about two seconds then quickly pulled her hand away and dropping it to the saddle.

The bard suddenly started coughing from the brief lack of air. She slightly opened her eyes yet closed them just as quickly and returned to her dreamscape.

Xena had heard the wet cough and knew her suspicions were true, Gabrielle was still sick. She then sensed the bard stirring more.

Gabrielle had shifted again in the saddle some to get more comfortable. She also had moved her right hand from Argo's mane to Xena's right hand that was on the horn.

The Warrior Princess felt her friend's hand lace through hers and she groaned. That'll teach me, she decided with a small laugh. But now she had a slight issue since she needed to better direct Argo but really could not with the reins in her left hand against Gabrielle's side. With a big sigh and a grin in her expression, she held onto Gabrielle's hand and slowly wrapped both of their arms against Gabrielle's stomach. She was now able to move her left hand, which held the reins.

For the rest of the afternoon, the small bard slept while Xena took care of the riding. It wasn't until about two candlemarks before sunset did she decide it was best to start looking for a good camp area. It so happened that Gabrielle had decided to wake up from her nap.

The Amazon Queen first woke herself up with a good stretch. Her legs stretched out and down while she reached for the sky with her hands. She gave a small yawn then settled back down in the saddle.

"Nice nap?"

Gabrielle was rubbing her stomach, just above Xena's arm. "Yeah, it was nice." She then furrowed her eyebrows at a random thought. My hand was holding Xena's hand around my waist. She blinked once she thought about it. Oh gods, I must have.... And suddenly a blush formed on Gabrielle's face and she was very happy Xena couldn't see it.

"Still waking up huh?"

The bard tried not to laugh but replied, "Yeah, sorry. You know me." Now she kind of expected Xena to have removed her arm yet hadn't so far. "The first part of my dream was real weird too."

"Yeah about what?"

"I was swimming in the water or something, trying to swim to the top because I was about to run out of air." Gabrielle laughed some and finished off her story. "I thought I almost ran out of air and started coughing but made the top just in time."

The biggest grin creased Xena's lips as she tried incredibly hard not to laugh. "Well... glad you made it to the top."

"Thanks," deadpanned the bard.

Xena closed her eyes as a laughing expression took over her face and she held her breath.

"So uh... we looking for a camp?" the bard had noticed their shadows were rather long ahead of them. She didn't need to look behind to see the setting sun to know it wasn't long before night.

The warrior finally calmed down and replied, "Yeah. Let me know if you spot one."

Gabrielle almost fell out of the saddle at those words. "Wwwwooooo, you asking for my opinion on a campsite for tonight?"

"Why not?" countered the warrior.

"You never ask me for my opinion. You just... you know suddenly walk off the road and we end up in this perfect campsite."

Xena shook her head. "Well, you never express your opinion in the matter."

"You never ask," protested the bard.

"Ha Gabrielle, you have an opinion about eeeverything else. So I figured you'd let me know your opinion about the campsite since you do about all the rest." She considered that for a moment then added, "As a matter of fact, I have yet to hear a complaint about my campsite selections."

"Yeah well... it's something you can do right," teased the Amazon Queen. "I guess its just one of those many skills of yours, Xena." Suddenly she felt her stomach squeezed really tightly. "I was just teasing!"

Xena had a grin on her face as she lowered her head down close to Gabrielle's left ear. "Be careful what you tease me about," she whispered sensually, "or I'll show you another skill of mine."

Gabrielle instantly straightened up and turned her head to look side long at her friend. "Xena, I don't think so."

The Warrior Princess let a deep laugh come up and she stated, "And what did you think I meant?"

"Uhhhh..." The blushing bard turned her head away.

"I see." The warrior slowly felt her friend relax back into her body. She tried to reassure Gabrielle by giving her a gentle squeeze.

The bard smiled to herself and reached up to pat Xena's arm. "How about that camp?" she joked.

Xena grinned and asked, "You want to pick it out?"

"Hades no, I have a good thing going with you picking it out."

The older woman laughed then suddenly pulled Argo off into an open area of the forest. It wasn't long before she saw the forest open up into what would make a great campsite. "Look good?"

"Excellent."

The grinning warrior pulled her mare to a halt on the edge of the open area. "You got the wood?"

Gabrielle nodded, yawned then carefully slipped out of the saddle with her friend's help.

"Want your staff?"

The bard peered at her staff and really thought about it. "Nah... I'll scream." She threw her hand at it then walked off into the woods.

The Warrior Princess shook her head at her friend's relax attitude but she knew Gabrielle was also right. It wouldn't take anything but a yell or scream for her to come after the bard. While her partner was getting firewood, she took care of setting up the

campsite. She knew she'd have it finished before Gabrielle could pick up three pieces of wood.

It wasn't anymore then about twenty minutes until the pair had finished preparing for the night. After Gabrielle had the fire started, Xena was already off on a hunt for tonight's dinner. The warrior then soon returned with two rabbits for the evening. The bard was about to take the rabbits but then quietly asked, "Feel like soup?"

The warrior stared down at the bard, who was kneeling next to the fire with her cooking supplies. Her throat must be really bothering her. She slowly nodded. "You get the water and boil it. I'll take care of cutting up the rabbits."

"Thank you." Gabrielle stood up with the cooking pot and held out a small wood board for cutting the rabbits. "There is a lake near or something?"

The Warrior Princess lifted her left hand and pointed down to her right. "Not that far." She then took the cutting board.

"I'll be back." Gabrielle gave a quick smile then headed for the water source.

Xena briefly watched then disappeared into the forest, a bit far from the camp not to let the scent of the rabbits to filter into the camp. After she'd further cleaned up the rabbits then cut the meat up, she walked back into the camp with a board full of meat and a bloody dagger. She found her best friend sitting beside the fire again with a pot of water. "Here's the meat."

Gabrielle reached up and received the cutting board. "It shouldn't be too long."

Xena nodded then said, "I'm going to clean my dagger."

"Alright." While her partner went to the lake, she took a moment to select what items to put into the soup. She picked out thyme for an herb, dried carrots, and dried onions. She then weeded through the cooking pack even more looking for some kind of thickening. She finally decided on a creamy, pasty like powder. She placed all of the items beside the cutting board then glanced at the rabbit meat. She furrowed her eyebrows when she realized her partner had chopped up the meat a lot finer than what she typically had done in the past. I wonder why she did that instead of thick chunks like she likes it.

Xena had already returned from the lake and saw Gabrielle studying the rabbit meat in curiosity, almost like something was wrong with it. "Meat looks okay?" she asked from across the camp.

The bard quickly looked over at her and smiled softly. "Yeah, looks perfect...thanks."

The warrior grinned as she came over with the now clean blade. "You were looking at it like something was funny." She went to her saddlebags that leaned against a tree trunk.

"No, no... it's fine."

Xena slipped her dagger away then removed Argo's brush. She went over to her horse and slowly brushed her down.

Gabrielle turned her head away but stared at the pot again. She knew it was time to throw in the ingredients. She stood up with the board of rabbit meat and pushed it all into the pot. She then grabbed all of the dried vegetables and poured them in too. Last she added in the thickening then used her long wooden spoon to give it a good stir.

The pair remained silent while dinner was brewing. Xena continued brushing down her mare while Gabrielle kept an eye on the soup. After awhile, she went over to the saddlebags to pull out two bowls and spoons.

"We'll have that nutbread afterwards, right?" inquired the warrior.

The Amazon Queen almost groaned at the thought of her sore throat and nutbread. "Yeah, sounds fine."

Xena grinned to herself because she knew her partner wanted the nutbread but couldn't handle it with her throat. "Unless you're full afterwards...." She trailed off however looked back at her friend over her shoulder.

Gabrielle peered up and shyly smiled. "I'm really not that hungry."

Xena turned her head around because she knew she'd just given her friend a way out of the dilemma. "How about we see how you feel after, okay?"

"Fine by me." The young woman now returned her attention to the soup. "I hope there's no hedbane in there either."

The Warrior Princess was grinning ear to ear as she responded, "That wouldn't be any fun if there wasn't."

"Xena," warned the bard. "No wonder you're so intent on getting me to eat it," she teased.

"You figured me out," taunted the warrior.

"Are you serious? There's really hedbane in there?"

Xena finally laughed and shook her head, her back still to Gabrielle. "No, Gabrielle." She stroked the brush down the side of Argo while muttering, "Just wanted to hear you call me beautiful again."

"What?" called the bard.

"Nothing," yelled Xena.

Gabrielle narrowed her eyes as she glared at her friend. "I'm not deaf, yah know."

"What?" yelled the warrior even louder.

"Cut that out."

"Huh?" yelled Xena.

Gabrielle gritted her teeth and saw how Xena's shoulders were shaking from her laughing. She got up and came right up behind her best friend. "Can you hear me now?" she yelled into the warrior's ear.

Xena closed her eyes while she waited her ears to stop ringing. She held up her hands as she turned around and opened her eyes again. "Could you be a little louder, please?" she teased and lowered her hands with the brush still in her right hand.

The bard ground her teeth some, opened her mouth, and prepared to yell even louder.

Xena suddenly lowered her head down, her face directly in Gabrielle's face. "I dare yah," she threatened yet a nasty smirk formed in her expression, her eyes twinkling.

Gabrielle's mouth remained open but nothing came out.

"You better close your mouth before a horse fly lands in it," she whispered.

The bard's eyes flickered over to the back of Argo and she saw a fly buzz around her tail. She slowly closed her mouth then her eyes focused back on Xena.

Xena licked her lips, knowing she could really torment her best friend at this point. She gradually moved her head forward but before she said anything, she noticed the soup was starting to boil. She brushed her lips against the bard's ear then whispered, "You know what I think?"

Gabrielle swallowed despite the pain and felt a chill ripple up her back. "What?" she barely said.

"I think...." Xena paused, knowing the wait would drive her partner crazy. "I think you need to check the soup, it's boiling over."

"Oh Hades!" The Amazon Queen spun around and almost lost her balance between everything. She recovered herself and raced over to the boiling pot. Without thinking about it, she just reached out to grab the handle that was hanging over the fire. She felt her hand scream out in pain and she instinctively let go of it, she was about to yell as she lost it. Yet she stopped when she saw a much larger hand grab onto the handle in midair and lower it down to the ground.

"Be careful," warned Xena. She quickly dropped the handle after the pot was on the ground. She then grabbed her friend's fisted hand. "Let me look."

Gabrielle had her eyes closed as she forced herself to open her hand. She sucked in her breath as two fingers gently probed the burn mark.

"Looks like it could fill up with liquid later." Xena noted her friend finally looking down at her hand. "Let's put some salve on it just to be safe."

The bard faintly nodded and she was biting her lip from trying not to get upset.

The warrior saw how her partner's mood had suddenly changed. "I'll be right back." She hurried over to the saddlebags and pulled out the salve from the medical kit.

Gabrielle had walked over a little ways and met Xena halfway.

The Warrior Princess gently rubbed the salve into her friend's palm. "How's that feel?"

Gabrielle only nodded her head, which was hung low.

Xena sighed and put the salve away then came back to her partner. "Hey, it's alright huh? Not worth crying over spilled soup?" She could only hope the joke would lighten the mood.

"Would have been spilled soup," muttered the bard. She finally lowered her hand back to her side.

"It's was my fault for distracting you."

"Not your fault," brushed off the bard. She went over to the pot to start filling the bowls.

Xena quickly came over and offered, "Let me handle it huh?"

Gabrielle sadly nodded and sat down on the ground after walking a little ways from the fire.

The warrior filled her bowl higher than Gabrielle's. She also tried to put less meat in her partner's bowl versus her own. She then grabbed the two spoons off of the cutting board and slipped them into the bowls. She then offered her partner her bowl of soup. She sat down beside her then quietly started eating the soup.

Gabrielle had noted the less amount of soup but was grateful for it. She took her time eating it by making it seem like it was extremely hot and blowing on it. "How is it?" she asked before putting the spoonful into her mouth.

"Really good," complimented the warrior.

"Good." The small woman continued eating her soup, happy with how it came out. And for the first time, she realized her best friend was sitting beside her for dinner. Normally Xena would sit a little further away or at the other end of the log, something along those lines. But tonight, Xena's knee was pressing against her own and she liked that.

The Warrior Princess soon finished her soup and decided she was up for a second bowl. So she returned to the soup pot and filled up her bowl halfway but made sure to leave some incase Gabrielle would want some. She carefully sat down back in her spot again and continued with her meal.

"You're really hungry," commented the bard.

"I think it's because of last night," mentioned Xena.

Gabrielle chuckled. "Oh you mean because of the fruit and cheese huh?"

"Mmmm," agreed Xena. She then slowly raised an eyebrow at the other woman. "You're not hungry huh?"

The small bard peered down into her bowl and saw it was pretty well filled. "I think it's because I didn't do much today... other than sleep," she joked.

"Oh... is that why?" Xena quickly looked away and shoved her spoonful into her mouth.

The Amazon Queen sighed as she lifted up a spoonful of her soup. She did like how the soup soothed her throat however for some reason it was slowly starting to taste funny. She couldn't quite figure out why either but she ignored it and kept eating.

The warrior didn't take long to finish off her second bowl then she placed her bowl to the side on the ground. "That was great."

Gabrielle slightly grinned and asked, "Was good huh?"

"Oh yeah." The warrior gave a huge grin and teased, "That little boiling over seemed to do the trick."

"Funny." The bard laughed some at her then returned to her soup.

Xena contently sighed then leaned back, her hands swinging back to land palm down on the ground. "How about I take care of the dishes while you finish up. Sound alright?"

"I can get them," protested Gabrielle.

"No, go ahead and finish up. By the time you're done, I'll have the stuff clean." Xena stood up, relieved to get space from Gabrielle. Now she remembered why she always kept a certain distance from her. She shook her head and tried to finally recover her control of her body's tingling sensations. She quickly picked up the pot with the large ladle in it, the cutting board, and her own bowl with spoon. She hurried down to the lake.

After Xena had left, the bard finally felt all the tingling in her body turn into one big shiver. She shook it off and tried to return to her soup. And Xena was right, by the time she was back with the clean dishes; Gabrielle was finished with her soup.

After the pair took care of the dishes and put set everything out near the fire to dry, they settled down into separate spots to relax. Xena had her sword and whetstone like always and she saw Gabrielle was about work on her scrolls but realized her hand still bothered her.

Xena sighed at her bard's delay so she asked, "How about a back rub?"

The bard was milling through her scrolls near the saddlebags but stopped when she heard the offer. She turned her head to her partner. "Seriously?"

"Yeah, sure." The warrior placed her sword and whetstone down off to her right side. "Come here." She patted the ground in front of her.

The smaller woman went to settle down in the spot in front of her friend. She felt strong hands grasp her shoulders and made her lean back some. She then felt the large hands knead her shoulders starting out a bit light then going tougher. She looked over to Argo and called, "See girl, she is nicer when you're sick." Then her shoulders were squeezed really hard.

"Sick huh?"

"Um... well what I meant was still recovering from being sick."

"Hmmm." The warrior grinned while she continued the kneading on her partner's shoulders. "I guess you don't want any nutbread either?"

"Maybe a little later... still full. Did you want some?"

Xena chuckled and replied, "Not until you do. I got it for you."

"Yeah I know... and I'm offering."

"No thank you," sincerely replied the warrior. "Relax more," she whispered.

Gabrielle sighed then tried to calm down and closed her eyes as well.

Xena slid her hands down to Gabrielle's back and tried to massage her back even with the halter top in the way. "Tired?"

"Yeah, some what." Just at the mention of sleep, Gabrielle yawned. She shook her head and said, "I don't know why I'm so tired."

"Still recovering huh?"

Gabrielle picked up on the slightly teasing tone yet she also knew her friend was serious. "Yeah I guess so." She sighed contently then quietly asked, "How you feel?"

"Not bad... not quite tired."

"Yeah... didn't think so," agreed the bard. "Mmmm." She smiled some and added, "This is nice."

"Well... I figured you shouldn't write so I thought this would keep you happy."

"Thanks," grumbled the bard.

Xena chuckled lightly then lowered her hands further to get Gabrielle's lower back.

"Besides, you're a little more important than my sword."

"Oh you're full of all types of flattery tonight. Aren't you?"

Xena laughed and responded, "All for you."

"Geeeee... you spoil me, Xena."

The warrior sighed at her partner's words and she knew Gabrielle was getting sleepy. "How about I spoil you some more huh?"

"Oh yeah? With what?"

Xena felt a grin creased her lips as she came to the end of her massage. "Lay down, first." She slid her hands back up and grasped the same small shoulders and pushed down.

Gabrielle followed the signal and slid forward on the ground until she could rest her head in Xena's lap. "Xena, can I ask something before you.... spoil me?"

"What's that?" inquired the grinning warrior but she lost her grin when she saw the serious look given to her. "What is it?" she asked more seriously this time.

"I'm not complaining or anything, okay?" She stopped and saw Xena's confirmation. "But... why are we suddenly so... like touchy and all? In the two years we've been traveling together we've touched as much as we've touched all together today."

Xena thought about it and decided to make light of it for now. She lowered her head down close to Gabrielle's.

The bard stared up into vivid sky eyes as she waited forever for the answer.

"It's because you're sick," finally replied the warrior.

"I was," corrected Gabrielle.

Xena licked her lips faintly and thought of what to say. She grinned devilishly as she lowered her head even more and whispered, "You suck at lying, Gabrielle... especially to me." She received no verbal response but saw how Gabrielle closed her eyes and started to laugh.

Gabrielle then started to have trouble laughing as her laughter turned into coughs.

"Hey hey settle down," whispered the warrior.

Gabrielle patted her chest as she tried to control the coughing fit. She finally stopped but her breathing became rasped and her throat sounded filled with mucus.

"Need to sit up?" Xena had lifted her head back up and was about to sit Gabrielle up.

"No, no... hold on." The Amazon Queen patted her chest then cleared her throat out.

She suddenly received some mucus in her mouth and she swallowed it back down.

"Gabrielle, you didn't just..."

The bard sheepishly grinned. "Sorry... I didn't want to spit it around here."

"Gaaaabrielleeee," drew out the warrior, "you better next time," she growled.

"Sorry," squeaked the bard.

Xena shook her head some but asked, "Okay now?"

"Yeah yeah, I'm fine." The small woman cleared her throat a little then asked, "What was the spoiling?"

The Warrior Princess grinned at her partner's impatience and responded, "Okay, just close your eyes."

"Aaaalright."

Xena waited until she didn't see any spring eyes staring up at her. She took a deep breath and slowly started out with a quiet humming. Gradually the humming grew louder then Xena began singing in a language Gabrielle could not understand but it did not matter to her.

Xena continued to sing to her partner and noticed Gabrielle was slowly falling asleep as she planned. And as she sung her best friend to sleep, she lost herself into her own song. Her eyes closed and she let the song come from inside her heart. And when it ended, she gradually opened her eyes and peered down at the bard.

Gabrielle was now laying on her side, her breathing very slow, and her mouth a little open.

A very soft smile creased Xena's lips. She shifted her right hand off her leg and carefully brushed back Gabrielle's bangs. A faint moan drifted between Gabrielle's lips and Xena could tell her partner was faintly awake.

"Xena?" whispered a sleepy bard.

"Yes?" The warrior was still sweeping back her friend's bangs.

"Thank you."

"What for?" uttered the older woman. She never felt so comfortable in this position with her partner.

"Singing... the... song," muttered the Amazon Queen.

"You're welcome."

The bard slipped her right hand up and grasped her friend's knee. She felt rather

sleepy but she wasn't quite ready to drift away. She was enjoying where her head was resting at this moment. She also could smell the leather from Xena's outfit and she always loved that scent.

Xena finally let out a deep sigh then bent forward some. "Ready for bed?" she whispered.

"I'm comfortable right here," muttered the bard.

Xena's eyebrows shot up at the response, she hadn't really expected it. "Gabrielle," she drew out, "I'm not a bed."

"I noticed," muffled the Queen, "you're more comfortable."

If it was possible, Xena's eyebrows lifted even higher. "The things you say when you're tired, Gabrielle."

The Amazon Queen quietly giggled and uttered, "It's my flu."

"Yes, and you need to stay warm so you don't get worse."

"Not going to move," protested Gabrielle. To urge her point more, she tightened her hand on Xena's knee.

The Warrior Princess released a long, deep breath. "Gabrielle, you need to stay warm tonight."

Gabrielle grumbled and decided to make her final decision by bringing both arms up and around her partner's waist. She locked her arms around Xena and then contently sighed.

"Ggggabrielleeeee," growled the older woman. "You know that's not going to stop me."

"You have to be nice to me... I'm still sick."

Xena laughed quietly and shook her head at her friend. "Alright then." She suddenly reached forward and grabbed at her partner's sides.

Gabrielle's eyes flew open and she yelped when Xena began tickling her. "Xena, no!" she screamed and let go of the warrior. She tried to grab at Xena's hands but was too late and Xena had jumped up onto her feet.

Xena looked down and regarded her partner with a smirk. She noted how the upset green eyes were studying her.

"That was unfair," complained the tired Queen.

"How about I make it up to you?"

"Oooh?" asked the curious bard.

The warrior winked and walked off but not without saying, "Don't move."

"No problem," called Gabrielle.

Xena gathered up the two sets of bedrolls and furs. She went over by the fire and carefully unrolled them both. She glanced over at Gabrielle and noted how she was curled up in a ball, probably from being cold. "You alright?" she asked.

"Yeah." Gabrielle felt a chill ripple up her back.

The warrior had noticed it, and she became worried again. She quickly crossed over and knelt down. "Come here." She slipped her arms under her best friend then stood up with her.

The small bard opened her eyes.

Xena smiled down at Gabrielle but she now realized Gabrielle's eyes were blood shot. "Are your eyes bothering you?"

"Yeah a little... why?"

"They're red."

The Amazon Queen closed her eyes and felt it more soothing than keeping them open. "Stupid flu thing."

The older woman shook her head and decided it was definitely time for bed. She crossed over to the bedrolls. She carefully lowered her partner into the bedroll that was closest to the fire. She then knelt down at Gabrielle's feet and started taking her boots off.

"I can do that," protested Gabrielle.

"I've got it." Xena finished unlacing one boot and pulled it off. She then made quick work of the second one, tossing it aside with the other one. She then sat back on the ground and pulled a fur over. She threw it over her head then lowered it over Gabrielle. "Comfortable?"

"Very... but not as comfortable as earlier."

Xena didn't respond to that but did brush back her friend's bangs. "Go to sleep."

The bard faintly nodded and slipped her hand out from under the furs. She caught Xena's hand in her own and gave it a gentle squeeze.

The warrior had a sad smile yet squeezed her friend's hand back. She then stood up while releasing the smaller hand. She was walking around the camp while taking the time to unhook her weapons and armor. After she decided everything was okay around the camp, she returned to the bedrolls and pulled off her body armor. She silently placed it on the ground near her bedroll then lowered her weapons right next to her bed roll. She then knelt down to start on her boots.

It wasn't long before she had her boots off and next to her armor. She then sighed deeply and crawled under her furs. Tonight she decided to sleep directly next to her partner instead of leaving her alone. Typically Xena would sleep a little further away but not tonight, she was too concerned.

Xena just laid there, on her back, and her arms under her head. She stared up at the sky that had no clouds and only twinkling stars. It was funny to think that last night it was pouring down rain with lightening and thunder but now it was a beautiful but cool night.

A very long, drawn out sigh escaped her and she took a quick glance at her friend. Gabrielle was on her right side, facing her best friend but she was out cold. The flu more than likely wearing her out. That flu really worried Xena, she wasn't expecting it to take so much out of Gabrielle. Then again, she wasn't expecting Gabrielle to try so hard to pretend like she was fine. She didn't understand why Gabrielle insisted she was fine.

As Xena kept thinking about it, she grunted at the idea that it might have been Gabrielle's own stubborn side. Or it could have been the bard trying to show no weaknesses to her. She sighed at the thought of Gabrielle trying so hard to impress her or even be like her. When it came to being sick, Xena always believed it was the one time to let everything go and just spend the time to get better. She knew too well how a small flu could turn into a serious sickness and kill people.

The warrior also thought more about Gabrielle's earlier question tonight. Why am I so touchy, feel now? she wondered to herself. Xena wrote it off as the flu. For some reason, whenever somebody was sick Xena did not care about her stoic side anymore. She had to drop it in order to take care of the person but she only did this to her family members. She'd already considered Gabrielle a younger sister a long time ago and to her, this was taking care of her little sister.

Yet thinking more and more about it, Xena couldn't recall being quite this tender with either of her brothers or mother when they'd get sick. She simply shrugged it off and rolled onto her side, now facing her best friend. She studied the bard for several minutes then slowly closed her eyes. She finally drifted asleep.

The pair slept quietly most of the night until about four candlemarks before sunrise. Xena had opened her eyes when she heard a little whimpering. Gabrielle was still in the same position but balled up now. She was also shaking and still whimpering.

Xena sighed and reached across with her left hand. She pressed her hand against her partner's forehead and instantly her hand was coated in sweat. "Hades another fever." She didn't think it would have started again but it had started. She threw off her fur and felt the cool air grab at her skin and make her shiver. She hastily moved while lifting her best friend's fur. She scooted under it and pulled Gabrielle into her body.

"Xena?" whimpered the bard.

"Ssssh, go to sleep."

"I'm rrrreallyyy c-c-c-cold." Gabrielle then shivered and tried to bury herself into Xena's body.

"I know." The warrior helped her partner get closer and she wrapped her arms around her. She pulled her in as close as she could and then wrapped her legs over Gabrielle's legs. "Better?"

The bard faintly nodded and closed her sore eyes again. She felt incredibly warm in Xena's arm.

Xena sighed in relief but she was already hot from Gabrielle. The bard's body felt like a hot ember from a fire yet she was shivering. The thought of an ember made Xena look across to the fire and she realized the fire was starting to die out. She decided she wouldn't bother with it since it was more important to stay with her friend.

"Go to sleep, Gabrielle."

The Amazon Queen kissed Xena's chest and whispered, "I will. Thank you."

Xena sighed and snuggled her head closer to her partner's. "You're welcome," she muttered.

The friends slowly slipped back into their dreamscapes. The rest of the evening was quiet now and Gabrielle remained rather warm despite her fever. In the morning, Xena woke up to the sunset when the sun's rays pierced through the trees and onto her face. She lifted her head some and peered down at her friend. Since she had Gabrielle so close to her own body and could already tell the fever was either down or gone. Gabrielle's body wasn't as hot as it was last night. She also noticed there wasn't any perspiration touching her neck from Gabrielle's forehead like last night.

Xena now debated whether to get up and prepare breakfast for her friend or to keep resting. She decided to give it another candlemark then would get up. The candlemark passed by while they slept and Xena woke up a little past a candlemark. She urged herself to get up but slowly and carefully so she wouldn't wake up her partner.

It wasn't long before the warrior had the fire going again and a breakfast prepared. She could only hope that Gabrielle would eat it since she would need the energy. She had yet to decide whether they should take the risk to travel to the Amazons or to a nearby village or even stay here for another day. She couldn't make that decision until she knew how her friend was feeling. Then again, she also knew Gabrielle would say to keep traveling to the Amazons not matter her condition.

Xena was now sitting on a rock a little ways from her best friend. She was busy sharpening her sword yet she kept an eye on Gabrielle. She'd already put her boots back on, armor, and hooked her chakram into place. It wasn't until about another candlemark that her friend started to shifted. She lowered her sword and whet stone and just waited.

The Amazon Queen opened her eyes and instantly realized her best friend was gone. "Xena?"

"Hey." The warrior smiled across to her best friend.

The bard sadly smiled at her partner. She soon found her partner kneeling right beside her.

"How you feel?" Xena had already sheathed her sword and in her left hand was her whetstone.

"I'm okay," whispered the bard. She then coughed, which caused her to close her eyes.

The Warrior Princess sighed at how Gabrielle's cough was still wet and maybe even worse. "Seriously, how you feel?"

Gabrielle sighed and tried to do a mental inspection of her body. Okay so her throat hurt more now, her cough was still wet but she didn't have a fever now. "Fever is gone," she whispered.

"Uh huh. How's your throat?"

The small woman shyly grinned and said, "Great." But the 'great' came out a little rasped.

"Do me a favor," started Xena, "try talking louder."

Oh great she already knows, complained the bard. "I can talk louder," just rasped the bard.

"Uh huh." The warrior reached forward with her right hand and pressed her finger tips into Gabrielle's throat. "You mind as well save your voice so you don't lose it today."

"Gods... I sound like I've been running all day."

Xena grinned and quietly said, "At least this'll save my sanity." She'd already removed her hand from her friend's neck.

"What's that suppose to mean?" whispered the bard.

"You can't talk much," explained the warrior. She decided it was best to stand up for her own safety. "It'll save my sanity."

"Oh you're a br-" Gabrielle suddenly broke into a coughing fit from trying to yell out her words.

Xena quickly bent back down and placed a hand on Gabrielle's back. "Calm down."

Gabrielle had her eyes closed tightly as she rasped for air. "I hate being... sick," she rasped.

"I know," whispered Xena. "Okay now?"

The Amazon Queen had settled back down but now they both could hear her

wheezing.

"Mmmm." Xena had her lips together and whenever Gabrielle saw that she knew it meant Xena was debating with herself.

The bard decided to cut into the debate and asked, "When we leaving?"

The warrior's right eyebrow gradually lifted up and she said, "I was thinking we should actually stay."

"Nnnnno way," protested the bard. "I wanna keep traveling," she rasped.

"Gabrielle, I'd rather give your body a day of rest so the next day you can travel all the way to the Amazons."

"Xena, I'm not going to sit on my ass all day today." Gabrielle gave a hard stare at her partner. She was trying so hard to hold her own ground against her partner.

The warrior knew they'd just get into a fight about this if they really wanted to. Today she didn't feel like it and she also didn't like the idea of her partner traveling all the way to the Amazon Nation. She tried to think of some compromise. "How about this? There's a fairly good size town about halfway to the Nation. Why don't we stop there and stay there for the night. Get a room for tonight, a good meal, and we can do some shopping together."

Shopping together? repeated the bard in her head. She really must want me to take it easy. But a soft bed, a good meal... and more time alone with Xena.... "Then we go to the Nation?"

"Yes," promised Xena.

As much as Gabrielle loved spending time with her Amazons, she loved spending her time more with Xena. The warrior knew this a long time ago and always managed to use that to her advantage and this happened to be a good time to take it to her advantage.

Together, they were up and moving and started with breakfast. Afterwards, they slowly prepared to leave and Gabrielle took the time to lace her boots back on while her partner was tacking up her mare. She was about to find her staff then realized she'd left her staff still lashed on Argo's saddlebags. She knew Xena must have taken it off last night so she looked around and saw it leaning against a tree near the saddlebags. "Good one, Gabrielle," she muttered in annoyance.

The warrior glanced over when she heard that and noted where Gabrielle was staring. "Not like you needed it last night," mentioned Xena casually. "You had me around."

A lopsided grin appeared on Gabrielle's expression but she still felt a little annoyed, "Yeah but we know how you drilled it into my head," she rasped.

Xena walked over to the bard and grinned down at her. "You're sick... doesn't matter."

"Oh is that my... excuse?" whispered Gabrielle. She held up her hand.

Xena's grin grew as she reached down and clasped her partner's arm. "Yeah, it works." She pulled her friend up to her feet with ease.

The bard hadn't quite expected it so she caught herself from falling by grabbing Xena's hips. She sheepishly smiled at her best friend. "Sorry... was about to fall." She pulled her hands away.

"Like you need an excuse," teased Xena. She walked off without another word but she did look back and smiled at her best friend.

Gabrielle just stood there between surprise and feeling so content despite her flu. All she could do was follow after Xena.

The warrior led them to the road they'd been on yesterday. In one hand were Argo's reins and in the other was Gabrielle's staff. She knew as soon as Gabrielle caught up, she would want her staff.

The Amazon Queen rushed herself and caught up to her fast moving partner. She grabbed her staff and Xena released it. She climbed up onto the road and began the journey to the town.

The pair traveled most of the morning and a little into the afternoon. They finally arrived on the outskirts of the town about a half of a candlemark after noon time.

"Guess we're in time for lunch," mentioned the bard.

The warrior grinned at her friend. "I guess so. How about we get Argo stabled up. Then we'll go find ourselves a tavern-inn."

"Alright. Then lunch, right?"

Xena softly smiled and brought her left arm up and around her partner's shoulders. "Anything you want, Gabrielle." She suddenly tugged.

Gabrielle stumbled but came closer to her best friend as they entered the town. "Oooh, this could be a good day," she taunted in a quiet voice.

The Warrior Princess softly chuckled to herself then released her best friend. "This way," she commented after seeing a stable.

It didn't take long for Xena to stable Argo and take the saddlebags. Her partner took care of carrying her own scroll satchel and the furs. They then went in search of a combination inn and tavern, which actually wasn't that far from the stable. Once inside, Xena debated a price with the inn keeper and managed to get a decent room for tonight. When they got into the room, they put their stuff down on a chair and table that was set in one corner of the room. In the middle of the room was a large double bed and just off to the right was a doorway that led into the washroom.

"Not bad," whispered the bard.

Xena was over by the table, fishing through the saddlebags. "Glad you approve," she teased. She pulled out the small pouch of dinars and turned around. "Ready to eat?"

"I think so." Gabrielle really considered it. She was hungry but she felt like she couldn't quite eat.

The warrior had gone over already. "Eat what you can, alright?"

"I know," whispered the bard.

"Come on." The smiling warrior led the way out of the room and back down the hall to the tavern portion. She found them a seat near a wall despite there was only one other couple in the tavern. She sat down and stretched her legs out.

The bard sighed contently and tried to decide what she wanted to drink. She decided to just stick with water.

The barmaid approached the women and took their drink orders.

Xena had answered her with two mugs of water.

When the barmaid returned with their drinks, she told them what the three different lunch platters were today. She took down their orders, which were both the same.

"So how long you think we'll stay with the Amazons?"

Xena looked up from her water and sat back into her chair. "How long you want to stay?"

"I'm not really sure." The bard was turning her mug in a circle on the table. "I enjoy staying there but I can only take it for so long," she whispered.

The warrior agreed fully so she thought about what would be a good length of time. "Three days?" she suggested.

"That sounds pretty good." Gabrielle lifted her mug of water and took a small sip. She then noticed her water tasted a little bitter but not quite. "Xena, does your water taste funny?"

Xena shook her head and replied, "Tastes fine. Why?"

"Mine tastes really... weird."

Xena almost took the bard's mug but paused on a second thought. "Open your mouth and hold out your tongue."

"Why?"

"Go on," ordered the older woman.

Gabrielle shook her head yet did as she was told.

The Warrior Princess gave a drawn out sigh and said, "Okay."

"What?" asked the worried bard.

"You have a white tongue."

The Amazon Queen groaned and almost dropped her head on the table. If it was thing she couldn't stand it was a white tongue. "I hate those," she rasped.

"Yeah I know... just try to eat."

"Not exactly easy to ignore a white tongue, you know."

The warrior chewed on the inside of her mouth for a second. "Just try your best."

"I know," whispered the bard.

When the meal arrived, Gabrielle forced herself to eat it despite how the white tongue made it taste awful. Xena had noticed all the funny looks her friend kept giving the food. She almost wanted to start laughing at certain points but decided it wouldn't be a very good idea. Once they both finished their meals, they decided to go to the local market just in the centre of town.

As the pair was making their way into the market, Gabrielle started to feel some kind of sensation take her. She stopped and just gripped her staff harder as if it would calm her.

The warrior had taken another step, stopped, and looked back at Gabrielle. "You okay?" she whispered.

The Amazon Queen was staring at the ground and breathing hard. She closed her eyes for a moment then opened them again. She looked up at her partner. "Yeah... sorry." She continued to walk towards the market just ahead.

Xena held up her left hand as Gabrielle passed by. She pressed her hand against the centre of Gabrielle's back just about her halter top. She quickly realized her friend's skin was on fire. "Gabrielle-"

"Don't worry," cut off the bard. "I'm fine."

The Warrior Princess wasn't so convinced and didn't remove her hand as she walked closer now. "What's wrong?" she quietly asked.

"Nothing... I swe...." For the second time, Gabrielle stopped and suddenly dropped her staff and grab Xena's arm. "Xena," she rasped in fear. Her eyes quickly shut.

Xena became frantic and turned to her friend. She grabbed a hold of her partner with one hand around her waist and the other around to her back. "Gabrielle, what's

wrong?"

The bard lowered her face into Xena's chest and her grip on Xena's arm tightened. "Everything... is spinning," she rasped.

The warrior sighed when she realized her partner was getting dizzy spells now. "Just breathe normal and relax... it'll settle down," coaxed the warrior.

Gabrielle tried to focus on something other than her head. She began to concentrate on Xena's warm body around her and the mixed scent of spice and leather. Gradually her labored breathing declined and became more normal.

"Ssssh," whispered the warrior. She kissed Gabrielle's temple and rubbed her back in hopes it'd help. "Any better?"

"Yeah," uttered the bard. She lifted her head and opened her eyes. Everything was still now but her vision was slightly blurry. She lifted her eyes more.

Xena smiled softly when her eyes met with Gabrielle's forest green ones. "Okay now?"

The Amazon Queen just nodded in reply.

"Maybe we should go back to the room."

"No, I'm fine now... just a fluke thing."

The warrior lifted a challenging eyebrow.

"It was," persisted Gabrielle. She looked off to her left and saw her staff still there. She released Xena and bent down to retrieve it but when she stood back up it was too fast. "Oh gods," she whimpered.

"Hey, hey." Xena leaned forward and grasped her partner's hips. "Slower." Together, she straightened up with her friend. "Seriously, we're going back to the room." For once, Xena gave one of her looks of pure seriousness. It was the look nobody else would contest except for one person.

"Xena, no... I'm fine."

The Warrior Princess narrowed her eyes and she lowered her head closer. "Let me put it this way, Gabrielle. If you don't walk back there right now, I will carry you there. And I do not care what kind of scene you make."

"You wouldn't dare," growled the bard.

Xena brought her head just a little closer, her nose almost touching Gabrielle's. "Try me," she whispered and a very sly grin creased her lips. "I'd just love for you to push me to do it."

Gabrielle swallowed as she considered her options. She could walk around her best

friend and hope to get away but what point would that really serve? Or she could be carried back and that wasn't exactly that bad but in public she would feel embarrassed. Then she could just agree and walk back to the inn. In all honesty, she just wanted to lean a little further, get a kiss, and then hug her partner. That's not on my multiple choice list though, joked the bard inwardly.

The warrior was still waiting for an answer but she wasn't going to wait anymore. She started to bring her hands forward. "I'm not waiting."

"Okay, okay!" The bard jumped back and turned around. "I can take a hint."

"Yeah right," chided the Warrior Princess. She rose back up to her full height and followed behind her partner. Around her she noticed the villagers had been watching them but were now back to their usual chores.

As Gabrielle continued to the inn, she felt herself going lightheaded now and her body was getting weaker with each step. She wasn't sure if she could really make it to the inn now or not. Just ahead she saw a building to her left and she made a beeline for it.

Xena quickly noticed how her friend was slowing down and going in the wrong direction slightly. She knew something was definitely wrong.

The bard approached the building and grabbed the side of the building. She then carefully leaned her staff against the building and just continued to hold.

The warrior came up from behind. "Getting worse?" she whispered.

Gabrielle didn't response as she hung her head down and closed her eyes. She felt everything going dizzy again but even worse than earlier. Suddenly her stomach protested to the dizziness and lightheadedness, Gabrielle hastily moved away from her partner and bent down to throw up.

Xena gritted her teeth because she knew this was going to happen. She neared Gabrielle and bent down beside her but slightly behind too. She rubbed the bard's back and waited to see if she was finished throwing up. For about a minute, all she could hear was Gabrielle dry heaving.

The bard knew she'd brought up her entire two meals today and she fell backwards onto her butt. She sat there trying to breathe and calm down. Now though, she realized her entire body was shaking, she was very weak.

"Don't move," ordered the warrior. She quickly stood up and grabbed her partner's staff. She hastily attached it to her back by locking it with her sword's sheathe. She then returned to Gabrielle's side and said, "Too weak to get up?"

"No, I can-"

"Gabrielle, even I know when to quit being so stubborn." The warrior peered into her partner's eyes.

Gabrielle realized her best friend was pleading with her to stop. She's just trying to

help, she reminded herself. She sighed and leaned over into her partner's arms.

Xena felt relieved as she pulled Gabrielle in closer. She carefully stood up and made sure Gabrielle was comfortable in her arms. "Okay?"

The smaller woman faintly nodded then dropped her head against Xena's shoulder. She closed her eyes and tried to forget about this sickness. She could though already feel the ground underneath moving quickly as Xena took her to the inn. "Getting a headache," she muttered.

The warrior almost growled because if it was one thing she hated it was flues and sicknesses. It was one of the few things Xena couldn't actually physically fight off. It was the one enemy she really could not control or predict. It only took a minute for Xena to return to the inn. She quickly pushed her way through the door and went directly down the hall to their room. She kicked open the door with her foot and went to the washroom first.

Gabrielle felt her partner slipped her carefully down and her feet touched the ground again. She groaned when she felt everything going slightly dizzy again. She knew Xena had brought her in here so she could clean up. So she turned to her left where there was a wash basin. It only took her two good splashes to clean her face off.

The warrior tried not to get in the way because she knew when Gabrielle would ask for her help. She carefully watched as Gabrielle went over to the tub and gave her a questioning look. Xena simply nodded and walked back into the bedroom. She retrieved a waterskin and gave it to her friend.

The bard washed her mouth out twice and spit it out in the tub that drained out. She then felt her stomach suddenly turn at the water being in her mouth. She quickly sat down on the ground and dropped her head on the top of the tub. The waterskin slipped out of her right hand onto the floor. Gabrielle tried so hard to control her breathing as she sat there waiting for her stomach to either calm down or revolt.

Xena chewed on the inside of her mouth. She bent down and picked up the waterskin. She then carefully placed her left hand on Gabrielle's closest shoulder.

Gabrielle took a deep breath and as she released it, her stomach gradually calmed back down. She finally lifted her head and peered across at Xena.

The corner of Xena's lip twitched into a partial frown.

The bard sighed and leaned over into her friend.

Xena let out a heavy sigh but pulled Gabrielle in closer then lifted her up. She went back into the bedroom and lowered her onto the bed gently. She then shifted to the foot of the bed more, dropped the skin to the floor, and started untying Gabrielle's boots.

Gabrielle closed her eyes and tried to ignore her headache, stuffy nose, sore eyes, and sore throat- it was getting a little tough to do.

Xena had her friend's boots off in record time and stood up, about ready to bring the covers up.

"Too hot," protested the bard.

The older woman lifted an eyebrow.

"I'm really hot, Xena."

The warrior lowered the blankets back to the foot of the bed right below her friend's feet. "How you feel?"

"Besides feeling like a herd of horses just ran over me, I'm great."

Xena sighed and sat back down on the bed's edge but closer to Gabrielle now. "I know, I'm sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry about... I should be sorry." Gabrielle reached over and rested her hand on her friend's leg. "I've been real stubborn the last couple of days. I just hate being sick and I hate admitting it."

"I know, so do I." Xena could tell just how high Gabrielle's temperature was by the heat she felt from the bard's hand. She felt like the sun was burning her leg. "Just get some rest, it's the best thing for you." She paused and considered what she had in their medicine bag. "I think I'll give you something for the fever."

The Amazon Queen faintly nodded then removed her hand.

The warrior then went over to their saddlebags and pulled out the medical kit. She shifted through it until she found the aconite for fevers. She decided it was best to mix the powder into water. So she pulled out a mug and put a few pinches of the powder in then went back to the bed. She bent down to pick up the waterskin.

Gabrielle had her eyes half open and curiously watched her partner.

Xena squirted some of the water into the mug then tossed the skin towards the saddlebags. "Here." She sat down the bed's edge and watched Gabrielle sit up.

The bard took the mug and wrapped both hands around it. She felt her arms shaky but she managed to drink down the contents despite the awful taste. "Ick, here." She handed back the empty mug and now noted the amused look on her friend's face. "What?" She started to lay back down.

Xena shook her head and stood back up. "Get some rest."

Gabrielle looked across the room to her friend. "What you going to do?" she whispered, still reminded of her sore throat.

"I'm going to check on Argo then I'll be back. I won't be long. Will you be okay?"

The Amazon Queen faintly nodded. "I'll scream if I need you."

The warrior was at the door and she looked back to give a grin. "I'm sure I'll hear you."

"You won't miss a beat, I'm sure," teased the younger woman. She then saw Xena turn her back to her again and she giggled.

"What?" Xena turned back around some.

The amused bard revealed a larger grin. "You still have my staff, partner."

"Hades," grumbled the Warrior Princess. She reached around and extracted the long staff. She then propped it against the wall near the door. "I'll be back."

"Don't be long."

Xena looked back because for once she actually detected a hint of fear in her friend's voice. "I'll be quick, promise." She gave Gabrielle a reassuring smile.

Gabrielle barely nodded and watched the other woman silently leave the room. She sighed deeply and slumped down into the bed more. She closed her eyes and tried to sleep, which took several minutes but the flu had worn her out and she fell asleep after about three minutes.

The warrior was right, it wasn't long before she returned to the room. She'd given Argo some feed along with a bucket of water to keep her happy. When she returned to the room, she made sure to stay silent since Gabrielle was sound asleep.

Xena actually felt rather worn out herself but she feared if she got into the double bed she might wake her friend. So she simply went over to the table with the two chairs and sat down. She made sure to remove her weapons and place them on the table.

For awhile, Xena just sat there studying her best friend. She also thought a lot about today's events and what they'd said back and forth. In her years with Gabrielle, she hadn't recall ever feeling this close to her partner. Well she knew she was close with Gabrielle yet these past few days this flu had made her worry more. She tended to watch after Gabrielle more carefully than normal. Still though, something was different and she wasn't sure how to explain it but she knew it wouldn't be long before it cleared up.

Xena finally decided she needed to rest as well. She pushed her chair back more and dropped her head against the wall. She spread out her legs but stretched them out as well then closed her eyes. She now listened to Gabrielle's breathing and realized her breathing was equal to her partner's. She grinned to herself and slowly drifted off.

It was rather late at night when Gabrielle rolled onto her left side and opened her eyes. She couldn't see anything right away since the candles had burned out. Slowly the moonlight helped her see better and she saw brass armor glistening across the room. She knew Xena was just across the room now.

Gabrielle debated whether to wake her friend or not. She had to use the washroom

rather badly and could only hope she could be quiet enough about it. She took a deep breath, rolled onto her back, and started to sit up. Suddenly everything spun around her and she instantly fell back into the bed. "Oh gods," she moaned and rested her right hand over her forehead. She shut her eyes and waited until everything stopped spinning. Gradually she opened her eyes and everything was normal again. She sighed because she knew now she'd probably need Xena's help but she didn't want to wake her partner. She rolled onto her left side again and stared across at the warrior. She thought for a minute what to do or if she could hold it until tomorrow. Her concentration then refocused on Xena and that's when she realized blue eyes were staring at her.

"Hi," Gabrielle whispered. She then saw a smile of teeth flash at her. She quietly chuckled at her friend.

"How you feel?"

The bard sighed and replied, "I'm okay."

The warrior decided to do her own inspection. She got up to her feet and quietly came over. She sat down on the bed and pressed her hand against Gabrielle's forehead.

The Amazon Queen closed her eyes and almost let out a soft moan at the cool hand.

"Still a small fever huh?"

"Yeah, I think so," muttered the younger woman.

"How about your throat?"

Gabrielle sighed and tried to swallow. "About the same." She felt Xena's hand now brushing back her bangs. "Still dizzy too."

"Headache?"

"No," whispered Gabrielle.

"Need any water?" Xena was still repeatedly running her fingers through her friend's bangs. She knew it would help sooth her.

Gabrielle grunted at the question as she opened her eyes. "Actually I was thinking the opposite."

"Ooooooh," whispered the grinning warrior. "I see."

"Yeah... and I can't exactly get up."

"That bad huh?"

Gabrielle sighed and shifted her hand over to rest on her friend's thigh. "Yeah, I can't even sit up."

"I can carry you in there."

The small woman groaned loudly and turned her head. She buried her face into her pillow as she felt embarrassed.

Xena felt her grin reappear and she moved her hand away. "Come on," she urged. She stood up.

"Xena, its okay," protested the bard. She lifted her head up and frantically shook it.

"Oh no, I insist." The Warrior Princess reached forward and slipped her arms under her best friend.

Gabrielle knew it was useless to fight the other woman so she just sighed and dropped her head against Xena's shoulder. "This is ridiculous," she complained.

"Well... nature calls," reminded the warrior. "Wouldn't you carry me into the bathroom when I'm sick?"

Gabrielle laughed. "Like I could," she joked. She realized the bathroom wasn't all that dark thanks to the moonlight mostly filtering in through the two windows. She sensed Xena carefully lowering her down onto the pot. "This is sssso embarrassing."

The Warrior Princess chuckled some and after letting go, she started to stand back up.

"Wait." Gabrielle's voice was fearful and her hand reached out to anchor onto Xena's arm.

"What's wrong?"

"Getting dizzy," whispered the scared bard. She closed her eyes, hoping it'd help to stop it.

Xena knelt back down and wrapped her left arm around her partner's back. "Just relax," she whispered.

Gabrielle took several deep and long breaths, she actually felt herself settle down. Her vision went still and she looked at her partner.

Xena flashed a huge grin. "Know what this means?"

"Yes," groaned the bard. "You're gonna have to stay in here with me." She now heard a very deep chuckle come from Xena. "I can't do this," she suddenly said.

"Gabrielle," drew out the warrior. "It's only natural."

"Yah but I'm not doing this in front of my best friend."

The warrior gave a dramatic sigh. "What do you suggest then?"

The Amazon Queen groaned and dropped her head against her partner's shoulder. "I

don't have a choice." She lifted her head and peered into warm eyes.

"Tell you what, I'll cover my ears and close my eyes. Will that help?"

The bard giggled but said, "You can hear anything, Xena. It's not like that'll do much."

"That's only if I focus on something," protested Xena. "I'll think about something else."

"Like what?"

Xena shrugged and said, "I'll think about you."

"Yeah about me going to the bathroom."

The warrior began laughing again and she said, "I'll think about my childhood."

"Alright." Gabrielle licked her lips and felt Xena's hand slip away from her back. She reached with her closes hand and held onto her partner's shoulder. She then stood up on her weak legs. She managed to slip her skirt down enough with her left hand. She sat back down.

Xena was trying hard to think about anything else other than Gabrielle's predicament. She couldn't help but want to laugh and she was already biting her lip hard enough.

Gabrielle finished her nature call and reached across Xena for some cloth. After she was finished, she stood up carefully and hastily pulled her skirt back up without a problem. She felt a little lightheaded but it calmed back down soon as she sat down. She then squeezed her partner's shoulder.

Xena knew what the signal was and she lowered her hands from her ears. As her left arm slipped back around Gabrielle, she opened her eyes. "Finished?"

The bard groaned.

"I'll take that as a yes." She shifted some and picked up the Amazon Queen. "Wasn't that bad huh?" All she got for a response were green eyes rolling at her. She could only chuckle at Gabrielle. Xena finally made it back to the bed where she carefully lowered the bard onto it. "Are you hungry?"

Gabrielle considered it then shook her head. "Not really."

The warrior narrowed her eyes in suspicion. "Not at all?"

The bard slightly shrugged. "Maybe some."

Xena sat down on the edge of the bed and curiously studied her friend. "How about soup? It'll be easier on your throat."

Gabrielle didn't respond right away as she rolled onto her left side, facing Xena. "More soup?" she teased.

Xena had a partial smile but she nodded.

"I know I need to eat something." Again, Gabrielle watched as her partner nodded once more. "How late you think it is?"

"Not late enough for the tavern to be closed." The Warrior Princess stood up. "I'll be back in a few minutes." She first bent down at the saddlebags by the table to retrieve some dinars. Then Xena left the room and went down the hall to the tavern room.

Gabrielle, however, rolled onto her back and closed her eyes. She swallowed deeply but her throat rejected the idea with pain yet she forced it anyway. "I hate being sick," she grumbled. She closed her eyes and tried to ignore her burning forehead, sore throat, and aching eyes. After a little while, Gabrielle sensed she was starting to drift off to her dreamscape yet she was jarred awake when the door opened again.

The bard forced her eyes open in the moonlit room and she made out Xena's tall form quickly moving towards her. "What'd you find?" she softly asked.

Xena slid the small wood tray onto the table then picked up a wood bowl with spoon in it. "Rabbit soup."

"Oh gods no," moaned Gabrielle.

The warrior chuckled, sat on the edge of the bed, and brought the soup to her lap. "Its actually chicken soup with carrots, rice, and a touch of rosemary."

"Mmmm." Gabrielle carefully lifted herself up and leaned back against the headboard. Her head slightly spun but not that badly that she couldn't ignore it. She collected the soup from her partner and the warm steam floated up under her nose. Her stomach immediately growled happily at the prospect of food.

"Hmmm." Xena had an amused smile but she got up and sat down at the table.

"What'd you get?" inquired the bard.

"Grilled chicken, rice, and some applesauce with it."

"Almost the same thing," mumbled Gabrielle but then she couldn't talk as her mouth was full with a spoon and soup.

The pair quietly ate for awhile then Xena took her friend's bowl and spoon from her. Xena then gathered up everything and left the room to return the dishes. She also decided to quickly check on her mare in the stable. She returned to the room after a quarter of a candlemark or so only to find Gabrielle was still awake and waiting for her.

Xena easily stripped of her weapons, armor, and leathers only to slip into a soft linen nightshift. She then crawled into the bed where she found Gabrielle awaiting her. "Time to get some sleep," she stated.

Gabrielle was on her side so she could face Xena. She pulled the covers over her shoulder some to keep her warmer. "I hate this time of the year," she murmured.

The warrior was settled down in the bed, on her side too, and studying her friend's profile in the moonlight. "Why?"

"The prespring, you know," went on the bard, "before the actually spring. I seem to always get sick at this time... especially when I was a kid."

Xena considered her friend's words. "You were sick often as a child?"

"Yeah," whispered the bard, "pretty often and typically at this time of the year I would get sick." She went quiet for a moment while her mind ran through her memories. "I remember the one time I was really sick... my mother and father asked the healer to come to the house. He couldn't make heads or tails about what to do about making me better. My mother was convinced I wouldn't make it actually."

"Obviously you did."

Gabrielle slightly grinned. "Obviously." Her grin slipped off. "I think I was about ten summers old by then. After that, I never really was seriously sick again other than the occasional cold."

Xena let out an audible sigh. "Let's hope this isn't one of those flues."

"I'm hoping too." Gabrielle then suddenly rolled the other way and began coughing hard.

The warrior unconsciously gritted her teeth together but she reached forward to touch Gabrielle's warm back. "You need something to drink?" After Gabrielle's head shake, she pulled away her contact.

The small woman finally settled down from her wet coughing spell and she rolled onto her back. "I really hate being sick," she complained.

"I know you do." Xena then heard how Gabrielle was wheezing in between her breaths. It worried her so she rolled out of the bed and went to the saddlebags.

"What is it?" gently asked the bard. She was on her side some so she could watch her friend.

The Warrior Princess sifted through the bags until she came to the small medical bag near the bottom. "I think I have something to help with your coughing so you'll sleep better tonight." She found what she was looking for; a small glass container and a small wood spoon. She came over to the bedside, poured some of the horehound syrup into the spoon, and held it out to the bard.

Gabrielle took the medicine and immediately the bitter taste popped in her mouth, which caused her to make a disgusted noise.

Xena somewhat chuckled at her partner's reaction but she went to put the supplies

back. She then crawled back into the bed and once she was settled in again, she asked, "Is it helping?"

"Yeah, actually."

The warrior felt relieved to hear that.

"What we going to do tomorrow?" spoke up the bard.

Xena considered it and her only answer was simply, "We'll see how you feel in the morning."

"If I'm great then we'll go?"

"Yes," replied the warrior.

"If I'm not great then we'll stay?"

"Yes," repeated the warrior.

"If I'm middle ground then we'll...?"

"Yes," re-repeated the warrior.

"Xena," threatened Gabrielle.

Xena amusingly chuckled but she seriously responded. "I want to see how you feel in the morning. Okay?"

"Okay," agreed the Amazon Queen.

"You need to sleep though."

Gabrielle took the hint and she rolled onto her back. She closed her eyes, relaxed, and merely listened to her matched breathing with Xena's.

Xena turned over onto her back and stared up at the ceiling. She tucked her hands under her head and listened to Gabrielle's deep breathing. She could tell her breathing was slowing down but it was still heavy from the flu. She noticed it seemed easier for Gabrielle to breathe, which she was grateful for having that medicine.

Eventually, Xena drifted off into a mild sleep. She had her usual dreamscape of her past but this one was a bit more twisted with Gabrielle involved. Her dream turned into a deep rooted nightmare about Gabrielle becoming deathly ill at a young age and dying before she ever joins up with Xena.

Xena jolted awake in the middle of the night at the end of the dream. She wiped the sweat off of her forehead as she rolled to her right side, her eyes focused on her friend. There was a brief sight from her but she stretched out her hand. When the palm of her hand pressed against Gabrielle's cheek, she realized Gabrielle was very feverish than any previous time. Xena quickly sat up in the bed.

Gabrielle slightly moaned from the movement in the bed.

The warrior knew she had a medicine in her bag for her lupine syrup now since it would help with the fever. She was able to dig it out from the medical supplies and with that same spoon, she poured some out. Carefully she came over to the side of the bed, sat on the edge, and roused her friend.

Gabrielle partially woke up and didn't ask what was going on but merely took the medicine that was offered. She wrinkled her nose at the taste then slipped back under the covers.

Xena quickly went the washroom to clean off the spoon then put it back in the bag. She slid into the bed yet she studied her friend some and she could feel the heat radiating off of Gabrielle from where she laid.

"Xena," came the muffled voice.

"I'm right here."

The bard's voice was slightly shaking and she was curled up into a ball. "I'm so cold."

The older woman felt her worries increase when her partner told her that. She didn't hesitate though to scoot over and she pulled her friend in close. "Better?"

"Yeah." Gabrielle was snuggled deep into Xena's arms. She sensed her body was somewhat wet from sweat yet she felt colder than ice. The chills were especially running up and down her back. Then she realized her body was aching unlike earlier tonight. "My joints really hurt," she murmured.

Xena closed her eyes for a moment. "I know... try to sleep." She held tightly to her friend, who felt like an ember.

"I don't... like this... I'm scared."

"Don't be," countered Xena, "It'll be better in the morning." For emphasis, she placed a kiss on Gabrielle's head.

The bard tried to take comfort in her friend's word and embrace. It wasn't that long before she drifted off again but into a very strange set of dreams.

Xena though took several candlemarks before she could actually sleep at all. When the sun was well past a candlemark over the east horizon, she woke up. She carefully slipped out of bed so that Gabrielle wouldn't stir. She went to the window and the sun's warm rays flowed over her soft features. Despite she knew it'd be a cool day she knew it would be a beautiful day.

The warrior turned around then studied her friend on the bed. She silently went over, knelt down some, and lightly pressed her hand against Gabrielle's forehead. The bard's head was amazingly normal, which made her worries settle some. She decided it was best to let her partner rest more so she went to the washroom with her leathers. It took

her about a quarter of a candlemark to get cleaned up and slip into her leathers.

When Xena came back out of the washroom, she noted Gabrielle hadn't moved at all. Xena quickly put her armor, weapons, and boots on then silently left the room. She first attended on her mare then returned to the inn but made sure to pick up some food for breakfast. After settling the food tray on the table, Xena went to the bed and carefully tried to stir Gabrielle.

There was a faint moan from Gabrielle but she didn't wake up.

"Gabrielle," softly called Xena. "Come on. I have breakfast for us." Again she gingerly moved the woman's small shoulders but she received no response. Xena pulled her hand away and expression twisted into confusion. "Gabrielle?" she called a bit louder than needed.

The bard did nothing- no movement or sound.

Xena knew Gabrielle was fine because her chest rose and fell at a constant pace. What she did notice though was that Gabrielle's breathing seemed slow, slower than it should be for even sleeping. The warrior pressed her left hand against Gabrielle's chest, just over her heart, and Xena quickly moved to the saddlebags.

Within a finger's snap, the Warrior Princess returned to Gabrielle's side with a tiny jar that she was screwing the lid off. She brought the small jar of smelling salt under her friend's nose and impatiently waited for some reaction yet she received none.

The tavern keeper continued his drying of the mug then slipped it away under the counter. He then heard heavy boots hurrying down the hallway and he immediately lifted his head. He went rigid when the female warrior approached him.

"I need a healer."

"Aye, there's one in the village." The tavern keeper pointed off to his right and added, "He's about ten houses in... got a sign and all."

Xena reached to her side and lifted her hand with two dinars in it. "Can he be brought to my room?"

The bar keeper held up his hand and pushed the dinars back at Xena. "It's the girl huh?"

"Yes," merely answered the warrior.

The tavern owner sighed at the woman's defensive attitude. "I figured she was sick... I could tell by there way she was walkin' in 'ere." He folded up his dark rag, dropped it on the counter, and turned towards the door that led to the kitchen. "Wait 'ere."

The Warrior Princess tried to be patient yet her worries were entangled with Gabrielle. She then saw a young man come out of the kitchen with the tavern owner behind him.

"My son will bring the 'ealer back," offered the tavern owner.

This actually caused a thin smile to crease Xena's lips. "Thank you."

"Go on," urged the father.

The son nodded, glanced at Xena, and then slipped past her to head out of the tavern.

"Let me know if dere be anythin' else I can help with."

"Thanks." Xena then returned back to the room. She went directly to the bed, sat on the edge, and kept her eyes locked on her friend. Occasionally she tried to shake Gabrielle awake but with no success. It seemed as if she was waiting a lifetime for the healer to show yet she knew it hadn't been long when he arrived.

The tavern owner's son directed the healer into the room and Xena made sure to give the boy a dinar for his trouble.

Xena then brought the healer up to speed about Gabrielle's symptoms and what she'd given Gabrielle.

The healer set his supplies on the table then approached the bard while asking, "You tried smelling salt?"

"Yes."

The healer bent over the small woman in the bed and carefully lifted her eyelid to see her pupils were dilated. He slid his right hand around the small throat and noted that it was swollen. Next he rested his hand over her chest; her heartbeat was at a very slow rhythm. "You already tried the smelling salt?"

"Yes, I did."

The healer didn't bother to glance at the warrior; instead he continued his inspection of Gabrielle. When he finally pulled back, he just remained staring at her as if he wasn't sure what to do next. Just as he bent forward to do something else, Gabrielle's body convulsed.

Xena quickly stepped forward.

Gabrielle didn't awake but her body started twitching slowly then began to suddenly flail around in the bed. Her legs kicked up and down while her arms threw across her chest every which way. Suddenly she sat up with her arms swinging about herself.

Xena didn't hesitate to grab her friend's arms, stilled her, and forced her to lay back down. "Come on, Gabrielle," she murmured despite she knew Gabrielle couldn't hear her.

The healer, in the process, had been smacked across his face by one of the bard's swipes. He stepped back to let the tall warrior deal with her. He sighed in relief when the young woman settled down into a peaceful state again. He cautiously stepped up to her.

"Seizures?" slightly growled Xena to the healer.

The old healer merely glanced at the woman then back at Gabrielle. He pulled back the bed sheet from the small woman's body and began a careful search for something. He suddenly stopped when he came to her right side. "Here." He pointed to her lower right side.

Xena bent over some and carefully gazed over the purplish rash that'd never been there.

"She has the sleeping sickness," concluded the healer.

The warrior opened and closed her mouth as she was not sure what to say. She knew of the sleeping sickness as some of her men in her armies had suffered from it. And as she considered it, she realized none of them ever survived the sickness. "How did she...."

The healer turned to the warrior. "Often people suffer from sleeping sickness from drinking contaminated water."

"We were caught... in a rain storm the other day," whispered Xena.

"Most likely that could be it," agreed the older healer.

Xena shook off her trance and looked directly at the man. "What can we do?"

The healer was silent for a moment then quietly responded, "Nothing."

The Warrior Princess stared at him in disbelief and her mind raced to thinking all the cures and medicines she knew about and none of them she knew for sleeping sickness. "No," she harshly stated, "there must be something."

The healer shook his head sadly. "There is no known cure for sleeping sickness." He turned his head to the sleeping woman. "Other than the Elysian Fields," he whispered.

"There has to be something," hotly cut in the warrior.

The old healer now stepped away from the angry woman and went to his bag on the table. He collected it, faced Xena, and clearly stated, "There is nothing I can do." His eyes flickered to the young woman on the bed, his heart going out to her, and then he met Xena's gaze again. "I am sorry." He dipped his head then left the room.

Xena heard the door quietly close but her attention was centered on her best friend on the bed. She knelt down beside the bed, touched Gabrielle's arm, and she stared at her. "Gabrielle?" she softly called in hopes her friend would wake up but there was nothing. She closed her eyes and her mind raced to think of a plan but just as fast as her thoughts went, her anger mounted.

Then suddenly her eyes flew open and she muttered, "The Amazons." Without hesitation, Xena hurried out of the room, went to the tavern owner, and demanded, "I

need a messenger."

The tavern keeper noticed the upset as much as angry expression on the woman's face. Earlier he'd seen the older healer leave without spending much time in the room so he knew what the diagnoses had to be. He nodded his head and said, "My son will bring one 'ere."

"Thank you," gratefully replied the warrior. She went back to the room to find Gabrielle peacefully sleeping on the bed. She paced in the room though until the messenger showed. First she made sure to give the boy another dinar for his trouble then she instructed the messenger on what to do. After she scratched out a quick message, she sent him on his way with his payment.

Once the room was empty again, the warrior fell into the chair next to the table and her eyes locked on the small bard. She'd never felt so frantic and worried in a long time. She could only pray that the messenger would be speedy on his short trip to the Amazon Nation. They were Gabrielle's only hope.

It was two or maybe three candelmarks after sunset, Xena wasn't really sure as she'd lost track of time awhile ago. She hadn't moved much from her position in the chair. Her eyes never left their mark. She was now bent forward, her elbows on her padded knees, and her chin rested in her laced hands. She'd had all day to plan out what to do and now she only needed to be on her way.

Just then there was a booming knock at the door.

"Xena, are you in there?"

The warrior was already headed for the door before she even heard the familiar voice. She threw open the door and a faint smile touched her at seeing the faces in the hallway. "Solari."

"We came as soon as we got your message."

"Thank you." Xena stepped aside and let the two Amazons into the room. She recognized the second Amazon with Solari but didn't know her name.

"Xena, this is Alexa."

"Nice to meet yah," offered the Warrior Princess.

The quiet Alexa dipped her head but gave a small yet true smile.

"What's happened?" cut in Solari.

"Gabrielle has the sleeping sickness." Xena directed the two Amazons over to the bed.

Solari stood at the foot of the bed, her hand on the post, and her eyes resting on the queen. "What can be done?"

"The healer says nothing."

Both the Amazons' heads shot around faster than an arrow towards Xena.

"What?" asked the suddenly upset Solari.

Xena bit her lower lip for a moment then replied, "There is no cure for the sleeping sickness."

Solari's eyes narrowed at the tall warrior and she curiously asked, "But you have an idea?"

"I do." Xena's eyes moved away from Solari and focused only on the sleeping bard. "I've heard of an amazing herb discovered by the centaur Chiron."

"What is it? What about it?"

"It's called betony... wood betony. Chiron discovered it and it's said to cure anything."

"Where do you find it?"

Xena licked her lips, her arms now folded over her chest, and her eyes now locked on Solari. "It only grows in July in wooded areas."

"But its March," reminded Alexa.

"I know," murmured Xena, "I have to find it."

Solari could tell that Xena already had some plan in mind. She decided it was best not to waste time asking about the plan and found it more important to get Gabrielle to a safe haven, namely the nation. "We will take Gabrielle back to the nation."

"Yes, I need you to," agreed Xena. "I will arrive there when I've found the betony. How many Amazons traveled with you?"

"There are six of us total," answered Solari. "We brought a traveling pallet, furs, and medicine for Gabrielle's journey back."

"Good. Let me tell you what you need to do, her symptoms, and best way to handle them."

Solari nodded her head but she turned her attention to Alexa. "Go tell the others to ready the pallet then meet us in here."

"Yes, ma'am." Alexa quickly left the room.

Solari stepped up to the Warrior Princess while she reached to her right side. "Before you begin that, I am to give you this." She held out a medium size leather bag.

Xena took it from Solari and realized it was a bag of dinars that probably could

amount to at least a hundred dinars. "Solar-"

"Ephiny's orders. She wanted to make sure you had dinars incase you had to buy something for Gabrielle. She didn't want you scrounging around for them while Gabrielle was on her death bed."

The warrior knew the Amazon was right so she accepted the help. She then began briefing Solari on Gabrielle's condition and how to care for her. By the time Xena finished the four of the give Amazons arrived in the room and quietly awaited. Earlier in the day, Xena had already gathered her things to leave but first she wanted to make sure the Amazons left with Gabrielle.

"It's best that we go now," decided Solari.

The Warrior Princess nodded her agreement. "Is the pallet prepared?" She gazed over at the young Amazon, Alexa.

"Yes, it's ready."

Xena nodded, went to the bedside, and she pulled the sheets away. When she slid her hands under Gabrielle's body, she realized just how warm the bard was despite her earlier position was of her huddling. She collected Gabrielle into her arms, straightened up, and carefully adjusted the sleeping bard. "Alright, lead the way."

Solari nodded, left the room with Xena on her heels, and they were followed by the Amazons. Solari now led the group through the tavern, outside, and only a hundred or so paces to where an Amazon stood at attention next to a horse. Xena immediately saw the traveling pallet that was on wheels behind the horse. She noted how it was heavily padded, which she was thankful for as she lowered her friend onto it. Her head quickly turned to Gabrielle's face when Gabrielle softly moaned. "Gabrielle?" she murmured. She received no response and this caused her shoulders to faintly slouch.

Solari clasped Xena's left shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. "We'll get her to the nation as soon as possible."

"I know," quietly responded the warrior. She was carefully pulled the heavy furs over the bard. "I won't be far behind."

Solari squeezed once more then pulled her hand away. "Be careful, Xena. Gabrielle is in safe hands."

The Warrior Princess finally had her friend tucked into the now warming pallet. "I know, Solari." She faced the Amazon and held out her arm. When Solari clasped her arm, she warmly said, "Thank you."

The second in command offered a promising smile. "See you soon, Xena."

Xena nodded, broke the arm shake, and quietly hurried back to the inn.

Solari did a quick check over the queen then ordered everybody to move. She stole one last glance towards the inn behind her and she caught sight of Xena's shadow

quickly moving about in the room's window. She sighed and murmured, "Don't fail her now, Xena."

The Warrior Princess forced Argo to ride even harder. She'd been riding all night since she'd left the inn back at the small town. She was hard pressed to make it to Athens by tomorrow evening as she could only hope that Athens would carry the betony somewhere in her markets. And she was certainly thanking Ephiny for the dinars that the nation had provided her with since she knew how much betony could cost. Yet it wasn't so much the price that Xena was completely concerned about but whether anybody would be willing to sell any. She decided to concern herself with that when and if it came up later.

Right now, her fears and thoughts were completely centered on the bard. She imagined the Amazons were either at the nation or almost there. She could only hope that the journey went smoothly for them.

"We should arrive at the borders in another two candelmarks or so," announced Solari to the group. She took a quick glance behind and nodded at the continued formation that the Amazons held around the queen. Solari was in the lead, Alexa rode the horse, two Amazons walked beside the front of the small wagon and two Amazons at the back of the wagon.

"I don't think quite in two candelmarks," corrected Alexa, who was starting to pull on the horse's reins.

Solari stopped and reached back at her sword. She wasn't exactly in the mood for dealing with road scavengers tonight but she did expect it. "Archers at the ready," she called, "Alexa and Gloria at my side."

Alexa had already dismounted the horse and had her sword out as she approached the second in command's right side.

Solari caught from the corner of her eye Gloria coming to her left side. She then put her full attention on the eight bandits approaching them. She was thankful for the full moon lighting the road and the small skirmish ahead of them. "Listen, we don't want any trouble," she called down to them.

The bandits all laughed together and one bandit stepped ahead of the rest, presumably the leader. "Neither do we so just put your little weapons away and hand over anything of value."

Solari had her left hand behind her and she gave a hand signal to the three Amazons that guarded the sleeping queen.

The three Amazons took the signal, strung up their arrows, and aimed for the bandits.

"We don't have anything of value," yelled back the second in command.

The leader unsheathed his sword from his side. "If you didn't, you wouldn't be traveling this late or with this many... girls."

Solari narrowed her eyes at how he insulted them. She then saw the bandits advancing them and she loudly ordered, "Fire!"

The three archers fired and made their marks then they strung up their bows again yet they couldn't fire until they had clear shots.

Solari was thankful that the archers had swiftly taken out three enemies. She was now caught fighting two bandits at once, Gloria had two as well, and Alexa had only one.

Gloria suddenly became overpowered by one of her opponents and her other opponent slipped away. She tried to get the archers' attention but she quickly lost her chance when her enemy brought his sword across her chest. Gloria felt the tip of the sword cut just the upper layer of her skin causing it to bleed. She growled at the bandit and went into an angry attack.

One of the archers realized that a bandit was coming towards them. The archer, Triona, knew the bandit was too close for her to shoot so she threw her bow and arrow to the ground. She had her sword unsheathed just as the bandit took a swing at her. She stopped his blade just in time, a smirk on her face, and she teased, "I don't think so."

The heavy breathing bandit growled at her and continued his attack.

Another archer quickly realized she had a clear shot and she took it.

Solari had heard the screaming arrow coming at her from behind. When her enemy swiped at her, she dropped down and watched as one of her opponents went falling backwards from the blow of the arrow. She then bounced up to her feet and attacked her last enemy.

Alexa was having less luck with her bandit. She was losing ground with him as he pressed down on her. She was much smaller than him and he was better trained than her. Yet Alexa was holding her own for the most part. She'd just parried off two stab attacks then she made her own slash for his stomach but missing.

The young Amazon ducked from a swipe at her head yet she didn't anticipate the next attack. She was suddenly kicked in the stomach and she went flying onto her back. Her sword was lost sometime while she was in midair and it skittered across the road. Alexa partially sat up just as the bandit came over her and he kicked her back down.

The bandit smirked down at her and then he lifted his sword for his final blow.

Alexa sensed fear course through her for a second but she held hope. When her gaze refocused up on the bandit, she saw his stunned expression and she followed his gaze down to his chest. Her lips curled into a grin at seeing the arrow resting in his chest, directly through his heart.

Alexa didn't hesitate to kick him off of her and she made sure to kick him between the legs. She rolled up onto her feet and saw which archer had saved her. She smiled and called, "Thanks."

The archer winked at her.

Alexa collected her sword and noted that Solari had just finished off her last enemy.

Gloria had already killed hers as well as Triona.

The second in command stared at the leader bandit as his weight rested on her sword. She slowly extracted her sword out of his belly and watched him fall to his knees then on the ground. She shook her head at the senselessness of the fight. She faced the others, approached them, and quietly asked, "Everybody okay?"

"Yes," answered each Amazon together.

"The queen is safe," added Triona.

"Good." The second in command quickly scanned the situation around them then she made a decision. "Let's travel up here for several hundred paces then we'll take a break. Everybody okay to do that?" After everybody nodded, she ordered, "Let's go."

"I second that," muttered Gloria.

Alexa mounted the horse and spurred it into a walk again.

The four other Amazons fell back into their positions around the sleeping queen. The escort group continued their march down the road but not for very long. Solari led them off the road and into a fairly open area in the woods where everybody could rest. Triona actually retrieved the medical kit that was at the foot of the wagon and she hurried to Gloria.

Gloria smiled gratefully for Triona's concern. She followed Triona over to a decent size rock partially buried in the ground. She sat on it and Triona knelt down off to her side with the medical kit.

Solari had briefly been studying the pair but she then turned her focus to the wagon. Quietly she approached the right side of the wagon, her hands now resting on the edge of the wagon. She stared at the peacefully sleeping queen. "We'll have you in the nation in a couple of candlemarks," she murmured despite she knew Gabrielle wouldn't hear her. For a moment, she adjusted the furs over the bard.

Alexa silently appeared at the second in command's side. "Everything will work out."

"I know," whispered Solari. She turned her head to the young Amazon. "How are you feeling?"

"A little tired," she admitted.

"I am as well." Solari tilted her head to one side. "Did you eat a little something?"

"No."

The older Amazon faintly grinned, shook her head, and touched Alexa's closest arm. "Come on."

The group of Amazons continued their break for about half of a candlemark. They then collected themselves and proceeded with the rest of the journey to the nation. And it was roughly another two candlemarks before they arrived at the borders of the nation with their precious cargo. When they entered the village, they didn't hesitate to continue directly to the queen's hut where Ephiny, the healer, and Eponin were waiting.

Alexa stopped the mare when the wagon was next to the hut door. She quickly dismounted and went to the back but the other four Amazons were a step ahead of her.

Triona and Gloria were carefully sliding the wood pallet down the wagon while the two other Amazons waited for the head of the pallet to come to the edge of the wagon. The four Amazons had carefully slid the queen and pallet out off the wagon and carried her towards the door.

Ephiny had been there for awhile now and she'd already had the door open when the group had arrived. She then sensed the second in command at her side. "How'd everything go?"

Solari folded her arms over her chest while she watched the four Amazons delicately carry the queen on the pallet through the doorway. "It was okay."

"I see you ran into some trouble." The regent directed to Gloria's injured chest as she went past.

"We ran into a small gang of bandits."

Ephiny gave the second in command a curious expression.

"They're dead," quietly reported Solari.

The regent merely nodded, headed for the entrance of the hut, and Solari was right behind her. After two Amazons carefully lifted the queen out off the pallet and onto the bed, she saw the healer approach the bedside.

Eponin had been waiting in the hut with the healer but she now came to Ephiny and Solari. "She looks perfectly fine," she murmured to the pair.

"Like she'll wake any minute," quietly added Solari.

The three head Amazons stared at the queen.

Ephiny then moved away from the pair and went to the bedside. She turned her attention to the healer. "How is she?"

"She seems to have a slight fever."

"Xena said her fever comes and goes," informed Solari, who was at Ephiny's side again.

The healer, Eilis, slowly nodded her head. She then began closely inspecting the queen's body starting at the head. She also moved Gabrielle's halter around some then her skirt to check over her. She then came to quick stop when she shifted the skirt around some. "Sweet Artemis... it's true."

Ephiny's eyes squinted a little as she looked closer at the purplish rash that covered Gabrielle's hip side. "What is that, Eilis?"

"It's a type of rash... only associated with sleep sickness."

The regent sighed. "Is there anything we can do?"

"No," quietly answered the healer, "beyond making her comfortable until Xena arrives."

"Do you think wood betony will really work?" inquired Solari.

The healer didn't respond at first while she pulled the covers over the queen. She straightened up and studied the two Amazons. "It's said to be able to cure anything."

"But you're not sure," concluded Solari.

The healer shook her head. "There is no known cure for sleeping sickness."

"How much longer does she have to live?" asked the regent.

Eilis glanced at Gabrielle then back to Ephiny. "It's hard to say. Nobody is sure what exactly kills the person. They merely go into this deep sleep, never awake again, and die within seven days... in some cases even less."

"How do you think she got it?"

Eilis sighed and folded her arms over her chest. "Typically somebody drinks dirty water or eat something that's gone bad or turned." Her lips pressed together for a moment. "People that travel on the road a lot are most susceptible than others." She then dipped her head a little and said, "Excuse me though; I need to finish up here."

Ephiny and Solari understood the healer's request so they moved away from the bed. They rejoined the weapons master and silently watched the healer care for the queen.

"Xena won't be long," decided Eponin.

The other two Amazons gazed at Eponin.

The Warrior Princess almost fell off her mare from being so saddle sore. She needed a break though, Argo needed a break. She led her horse off the road and onto the open grasses that rested ahead. She could make out the Gulf of Corinth no more than a thousand paces ahead or so. She knew she wasn't far from Athens, maybe another six candlemarks ride or so.

She came upon a few lonely olive trees and stopped next to them. Argo came up to her and she removed the facial tack off of Argo.

The mare was grateful for it and lowered her head into the grass.

Xena grazed her hand down Argo's side as she went to the saddlebags. She unlashed a waterskin and went to the nearest olive tree. With her back against it, she uncorked the skin and hungrily drank from it. She figured the skin was still half full by the time she was finished drinking from it. So she went to Argo and maneuvered the flow of water into her horse's mouth.

Argo happily drank from the little waterfall of water. Her tongue came out and sloshed the water about in the air. She whined when the water stopped flowing out but she was content so she lowered her head back into the grass again.

Xena patted her mare's neck then returned the waterskin to the saddlebag. She then decided it was best to stretch her legs more so she took a short walk to the cliff side that overlooked the gulf. She came to the edge and immediately she noticed the winds were stronger here. For awhile, Xena merely looked out over the gulf and listened to the waves crash against the rock shore far below her.

"Gods," she murmured, "I wish you were here, Gabrielle." The warrior knew exactly how much her friend would love to see this now. She also realized she'd never really shown Gabrielle the cliffs of the Corinth Gulf since they'd always rushed through here to get to Athens. This was something Gabrielle would truly appreciate and Xena decided this would be the first place they'd come to after Gabrielle was better.

Xena turned around and her mare had her mouth down in the grass. She slightly smiled but her smile was lost on her thoughts about her best friend. I never realized I could be in such pieces without her near me, mentally decided Xena. She shook her thoughts off then went back to gazing out over the gulf. After her short break, she returned to the olive tree near her mare. She picked up the face tack from the tiny branch and went back to Argo.

The horse sighed but she lifted her head. She then felt the bit enter her mouth then the leather tighten around her face.

The warrior now led her mare back to the main road then mounted the horse. She decided to start in a walk then eventually she pushed Argo into a trot and finally a gallop.

The sun was dipping midway in the western sky so Xena figured she had another three candlemarks or so before nightfall hit. She wanted to make Athens before then if she could help it but she knew it was impossible. She decided the best thing to do was get into Athens, find a room, rest up, and in the morning hit the market first thing. Argo

would certainly need the night to recover and she would need her own rest if she could sleep.

The innkeeper had his head down some yet he knew what everybody was doing in his inn. He finished drying the mug with his cloth and tucked the mug under the counter. He heard the door open and close but he didn't bother to peer up. He listened to the heavy booted footfall come directly to him and only then did he lift his head. He was remotely surprised but his expression remained neutral.

"Can I help you, warrior?"

"Yeah, I need a room for the night."

The innkeeper grunted at the curt attitude of the warrior but as he turned away to get a room key, he said, "Ten dinars." When he turned back with the key that hung on the wall behind him, he found the money resting on the counter. He collected it while the warrior picked up the key. "Down this hall, fifth room on the right."

"Thanks," answered the warrior.

The innkeeper watched the dark warrior disappear down the hall.

Xena opened the door and stepped into the warm room. She did a quick visual scan and decided the room was fairly nice. When she went to the bed and pressed her hand into it, she found it amazingly soft. "Maybe I will get a few candlemarks of rest," she muttered. That was one thing about Athens, she'd come to decide, everything has more class than any local town. She now situated her belongings on the floor next to the table.

The Warrior Princess decided first she would need to eat, find out when the market opens, and where any prominent healers are located. So she left the room and returned the small tavern portion of the inn. She threw a quick glance at the innkeeper then found a small table off in a corner. It wasn't long before one of the two barmaids arrived at her table to get her order.

"What can I get yuh?"

"Before you take my order can you tell me some things."

The barmaid shrugged and steadied herself instead of seeming like she was in a big rush. "Ask away."

"The market still opens at first light?"

"Of course."

Xena nodded then asked, "Do you know which healers here are the popular ones?"

The barmaid chuckled and shifted a bit closer to the warrior. "Are you looking for the

popular ones or the good ones? There's certainly a difference."

The Warrior Princess slightly grinned at the woman's mild joke. "The good ones."

"Well they actually happen to be close to the market." The barmaid straightened up and turned some to her right. "The market is this way, right? Well when you get to about the mid market, you'll see a big cobble street called Dionysiou Areopagitou and you go to the left." The barmaid faced the warrior again. "You just follow it a little ways. You'll eventually see all the signs hanging from the buildings with the healers' names."

Xena nodded her head. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." The barmaid offered a smile then asked, "Now what can I get you?"

"Whatever the special is tonight. Then just some water will be fine."

The barmaid nodded then quietly left.

The Warrior Princess sat back in her chair and studied everybody in the tavern. It was a fairly small tavern she'd decided but it was packed mostly with local people. She only picked out about three other warriors in the bunch, who didn't seem like much of a threat at all. It wasn't long before the barmaid returned with her meal and water. And Xena found she was rather hungry since it been almost an entire day since she ate.

The warrior hungrily ate her meal then washed it down afterwards. When the barmaid came back over to get her dishes, she paid her with a tip for her extra help. Xena then decided it was best to get ahead start and see where all the healers resided near the market. Besides that, she needed a small walk to wind down and walk off her meal. She slipped out of the inn and went down the cobble road towards the dead market. There were still many people walking about the streets or stumbling if they were leaving taverns.

Xena easily found Dionysiou Areopagitou Street because it was much larger than all the side streets plus it was cobbled as well. She began her journey down the well lit street and it wasn't long before she saw signs with names and either pedestals in mortars or a caduceus. After following the street some, she was satisfied that she was ready for tomorrow's mission to find the wood betony between here and the market. All she could do now was hope that one of these healers would have betony and sell it to her.

Xena made her way back towards the inn but chose to go see Argo first. She took some time to pat Argo down then checked her feed and water. She gave her mare a kiss between the brows then she faintly smiled as she left the stables. Finally the warrior entered the quiet inn and went down to her room for some rest. She knew this would be a very long night but she could only hope that a few candlemarks of sleep would come to her.

"How is she doing?" quietly asked the regent.

The healer acknowledged Ephiny with a quick glance then continued her inspection of the sleeping queen. "The same." She began pulling the sheets back over the chilled queen but she took a moment to touch the bard's forehead.

Ephiny took a small side step to the right because the early morning sun was shining in her eyes from the window across the room. She neared the side of the bed and hunched over her friend. "Fever?"

"Yes," murmured the healer, "they're coming and going in cycles." She sighed and pulled her hand away from Gabrielle's forehead.

"Are the cycles becoming shorter or longer?" Ephiny paused then added, "Between the periods."

"They seem to be getting shorter."

"More fevers then," murmured the regent.

Eilis nodded at the regent. "I'm afraid it's not a good sign."

Ephiny slightly cleared her throat and whispered, "I wouldn't think so."

The healer faced Ephiny and bowed her head. "I'll leave you with her, regent." She straightened up then quietly left the hut.

"Thank you, Eilis," called Ephiny then she heard the hut door close but not before somebody slipped in as Eilis left. Ephiny already figured who it was so she stepped up to the head of the bed and studied her best friend's soft face.

"How is she?" murmured a concerned voice.

Ephiny didn't take her eyes off of the queen. "Eilis says she's progressing... for the worse." Finally she lifted her head and looked at the other Amazon.

Solari frowned and stepped closer to the regent. She slipped her arm around her lover's waist. She knew Ephiny was very scared to lose Gabrielle but she also knew nobody would suffer more than Xena.

Xena rushed around the block and hurried down Dionysiou Areopagitou Street in search of an open healer. The sun was half of candlemark over the eastern horizon. She was hoping for all of the healers to be open but she knew only a handful would most likely be open. She'd already taken note that the market was just beginning to open so it would be her 'all else fails' stop if no healer had betony.

The Warrior Princess was in luck to find the third healer's building open so she hurried up the three steps and entered. She was instantly greeted by the smell of incense burning around the lobby room.

It was only a few heartbeats before the healer came out of a side room from the hallway. He offered a light smile to the warrior and softly said, "Good morning. Is there anything I can help you with?"

"Good morning," offered back the warrior, "I am looking for wood betony."

The very young healer dipped his head some while he was in thought about his herbal inventory. When he lifted his head again, his answer was, "Betony is very hard to find this time of the year."

"Yes I know," replied Xena, "but it's important that I get some."

"I'm afraid I don't have any and I can guarantee that none of these healers here will have any either." He paused then quietly added, "At least none for sale."

The Warrior Princess sensed her body tensing with stress. "The market wouldn't either," she decided aloud.

"No it wouldn't," agreed the healer. He tilted his head to one side. "What did you need the betony for?"

Xena was about to leave the building but she paused and decided to answer. "My friend... she's dying of sleeping sickness."

The healer opened his mouth but he said nothing. He closed it while he considered a few things.

Xena was extremely curious as to what he was thinking about because she could tell he had something in mind.

The healer focused back on the taller warrior again. "A fellow healer of mine... he's about ten houses down on this side of the street. He told me he has some betony leftover from this past summer. Its possible he may still have it."

The Warrior Princess suddenly had a smile and she moved for the door. "Thank you very much."

The healer then shook his thoughts away to see the woman leaving. "Be sure to tell him that I sent you. Tell him that Hippocrates sent you."

"I will. Thank you again." Xena slipped out of the healer's building with the door closing behind her. She then hurried down the sidewalk until she came to the tenth small building and she climbed up four steps this time. She opened the door and as she did so, a bell on the inside of the door sounded her entry.

"Just a minute," called a deep voice.

The Warrior Princess impatiently waited but was relieved when a middle-aged healer came into the lobby room.

"How can I help you?" inquired the healer. He brushed his right hand on his pant leg and held out his hand. "I am Empedocles."

"The name's Xena."

Empedocles nodded his head and released the woman's strong hand. "Now, how can I help you?"

"I just came from Hippocrates," started the warrior, "I am looking for wood betony."

Empedocles expression faintly shifted into surprise. He nodded his head. "I see." His hands went behind his back. "You're in search of betony for...?"

Xena sighed at having to go through the explanation again. "My friend is dying from the sleeping sickness."

Empedocles slightly hung his head and quietly stated, "You do realize there is no known cure for sleeping sickness?"

"Yes," hastily answered Xena, "trust me. I've dealt with it before and haven't succeeded."

"But you're hoping that the betony can perform a miracle?"

"Yes."

Empedocles' head bobbed a little. "I would offer the betony to you for a price however I have already sold it."

Xena took a deep breath to calm herself.

"It is possible though that you may be able to buy it from who I sold it to." Empedocles noticed the instant change in the female warrior. "I sold it to the priestess of the Aphrodite temple."

Several curse words flew Xena's mind just then yet she remain collective. "Where is the temple?"

Empedocles stepped around the warrior and went out of the building.

The Warrior Princess now stood in the open doorway as the healer spoke to her.

"Right up there." Empedocles pointed to the large, extravagant temple resting upon a hill that overlook the city. "You'll want to ask for Priestess Hermione."

"Thank you," replied the warrior. She stepped around the healer and went down the couple of steps.

"Good luck," called the healer.

Xena merely glanced back at him but continued her fast pace down the streets towards

the temple. As her fast walk pushed into a jog, she began to wish she'd brought Argo. She knew every heartbeat was valuable to her best friend and that thought made her break out into a full run. It wasn't but a quarter of a candlemark that Xena arrived at the doors of Aphrodite's Temple. Xena had paused for a moment and dropped her head back some to take in the immense size of the temple, which was apparent by the scale of the pillars and doors.

"Almost as big as her breasts," muttered the warrior as she walked through the open doors. She quietly made her way through the temple that was littered with statues and artwork of Aphrodite. At the other end of the temple was the large altar and a woman kneeling behind it, her head dipped down. Xena came up to the altar, stopped, and folded her arms over her chest.

Slowly the priestess came out of her solemn pray and greeted the warrior. "Welcome."

"I'm looking for the priestess Hemione."

"You're quite forward aren't you." The priestess rose up to her short height. "Let me find the head priestess. Please wait here."

Xena only nodded and watched the priestess disappear behind a nearby curtain. She realized she was alone in the temple so she took a moment to study the temple more detailed. She now picked up an odd but familiar scent, which led her to go to the wall on the far left. She approached the incense bowl that protruded from the wall and when she peered over the bowl, she realized it was wood betony that was burning.

"Can I help you?" called a deep voice.

The Warrior Princess turned around to face the tall priestess that she assumed was Hemione. "Yes. I am looking for wood betony and Empedocles told me he'd just sold his supply to you."

The priestess glanced at the burning bowl of betony then back at the warrior. "Yes, he did."

Xena's frustration was mounting but she tried to remain calm. "May I purchase some from you?"

Priestess Hermione now turned and strolled off while asking, "And why do you require it?"

Xena followed after the priestess. "My best friend has fallen ill due to the sleeping sickness."

The priestess stopped and faced the warrior again. She was silent but then asked, "What is her name?"

"Gabrielle."

Hermione dipped her head down in consideration of her thoughts. "And yours?" Her head lifted back up.

The Warrior Princess wasn't hoping for this part but she did answer. "Xena."

The priestess's head bobbed a couple of times. "I see." Her hands fell to her side from being crossed at her chest and she walked up the few steps onto the altar floor.

"I'm willing to pay for it," offered the warrior.

"Let me see how much we have... wait here." Hermione twirled around and quickly disappeared through the red current.

Xena let out a faint sigh since this was her first light of hope since she'd left the Amazon Nation. Yet the hairs on the back of her neck suddenly jumped up and Xena tensed up, her hands slightly lifting up.

"What's up, warrior babe?"

Xena slightly relaxed as she neared the goddess. "I figured you'd show up."

"Of course." The goddess remained sitting on the altar, her legs crossed, and her pink sparkly dress flowing over her legs. "So the bard is sick?"

Xena's hands went to her hips as she sized up the goddess. "She has been."

"You really expect that betony to work huh?"

"It's her last hope," answered the warrior then she muttered, "My last hope."

"Well I sure hope you're right, warrior babe."

The Warrior Princess lifted an eyebrow and now folded her arms over her chest.

"See the problem isn't whether my priestess has that betony but it'll help your little bard." Aphrodite now slid off of the altar table and sashayed up to the warrior.

"And what stake could you possibly have in Gabrielle living?"

The Goddess of Love suddenly had a shocked expression. "By me... how could you be like that? She's like a friend."

Now Xena's eyebrow lifted even higher. "I can't imagine you're still not slightly being peeved about the Mystic Diamond?"

Aphrodite chuckled and flashed her pearly whites. "Of course not, warrior babe... that was so long ago." She turned away and walked back to the altar table.

Xena sighed. "It was only a few moon cycles ago."

"Duh! My anger lasts for all of a candlemark." Aphrodite sighed and waved her hand at the warrior even though her back was to Xena. "Besides... who needs a stupid constellation to be remembered by?"

Xena grunted.

Aphrodite began picking up the offerings on the altar with her fingertips. "I hate fish," she growled when she smelled it before she saw it.

"What do you want Aphrodite?" cut in the irritated warrior.

The goddesses faced the warrior again. "No need to be hostile, warrior babe." She now had her hands on her hips. "And who says there's a catch? I actually happen to like Gabrielle."

Xena sighed and rolled her eyes. She hated playing any god's game like this. "I can't-"

"Warrior babe, I take it you can't accept real help when it's given to you?"

The warrior's eyes narrowed. "Nothing is free in this gods-forsaken known-world."

Aphrodite's lips puckered but loosened as she neared the tall warrior. "True." She came a few steps closer to Xena and her voice was now very low. "But here's my secret Xena, I have as much to lose by Gabrielle's death as you do or the Amazons."

The Warrior Princess was confused but she wasn't sure she exactly wanted to know either.

"So... call this a free-be, warrior babe." The Goddesses of Love took a few steps backwards and lifted her right arm. "Let me see to my priestess." She grinned as the pink sparkles fell from her fingers over her head. "Toodles."

Xena felt her body fully relax now and it was only in a few heartbeats that the red current pulled open and the priestess appeared.

"You are in luck, warrior. I have enough to spare."

The Warrior Princess felt relieved and she approached the priestess by the altar table. "How much will it cost me?"

Priestess Hermione held out the three leather bags and when Xena lifted her open hands, she replied, "A dinar a bag."

Xena curiously studied the priestess. "Are you sure?"

"Yes."

The warrior decided not to argue so she pulled out the three dinars from her small pouch at her side. She handed them over and took the three pouches from the priestess. "Thank you," she gratefully stated.

"I hope she makes it," offered the priestess. She bowed her head then turned to leave through the current.

Xena paused only for a moment then hurried out of the temple, through the heavy doors. After she was well on her way down the road back into Athens, Aphrodite's figure appeared against the doorway of the temple.

Aphrodite smirked at Xena's receding form. She straightened up from leaning against the door, patted the door, and looked back at the warrior. "As big as my breasts... we will see who has those, warrior babe." She laughed and disappeared in a puff of pink sparkles.

"How much longer?"

The healer shook her head as she turned away from the bedridden queen, instead she faced the regent. "It won't be much longer before she slips away." She paused in thought then quietly added, "It's amazing she's lived this long."

"Everything happens for a reason," quietly whispered the regent.

Eilis dipped her head in agreement then quietly slipped away with her bag of medicine.

Ephiny stepped up to the bed and gently touched the bard's forehead. "Hang in there, Gabrielle. Xena is on her way." She sighed a deep breath then silently left the hut. She received a brief nod from the guard at the hut then she continued on her way back towards her hut to start on her scroll work for the day. As she took the quiet stroll across the village, she started calculating exactly how long it'd been since Xena had left. Today was the sixth day that the Warrior Princess had been gone. She knew it was a long journey down to Athens and back but she prayed Xena would hurry.

The regent finally came to her hut and went inside to find her hut empty. She gazed over at her desk then after a faint sigh, she went to her desk and sat. At first Ephiny did nothing as she stared blankly at her scrolls that she needed to go through. Something in the pit of her stomach told her that today was it, today was Gabrielle's last day to be with the living and there was nothing Ephiny could do to stop it. She would have rather fought Ares's greatest army right now than this because at least she stood a chance then against some mysterious sickness.

"Ephiny!" bellowed an Amazon's voice from outside. "Ephiny!"

Ephiny jumped from her seat and raced to her door. When she flung it open, there was Solari before her. "What is it?" she called out to her second in command.

Solari was sprinting across the village but she yelled out, "It's the queen!"

The regent didn't hesitate, she ran out of her hut without even thinking to close the door. She met Solari and the pair ran back across the village to the queen's hut. "What's happening?" she demanded.

"The queen is having an attack. Eilis and Eponin are in there already."

"By the gods," murmured the regent. She picked up her speed and the guard at the queen's hut saw her coming.

The guard threw open the door for Ephiny and Solari and they breezed past her. The royal guard stole a glance into the hut at the convulsing queen before she closed the door. For a second, the guard sighed and leaned against the hut and her body was slightly sunk in worry.

"Oh gods," whispered Ephiny at seeing Gabrielle's body flailing all over in the bed; the sheets long gone on the floor.

"Help me!" called Eponin, who was trying to hold down Gabrielle's entire body with no success.

Eilis was over at the nearby table and scrambling through her supplies.

The regent and Solari hurried to either side of the bed and helped Eponin gain control of Gabrielle. Ephiny noticed how the queen's body was soaked in sweat and her breathing was incredibly heavy. "Eilis, come on!" she demanded.

The healer was too frantic to yell anything back as she hastily coated a spatula probe on one end with a pasty form of jimsonweed. She then rushed over to the bedside and ordered Eponin to hold the queen's head still. Eilis was lucky enough that Gabrielle's mouth was already open and she carefully inserted the spatula end of the probe into the queen's mouth and laced her tongue with the jimsonweed. After she quickly pulled the probe away and forced the queen's mouth closed. "Just hold onto her."

Eponin grunted while trying to keep Gabrielle still in the bed. She then slowly noticed the gradual calming of the queen but it took up to a quarter of a candlemark.

Finally all four Amazons released Gabrielle and took a step back.

Eilis placed her spatula probe onto the nearby nightstand and took a moment to inspect the bard.

Ephiny bent down and picked up the bed cover; with Solari's help she managed to get it back on the bed perfectly.

Eponin noticed the very worried look on the healer's face. "What is it?" she quietly asked.

Eilis said nothing but instead she picked up the queen's right arm. Her fingertips pressed into Gabrielle's pulse point and she did a count. "Her pulse is slowing."

"More than normal?" questioned the second in command.

"Its not the medicine doing it?" countered Ephiny.

"Yes and no," answered the healer, "The jimsonweed is suppose to stop convulsions." She then lowered her ear against the queen's chest.

Just then, there was a loud knock at the door and before anybody could respond the door shoved open.

"What is it?" asked the annoyed regent to the guard.

"Xena has been spotted at the borders," answered an Amazon that had raced up to the guard's side in the doorway.

Ephiny looked at Eponin. "Escort Xena here and hurry."

The weapons master didn't hesitate and she darted out of the hut and took the Amazon with her. "Was she on horseback?"

"Yes," answered the Amazon.

Eponin and the Amazon made a beeline for the gates. "Get the gates open!" ordered the weapons master.

The four guards at the gates suddenly scrambled to open the large wooden door, which was always a slow process.

Eponin then stepped through the gates and gazed down the dirt path that disappeared into the thick woods. She tilted her head and finally made out the distinct sound of hoof beats. A sigh of relief filtered between her lips then her confidence about the queen's health was suddenly revived when she saw the Warrior Princess galloping with Argo.

Xena came to a fast trot and had Argo halt next to the weapons master. "Where is she?"

"In the hut still."

"Is she...?"

"She's still with us," answered Eponin. "Go."

The warrior nodded then spurred Argo into a gallop towards the queen's hut. Her heartbeat was as fast as her mare's gallop. She hadn't slept or eaten since she'd left Athens but it was of little concern to her right now. She jerked Argo to a stop in front of the hut then jumped out of the saddle. "Take care of her," she ordered the guard.

The guard blinked and stepped up to the horse to get the reins from Xena.

The Warrior Princess hastily pulled out the four bags of wood betony and entered the hut.

"You're back," announced Solari.

"Finally," happily breathed the regent.

"Did you get the betony?" questioned the healer.

Xena nodded and said, "I need your help, Eilis."

The healer met Xena at the table but before she could even ask, Xena spoke.

"Crush these two bags up. I want one for burning and the other as a paste."

Eilis didn't hesitate to reach into her medical bag and removed the pestle and mortar, two bowls, and some white paste. Xena handed her several leaves of the betony and she began grinding them up hastily with the pestle and mortar. She then pour the finely crushed leaves into one bowl next to her. Next Xena handed her more betony leaves, which she began to crush finely also then she put some of the white paste into the mortar. After she the betony paste into another bowl, she searched in her bag for another spatula probe.

Xena however took the crushed leaves in one bowl and put it on the nightstand. She then picked up the lit candle next to it and lowered the burning tip into the leaves.

Eilis came over to the bedside with the coat spatula probe tip. "Ephiny, can you open her mouth?"

Ephiny bent over the bed and gently opened her friend's mouth and held her jaw. She watched as Eilis coated the back of the queen's tongue with the light green paste.

Xena then dipped carefully coated her index and middle finger with some of the paste from the rim of the bowl. She then gently rubbed the betony paste over her best friend's chest until it was well rubbed into her skin. Even from where she was standing over Gabrielle, she could smell the scent of the pungent herb and she could only hope it was quickly entering the bard's system.

"I hope this works," murmured Solari.

"It will," stated the optimistic regent.

"Its going to take some time," stated the healer, "so I suggest we all leave the hut for awhile. There's nothing else we can do."

Ephiny nodded her head.

Solari came around to the other side of the hut and went to the table to assist Eilis.

Eilis and Solari quietly gathered up mostly everything but the pestle, mortar, and bowl with the betony paste since Xena may need them again. Solari also picked up the spatula probe from the nightstand and handed it to Eilis.

Xena was quiet and her gaze locked on the bard. She touched Gabrielle's wet bangs and pushed them back.

"She'd just had several convulsions before you walked in," mentioned Ephiny.

The warrior only nodded her head.

The regent now came around to the other side of the bed and touched Xena lightly on the shoulder. "She'll be fine. If she's held out this long then she'll beat this."

"I know," whispered the warrior.

Ephiny nodded and looked at the other two Amazons. She signaled for them to leave and she followed behind them. Once Eilis and Solari were out of the hut, she turned her head back to Xena and gently said, "Just give her some time, Xena. She'll be awake soon."

The warrior looked over at Ephiny and offered a faint smile then she looked down at the bard again.

Ephiny silently left the hut with the door closing behind her.

Xena picked up a chair from the table and placed it close to the bed. She sat down and her entire body melted into the comfortable chair. After a heavy sigh, she bent forward then captured Gabrielle's hand into her own. "Don't leave me, Gabrielle," she whispered, "Don't you dare."

Eilis gingerly knocked on the door before she entered the queen's hut. She poked her head in first and spotted the Gabrielle still asleep and Xena was seated on a chair but bent forward with her head down and on the edge of the bed. Eilis slightly grinned at the scene but she knocked on the door a little louder because she knew Xena was out cold.

The warrior now lifted her head and spotted the healer in the doorway.

Eilis now entered the hut and approached the table to settle her bag onto it. "How is she?"

Xena brushed her hair back and peered over at her partner. "She's been fine all night."

Eilis went to the opposite side of the bed and began checking over the bard. "How are you feeling, Xena?"

The warrior nodded and simply replied, "Fine."

The Amazon paused and skeptically peered over at the other woman. She decided not the question the answer and went back to checking over Gabrielle. "Did you get much sleep?"

"I nodded off here and there," mentioned Xena. She stood up from the chair and gave her body a good stretch then went to the table. She collected the betony paste and went back to the bard. She placed some of the betony on Gabrielle's chest then carefully smoothed it in.

Eilis had finished checking Gabrielle's pulse and noticed it was steady now. She

pushed the heavy cover back and did a visual inspecting of her body. She checked the same spot where she'd first discovered the purple rash. "Well this is a good sign."

Xena had just finished rubbing the paste in and now studied the rash that had shrunk down to about the size of a child's palm.

"She's coming around," happily concluded the healer. And she could certainly see some of the tension release from Xena at that point. "I don't know how that betony worked but I'm not complaining," she stated. She then went to the nightstand next to Xena and picked up the bowl. She'd noted it'd stopped burning so she went to crush more betony leaves.

"Xena, why don't you go to the dining hut and eat?" Eilis turned around with the bowl now refilled with crushed leaves. She placed it back on the nightstand and lit it with the candle. "I'll stay and watch the queen."

Xena hesitated while she debated with herself.

"Just go," ordered the healer. "I can tell you haven't really eaten since you left for Athens."

The warrior knew Eilis was right so she gave in. "Thank you. I won't be long." She left the hut but not without giving one last look at her partner.

Eilis now took Xena's chair and stared at the peaceful queen.

The Warrior Princess marched across the village and went to the dining hut. When she went inside she found it was somewhat busy but she entered into the short line for the food. She then sensed somebody behind her.

"Good morning, Xena."

The warrior slightly faced the Amazon. "Good morning, Triona."

"How goes the queen? I heard you made it with the betony."

Xena's head bobbed a little as she moved ahead in the food line. "She's getting better."

Triona smiled now. "I'm glad to hear. You made it to Athens and back in record time."

Xena sighed at the thought. "Nothing like a deadly sickness to speed somebody along."

The Amazon grunted and followed Xena through the food line. After she had her plate of breakfast food she joined Xena at a table and settled down. She noticed how Xena didn't hesitate at all to begin eating her meal. "When did you eat last?"

"A few days ago in Athens. I had a quick dinner."

Triona sighed and started on her food. "Solari mentioned that Ephiny was really worried about the queen."

"They are close," explained the warrior.

Triona slightly smiled. "Not as close as you and the queen."

Xena smiled back at the Amazon. "Exactly."

Triona had her head dipped down now and randomly she started to shake it. "How'd the queen even get sick?"

Xena paused in the middle of her meal and touched her mug of water. She lifted it slightly off the table but answered the question first. "Gabrielle and I were caught in a rain storm while we were traveling on foot. Our packs were soaked, which means our food was soaked. The only thing we had to eat that night was really cheese and fruit."

"You think she caught it from the cheese... it went bad?"

"I think it was that and she was cold and wet that night. It was a bad combination of things."

Triona stopped eating and tilted her head at the warrior. "Why weren't you sick?"

Xena cleared her throat after she'd taken a drink. She placed the mug down first. "My body is stronger than most people's... its very rare I get sick."

"Don't jinx yourself," teased the Amazon.

Xena grunted and went back to her breakfast. It wasn't long before she was finished then she decided to quickly check on Argo. She didn't want her mare to feel misused especially after the hard ride to and from Athens. After she visited with Argo she went back to the hut and took Eilis place. She tried to get comfortable in the chair with her legs spread out and long in front of her then she leaned back deep into the chair.

It felt really good for her belly to finally be filled. She just stared at her best friend but then she sensed her eyes becoming heavy again. She tried to control it yet it seemed so impossible and almost unnatural. Finally she gave in without knowing it and her head fell back, she was out cold.

Xena suddenly shot up straight in her chair, her heart pounding loudly in her chest. Her head thrashed from side to side as she thought she sensed some threat in the room. That eerie feeling finally dissipated from her then she realized she was being stared at now. Her eyes lowered and met worn but lively green ones.

"Hi," whispered Gabrielle.

Xena instantly bent forward; her tired face was lifted by the largest smile. "Gabrielle... gods." She reached out but the bard met her halfway, their hands interlocking on the edge of the bed. "How do you feel?" she hastily asked. Her freehand now brushed back Gabrielle's bangs.

The bard cleared her throat a little and adjusted herself more while she was on her

side. "Better than... yesterday... whenever yesterday was." She slightly grinned.

Xena said nothing but her expression showed utter relief and happiness.

Gabrielle could tell Xena had been through a lot lately. She could only imagine what'd happened and why she was now in her hut in the Amazon Nation. She knew though that Xena needed to hear something light. "I still want us to go to the market you know, Xena."

The warrior now finally laughed and felt all her worries wash out of her. She gave a warm squeeze to Gabrielle's hand then leaned in to place a light kiss to the bard's forehead.

The bard had a huge smile on her face when Xena pulled back. She went a little more serious now. "What happened, Xena?"

Xena sucked in a deep breath then slowly let it out. "You got the sleeping sickness."

The bard's lips puckered some and she gazed about the room before looking back at Xena. "How'd I end up in the Nation?"

"When you didn't wake up and the local healer in the town told me you had sleeping sickness, I asked for the Nation to send help. Solari showed up with a few other Amazons... they brought you here while I went to Athens."

Gabrielle had a worried face but she asked, "How long have I been... out for?"

"About eight days," whispered the warrior. "Do you feel up to seeing a few people? I know Ephiny has been worried."

"I think so," answered the bard, "but not for too long."

"It won't be," Xena promised as she stood up from her chair. She went to her the door and cracked it open some. She asked the guard to let Ephiny know that Gabrielle was awake and the guard didn't wait for another word. Then she went back to her chair beside her best friend and seemed to stare at Gabrielle in faint disbelief.

"What is it?" quietly asked the bard.

Xena dropped her gaze then lifted it again. "I thought I was going to lose you."

"But I'm here," countered the Amazon Queen. She reached out and rested her hand on Xena's closest knee.

"Amazingly," murmured the Warrior Princess, "I've seen sleeping sickness before... you're the first I've known to survive it."

Gabrielle squeezed the warrior's knee then loosened her grip. "I know people usually die from it."

Xena only nodded her head.

Before Gabrielle could say anymore, she heard a knock at the door and Xena called for whoever to enter.

Ephiny, Eponin, and Solari each came in with the door closing behind them.

Ephiny immediately went to the bard and gave her a cautious hug. When she pulled back, she smiled happily. "How do you feel?"

"A little tired," admitted the bard.

Eponin snorted. "You've only been sleeping for eight days."

For a quick response, the regent smacked the weapons master in the stomach. "Ignore her." Ephiny lifted an eyebrow at Eponin for emphasis.

The weapons master smirked but her focus lowered to the queen. "Glad to have you back."

"You really had us scared," piped in Solari.

"Ah... Ephiny was ready to take over as queen."

"I don't think so," refuted the regent.

Gabrielle merely smiled to her Amazons.

"Get some rest, Gabrielle." Ephiny offered a warm smile now. "We'll stop in later today to see how things are. I'm sure Eilis will be in too."

"I figured." The bard now adjusted herself so that she sat up some. "Thank you all for taking care of everything... of me."

"That's what family is all about," stated Solari.

Eponin though rolled her eyes and again she was smacked in the stomach but by Solari this time.

"Let's go," ordered the regent. She and the Amazons marched out of the hut.

"I've really been asleep for eight days?"

Xena slightly grinned. "Only you, Gabrielle."

The bard huffed with a glare coming over her face. "I hardly ever get to sleep so maybe this was just a really big nap."

"Big nap doesn't cover it." Xena shook her head and slouched back in her chair.

"Xena, you look really exhausted."

The warrior shrugged in response.

"I'm serious." Gabrielle sat up a little more and noticed it didn't bother her head at all. She coughed some and felt a small amount of mucus run down her throat. She made a faint face at this but ignored it nonetheless. "How about this...." She waited for Xena to look at her again then she continued her idea. "You help me get a bath then we'll take a nice long nap together."

"Are you sure about moving around right now?"

"I won't know until I try." Then the queen started to move about and she twisted her body around so that her legs now hung off the bed. She then scooted to the edge of the bed until her feet touched the floor.

"Hold on." Xena got up quickly and put the chair back beside the table. She then stood next to the bard but let her try to stand on her own.

Gabrielle took a deep breath and lifted herself up and off of the bed. "Gods. I'm really weak." She instantly wrapped her arm around Xena's waist for support.

Xena put her arm around the bard's upper back. "How's your head?"

"Fine actually."

"Okay. Let's go into the washroom. I'll get the bath ready for you while you clean up." The warrior helped her partner slowly get to the washroom. She then let go of the bard yet before she left the washroom, she asked, "Do you think you can eat?"

"Yes... I can feel how hungry I'm already getting." The queen caught Xena's smile then when Xena left, she went to the chamber pot first.

Xena went to the door, cracked it open, and asked the guard to bring them some food and hot water for a bath. When she turned around, she found the bard sitting on the foot of the bed.

"Take your weapons off, Xena." Gabrielle folded her arms in her lap. "Stay awhile."

The warrior had a slight grin but she took her friend's advice. She removed her sword from her back then her chakram and placed them on the floor but near the bed. She realized it'd been awhile since she'd had a bath herself and she figured she probably needed it. So with that thought in mind, she began stripping off her armor then finally her boots.

"Going to take a bath with me?" prompted Gabrielle.

"Yeah I think so." Xena heard the knock at the door so she answered the door. She stepped aside as several Amazons came pushing through, into the washroom, and pouring buckets of steaming water into the large bathtub. They then disappeared back out of the hut but a fifth Amazon entered with a tray of food.

"I got it." The warrior took the tray from the Amazon. She took it to the table and

lowered it but it wasn't but a heartbeat later that Gabrielle appeared at her side and she was picking at the grapes. "Your appetite must be back."

"Mmmm." Gabrielle grinned. She then heard the march of Amazons come through again with buckets of warm water. She turned towards them as they were leaving. "Thank you," she called.

"You're welcome, my queen," replied each of the Amazons.

"Nothin' like the royal treatment," stated the bard after her Amazons left.

Xena snorted and said, "Come on, your royal highn-ass." She didn't leave Gabrielle's side as they made a slow trek to the washroom. "Why don't you get in first."

The Amazon Queen nodded then began removing her nightshift. When she had it off, she slipped carefully into the warm water. It wasn't long before Xena joined her and the pair took a long and well needed bath. After their bath, they changed into their clothes and sat at the table together. Xena watched in complete amusement as her best friend cleared the tray of any food. She was so relieved to see the changes even if they seemed slightly quick. She could tell though that Gabrielle still had a wet cough but that was to be expected.

Gabrielle leaned deep back into her chair, her hands on her full stomach. She took in the amused expression on her partner's face and she partially glared. "Its been eight days since I ate. I have an excuse."

Xena chuckled then smiled. "I'm not complaining a bit." Now she went a bit more serious. "I think we're going to stay here for a few days. I don't want us traveling until you're back to your full strength."

Gabrielle didn't argue at all. She stretched her legs out in front of her and said, "I feel like a nap... then a walk."

"A nap sounds... really good." The Warrior Princess felt pretty tired herself since she still hadn't caught any sleep yet. She got up and went to change out of her leathers then into her nightshift.

Gabrielle carefully got up then she had a few coughs rack her body but it settled down. She went to the bed and crawled into it. It wasn't long before Xena got into bed next to her and settled in. "And I promise to wake up in a couple of candlemarks."

Xena didn't find the joke funny at all, she never looked at her friend.

Gabrielle sighed, rolled onto her right side, and threw her arm over Xena's stomach. "I'm teasing."

The warrior grasped the bard's arm and gave it a gentle squeeze. "I know," she whispered, "just give me some time."

Gabrielle leaned in, placed a kiss on Xena's cheek, and snuggled down into the bed.

Xena sensed her cheek burning some from the soft kiss but she ignored it. Instead she closed her eyes and slowly went to sleep.

Xena and Gabrielle remained in the Amazon village for several days after Gabrielle had finally awoken. Gabrielle could tell after about the second day that Xena was feeling restless but at the same time, Xena insisted they stay. The bard never felt more grateful than now for her best friend or else she'd be seeing the Elysian Fields by now. The first day the pair merely took long walks and Gabrielle felt her strength returning to her. By the second day, they were on the sparring field in the morning and just before sunset; the practices extremely light. However by the third day, the pair were doing three practices and they were a little longer.

On the morning of the fourth day, Gabrielle woke up early but for once it was Xena that grabbed her and before she got up. The bard was locked by Xena's arms around her waist.

"Go back to sleep," muttered the warrior.

The Amazon Queen had a smug look and quietly asked, "Since when did you ever sleep in?"

"There's always a first," came the muffled response.

Gabrielle didn't debate anymore and snuggled down into the warm bed and body behind her. She drifted off again. When she woke up again, she found herself alone but she heard Xena in the washroom. "What time is it?"

"I'd say about two candlemarks before the sun is high."

The bard stretched a little then swung her legs over the side of the bed. She peered over at the washroom as her best friend came out. "Can I put in a request?"

The Warrior Princess's only response was a raised eyebrow.

"Can we leave today?"

Xena sighed and ventured over to her partner's side of the bed. She sat down and after awhile of silence, she asked, "Are you sure about traveling?"

"Yeah." Gabrielle gazed at her friend. "I'm ready to go... you know?" She paused then added, "Besides I know you're itching to go."

"I am," confessed Xena, "but I want you to be a hundred percent before we go."

"To be honest, Xena I don't think this small cold I have won't leave for awhile. Personally I don't want to stay here until it leaves." The bard grabbed Xena's hands. "I'll be okay."

"The last time I believed that look where it got us."

The Amazon Queen let out a dramatic sigh, her gaze falling to the floor now. "I know." She brought her attention back up. "I'm sorry... I shouldn't have done that. I promise I'll be honest about how I'm feeling."

Xena studied Gabrielle and knew she was being sincere. She gave in and nodded her head.

"We can go today?" asked the excited bard.

"Yes," replied Xena.

Gabrielle squealed some and instantly engulfed Xena with a large hug. "Thank the gods."

The warrior smiled when her friend released her. "We'll leave early this afternoon. We won't travel too far."

"Okay." Gabrielle wasn't about to argue since she was too happy to finally be leaving. As much as she enjoyed her time at the Nation, she better enjoyed her time alone with Xena and the adventures they had together. "Can we go through the canyon pass? Something a little different."

Xena considered it then nodded. "Alright... after we get through the pass, we'll make camp."

"Great." The queen was so thrilled and she bounded up onto her feet to start getting ready.

Xena smiled at all the energy her best friend had now. She felt extremely relieved to have Gabrielle back to her old self. She also knew exactly where they'd go first - to Athens, which was Gabrielle's favorite place.

By the afternoon, Gabrielle and Xena were in the stables and saddling up Argo for the trip. Argo was also grateful to be leaving her stall after so many days. She whined happily when the door opened and she was led out of the stables. When the group was out of the stables, they were greeted by Ephiny, Solari and Eponin.

"Are you ready?" asked the regent.

"I think so," replied the queen, who was now leaning against her staff. "Thank you for everything, Eph."

"You're welcome."

"Make sure you come and visit soon," added Solari.

"We will," promised Xena. Then a thought occurred to her and she went to her saddlebags while Gabrielle talked to the Amazons. When she came back to the group, she held a leather pouch in her right hand. "I meant to return this sooner."

Ephiny smiled at the bag of dinars and took it from Xena. "Thank you. How much did you use?"

"Only four dinars."

"It was only four for the betony?" inquired Eponin.

"Surprising yes." The warrior gave a faint shrug.

"Just as long as it worked." And everybody nodded their agreement to Solari's statement.

"We should go," informed the warrior to her partner.

Gabrielle chuckled and stepped up to Ephiny for a long hug. She then gave Solari and the weapons master each a hug.

Xena however gave everybody a brisk arm shake except the regent forced her into a hug. Xena paused a second but then returned the hug to Ephiny and when she pulled back she had a smile. She turned to her friend. "Ready?"

"Whenever you are, partner."

"Let's go." The Warrior Princess started their trek towards the gates.

Gabrielle hurried along side Xena but she gazed back at her friends and waved. She then turned ahead as they came through the slightly opened gates. When they were outside of the village, the gates began closing behind them and they entered the forest.

It took the pair a solid candlemark to reach the entrance of the pass through the canyon. To pass the time, Gabrielle had began a game with Xena and was already becoming frustrated with it.

"You better not be pulling that trick on me again like you did with Theodorus."

The warrior chuckled and glanced back at her friend, who was lagging behind. "I would never, Gabrielle."

The bard's teeth grounded together some from her frustration at the game. "Gareth?"

"No," called back Xena.

Gabrielle sighed then picked up her pace so that she'd catch up with Xena. As she walked faster, her mind raced faster through all the people that Xena had fought. "Minya?"

Xena suddenly stopped and looked back at her friend. "She's still alive, Gabrielle."

The bard stopped beside Xena, looked at her, and smirked. "Damn." She then started walking again. "So this person is dead dead?"

"Versus what?" pressed the warrior.

"Versus dead and now alive again."

"They're dead," answered Xena.

The bard saw a large stone ahead so when she came up to it, she kicked it down the path. "And they were a warrior?"

"Yeah."

Gabrielle stole a quick glance at her partner and saw the smug look on Xena's face. "You're really enjoying yourself." She sighed and kicked the stone ahead. "Is he... a monster?" She waited for a response but never got one so she skeptically looked back at her friend. She realized Xena had come to a stop so she did too. "What is it?"

Xena tugged on Argo's reins and she jogged up to Gabrielle's side. "I'm not sure." She felt that eerie feeling again like she had when Gabrielle first woke up from the sleeping sickness.

Then suddenly Gabrielle felt the ground shaking under her feet. "Oh gods!"

Argo whined and Xena let go of the reins. "Go, girl!" She hit Argo on the side as she galloped away then she dropped her head back to see several boulders rolling down the canyon side. "It's an avalanche!" Xena acted quickly by grabbing Gabrielle and pushing her backwards.

The bard was stunned but she let Xena take control of the situation. She suddenly felt her back pressed tightly against the canyon wall. She lifted her head just as Xena pressed her body hard against her.

"Duck your he-" Xena's voice was washed out by the loud roaring boulders slamming into the pathway that either came to a stop or continued over the next ledge.

The bard had her hands pressed against Xena's stomach and her face was conveniently buried in Xena's breasts. She shut her eyes tightly and could only hope that none of the boulders would strike them. For a moment she thought she heard Xena growl and wince in pain but then everything was going quiet.

Xena lifted her head from having it hunched over, her hands though stayed on Gabrielle's waist. She now scanned around and took in their situation but at first she couldn't see much from all the dust.

The Amazon Queen had also lifted her head and was poking her head around Xena's body. When the dust settled she was stunned to find they were completely surrounded by a gigantic rock pile that wrapped them. Amazingly none of the rocks or boulders had hit them and neatly left an opening where they stood but it was a tight opening.

"You okay?" asked Xena.

The bard blinked and dropped her head back some. "Yeah. You?"

The warrior only nodded her head. She then realized exactly how close their bodies were and she tried to make some room but she had no success. The pile of rocks around them gave them no room to move about and they were pretty much locked into place.

"Um, Xena... how are we getting out of this?"

The warrior twisted her head left and right so she could determine the best way to get out of this mess. She noted the rock pile was just about level with her mid torso and she had a clear view over the rocks. Just then she heard a whine and nicker to the right, which made her smile when she saw Argo waiting for them.

"Any ideas yet?"

The Warrior Princess now glanced up. She lifted her hands up and grabbed a few sturdy rocks that poked out of the canyon wall. "I think we'll have to climb up." She rested the palm of her hands against the rock wall as she lowered her gaze to her best friend.

Gabrielle had her head slightly tilted back and she stared back at Xena. She felt her stomach drop down then quickly lift back up. She didn't know what it was exactly but she loved how Xena's strong body was positioned over her and against her.

Xena noted how Gabrielle was at an even level with her breasts. She tried to ignore everything but she couldn't when her desire controlled her. Her left hand came down to Gabrielle's cheek then she leaned down most of the way. She was only encouraged to lean in the rest of the way when Gabrielle's eyes closed. Finally her soft lips met Gabrielle's and the kiss started out as something simple but just as Gabrielle started moaning, Xena realized what was happening.

Gabrielle's eyes fluttered open when she lost contact with Xena's lips. She quickly caught Xena with her hand behind Xena's neck. "Don't stop," she whispered.

At first Xena was cautious but she returned to the kiss that went from being simple to much more deep. Her tongue began brushing across Gabrielle's and she instinctively moaned. Gabrielle now had her right hand tangled in Xena's hair as she continued the kiss. Finally they broke away from the kiss, both breathing heavily and their foreheads against resting against one another.

Xena straightened up as her left hand now rested down on Gabrielle's hip. She cleared her throat then said, "Perhaps we should try to get out of this."

Gabrielle at first debated whether to saying anything and she decided it was best to let it go for now. "Who's first?"

"You are." Xena had her head back and studying the canyon side. "You should be able to climb up a bit then get on top of the rock pile here."

"Alright."

"I'll lift you up and try to grab a hold of whatever you can." Xena now returned her attention to Gabrielle. "Okay?"

"Got it."

"Leave your staff here. I'll hand it up to you." Xena now put both of her hands on Gabrielle's hips. "Ready?"

"Yup." The bard suddenly felt herself lifted high up and she scrambled to grab the canyon wall. She just managed to since Xena could only twist her around so much. She caught her feet into small foot holes and held tight to some rocks that protruded out.

"Can you get onto the rock pile?"

"I think so," called down the bard. She now stretched out her right leg since she was closest to that side. The tip of her boot touched the rock pile, she took a deep breath, then pushed herself off. She neatly landed onto the top of the large rock pile.

"Here's your staff?"

The bard grabbed it from Xena then tossed it off towards Argo.

The mare whined at Gabrielle.

"Sorry, girl," called the Amazon Queen. Gabrielle then stepped back on the pile as her friend began climbing up then easily jumped onto the pile next to her.

"Let me get down first then I'll help you." The Warrior Princess sucked in a deep breath, leapt into the air, flipped, and landed neatly on her feet.

"Show off," chided the bard.

Xena smirked up but she came to the edge of the pile then held her arms up. "Alright come on."

Gabrielle would have rather jumped down but she knew Xena was too concerned about her health. She had to do it the whimpy way so she sat down and scooted down the pile until Xena helped her off. "Thanks"

"Anytime."

"Was it Ming T'ien?"

Xena sighed but she was grinning. "No." She walked off yet she made sure to pick up the bard's staff.

Gabrielle came up to Xena's side and was given her staff back. "Was it somebody recent?"

The warrior had Argo's reins and started walking down the path again. "Yes." She

noticed how Gabrielle didn't say anything about the kiss but she knew it'd come up later. She also found it amusing how they continued down the canyon path like nothing had happened earlier.

"Xena, your back."

The warrior stopped when she sensed small hands on her back.

"One of the rocks must have scrapped you." The worried bard went to the saddlebags quickly.

"Don't worry about it right now. I want to get out of the pass."

"I know but let me wipe some of the blood off." Gabrielle had a rag and was now gently wiping off the blood despite it was already drying up. "You're sure you'll be okay 'til then?"

"I'll be fine."

That bard gave a sigh to the dry response but she held her tongue. She felt she cleaned it as much as she could for right now. "Alright." She tucked the cloth away and continued her walk beside Xena. She dipped her head down and thought more and more about who the mystery person was. "It better not be somebody you killed while I was sick."

The warrior smirked. "It wasn't."

"You swear?"

"I do," answered Xena.

Gabrielle's lips now pressed tightly together while she thought hard about whom. Her mind then became side tracked and before she could stop herself, she blurted out, "I knew your breasts were big but gods." She suddenly stopped and started laughing. "Oh gods I can't believe I just said that to you."

Xena had stopped too and folded her arms over her big breasts. "I get that a lot."

"I'm sorry, Xena," hastily stated the bard however she was still giggling.

"It's okay," brushed off the warrior. Her head dipped down some but she looked at Gabrielle again. "About back there...."

Gabrielle came closer to Xena. She grabbed Xena's freehand with her left hand. "That's okay too... we'll talk about it tonight." Yet she could tell Xena was fighting some internal battle so she did what she thought would help. She leaned in and gave a tender kiss. "Its okay, promise." She squeezed Xena's hand.

"As long as you're with me... it always is," murmured Xena.

Gabrielle smiled at Xena's confession and she gave one last squeeze before letting go.

"Crassus?"

"I didn't kill him," was Xena's quick answer and she began walking again.

Gabrielle stood there with her freehand on her hip. She huffed in complete annoyance. "Alright, fine!" She threw up her hand. "Who in the Hades was it?"

Xena and Argo stopped and they both looked back at her. Xena had the smuggest expression on her face. "Tahmores."

Gabrielle's eyebrows furrowed tightly together. The name didn't ring a single bell. "Who?" she growled at her friend.

Xena's smug expression was suddenly added by a grin as she realized Gabrielle was thinking about the name.

"Wait!" bellowed the bard, "That's a Persian name." Her eyes darkened in complete frustration when she realized how her friend tricked her again. "How did you even know any of those Persian soldiers' names?" She marched up with furry in her stride. "You're making that up!" she hissed.

"I killed over a hundred soldiers that day while you were on your ass up in that loft." Xena saw the growing anger in her friend's eyes so she had to push her off the edge. "You think I didn't get one of their names before killing them?" Before she got any response, she quickly mounted her horse and took off at a trot.

Gabrielle yelled at her friend and threw her staff a ways but made sure she'd miss. "You're such a cheater!!"

Xena pulled Argo to a stop and turned in her saddle. "You need to make some rules then, Gabrielle."

The frustrated bard grumbled to herself while she walked down the path and picked up her staff. "I'm not playing with you anymore," she finally stated when she came up beside Argo and Xena.

"The warrior chuckled and held out her hand.

The bard accepted and was helped up into the saddle behind Xena. She wrapped her free arm around her friend's waist. "You're a brat, Xena."

"I try my best." Xena gave a clicking noise and tapped Argo in the side.

Argo happily continued the walk down the path.

Gabrielle now rested her chin on Xena's shoulder and whispered, "You know what though?"

"HMMMM?"

"It's one of the many things I love about you."

The warrior couldn't stop her smile so she squeezed Gabrielle's hand that was on her stomach. She settled deeper into the saddle and Gabrielle's warm body. "Thank you," she whispered.

"For what?" inquired the confused bard.

"For always being here and not giving up on me."

A happy smile broke across Gabrielle's expression. "Thank you for the same." She placed a warm kiss to Xena's shoulder. "We were made for each other."

The End.