

# ~ The Bluest Eyes in Greece ~

by Red Hope

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## **Disclaimer & Notices**

**Copyright:** I do not own the Xena concept and certain characters but the plot is all mine.

**Violence:** There is violence.

**Subtext:** I really dislike this disclaimer.

**Summary:** The story opens up in the second season just after Xena has been brought back, Gabrielle is made queen of the Amazons, and Velasca starts her rampage as the Goddess of Chaos. What if Xena never chose Callisto as the necessary evil and instead fought against Velasca? Xena will find the challenge too hard, at least as a mortal, and she sacrifices her mortality to save Gabrielle. When Gabrielle thinks her life will settle down certain repercussions show up after Velasca destroyed the temple to Artemis. Can the godly Warrior Princess protect Gabrielle, help the Amazon Nation, and reclaim her mortality?

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## **Prologue - An Unnecessary Evil**

"I've never been a target before," the bard murmured.

Xena lightly touched her friend's arm. She felt deeply for Gabrielle because nothing has been right for Gabrielle since Xena's recent death and life. Xena understood the bard had suffered enough these past weeks between death, life, the Amazons, and Velasca. Not to mention Velasca was now a god.

"You'll be fine," the warrior promised.

Gabrielle peered up into her partner's confident eyes. The tension slightly eased in her, yet she still wanted more assurance that she would not get right now. She scanned about the cavern and watched her Amazons. "We need to keep Velasca away from them." She returned her attention to Xena. "She's after me, Xena."

The warrior now tightly held onto the bard's closest shoulder. "I know." She glanced

about the cave too then back at her friend. "Ephiny will keep her busy until we can make it to the lava pit."

Gabrielle bowed her head and softly questioned, "Don't you think we should get some help?"

Xena had already considered it, and she released a low sigh. "We don't have time."

"What about Hercules?"

The warrior shook her head. "There's no time to track him down. Velasca's powers are growing by every minute."

The Amazon Queen remained still and silent, but then she nodded. "Alright." She raised her head back up.

Xena took in the bard's deep fears. She silently promised the bard that she'd do anything to keep her protected from the insane Velasca. "Come on." She straightened up and led her friend to the mouth of the cave.

## **Chapter 1 - Warrior... Goddess**

"Hold on, Gabrielle! I'm coming for you!"

Gabrielle dropped her head back and tried to grip the tree root tighter. She couldn't control her frantic heartbeat when Velasca's laugh echoed in the ruins. She lifted her head and gazed past her boot tips at the tornado and lightening bolts.

Xena moved swiftly and made a jump for a long stick buried in the ground. She wrapped her body around it just as it snapped from her weight and the wind's pull. She rolled around on the ground and was dragged towards the tornado, and Gabrielle.

The bard let out a scream when Xena came at her side. "Xena?"

"I gotcha." The Warrior Princess clutched the tree root with one hand and ordered, "Hold onto me."

Gabrielle clung to her friend's body and hid her face into Xena's neck.

Xena released the tree root, and she and Gabrielle went sliding across the ground

towards the tornado. She gave a brief warcry and dug the stick's end into the ground. She and Gabrielle lifted into the air and glided past the tornado and to safety.

Gabrielle was stunned but relieved, and Xena quickly pulled her behind a fallen column.

"We have to get her to the lava pit," the warrior explained.

"I'm the bait," the bard reminded, "Where I go, she'll follow me."

Xena shook her head so that her hair was out of the way. "Go across the rope bridge, as fast as you can. I'll follow behind and slow her down."

"Xena," Gabrielle argued, "she's too powerful."

"Just do as I say," the warrior holler over the wind. "Take my chakram." She unhooked it and handed it to her friend. "When I tell you to go, make a run."

The bard glanced at the circular weapon in her hand. She swallowed and peered up at her friend. "Xena, be safe... please."

The warrior smiled and touched her friend's arm. "Always." She turned her head to the left and saw that the tornado was slowing down. "Get ready."

"Gabrielle!" called out Velasca's voice. "Where are you?"

"Go, now," Xena ordered.

The Amazon Queen popped up from her hiding spot and made a dash through the ruins.

Velasca formed in the middle of the ruins and laughed. She raised her right hand at Gabrielle's back. "You are mine, Gabrielle!"

"Chaaaaaayaaaa!" The Warrior Princess somersaulted from the hiding spot and made a very lucky calculation when she landed. She raised her sword horizontally just as the lightning bolt came at her.

Velasca suddenly had wide eyes when the lightning bolt reflected off the warrior's sword and came at her. She ducked just in time and straightened up with angry features. "Please, Xena." She stalked up to the warrior. "I've had enough of you."

Gabrielle had made it out of the ruins. She'd taken a few steps out on the rope bridge, but her stomach pitched when she saw how high she was from the lava river below.

She hesitated, freed her right hand that still held the chakram, and she quickly hooked the chakram through her arm. She now had a better grip on the rope bridge, and she forced herself to go across it. After another five steps, Gabrielle stopped when she heard her friend's scream.

Xena came soaring through the air, backwards, and she slammed onto her back just near the ledge of the pit. She had a bloody face and her right leg was cut badly. She forced herself up onto her hands, and she gazed at the rope bridge.

Gabrielle had stopped and partially turned. She gasped at her friend's beaten and bloody body. "Xena?" she yelled. "Oh gods."

"Go, Gabrielle!" the warrior hollered. She inhaled sharply and snatched up her sword by her body. She turned her head when she heard the evil goddess's footsteps.

Velasca held her unsheathed sword at her side. She studied the bard out on the bridge, then she lowered her eyes to the slowly standing warrior. "She's really not worth it, Xena."

The Warrior Princess fully stood and held out her sword at the goddess. She tightly gripped the handle with both hands. "Oh she is," Xena replied with conviction. She suddenly lunged at the goddess.

Velasca sighed and easily parried the warrior's attack. She was tired of Xena so she put all her effort and strength into the fight.

Xena felt the weakness come over her. She still wouldn't back down until she was sure Gabrielle was across the bridge. She stopped many of Velasca's lunges and slashes, but one made it past her defense and cut her across the chest.

Velasca took her opening and commanded, "Enough!" She prepared her powers so that she could throw Xena into the pit.

Xena knew what was about to happen so she came at the goddess. She quickly moved her left hand to Velasca's belt and made a grab for the small pouch.

Velasca surged her powers at Xena and threw Xena out over the lava pit.

The warrior cried out and lost her sword in midair, yet her left hand's grip was sure. She made her descent and came at the rope bridge.

Gabrielle was only a few steps away from the other side. She stopped and held her breath when her friend started to fall. She screamed, "Xena!"

The Warrior Princess grabbed the bottom rope with her right hand. Her body came to a jerking stop, but she made it.

Velasca was surprised, but she didn't much care. She walked out onto the rope bridge and started for the warrior. She paused after a few steps and lifted her right hand. "Goodbye, Xena."

Xena glimpsed at the evil goddess. She anticipated the lightening bolt, and she quickly bounced the rope bridge with her body weight.

Velasca shot her bolt, which went erratic thanks to the bouncing. She completely missed the warrior and just barely held onto the bridge. She growled, spun her sword, and decided to come after the warrior.

Xena knew she only had a minute left before she either lost her grip or Velasca skewered her. She quickly worked to open the small pouch in her left hand.

Gabrielle finally made it across, and she extracted the chakram from her arm. "Xena?" she called. She glanced at the evil goddess.

The warrior had the pouch's flap open, and she wiggled her two fingers into the pouch. She felt the slippery, soft contents in her fingers. She held her breath and released the pouch.

Velasca paused when she saw what was in the Warrior Princess's left hand. "No," she rasped and checked her right side. She gaped when she realized it was in fact true that Xena had taken her last piece of ambrosia.

Xena smirked at the goddess and glimpsed at Gabrielle. She'd promised Gabrielle that she'd do whatever it took to protect her from the insane goddess. Earlier she'd resolved to give up her mortality if it came down to it. The warrior lifted the ambrosia to her lips.

"By the gods," Gabrielle whispered in shock. "No."

Velasca quickly tried to move across the bridge, but she was too far.

Xena slipped the wiggly ambrosia into her mouth and quickly digested it. She then gripped the rope with both hands as the ambrosia hastily transformed her from mortal into god. She dropped her head back, closed her eyes, and released a silent cry.

Velasca shielded her white eyes when the lightening bolts pulled into Xena's body. She turned her head back and found the warrior was easily pulling herself back up on the rope. She also noted how Xena's body was now perfectly healed as if the fights

never happened.

The Warrior Princess balanced her feet on the rope bridge with perfect accuracy. She grew smug at Velasca's blanched features.

Velasca took in the warrior's godhood. What completely captivated Velasca were Xena's bright blue eyes that were enhanced by the godhood. She swore the skies were held in Xena's eyes. She steeled her fears and quickly came at the warrior.

Xena was plenty prepared to take on Velasca now that they were on even ground. She hastily halted the former Amazon's pursuit by using the lightening bolts.

Velasca shot her left hand up and returned the lightening bolt. She gritted her teeth when her bolt slammed into Xena's, and they fought.

"Gabrielle," Xena hollered, "do it now!"

Gabrielle was frozen by what'd happened, but she shook it away. She held up the chakram and stopped. "Xena, I can't-"

"Do it!"

Velasca and Xena both dropped their bolts from lack of strength. Velasca cried out and charged after the warrior.

Xena raised her hands up and prepared to stop the sword attack. She neatly caught the blade in her right hand and landed a punch to Velasca's face. "Now, Gabrielle!"

The evil goddess finally realized what Xena was telling the bard to do. She caught sight of the shiny chakram in the Amazon Queen's raised hand. "Nooooo!"

The warrior wrapped her arms around Velasca and held her from going anywhere. "Cut the ropes, Gabrielle!"

Gabrielle held her breath and brought down the chakram at the left rope. She easily sliced it, and she lifted her arm to take out the right rope.

Velasca struggled against Xena and to keep her balance. She started to lose the battle when both ropes were gone. "I'm not going without you," she snarled and held tightly to the other goddess.

Xena had no plans to go with Velasca. She started to slightly topple to the right, but she used her powers to break Velasca from her body. The power explosion between their bodies sent Xena flying towards Gabrielle's direction while Velasca fell towards

the lava pit.

"Nooooo!" Velasca hollered.

The Warrior Princess slammed into the cliff wall and managed her hands into some rocks. She stopped her fall and tightly gripped the rock. She was surprised when her fingers dug into the rock.

Gabrielle dropped the chakram to the ground, and she got onto her stomach. "Xena, take my hand." She stretched her right hand as far down as she could.

The warrior climbed up higher then managed her right hand into Gabrielle's. She and Gabrielle worked to get her up the cliff side and over the ledge.

Gabrielle fall onto her back and rasped for air.

Xena flopped onto her back too and stared up at the beautiful sky that mimicked her eyes.

The bard started to catch her breath, and she hotly demanded, "Why did you do that?" She turned her head to her friend.

The warrior played dumb and questioned, "Do what?" She earned a smack on her side, which made her grin. She turned her head to Gabrielle and lost her smirk at the bard's serious features.

Gabrielle lost her train of thought when she found those magnificent blue eyes upon her. She found no words that would ever describe how blue Xena's eyes were now. She felt so alive when she stared into them.

Xena gradually arched an eyebrow when she realized she completely lost the bard. "Gabrielle?"

"Huh?" The Amazon Queen refocused herself and tried to become annoyed again. "The ambrosia," she snapped but there wasn't much bite behind her words.

The warrior shrugged and casually replied, "It seemed like a good idea at the time."

The bard groaned and covered her face with her hands. "Great," she muffled between her hands. She dropped her hands to the ground again. "Just great."

"It's not that bad, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle shot a glower at her partner. "I suppose it's better than you still being dead,"

she coldly remarked. She sighed at her nasty words, and she quickly sat up. She scooped up the warrior's chakram but larger hands held hers still.

The warrior took the chakram from the bard's hands and set it down on the ground again. She sat up better and turned to her friend. "Gabrielle, I'm sorry about my death... that I just gave up." She paused when the bard bowed her head slightly. "I won't apologize for the ambrosia though. It was my only choice out there on that rope bridge. I wasn't about to let Velasca kill you."

Gabrielle kept her head down, and she closed her eyes. She sighed and raised her head back up. "I'm sorry, Xena." She understood that Xena made a sacrifice by giving up her mortality. "I just..."

The warrior understood, and she patted her friend's hands. "Come on." She stood up after she decided they could talk about this later.

The bard swallowed and climbed up to her feet with Xena's chakram in hand. She held it out to her partner.

The Warrior Princess hooked the weapon into its home. She turned on her boot heels and peered over the ledge.

"How long you think it'll hold her?" Gabrielle clutched the warrior's hip.

"I hope for eternity," the warrior murmured.

Gabrielle lifted her view to her friend. "What about your sword?"

Xena frowned at the question and carefully scanned the cliff for her sword.

The bard crinkled her nose and grinned. "Can't you just poof it up?"

Xena lifted her right eyebrow and smirked at the bard's suggestion. "Let's see..." She closed her eyes and concentrated on her sword and also Gabrielle's staff. She lifted her hands and suddenly they were filled with metal and wood.

Gabrielle brightened at seeing her staff. "That's a nice trick." She received her cherished staff from the warrior.

Xena opened her eyes and smiled at her sword. She swiftly sheathed it. "We'll have to take the long way around with the bridge out... but we have time."

The bard glanced at the lava pit. "Hmmm." She smiled up at her partner, who was now a goddess. "Come on, oh godly one." She tugged on Xena's wrist.

Xena followed along but teased, "I kind of like the ring to that."

Gabrielle released Xena's wrist, but she flashed a smirk at the new god. "Oh don't let your head go to Mount Olympus."

Xena chuckled and strolled along side her partner. "So, what should my title be?"

The bard rolled her eyes, yet she'd play along despite how worried she was about Xena's godhood. "How about the Goddess of Smartasses."

"Hmmm," the warrior seriously considered it. "No... that's just missing something. Goddess of Warriors always works."

Gabrielle chuckled and peered up at her friend. "And you want a following of smelly warriors?"

Xena crinkled up her nose at the idea. "You do have a point." She brought her arm around the bard's shoulders and tormented, "You're the only follower I need."

"Ha, ha." Gabrielle shook her head and remarked, "You know, this is pretty serious."

Xena inwardly sighed, but she had to face the facts. "I know." She removed her arm.

"You think one of the gods could help?" Gabrielle carefully tried, yet she knew her idea was already rejected by the raised eyebrow from Xena. "I mean what about Aphrodite?"

"Oooh no," the warrior argued, "she'll only make it worse."

"Xena, we don't have many options," the bard argued.

Xena sensed the worry and fear mixed in the bard's words. Then her godhood only magnified the bard's emotions, and Xena wanted to ebb them quickly. "We'll figure it out. Right now, we just need to get back to the nation so they know you're okay."

"We're okay," the queen corrected.

"We're okay," the warrior softly agreed.

Gabrielle relented and nodded. She tried to become casual again and lightly teased, "How about Goddess of Flowers... or Goddess of Bows.... better yet-"

"Knock it off, Gabrielle," the warrior warned.

The bard smirked at her friend and teased, "Goddess of Grumps might work too."

Xena playfully growled and lifted her hands.

Gabrielle's eyes became large, and she squealed at Xena's intent. She made a run for it through the woods.

The Warrior Princess devilishly laughed and chased after her prey. She found running always easy after so much training, but she noticed it was even easier thanks to the godhood. She also discovered her speed was much faster than normal, but she didn't push herself because she wanted to give Gabrielle the lead.

The Amazon Queen ducked under low branches and dodged around various brush. She then noticed ahead there was a road because of the slight incline. She was thankful because it could mean another way over the lava pit. She then heard a low whistle coming up behind her, and she became fearful.

Xena was a blur, and she swiftly caught up to her partner. All her warrior instincts were alive, and she was fearful for Gabrielle's life again. There was something in the air that caught her senses. She came up behind the bard, who slightly yelled. Xena hooked her left arm around the bard's waist to stop her from running, and with her right hand, she covered the bard's mouth.

Gabrielle's cry became muffled, and she stopped when she saw Xena's serious expression.

"Be quiet," the warrior softly instructed. She removed her hand and pointed at the road just ahead through the trees. "Something is coming."

"They'll see us from here," the bard murmured.

Xena tilted her head back and gazed up at the tree branches and heavy foliage. "Hang on." She stepped behind her partner, grasped the petite hips, and she bent her knees. "And stay quiet."

The bard wasn't completely prepared for Xena's impossible jump. She just bit back her small yelp, and she soon found her boots on a tree branch. She slightly teetered on the branch, but Xena held her steady. She also used her staff to help her balance on the branch.

Xena easily craned her neck over Gabrielle's head. She narrowed her eyes when she picked out the wagon wheels on the road better. Next she heard the soldiers' marching boot steps, and their metal armor clanked.

"It's an army," the bard whispered, "What would they be doing out here?"

"I'm not sure," the warrior replied. She waited patiently until the soldiers were in her view. She hoped she could pick up a lead when she saw the dress style of the soldiers.

Gabrielle saw them the same time as Xena, and she sucked in a breath. "It's the Athenian Army."

"Not the entire army," the warrior whispered, "but a nice size none-the-less."

The Amazon Queen carefully thought about why the army was out here. The only civilization were her Amazons and the Centaurs. "Do you think we should talk to them?"

Xena had a few suspicions about why the army was in this area. She didn't much like her conclusions. She considered the bard's idea but explained, "I think it's better to follow them."

Gabrielle was concerned, but she silently agreed with her partner. She remained quiet while the army marched past. She then peered up at the warrior once they were gone. "Follow them?"

"Mmmhmmm." Xena tightly held Gabrielle's hips, and she hopped them off the branch. She neatly landed with Gabrielle in front of her.

Gabrielle hurried up onto the road and took in the deep tracks from the wagons. She sensed Xena bent beside her, and she watched how Xena traced the fresh ruts with her fingertips. "It's a heavy load, isn't it?"

The Warrior Princess slowly stood up. "Yeah." She stared down the road in the same direction that her and Gabrielle would have to go to make it back to the nation. "Come on." She walked down the road and Gabrielle followed along side.

The pair traveled down the road for several hours, and Xena was able to detect the army the entire time. She found her heightened senses quite rewarding because of the godhood. She was able to easily follow the army without having to get too close. Just before sunset, she heard the army pull off the road. She suspected that the main, stone bridge across the lava pit wasn't too far from here, nor was Amazon territory.

Xena and the bard trailed off the road and discovered a clearing that was a safe distance from the Athenian Army. Gabrielle went about getting a campfire started, and Xena hunted for dinner. Just when Gabrielle finished building a temporary spit, the warrior strolled in with two rabbits.

"Here." Xena offered a handful of sage she'd found during her hunt.

Gabrielle brightened and took the herb. She neatly managed it on and in the rabbits. She then put the skewered rabbits on the spit and hoped for a good meal. She took in the soft grass near the fire and carefully considered where she and Xena would sleep tonight. Last night she hadn't slept at all because she was too afraid of Velasca showing up. Now that was behind her, and she actually felt exhausted.

Xena sat beside her friend and crossed her legs into a comfortable position.

The bard bumped her shoulder against the warrior's. "So what's it feel like?"

"Hmmm?"

Gabrielle sighed and urged, "Being a god?"

The Warrior Princess shrugged and nonchalantly answered, "Nottin' special."

The bard huffed and smirked then teased, "The Goddess of Many Words."

Xena mock glared at her friend. "I might be the Goddess of De-barding."

Gabrielle laughed at the awful joke. "Is that sorta like plucking the feathers off a chicken?"

"I don't know... let's find out." The god reached for the bard.

Gabrielle yelped and jumped up from her spot. "Now, Xena."

The warrior smirked, and her bright blue eyes revealed a dangerous glint. "Sit down... I won't do anything."

"Promise?" the bard demanded.

Xena showed a lopsided smile and softly replied, "Promise." After the bard sat, she muttered, "For now."

Gabrielle glared at her partner. "I heard you." She was silent for a few beats then seriously questioned, "Why you think the Athenian Army is coming this way?"

The goddess studied the bard's concerned features, but she knew she had to give her suggestion. "They're headed for Amazon territory." She let the information sink in, then she gently added, "Nobody comes this way unless they're going to the Amazons

or Centaurs."

"Okay... potentially they're taking a shortcut through the Amazon territory." Gabrielle prayed that was the case, but that sinking feeling in her told her otherwise. "To go to... wherever." She sadly sighed and questioned, "You really think they're headed for the Amazons?"

"There's not much else reason to be here or headed this way, Gabrielle."

"For once, I wish you were wrong," the bard murmured.

Xena stretched out her right arm and turned the rabbits. "I wish I am too." She sat back in her same position.

Gabrielle peered up at her friend. "Well, your godhood may just come in handy."

The warrior grunted and didn't comment back.

The bard remained quiet, but she mulled over Xena's new godhood. Another thought came to mind so she asked, "Do you feel anything? I mean emotionally."

"I thought I wouldn't," Xena mentioned, "but it seems to be the opposite in fact." She noticed Gabrielle's curious stare. She tried to better explain it. "I seem to feel emotions more but not in an emotional sense. More like..." She paused and searched for the right words. "More like I sense emotions better."

"You're more aware of them," the bard summarized. After the explanation, she grinned wildly. "So what you're really saying is that you'll be better at the sensitive talks."

The warrior laughed at Gabrielle's instant assumption. "I don't know about that."

"Well," Gabrielle teased, "this bard can dream." She stood up and took care of the rabbits.

The goddess observed her friend and mentally repeated Gabrielle's last words. She'd come to understand a lot about Gabrielle ever since she'd been in Gabrielle's body. Just as she'd come to know Autolycus's true self, she also understood her friend. Xena knew there were depths of emotions that floated in the bard and many centered on Xena. The next step was for Xena to bring them up, but there hadn't been a right time for the matter.

Gabrielle and Xena quietly ate the rabbits together, but Xena only ate about half. She was far from hungry, which she assumed was from the godhood. Gabrielle questioned

her, and Xena's smart remark was that she was simply full from the ambrosia. Gabrielle returned a smack to the warrior's side, but she polished off the remaining rabbit.

Once Gabrielle cleaned up after the meal, she felt rather worn out. She'd rested on her back in the soft grass by the campfire. She had her staff at her side, and her hands tucked under her head.

The warrior wasn't at all tired, and she suspected she wouldn't need any sleep. She felt somewhat tense because of the army being so near, but she hadn't sensed any nearby threats from them. She figured the army would pack up at first light, and they would need to follow.

Gabrielle rotated her head to the right and observed her friend, who sat in front of the fire. "Xena, lay down."

"Mmmm." The warrior stretched out her legs and leaned back on her hands. "I'm not tired."

The Amazon Queen considered the response and closed her eyes. "The godhood huh?" She sighed but teasingly offered, "You could always go stalk around in the Athenian Army. I'm sure they'll never notice you."

"It's tempting," the warrior granted. She knew she could easily maneuver through the camp since she was a god.

"I'll be fine here," the bard argued. She briefly yawned and covered her open mouth. She slipped her hand back under her head.

Xena shook her feet in front of her. She debated the idea.

"Go on before I fall asleep," the bard offered.

The warrior gave in and jumped to her feet. "I won't be long."

"Mmmhmmm." Gabrielle opened her eyes and gazed up into blue ones that reflect the firelight. Her heart missed a beat at the beautiful sight, but Gabrielle recovered. "I'll be here."

Xena grinned then turned and disappeared into the dark woods.

The Amazon Queen rolled onto her side, faced the fire, and tried to stay awake by watching it.

Xena though hurried through the woods at a fast speed. She came to a stop when she neared the perimeter of the army's camp. She squatted behind some brush and scanned for patrol. She soon spotted a soldier coming in her direction so she hid deeper into the brush. When he was close enough, Xena shot out her hands and grabbed his ankles.

The soldier fell to this back and before he could give a yell there was dark woman over him. He then lost consciousness when a fist connected with his head.

The warrior left the soldier hidden in the brush, and she headed for the camp carefully. She hid behind trees and finally came to the outskirts of the camp. She ducked behind a tent just when three soldiers passed. Once they were gone, she hastily snuck across the open space and went behind another tent. She heard a few voices inside, but it was only soldiers chatting away about nothing important. She ignored it and looked around the corner. She finally spotted the main tent where the commander would be located.

Xena moved swiftly through the dark camp and went around any fires or soldiers. She finally made it to the other side where the commander's tent was located. She knelt behind the rear of the tent and attempted to make out the voices, but they were too low. She concentrated harder, and her godhood increased her hearing ability.

"They won't surrender," one man argued.

"I don't expect them to," agreed a second man. "Not after how they ruined the temple."

"It still doesn't make sense why they did it, commander," mentioned the first man.

"The Amazons have always worshiped Artemis, and for them to attack and destroy the temple doesn't make sense."

The commander was silent but finally replied, "It's not our place to question why. We have our orders." He moved about in the tent and ordered, "I want the army prepared to move after dawn. We don't have far to go and build a temporary base in the valley. From there we'll prepare to attack the Amazons."

"Yes, sir. I'll see to the men." The officer saluted his commander and marched out of the tent.

Xena straightened up from her hidden spot. She didn't much like the news nor did she hear anything about the destruction of Artemis's temple. She agreed it didn't make sense that the Amazons would do such a thing.

Suddenly several soldiers ran into the camp and yelled about an intruder. They rallied other men and sounded the alarm around the camp.

Xena cursed and debated what to do next. She mostly feared that they would spread out their search efforts and find Gabrielle. She hadn't been careful enough when she knocked out the patrol guard. Well there went any theory that godhood meant perfection.

The warrior debated her first step, but she decided to finally give into her godhood. She spotted several soldiers coming her way, and they would spot her in a matter of seconds. She closed her eyes and focused on the one power she'd seen many gods use in the past. Xena reopened her eyes and smirked when the soldiers approached her but didn't see her. The invisibility worked perfectly.

Xena sidestepped the soldiers before she was bumped into by mistake. She then casually started through the camp and passed the fast moving soldiers. She wondered why she hadn't used the power before now. Once she was out of camp, she made a fast dash for her camp and hoped Gabrielle hadn't been discovered.

In the small camp, Gabrielle shot up and grabbed her staff when she heard the whistle sound. She sighed in relief when the blur formed into Xena. "Gods... do you have to do that? As if just disappearing and reappearing out of the woods wasn't enough to scare me." She patted her heavily pounding chest.

The warrior came closer and knelt down. "Sorry. I was worried."

The bard read the tension that flowed through the goddess. She tilted her head and asked, "Did they spot you?"

"Sorta," Xena admitted, "the guard I knocked out woke up sooner than I expected."

"You know," Gabrielle ranted, "you could have just used that invisibility trick and walked in there without being seen."

The warrior arched an eyebrow at Gabrielle's suggestion.

The bard sighed at the look. "Yeah, I know... you like to be creative and sneaky." She set her staff back down then lowered onto her back again. "Did you find out anything?"

"Yes and no," Xena honestly replied.

"Mmmm." Gabrielle stared up at her friend and waited for more details.

The warrior sighed and sat down. She didn't sense any danger around them. "They are headed for the Amazons."

The Amazon Queen released a low moan of annoyance. "Why can't anything ever be simple and quiet with us?"

"Would you really have left Potidaea then?" the warrior teased.

Gabrielle sent a dark look to her friend. "Did you find out why?"

Xena sighed but answered, "Kind of. The Amazons destroyed a temple to Artemis, and it sounds like they have orders to punish the nation."

"What?" Gabrielle shot up from her spot. "What temple? When? How?" She looked to Xena for the answers.

The warrior held up her hands. "I don't know... I didn't hear that part." She lowered them back to her lap. "It's not getting solved tonight, Gabrielle. Just get some rest."

Gabrielle realized her partner was right so she settled back down. She didn't like knowing exactly why the Athenian Army was headed for her nation, but she couldn't do much tonight about it. She hadn't slept last night so she was now exhausted. She needed some sleep so she could think clearly tomorrow.

Xena watched her friend slowly drift off to her dreamscape. She felt deeply for her partner, who hadn't slept well in several nights since Xena's accident that ended in her death. She hoped Gabrielle's sleep would be more fitful than the previous nights.

## **Chapter 2 - The Goddess of Many Skills**

Gabrielle was standing and planted in place. She couldn't do anything or stop it from happening again. She could only watch her friend dangle from the bridge's rope. "Xena?" she hollered.

Velasca stepped out onto the bridge. She pointed her right finger at the warrior. "Goodbye, Xena."

The bard didn't know what to do, but she wished she could use Xena's chakram correctly. She helplessly watched Velasca charge her thunder bolt.

Xena bounced the bridge's main rope and caused Velasca's shot to go wild. She still remained hooked to the rope with both hands.

Velasca growled and unsheathed her sword. She quickly moved across the rope and decided to take out the warrior the old fashion way. She came in range, spun her sword, and aimed for the Warrior Princess.

"Cut the rope, Gabrielle!" Xena yelled.

The former Amazon plunged her sword into Xena's left shoulder.

Gabrielle gasped when her partner released a piercing scream.

Velasca raised her sword and prepared to drive the tip into Xena again.

Xena gazed over at Gabrielle and demanded, "Cut it, Gabrielle!"

Velasca drove her blade towards Xena's head.

"Xeeenaaa!" the bard cried out. She ran out onto the rope bridge, but she lost her footing and slipped. She fell off the bridge just as Xena was killed and fell from the bridge. Gabrielle only heard Velasca's piercing laugh echo around her.

"Gabrielle, wake up," Xena ordered.

The bard hastily sat up and breathed heavily. The panic still swept through her, but she clung to her friend's muscular arms.

The warrior remained knelt beside the upset bard. She held Gabrielle by her sweaty sides, and she soothed, "It was a dream."

Gabrielle gasped for air and dropped her head against Xena's arm. She closed her eyes and tried to reclaim herself. "Gods... it was so real."

Earlier Xena had heard the faint sounds from Gabrielle that meant an onset of a nightmare. She'd hoped it'd past, but instead it'd worsen until Gabrielle woke up. "It wasn't," she argued. She withdrew some so that she could get a better view of Gabrielle's face. "Are you okay?"

The bard peered up into captivating blue eyes, and she recalled the reality that her friend was indeed a god now. She dipped her head slightly because she felt as if Xena's eyes could read through her. "Yea, I'm fine."

The warrior didn't believe it. She hooked Gabrielle's chin with her index finger and tilted the bard's head back. She studied deep into the bard's eyes and easily read the emotions normally hidden deeper. "It was about Velasca?"

Gabrielle was briefly caught in Xena's eyes, but she broke away and replied, "Yes." She captured Xena's hand into hers. "You were back on the rope bridge. You didn't have the ambrosia this time, and Velasca..." She shook her head. "I didn't care about stopping her anymore. I just... ran out on the bridge and fell off." She sighed and muttered, "I didn't want to go back to that place... where you're dead."

Xena was amazed by the emotional depth she felt for the bard. She considered a better plan for the rest of the night. She gently teased, "So are you comfortable sleeping here?"

Gabrielle mimicked Xena's arched eyebrow.

"Come on." The warrior helped the bard stand, and she scooped up the staff too. She guided Gabrielle over to her earlier sitting spot. She'd been seated on the ground with her back against a soft tree. Xena set the bard's staff down on the ground, then she unhooked her sword and chakram.

Gabrielle was curious, yet she didn't question her friend. She briefly glanced at the campfire, which had hardly weakened and most likely because Xena had kept plenty of wood in it.

The warrior finally sat down and ordered, "Come here." She watched Gabrielle shifted around and come to sit between her open legs. Xena propped her legs up then reached forward. She snaked her arms around the bard's waist and gently tugged.

Gabrielle pressed her hands against Xena's propped up knees. She pushed her body back deeper and then laid back. She was amazed at how warm she found Xena's body. "I know you're always hot blooded but wow."

Xena chuckled, then she shifted around until they were both comfortable. "I think it has something to do with the godhood."

"Mmmm... it must." Gabrielle felt comfortable, warm, and quite safe in her partner's arms. She rested her head against the warrior's broad shoulder and closed her eyes. "Thanks, Xena."

Xena softly smiled and more so because she could sense that Gabrielle's earlier, upset emotions were now gone. She felt relieved that her idea helped the bard calm down. She could tell though that Gabrielle wasn't quite sleepy yet.

"We're going to have to stop the Athenian Army, you know."

The warrior sighed and leaned her head against the tree. "I know."

"Then there's your godhood." The bard considered the godhood problem and mentioned, "It'll come in handy though if we have to fight the Athenian Army."

"We're not fighting the army," the warrior argued.

Gabrielle had her hands in her lap, but she placed her right one on Xena's solid leg. "Well they seem pretty well prepared to fight the Amazons if they're toting a few siege weapons."

Xena sighed but more at the fact that Gabrielle was starting to understand how armies worked. She hadn't realized how much the bard was catching on these days. "Most likely it's a misunderstanding."

The bard could tell her partner was trying to be the optimistic one, which was usually Gabrielle's job. She brushed her bangs back with her left hand. "I hope you're right."

"Well," the warrior started, "between your bard skills and my fighting skills, I think we can produce a pretty convincing case why they shouldn't attack the nation."

Gabrielle laughed and bowed her head slightly. She lifted it again once the laughs died. "Never mind that you're a god now?"

Xena smirked and reminded, "They don't know that."

"Yet," the bard muttered.

The warrior hadn't lost her grin, but she ordered, "Get some sleep."

The bard rested her head back on Xena's shoulder. She idly started to move her right hand over Xena's leg without thinking about it. She made random patterns in a soothing motion. She remained mostly quiet and sleep wasn't far from her again. She then softly asked, "Do you regret coming back?"

Xena was caught off guard by the question, and she needed a second to understand its context. She bowed her head closer to Gabrielle's. "No, I don't." She had a slight view of the bard's profile, and she questioned, "Why?"

Gabrielle shrugged so she seemed more casual than how she felt. "I was just curious."

The warrior let it go and softly urged, "Get some rest, Gabrielle."

The bard decided not to argue. She rested back into her friend's warm body. She found sleep much easier this time, and she was surrounded by the warrior's presence.

Xena remained awake all through the night. Never once did her dreams call her, and she considered if she'd ever see her dreams again. In reality, she knew her dreams always transformed into nightmares, and she was quite content to leave them behind her now. The other night, after she'd been brought back to life, she'd had a nightmare again about dying and going to Hades. It wasn't so much the death that'd frightened her or even Hades, but it was seeing Gabrielle so hurt again. Xena didn't think she could return to that place again... she couldn't return Gabrielle to that place again.

Just before dawn, the warrior stirred her sleeping partner. She let the bard wake herself while she went in pursuit of some quick breakfast for the bard. Xena wasn't at all hungry, but she knew Gabrielle's mood could often depend on her stomach's moods. Gabrielle had washed her face down in the creek nearby, then she warmly received the berries that Xena had foraged for her. Xena promised they'd make it to the nation by sun high and in time for lunch.

The duo continued on their journey back to the nation. Xena led the way around the army's camp and came out on the road just in front of the stone bridge. She and Gabrielle crossed it, and soon they'd enter the Amazon's territory.

Gabrielle had been mostly quiet during the trip because it'd taken her some time to fully wake up. She felt rather rested today but there were still a few dark circles under her eyes. She peered up at her friend and inquired, "So, what do I tell the Amazons about your eyes?"

"My eyes?" Xena took a second to catch up, then she recalled the dilemma. "I drank too much milk," she offhandedly replied.

Gabrielle furrowed her eyebrows when she didn't at first follow Xena's thinking. She suddenly stopped walking when she realized what Xena said to her. "Xena?" She halted the warrior.

The god stopped and turned to her partner. She arched a perfect eyebrow.

The bard hesitated when those dazzling blue eyes rested upon her. She shook her head to rid herself of the alluring call from them. She ordered, "Draw your sword."

Xena was confused, but she did as she was told. She watched as Gabrielle grabbed the blade and adjusted the blade a certain way.

"Look at your eyes."

The Warrior Princess sighed and focused on her thin image in the blade. Gradually her right eyebrow inclined to that arc again. She peered over the blade and smirked at Gabrielle. "They go well with the leathers, don't you think?"

Gabrielle rolled her eyes and remarked, "Black leathers would match better." She sighed and continued the trip back to the nation.

The warrior sheathed her sword, and her long strides easily brought her to Gabrielle's side. "One of Velasca's lightening bolts made my eyes bluer."

Gabrielle groaned and remarked, "I see the godhood hasn't done anything to improve your creativity."

"Hey," Xena shot back, "I'm perfectly creative during fights."

"Alright," the bard relented. She slightly grinned. "Goddess of Creative Fighting."

Xena gave a disgusted look then picked up the pace.

Gabrielle snickered, but she easily caught up to the warrior. "Should I say the lightening bolt hit you in the ass?"

"Get off it, Gabrielle," Xena threatened.

"I'm just going with your brilliant suggestion," Gabrielle remarked in a cheerful voice.

The warrior shot a glare at her friend. "You're relentless."

"That's why we get along so well."

Xena displayed a devilish grin. "Oh is that why?"

Gabrielle hesitated, but she managed to stay at the warrior's side. "If I didn't know better-" She suddenly lost her words when Xena's hand came over her mouth. She muffled her last words.

"Sssh," the warrior ordered. She removed her hand and turned around. She slotted her eyes when the distance horse hoofs rung in her ears better.

"What?"

The Warrior Princess dropped her head and studied the leafy trees over her. "I think it's a scout." She turned to the bard, grabbed her hips, and prepared to jump up.

"Wait, Xena. I really hate-" Gabrielle squealed when she was rocketed up into the air. She almost dropped her staff, but she managed it. Xena balanced her safely on the branch. "Why do you have to do that?"

The warrior had a broad grin. She softly ordered, "Stay here. I'm going to check it out."

"I'm coming too," the Amazon Queen argued.

Xena chuckled and started down the tree branch. "If you can, Gabrielle." She ran down the branch, hopped off, and landed on another tree's easily.

Gabrielle edged out on the branch some, saw the distance between the branches, and the distance to the ground. She slightly paled and gazed back at the warrior. "I'll guard this tree." She rolled her eyes at Xena's low laugh. "Just go."

"I won't be long." The warrior disappeared deeper into the trees.

Gabrielle came back to the tree's trunk. She felt safer, and she leaned her back against the trunk. She lifted her staff and played with it. She considered the warrior's earlier comment about why they get along. She had to admit they were pretty opposite so how did they manage to get along after a year and half?

Gabrielle lost her thoughts when she heard hoof beats. She carefully hunched down so she wouldn't be as obvious. She slotted her eyes when an Athenian soldier on horseback rode into her view. She tilted her head and carefully watched him.

The scout slowed down and gazed about the local area. He halted his horse and reached behind to his saddlebags.

The bard bit her lower lip. She was able to stare directly below where the scout had stopped. She wondered what'd happened to Xena.

The Athenian scout unrolled a map in his front of him. The map clearly marked out the lay of the local land and showed the Amazons' borders. He pointed at his current location, which wasn't far from the borders. He lifted his head and stared at the trees before him that stretched deeper. The scout then traced his finger to the west, and he tapped a specific location.

Gabrielle leaned to her right and tried to get a better view of the map. She wanted to know what spot he was pointing at because it could be where the army planned to camp. She scraped her boot over the branch accidentally and made an audible noise.

The Athenian scout straightened up at the sound. He reached to his sword handle at his side, but he didn't unsheath it. He scanned the forest carefully and looked for any danger.

Gabrielle bit her lower lip and prayed to the gods that he wouldn't spot her. She knew she could easily handle one soldier, but she didn't want to think about the repercussions if the scout didn't show back up at the army. She then stopped her prayer to the gods when she recalled that her best friend was indeed a god. Instead she smirked and cursed that particular god for leaving her here.

The soldier released his sword hilt then gazed back at the map. He rolled it up after a second then ordered his horse to head west.

Gabrielle sighed once the scout was gone. She dropped her head against the tree and closed her eyes.

"I heard you damning me," remarked a husky voice, which echoed in the woods.

The bard straightened up and look about for her friend. "Xena?" She then slightly grinned when the warrior slowly appeared on the ground, under the tree.

"I was right here the entire time he was here."

Gabrielle sheepishly smiled and shrugged. "I didn't know."

Xena shook her head and grinned. "Come on." She held up her hands. "I'll catch you."

The bard debated the jump, but she gave in anyway. She first tossed her staff onto the ground, stood up, and made the leap for Xena.

The warrior stretched out her arms, braced her body, and easily caught the bard. She set the bard onto her feet, but she still held the bard's hips.

"So, you gave into the invisibility huh?" the bard teased.

Xena slightly lifted her eyebrow.

"Hmmm... that's not too creative," Gabrielle idly remarked. She pulled out of Xena's hands and retrieved her staff a few steps away.

The Warrior Princess sighed and waited for Gabrielle, then she continued the walk back to the nation. "Did you come up with a good story for my eyes yet?"

Gabrielle puckered her lips and cheerfully stated, "You ate ambrosia. How about that?"

Xena sighed at the terrible joke. She sped up the pace and hurried to the nation.

"You think that spot he was pointing to was where they plan to make camp?"

"Most likely," the warrior agreed. "The valley is about the perfect size for the army."

The bard shook her head and muttered, "Who attacked the temple though?"

The warrior glanced at her partner then replied, "Velasca."

Gabrielle's eyebrows almost met, and she deeply considered the idea. "You think she had enough time to do that while we were leading her to the ruins?"

"It wouldn't take long to destroy the temple." Xena shrugged. "A little detour to deface Artemis's temple."

Gabrielle shook her head and wondered what they could do now to convince the Athenian Army that it wasn't her nation. She realized there wasn't much to fix it because Velasca was still an Amazon regardless.

Xena touched the bard's back and gently offered, "It'll work out fine."

"And if it doesn't?" the bard argued. "What if we have to battle the army? I don't think the nation is strong enough to defeat them."

"It's not going to happen," the warrior promised.

Gabrielle released a sigh and brushed the warrior's hand. "I hope you're right."

Xena lightly touched the bard's back in response. She hurried up the pace again and hoped to make it to the nation in about an hour. She knew Gabrielle would be plenty hungry by the time they'd arrive plus they'd need to catch up with Ephiny.

At Helios high, the partners made it back to the nation. Ephiny and Solari greeted them at the gates and asked how it went with Velasca. Gabrielle quickly relayed that everything had turned out well and that Velasca was now entombed in the lava pit. Ephiny and Solari followed the pair to the dining hut and talked some more.

"So I don't remember your eyes being that blue, Xena," Solari commented. She took a seat at the table after everybody else sat down.

The warrior noticed how the Amazons were staring deep into her eyes. She mentally groaned and bowed her head. She prayed her friend would take over the conversation.

Gabrielle softly laughed and studied her Amazons, who kept staring at Xena. "I think it's from the ambrosia."

Ephiny broke away and studied the queen. "Ambrosia?"

Xena remained silent and ate her meal.

"Mmmhmm." The bard swallowed her mouthful and mentioned, "Since Xena came back from the dead they've just been getting bluer." She shrugged then turned her head to Xena. "That's the only thing we can figure out."

Xena lifted her head to the bard. "I think my eye color is the least of the concerns."

Gabrielle inwardly grinned at Xena's tactic to change the topic. She turned back to the Amazons. "Xena's right. We have a slight problem."

Ephiny grew concerned, and Solari leaned against the table.

"The Athenian Army is headed this way."

Ephiny, the regent, gaped and demanded, "Where? Here to the nation?"

"Yes," the warrior answered, "they plan to destroy the nation because the Amazons ruined a temple to Artemis."

"What?" Solari laughed and shook her head. "That's impossible."

"Not entirely," Gabrielle debated, "We think Velasca has something to do with it."

Ephiny lowered her eye contact and considered it. "It's possible she did it. There was a gap of time we couldn't find her."

Xena and Gabrielle exchanged looks when they had their answer. Xena returned to her meal while her partner filled up the conversation.

"Then most likely that's what happened." Gabrielle pushed aside her mostly empty plate, which only had a piece of flat bread on it. "I think we should contact the commander. Maybe we can work out the problem without getting into a fight."

"The nation needs to be on alert," the regent offered, "in case we can't work it out."

"I know," Gabrielle sadly murmured.

Xena had her right hand under the table, and she slipped it over to the bard's knee. She gently squeezed and silently promised to make sure it worked out okay without any bloodshed. She could tell after this predicament was taken care of they'd need a vacation.

The group continued to chat for awhile and formulate an initial plan. At nightfall, Xena would leave the village and track down the exact location of the army. Gabrielle and Ephiny would spend the time preparing the Amazons for a possible battle. Solari also promised to assist Ephiny and Gabrielle with preparations. After the lunch, Xena and Gabrielle separated from the Ephiny and Solari and went to their hut for some time to relax.

Gabrielle took a chair at the table and stretched out her legs. She'd already propped her staff against the wall, near the door. "You'll be careful tonight?"

The warrior, now a god too, slightly grinned and sat on the bed. "Oh I will be."

Gabrielle chuckled at her mistake. "Something could always happen." She'd certainly learned that when Xena was hit by that lashed tree and died days later. She sadly released a sigh and leaned forward until her elbows met her knees. "One day you're

alive, the next dead, then alive... and now a god." She peered up and slightly grinned. "You make it interesting, Xena."

The warrior returned the half grin, but she could tell Gabrielle was torn about it. "I do, don't I?" She leaned forward and collected Gabrielle's hands into hers. "You wanted an adventure when you left Potidaea."

Gabrielle stared at their opposite hands. Hers were much smaller compared to Xena's, but they both had calluses from their weapons. She also found Xena's hands soft like hers. "Yea, I did."

Xena slid her fingers through Gabrielle's and locked them. "So what's your theory about why I came back?"

The bard silently thought it out, but she'd already considered it since Autolycus's arrival in the village. "To finished what you started with the Greater Good."

"Hmmm." The warrior was quiet then replied, "I was ready to pay for the rest of my sins in Tartarus."

Gabrielle lifted her gaze from their hands and was captivated by Xena's eyes. She tried to break from her haze, which seemed to be created by the blue of Xena's eyes. She opened her mouth to ask, but she stopped when the hut door opened with a proceeding knock.

"Gabrielle?" called Ephiny's voice. The regent walked in and hesitated when she found the close position of the pair. She'd caught the tail end of something intimate, and she witnessed the instant retraction from them when she'd walked into the hut. She mentally slapped herself for the intrusion.

Xena had straightened up, and Gabrielle separated their hands. Xena decided to get up and move away from the bard.

"Yes, Ephiny?" The bard leaned back in the chair.

"I needed to talk to you about some things..." Ephiny hesitated and glanced at the warrior then back at Gabrielle. "About protocol for war and such."

Xena understood the subtle hint so she remarked, "I'm going to see to Argo." She brushed past Ephiny, but Gabrielle's voice haltered her hasty exit.

"I'll meet you there later."

Xena turned her head to the bard. She let go of her earlier annoyance at Ephiny's unexpected entrance.

"Maybe we can go for a ride," Gabrielle offered in compensation.

The warrior held onto the open thatch door. She smiled finally and answered, "You're on." She quickly left the hut and closed the door.

Ephiny blew up some air. "Thanks." She walked over to the bard. "I didn't mean to barge in."

"You didn't," Gabrielle argued. "We were just talking."

The regent didn't fully believe the cover up story, but nor did she plan to pry that deeply. She knew Gabrielle had a lot to struggle with since Xena's death and rebirth. Ephiny had seen her own life turned upside down countless times. "So is Xena more up to speed than when she first..." She wasn't sure how to phrase it right.

Gabrielle understood the meaning and nodded. "Yes, you could say that. She had... no problem handling Velasca."

Ephiny took Xena's vacant spot on the bed. She casually remarked, "It's pretty amazing she came out of that fight without a scratch."

Briefly the scene of Xena's cut, bruised, and beaten body under Velasca's sword flashed through Gabrielle's mind. She shoved the memory away and thanked the godhood's healing powers. "Xena has many skills."

Ephiny softly laughed, but she noticed how the bard didn't at the old joke. She went more serious and started the conversation about war protocol in the nation. She was grateful that the bard was so patient and intent with the topic. It was obvious that Gabrielle cared for the Amazons and what happened to them. Gabrielle was meant to be a queen despite she'd always follow Xena's path.

Later Gabrielle was escaped from the hut and Ephiny. She trekked across the village and went into the stables where Xena was finishing with Argo's brushing. Gabrielle smiled and leaned against the stall. "Are you still up for that ride?"

The warrior, who loved to ride, grinned and taunted, "Are you?"

"With you?" Gabrielle shrugged and joked, "Always."

Xena started with a grin, but it shaped into a smile. She then noticed Gabrielle had forgotten something. "Where's your staff?"

The bard repeated her shrug and answered, "I figured I didn't need it." She folded her arms on top of the door. "You're a god now... that's all the protection I need."

"Even I can't be in two places at once," the warrior teased.

"You won't have to be because I'll be right beside you." Gabrielle smirked at Xena's doubtful look. "Come on, oh godly one."

Xena dramatically sighed and hurried to get Argo tacked up. She found the stall door opened thanks to Gabrielle, and she guided Argo out. She and Gabrielle then strolled out of the stables into the warm afternoon.

"It's a beautiful day." Gabrielle stopped just outside and gazed up at the clear, blue sky. "Almost like your eyes," she murmured.

The Warrior Princess now studied the sky and recalled her eyes' reflection in her blade. She turned her head to Gabrielle and softly smiled when Gabrielle looked at her. "Come on." She headed for the gates.

Gabrielle mimicked Xena's earlier smile, and she easily followed along side. She tenderly whispered, "I'd follow those eyes anywhere."

Xena chuckled, but she couldn't hide her smile at all. She came outside the open gates and easily climbed into the saddle. She held out her hand to Gabrielle and waited.

Gabrielle collapsed the warrior's arm, and she was easily lifted into the saddle behind Xena. She grasped the warrior's hips and stole one last look at the guards by the gates. She smirked at how they were all staring at Xena. She leaned forward and whispered, "We have an audience."

Xena took notice of the guards that studied them, but her godhood allowed her to figure out that they were mostly intent on her blue eyes. Xena felt as if she could draw people's attention to her because of the godhood. Not that she wasn't use to doing that, but the godhood seemed to intensify it. "Hang on," she commanded and tapped Argo's sides.

The duo started out with a slow ride, but Xena signaled Argo into a strong canter. Gabrielle finally slipped her arms around the warrior's waist and held tighter. She'd grown accustom to the rides, and she could even nap at times if Argo was only walking. Xena always treasured any moments she was able to get Gabrielle in the saddle with her. She rarely struggled with Gabrielle, who often refused her offers. Eventually Xena mostly stopped offering rides unless they had to cover ground or if she noticed Gabrielle needed a break from the walking. Overall, Xena credited Gabrielle's persistence to always walk to the well developed muscles in Gabrielle's legs. In all reality, it paid off for the bard because the toned legs helped her become a better fighter with her staff.

After a solid thirty minute ride, Xena slowed Argo into a walk again. Gabrielle lowered her head and rested her cheek against Xena's shoulder blade. Gradually her eyes drifted shut.

Xena silently enjoyed the beautiful day, ride, and her friend's presence. She was glad for the moment of peace for them before the crisis with the Athenian Army struck the nation.

"This is nice," Gabrielle muttered. "Are you sure we have to go back?"

The warrior chuckled and freed her left hand from the reins. She bunched up the reins into her right hand and now easily patted the bard's hands over her stomach. "I'm sure Ephiny could handle it."

The bard grunted and remark, "Oh no. Now that I've shown my face again, I can't leave... Ephiny would make sure of that."

Xena chuckled and squeezed the bard's hands. "I wouldn't worry, Gabrielle."

The Amazon Queen was silent, but she eventually raised another question. "If we can't settle this peacefully then are you going to use this godhood?"

The warrior remained quiet and carefully thought out a decent response. The godhood was certainly a benefit in many ways, but the fact that she was also immortal would prove to be a problem. She had every intent to grow old and hopefully with Gabrielle. She finally formulated a good enough answer and softly promised, "If it comes down to it, then I will use it."

Gabrielle bit back a faint yawn and remarked, "It'd probably take you all of ten minutes to wipe out the Athenian Army." She slightly smirked. "I mean it'd take you about an hour if you didn't have the godhood."

Xena laughed and shook her head. "So what mathematical formula are you using?"

"It's really easy," Gabrielle mentioned. "You first have to find out how many warriors equals a Warrior Princess. So far, by my calculations over the year I've determined that's about ten warriors."

"Uh huh. Go on," the smirking warrior encouraged.

"The next thing is you have to figure out is how many warriors equals a god." Gabrielle lifted her head off of Xena's shoulder as she really fell into the role. She puckered her lips and tapped Xena's leather clad stomach. "Well let's use Ares as the basis. You think he's like a hundred warriors?"

Xena grinned, yet she went along with the game. "That sounds reasonable."

"Okay so that's a hundred." Gabrielle nodded twice. "Now to correctly assess your new level of skills, you have to multiply one Warrior Princess by one god... or rather ten warriors times one hundred warriors." Gabrielle paused and listened to her friend's laughs. "That equals a thousand skill level. Now just going on a rough basis... I suspect it would take you one second to stop one warrior."

"Sixty warriors in a minute," Xena calculated between her chuckles.

"Exactly." Gabrielle beamed and declared, "That's six hundred warriors in ten minutes. I bet the Athenian Army is about that size too."

The warrior laughed because Gabrielle's estimation about the army was around there. She shook her head and teased, "That's a very interesting formula."

"It's pretty precise too," Gabrielle teased.

Xena smirked and tormented, "Do you have a name for this... formula?"

The bard wasn't beat, and she shot back, "I call it the Skill Formula."

The goddess shook her head, but she had to admit that Gabrielle did have the creativity in their friendship. She hoped someday that the bard would utilize her

creativity in fighting, but she figured Gabrielle wished Xena would do the same with her daily life. Xena shifted from her thoughts and studied the local area. She estimated that they were near the lake that they'd often passed but never visited. It was the perfect time to visit.

Gabrielle's expression lightened when she saw the serene lake. She'd known of the lake yet never seen it until now. She was thankful that Xena had thought to stop here. Soon enough, Gabrielle found herself helped out of the saddle and onto her boots.

Xena decided to give Argo a break too. She removed the face tack and hung it on a tree branch nearby. She patted her mare then went to the waiting bard. Xena and Gabrielle strolled down to the lake's edge and watched the silent lake.

The bard leaned towards her partner and whispered, "You think there's any good fish in there?"

The warrior smirked and replied, "I don't know." Then a dangerous glint filled her eyes, and she threatened, "Why don't you find out."

Gabrielle took a beat to translate the warrior's threat, however, a set of strong hands were at her shoulders. "Xeeena! Noooo!" She screamed and squealed, but it was useless. Gabrielle was suddenly airborne and soaring for the lake.

"Don't forget to count them for me!" the warrior hollered just before the bard made the dive.

Gabrielle's body broke the peaceful lake's surface. She dove into the water, which swallowed her scream and ever her body. The bard went down to the bottom then made the swim back to the surface.

Xena folded her arms over her chest and leaned her weight onto her right foot. She was quite smug and waited for the bard's surface.

Gabrielle had swam closer to the shore until she knew she could stand again. She slowly rose out of the water, and she was nothing short of furious.

The Warrior Princess softly laughed at her partner's angry features. "So how many?"

The bard gritted her teeth while she stood in waist high water. "I was too busy getting over my shock to count them."

"Well maybe you should go back-"

"Xena," the bard snarled. She fisted her hands at her sides.

Xena tensed at the bard's tone. She easily predicted what the bard may do. She bent her knees slightly when Gabrielle lifted her fisted hands out of the water.

Gabrielle also bent her knees and mentally prepared for battle.

The warrior lifted her right foot ever so slightly.

Suddenly there was a warcry from Gabrielle, who exploded from the water. The warrior broke into a normal sprint and let out an echoing, tormenting laugh. Gabrielle was on the shore, and she continued her fast pursuit for her friend. She and Xena knew if Gabrielle managed her wet body onto the leather clad warrior that it wouldn't fair well. The slightest bit of water tended to irritate the warrior, who cursed any water on her leathers or proud armor.

Xena raced up towards the woods where she knew there were plenty of hiding spots. She disappeared into the woods and ducked behind a tree.

The soaked bard blazed past a stunned Argo and entered the woods. She stopped after a few paces and scanned the trees. "Xena?" she angrily called. She was breathing hard and her heart pounded. She carefully stalked through the woods for her tricky friend.

The warrior silently shifted through the woods and eventually made her way behind the bard. She knelt and carefully crept up behind the bard, who was silently moving through the woods. Xena edged closer and closer until she was just a few steps from the bard.

Gabrielle unexpectedly whirled around and smirked at the warrior. "Gotcha!" She jumped for Xena.

The surprised warrior just caught the flying bard. She fell on her back and rolled around with the irate Amazon. She tried to get a grip on the bard, but Gabrielle was rather quick.

Xena finally managed to roll them, and she came on top of the bard. She pinned the bard under her then grabbed the bard's small wrists. She easily held the fuming bard under her weight and strength.

"This is completely unfair," Gabrielle growled.

"Why?" the bemused warrior asked.

"Because you have a godhood," Gabrielle replied.

Xena chuckled and lowered her head closer. "I'm not using any of it and besides what makes you think I couldn't do this without the godhood?"

Gabrielle huffed and tried to wiggle her wrists free, but it was completely useless. "You know, sometimes I just hate you."

Xena was even more amused at the childlike statement from her partner. She dropped her head down and brought her lips close to the bard's ear. She immediately noticed how Gabrielle stopped struggling when she came that close. "How much do you hate me?"

The bard's eyes fluttered, and she tried to recall the question. She then realized it was another game from the warrior that she wasn't going to play into again. "Honestly hate is such a strong word."

Xena withdrew and studied the prone bard. "Really?" She didn't require her godhood to detect the surging emotions in the bard. She used her eyes and position to her advantage and studied deep into Gabrielle's eyes.

Gabrielle felt like melted ambrosia when she became caught in Xena's gaze. Her thoughts were blank, and she could only daze off into the warrior's alluring blue eyes. She couldn't explain it, yet she felt at peace and calm unlike the past moon after all the chaotic events.

Xena blinked, which seemed to break the spell finally.

The bard had quickly learned, and she took her opening. She used her strong legs to toss them to the right, and she was soon free from the warrior's grasp. She rolled away from the warrior, popped up onto her feet, and proclaimed, "Tuhda!" She stood proud with her hands on her hips.

The Warrior Princess was also proud, but she was grinning on the outside. She came to a kneeling position and revealed her more ruthless smile.

Gabrielle back stepped once. "Do you know how much I love you, Xena? I mean a poem just wouldn't cover it."

"Oh really?" Xena slightly lifted herself and raised her hands up in a ready position.

The Amazon Queen cleared her throat and stepped back again. "Really, really." She suddenly squealed when her friend went on attack. Gabrielle made a run for it and screamed loud enough to chase off the local birds.

Xena ran after her friend, and they were headed back to the lake. She made a quick plot for revenge.

Gabrielle glanced over her shoulder and saw how close the warrior was to her. She felt a surge of fear course through her at being so closely tailed by the tricky warrior. She realized she was coming back to the lake, and that could spell trouble.

Xena increased her strides and speed. She quickly came up behind the bard, and she prepared to scoop up the bard.

Gabrielle screamed again when strong hands and arms lifted her off the ground. She realized Xena wasn't stopping and stilled aimed for the lake. "Xena, no! Please!" She quickly squirmed and desperately tried to find an escape.

Xena braced her body to toss the bard and stop on the edge of the water. She gave a resounding battle cry.

Gabrielle's legs were first lifted up, and she was going to hit the water on her back, feet first. She let out another yell, but she didn't give up and quickly latched onto some armor and limbs.

Xena's eyes grew wide when Gabrielle tangled onto her. She lost her footing on the

muddy ground and started to go with the bard.

Gabrielle smiled just before her back was swallowed by the water. She'd actually managed to turn the table on the clever warrior. She hit the water and went deep into it.

Xena, however, hit the water face first, and she almost hit her face on the bottom of the lake. She was able to push up and arch back up to the surface. She had every intent to make the bard pay for her wet leathers and armor. She surfaced first and angrily wiped her soaked bangs from her face.

Gabrielle came to the top next, and she proclaimed, "I've got skills!" She laughed between Xena's angry features, her amazing feat, and her joke.

The warrior suddenly dove under the water.

Gabrielle instantly went quiet and moved around in the water. "Oh gods, oh gods." She had no idea where the warrior would pop up. Then behind her there was a loud surge of water and a familiar battle cry. Gabrielle screamed yet again, but she was silenced when she was hauled under water.

Xena had easily pulled her friend underwater. She held tightly to the small hips, and she swam them closer to the shoreline. She didn't plan on keeping her leathers and armor in the water any longer than they needed to be.

Gabrielle's feet hit the bottom, and she stood up for a gulp of needed air. She didn't have much time to relax because Xena picked her up and carried her to the shore. She remained gleeful and tossed her left arm around the warrior's shoulders. She swung her feet in midair like a kid and teased, "I gotcha."

"Finally," Xena tormented back.

The bard's parade was not at all rained on by the warrior's tease. She'd finally beat Xena at her own game, and she planned to live it up.

Xena set the bard down on her feet, and she continued to trek up to Argo. She stopped next to the tree that held the tack. She took a moment to throw her hair forward and work the water out of it.

Gabrielle had squeezed most of the water from hers while she approached the warrior. She grinned happily.

Xena straightened up and shook her head at the bard's look. "You're quite happy with yourself."

The bard evilly laughed and just started the trek back to the village.

The warrior shook her head, but she was quite amused. She efficiently tacked Argo again then easily caught up to her friend. She'd briefly considered using her godhood to dry her leathers and armor, but she completely decided against it. She didn't find dry leathers and armor worth it compared to Gabrielle's accomplishment and

enjoyment.

The bard strolled along side the soaked warrior. She walked closer and thoroughly teased, "You want to ride Argo?"

Xena mock glared because she and Gabrielle both knew how hard it was to ride in wet leathers. Xena wouldn't opt to be chaffed in certain places, but in reality it wouldn't bother her now that she was a god. Xena though went along with the joke for the bard's benefit.

The bard and warrior walked in comparable silence on the way back to the nation. They enjoyed the last of the warm afternoon and the lively woods around them. The ride and romp around the lake turned out to do them a lot of good. When they were about ten minutes from the gates, Gabrielle edged closer to her friend.

Xena curiously peered down at the bard.

"Do we have to really go back?"

The warrior bit her lower lip some then honestly answered, "No." When the surprised bard looked to her, she added, "But we should."

Gabrielle sighed and nodded. "I know... just wishful thinking or wishful asking."

Xena lightly considered it and promised, "We won't take long to handle this."

The bard brushed the warrior's arm. "I know." She smiled though and mentioned, "I'm just glad you're here."

The warrior mirrored the smile and replied, "Me too." She lifted her head until the gates came into her view. She inwardly sighed and her mood darkened at the thought of the Athenian Army.

Gabrielle felt the change in her friend so she decided to correct it quickly. She nudged the warrior with her elbow. "I got it now."

Xena turned back to the bard. "What's that?"

Gabrielle smirked up at her partner, and mirth filled her voice. "The Goddess of Many Skills."

"Gabrielle!"

### **Chapter 3 - Just How Godly?**

Xena knelt and carefully studied the Athenian Army that was nestled in the valley. She sighed at being right. She carefully studied the camp's overall layout and watched

the campfires flicker in the moonlit night. She debated whether to sneak in the traditional way or use her invisibility. After a brief struggle, the warrior gave into her warrior creativity. She carefully and silently snuck down towards the camp.

Back in the Amazon village, Gabrielle was walking back to her hut with Ephiny. She expected Solari to join them shortly so they could discuss the plans to deal with the Athenian Army.

The regent walked closer to her friend. She whispered, "If the nation has to fight the Athenian Army, I don't know how we'll win."

Gabrielle remained quiet and considered a decent response.

"The Amazons are talking... they fear a loss."

The queen stopped and turned to her friend. "Ephiny, Xena and I are going to do everything we can to stop the war from happening."

"I know," Ephiny agreed. She grabbed the bard's shoulders and reminded, "You and Xena can pull off some impossible feats, but you and Xena aren't the gods." She hesitated and further mentioned, "Sometimes it does come down to the battles to settle disputes."

Gabrielle sighed at the Amazon's dim words. "It should be the last option."

"And it may just be." Ephiny squeezed the distraught bard's shoulder, then continued the walk. "If we didn't have war, we'd forget what peace is like."

Gabrielle sadly smiled at the truth behind Ephiny's words. She soon came upon her hut, and she opened the door for them. She glanced at the fireplace, which was in full swing and was drying Xena's normal set of leathers. Gabrielle also had set her normal attire near the fire to dry. She'd since donned her Amazon Queen leathers for wear until later.

When Xena had stripped from her soaked leathers, boots, and greaves she'd recalled Xena's abilities as a god. She'd asked why the warrior hadn't used her godhood to simply dry her attire, and Xena explained that it'd taken the fun out of things. Gabrielle smiled at the warrior's consideration because Gabrielle would have felt cheated if Xena just merely dried her leathers with the godhood.

Besides that Xena had a spare set of leathers; older as they were, but they did the job. Xena had to burrow a set of boots from the Amazons while hers dried. The weapons and armor were easily dried after Xena wiped them down. The sheath though had to remain by the fire while Xena decided to carry the weapon.

Ephiny glanced at the drying clothes by the fire and grinned. She'd heard the entire story while at dinner with her friend. She'd always found childlike stories like this impossible of the warrior yet enduring. Ephiny found it hard to believe the amount of changes in the Warrior Princess ever since Gabrielle joined her. It'd been over a year since she'd met Xena and Gabrielle, and she was surprised by the changes within just the year.

"Sit down," Gabrielle offered. She pulled out a chair for Ephiny then sat down herself.

The regent became comfortable then started the discussion about the Amazons' forces. She explained that the Amazons would mostly be on foot. The Amazons best with arrows would take to the trees and cover everybody's back.

Gabrielle suggested they use the traps in the ground. She'd always found those a perfect surprise for any enemy. Earlier at dinner, Solari also tried to suggest that Gabrielle wouldn't enter the battle. Xena had been there during that suggestion, and she sat back with a grin. Xena enjoyed listening to Gabrielle lay into Solari for the idea. By the end of the lecture, Solari apologized and decided to go check on something or another. Afterwards, Gabrielle felt bad and silently promised to apologize to Solari, who was merely concerned for the queen's safety.

And Solari did arrive in the queen's hut later. She reported that the Amazons were well alerted and that they were ready to begin preparations tomorrow. Gabrielle promised she'd help prepare the traps and figure out where to position the archers. Finally the discussion ended and Ephiny and Solari said goodnight to the bard, who was obviously weary.

Gabrielle first tried to do some writing, but she couldn't completely focus plus she was tired. She set aside her scroll and quill on the table then decided on a short walk. She left the hut and took in the glowing village that was fairly quiet. The calm before the storm, the bard mentally concluded.

Gabrielle wandered to the gates, which were closed because of the Athenian Army being so near. She ducked through the open door in the right gate and was saluted by two guards. She offered greeting then continued into the cricket filled woods.

After fifteen minutes or so, the bard stopped in the woods and found a nice, clear view of the crescent moon overhead. She felt a slight chill in the air so she wrapped her arms over her chest. Then a yawn tried to come over her, but she bit it back.

Gabrielle's thoughts went out to her friend. She wished the warrior was with her, and she worried about how safe Xena was out there. She chided herself because Xena was a goddess now, yet she couldn't help being concerned. Where she'd thought nothing

could stop the warrior, she'd found out otherwise. Her fantasy that Xena was an immortal mortal had been shattered days ago and ironically the warrior transformed into a god. She shook her head at the unseen solution to changing Xena back to a mortal.

Regardless, Gabrielle was happy that the godhood hadn't affected Xena's mental state. On the contrary, it seemed like Xena was better aware of pending emotions in the bard. Gabrielle had to admit the warrior was more attentive than normal, yet Xena had been that way since her rebirth and before the godhood. Gabrielle couldn't piece it all together because she was just too tired to think it through. She shook away her deeper thoughts.

Gabrielle then sensed a presence somewhere near her, but she didn't see anybody. She somewhat tensed and worried an Athenian soldier was stalking her. "Xena?" she called. Unexpectedly she felt a warmth come around her, and she knew without fear that it was indeed Xena. She slightly smiled and warned, "You shouldn't do that." She inhaled sharply when a solid body formed behind her and strong arms around her waist.

"And you shouldn't be out here alone," the warrior challenged. She tilted her head to the right and took in the bard's profile.

Gabrielle turned her head to the warrior. "I needed a walk."

"Hmmm." Xena stepped closer so that her front pressed into Gabrielle's back. She'd felt how cold the bard was from the cool night. "Next time bring your cloak... and staff."

"I'm fine now," the bard teased and giggled at the warrior's sour look. She leaned back into the warmth that was her partner. "Besides this is nicer."

"Oh?" Xena prompted.

"Mmmm." Gabrielle rested her head against Xena's shoulder. She closed her eyes and inquired, "Find out anything else?"

"Nothing much." Xena sighed and tilted her head back. She enjoyed the beautiful moon.

"You're telling me you're a god now, and you couldn't find out anything else?" Gabrielle teased and furthered it. "What good are you? Can't you read minds or something?"

"Actually no," Xena argued, "I can't."

Gabrielle was remotely surprised and tried to figure out why Xena couldn't because the other gods seemed to be able to do it.

"I think I'm more like a half god," Xena informed as if she was reading Gabrielle's thoughts.

"Are you sure you can't read thoughts?"

The warrior smirked but lost it and filled in some gaps. "I can pick up bits and pieces if the thoughts are directed at me."

Gabrielle now understood especially after she sent her nasty prayer to Xena when she was left with the Athenian scout.

"Did you really think I'd leave you there alone?" Xena argued.

The bard's eyes widened, and she suddenly spun around in the warrior's arms. "You can read people's thoughts!" She poked the warrior's chest. "Don't lie either because it's not very becoming of a goddess."

The warrior arched an eyebrow at her partner. She shifted her hands to rest on the bard's hips. "I can't, Gabrielle."

"Alright... let's try this." Gabrielle closed her eyes and directed her thoughts at Xena.

Xena rolled her eyes and hotly fought, "Yes, I know my leathers are still soaked in the village. And yes I know I could have used my powers to dry them. And you're damn welcome."

Gabrielle laughed and opened her eyes. "You can read my thoughts."

"That's because it's direct at me," Xena reminded in annoyance. "Try something else... not related to me at all."

"Okay." The bard shut her eyes and ran through a list of topics.

Xena caught a few topics because they were about her. She faintly raised an eyebrow.

Gabrielle finally thought about her childhood, her parents, and her sister. She went deeper into a memory about her and Lila playing just outside the village. They use to climb trees often, and Gabrielle recalled the one time she fell out of tree because she hadn't been careful. She'd fallen, landed on her right side, and broke her arm for the mistake. She could still recall how much it'd scared her because she thought she'd hit

the jagged tree stump, but she'd just missed it.

Gabrielle opened her eyes and took in Xena's wistful expression. "What?"

Xena gradually frowned and softly replied, "I'm sorry, Gabrielle. If I'd known you'd fallen from a tree as kid, I wouldn't have left you alone."

The bard touched her friend's arm and held onto it. "You didn't know... besides it happened when I was a kid." She shrugged and argued, "If you fall out of a tree, you have to get back in it."

Xena sadly smiled, but she jumped when Gabrielle's suddenly smacked her side.

"And you can read my thoughts!" Gabrielle pointed a finger at the god. "You are a liar."

The Warrior Princess had controlled her initial reaction to toss Gabrielle from the surprise smack. She released a deep breath when the tension receded, and she scowled the bard. "Be careful."

Gabrielle became sheepish. "You're use to me doing that by now."

"Mostly," Xena admitted.

"And don't change the topic," Gabrielle fought. "You can read my thoughts."

The warrior groaned and walked away from the bard with her arms flopping to her sides. "I can't seem to read anybody else's thoughts."

Gabrielle hurried and caught up to her friend's side. "That doesn't make sense." She brushed her bangs back and curiosity got the best of her. "Do you just always hear my thoughts or... How does it work?"

Xena shrugged and casually answered, "I have to actually listen to your thoughts if you're not directing them to me."

"If I'm thinking about you then you just... hear it?"

"Yeah," Xena replied, "like you're talking aloud to me."

The bard grinned and slowed down now that she was at Xena's side. "That's pretty neat."

"I could do without hearing them," the warrior debated, "I can read you just fine

without hearing your thoughts."

Gabrielle was offended, and she came to a quick stop. "Are you saying I'm an open scroll?"

Xena was a few steps away, but she stopped and turned back. "I'm saying you're a bard. Personally I could do without hearing your thoughts because it's half bad just hearing you talk all the time." She held back her wild smirk as Gabrielle's temper developed. "Now it's like having two of you." She turned and continued back to the village.

Gabrielle grounded her teeth. "You know, I really-" She stopped her words when the dark warrior turned to her. She saw that blaze in the warrior's bright blue eyes that shined silver in the moonlight.

"Say it," Xena dared.

Gabrielle lost her temper and smiled sweetly. "I was just going to say I really find you fabulous." She strolled up to Xena and lightly rambled, "What other god would put up with hearing me aloud and my thoughts? I'm just so lucky."

Xena raised an eyebrow and rotated on her boots. She started walking again without Gabrielle.

Gabrielle stood still, tilted her head, and slowly a smirk shaped on her face. She decided on her revenge at that moment so she focused on Xena's ass. She had a dark grin as her thoughts went out to Xena.

The Warrior Princess was shocked, and she spun around. She pointed a finger at her friend and hotly warned, "Gabrielle, I swear..." She lost her threat but kept pointing at the bard.

Gabrielle rocked her on boots and smiled innocently now. She sashayed up to her partner, halted by Xena's side, and thoroughly teased, "At a loss for words, are we?" She winked and walked off.

Xena was at a loss for words. She was blown away by Gabrielle's thoughts about... well what Gabrielle thought of her ass and wanted to do with it. She cleared her throat and wiped away her stupefied expression. She lengthened her strides and met the bard's side.

Gabrielle was quite content with herself, and she enjoyed the silent walk back to the nation. She carried her hands behind her back.

The god was quiet and tried to get over Gabrielle's last thought. She felt a slight flush creep over her. She was grateful it was dark out or Gabrielle would have caught the blush.

Gabrielle was first into the hut, and she closed the door when Xena entered. She and the warrior quickly readied for bed and Gabrielle was appreciative to have a soft bed tonight. She rested on her side and faced the warrior, who was on her back.

Xena hadn't spoken a word since her last attempt in the woods. She stared up at the thatch ceiling and kept her hands tucked under her head.

"You won't sleep, will you?" Gabrielle inquired. A yawn followed her words.

The warrior gazed at the bard now. "No, I don't need it."

"You don't even feel tired huh?"

"No," Xena told. "I don't feel tired or hungry anymore."

Gabrielle slightly grinned and joked, "I wouldn't miss feeling hungry."

Xena considered it then honestly confessed, "I do miss it."

Gabrielle pulled her hand out from the pillow and rested it on the warrior's arm. "I'm sorry, Xena." She gently squeezed.

The warrior sighed and closed her eyes. "We're both still here and alive... that's all that matters."

The bard wasn't completely sure, but she squeezed Xena's arm again. "Thank you." She felt the stress from the days come over her.

Xena softly ordered, "Go to sleep." She sensed Gabrielle's hold on her arm loosen, but it didn't leave. "I'll be here." She sensed Gabrielle pass into her dreamscape.

Gabrielle hadn't removed her hand, but her grip wasn't strong. She shifted into a dark dream, which caused her face to slowly tighten.

The warrior glanced at the bard and saw her features begin to darken minute by minute. She became worried and debated whether to awaken Gabrielle or not. She prayed that the dream would eventually pass, but she wasn't so sure.

After awhile, Gabrielle's grip returned on the warrior's arm. It'd stirred Xena from her thoughts, and she studied Gabrielle's upset face. Xena stretched out her hand and

touched the bard's burning forehead that was starting to coat with sweat. Xena frowned and considered what to do. She then wondered if she could perform a little miracle. She knew she could already read Gabrielle's thoughts whether or not it had to do with her. Carefully Xena focused her godhood on Gabrielle.

Gabrielle was furiously battling three tribal warriors. She could barely keep them at bay. She stole one last glance down at Xena, who was slumped on the ground behind her. "Xena, get up!"

The tribal warrior made a lunge for Gabrielle.

Gabrielle barely stopped his curved weapon from cutting her chest. She stepped back once and closer to Xena's slumped form. "Xena, please wake up!"

Xena remained motionless against a tree and bloodied at the right temple.

Gabrielle wasn't sure how much longer she could hold off the three tribal warriors. She was also sure reinforcements would follow and that's when she'd and Xena would be dead. She tried to desperately increase her efforts but the warriors were far more skilled than she.

The bard lost her foot and fell to her knees. She raised her staff just in time to halt a powerful ax blow. She heard her staff give into the blow with an audible crack. "Oh gods, no." She'd never felt so desperate, but she wouldn't give up. She cracked her staff's end at the center enemy and hit his knee squarely. Her victory was short because the two tribesmen jumped at the bard with raised axes.

"Xena!" Gabrielle screamed when the first ax cut through her staff and came close to her chest. She braced for the second ax to strike her, yet a clang of metal sounded over her head.

The two tribal warriors held their breaths when they met the angry Warrior Princess's face and blazing eyes. They found their axes locked by the steel blade.

Xena snarled and jerked her sword up and over. She effectively ripped the axes from their hands and brought them over her head. The axes spun in the air and landed solidly in the trees behind her. Xena gave a fierce battle cry then jumped over her friend and came between Gabrielle and the tribal warriors.

The earlier warrior, who had been knocked down was up again. He raised his curved blades and prepared to take on the Warrior Princess with his comrades.

The two weaponless warriors extracted daggers then together they came at the female warrior.

Xena easily battled them and put her every strength into defeating the enemy. She would never allow her and Gabrielle to be taken by them.

Gabrielle dropped her broken staff to the ground. She stared in disbelief that it was really Xena, who had just been unconscious and bloody. She slowly stood up and watched in amazement at how perfectly and confidently her partner battled the tribal warriors.

Xena soon defeated the enemy, and she left them banged up and unconscious on the ground. She turned around and faced the bard, who was on her knees.

Gabrielle was relieved, and she wistfully smiled. She took in the warrior's beautiful, golden glow in the setting sun behind the warrior. She covered her face when the tears struck her.

Xena carried her sword at her side, and she walked up to her partner. She dropped to her knees in front of Gabrielle and touched the bard's dirty and moist face. "Are you okay?"

Gabrielle removed her hands and held out her palms toward Xena. "Yes." She bit her lower lip when Xena's left hand took her hands. "Are you?"

Xena had a few scratches, cuts, and bruises but she never felt better. "I'm great." She grinned at Gabrielle's surprised laugh. "Come on." She stood up and helped Gabrielle to her feet.

"My staff... it's ruined."

The warrior studied it but promised, "I'm sure we can fix it." She knelt and scooped up the sliced weapon. She could think of a few solutions, but it'd have to wait until later. "Let's get out of here huh?" She turned and lifted her right hand. She gave a sharp, distinct whistle.

Argo whined and appeared out of the woods. She cantered up to her master and stopped.

Xena quickly tucked the staff away, climbed into the saddle, and helped Gabrielle up. She set the bard in the front then took Argo's reins. "We won't go far, but we'll get some distance away from them."

Gabrielle didn't argue and let Xena lead the way.

The warrior hurried Argo into a full gallop back to the road in the woods. She kept the

ride steady down the road then slowed into a walk when it was getting too dark. She steered off the road and searched for a nice campsite.

"Over there," Gabrielle offered.

Xena smiled and lightly teased, "You're getting better at this."

The bard chuckled and patted the knee near hers. "I have a good teacher." She was happy to get out of the saddle once Argo stopped. She then took the saddlebags from Xena and went into the normal routine to ready camp.

Xena quickly brushed Argo down, which gave her a minute to catch her breath. She was glad her planned had worked, but she suspected a talk would some come too.

Gabrielle decided to make a soup since there was some dried meat in the saddlebags and vegetables. She readied the meat, vegetables, and herbs then called to Xena, "I'm going to get water."

The warrior glanced over her shoulder. "Be careful."

Gabrielle nodded and journeyed off with her empty pot. She returned soon enough and found that Xena had started the campfire. She was relieved because she didn't feel much like doing it. She easily filled the pot with the contents then hooked the pot over the fire.

The bard then turned to Xena and offered, "How about I clean your wounds while the food cooks?"

The warrior was already removing the medical kit from the saddlebags. She nodded and handed the leather pouch to her friend. She walked over to the half remains of a fallen tree. She sat down and soon small hands were working over her body.

Gabrielle didn't find any cuts that required stitching. She'd already removed the warrior's armor and now carefully cleaned the wounds. "I really thought you were down," she softly started.

Xena tilted her head to the right so that Gabrielle had better access to her shoulder wound. "Only for a few minutes." She shut her eyes.

The bard studied her friend's profile. "It was like last time... I thought you gave up again." She knelt down and gingerly cleaned the cut on Xena's back arm. The wine soaked rag was lightly blotched with Xena's blood.

Xena lifted her head and opened her eyes. "Last time isn't going to happen again."

Gabrielle hesitated from her cleaning. She released a faint sigh then stepped around the log. She knelt in front of the warrior and carefully cleansed the small blade cut on the warrior's right leg.

The warrior received no response from Gabrielle. She knew Gabrielle didn't fully believe her. When Gabrielle finished with the last cut, she bent forward slightly and hooked the bard's chin with her fingertips. She tilted Gabrielle's head back until their eyes met. "I've come to realize there's a good reason not to give up. I just didn't see it before."

Gabrielle wanted to know the reason, but she turned away and stood up. "The soup is almost ready." She kept the rag with her and planned to clean it later when the stew pot needed to be cleaned.

Xena silently cursed at her half successful attempt to reassure her friend. It as rare that it was hard for her to get Gabrielle to listen to her. She'd have to push later.

The partners soon were sharing a silent dinner. Gabrielle mulled over the warrior's earlier words, and she mostly believed them. She wasn't sure what shook her up so badly. Lately she'd witnessed several times where Xena showed her imperfect, human qualities where as Gabrielle always saw Xena as the immortal hero. For once, Xena wasn't fast enough and Perdicus died. Not long after, Xena let Callisto slip into the quick sand, and the guilt ate at the warrior. Then recently Xena simply gave up after being struck by a swinging tree stump.

Gabrielle was starting to realize that Xena wasn't so perfect. The danger and death were real after all, and Xena couldn't even cheat it or stop it. Gabrielle had to accept those facts and move on, she knew it. The fact that Xena had come back from the dead did tell her that something inspired the warrior. The inspiration was new though, that much Gabrielle figured.

By the time dinner was finished, the warrior and bard were fairly exhausted from the day. They'd pulled out their bedrolls and furs and set them up near the warm fire. Gabrielle wiggled under the furs and felt the warmth spread over her. She listened to Xena get comfortable as well.

The warrior tucked her hands under her head in usual fashion. She stared beyond the tree foliage above and observed the bright stars.

Gabrielle was doing the same and felt a sense of peace. A smile twitched at the corner of her lips, and she softly mentioned, "The sky was really blue today."

Xena had drifted away into her thoughts, but she came back at Gabrielle's words. "It

was."

The bard turned her head to the right and studied the warrior's amber, soft profile. "Whenever I write about your eye color, I often use the sky for an analogy."

The warrior's interest peaked, and she gazed at the bard now.

Gabrielle slightly grinned at her partner's curiosity. "It's probably a little blown out of proportion because I've seen your eyes darker." She shrugged yet added, "I've also seen them as blue as the sky when the light hits them right."

Xena had a lopsided smile at the explanation. The bard's description also struck a familiar note in the warrior.

"I won't forget how angry I was when I thought you were dead after Callisto's dart hit you." Gabrielle saddened when Xena's smile left, but she continued to speak. "Nor have I forgotten how amazing I felt when you were alive... and you stopped Talmadeus." She recalled Lord Talmadeus dumbfounded expression after Xena got up from the ground. She sighed and shook her head. "I don't understand what was different this time. You fought against the poison then, but you gave up this time."

The warrior had to fill in the gaps. She rolled onto her side and propped up her head. She easily gazed down at the bard beside her. "It was the guilt this time," she confessed. "I couldn't save Perdicus. I let Callisto die." She shook her head and sadly stated, "As a result, you ended up being hurt every moment. So it just seemed easier for me to remain in Tartarus this time, and I figured you would move on."

Gabrielle licked her dry lips. She was nervous because they were back to the same point where they were in the earlier conversation. She finally had to know. She stretched out her right hand and pressed her palm against the warrior's cheek. "Why?" she hoarsely whispered, "Why did you come back?"

Xena collected the bard's hand from her cheek. She neatly slipped her fingers through Gabrielle's and whispered, "Because you asked me to... because you said you needed me."

Gabrielle squeezed Xena's hand. She then sat up enough and moved her face into Xena's. She pressed her lips against Xena's and emotionally murmured, "Thank you." She sealed their lips again, and Xena responded to Gabrielle's desire. Gabrielle moaned at finally having her long awaited kiss.

Then slowly Xena's lips faded and so did the smell of the campfire. The trees' leaves stopped rustling overhead, and it was no longer dark. Sunlight was warming against the side of Gabrielle's face, but she was still plenty warm.

Gabrielle gradually opened her eyes and was surprised to find Xena's face so close to hers. She recalled now that she was in her Amazon hut. It was just after daybreak and the sun's morning rays were streaming through the open window and onto her face.

Xena revealed her striking blue eyes, and she raised an eyebrow at Gabrielle's sleepy features. "Sleep well?"

The bard recalled the latest events of Velasca, the ambrosia, Xena's godhood, and the Athenian Army. She slightly furrowed her eyebrows but replied, "Yes." She hesitated when she realized Xena's left hand was at the back of her head and tangled in her hair. "Did you..."

The warrior debated whether to explain now or later that she'd managed to enter Gabrielle's dream. She decided it was best to wait for that talk. She simply replied, "No, I was just thinking." She needed a quick reason for why she had her hand on Gabrielle's head. "You had a nightmare... I was trying to get you to calm down."

Gabrielle was almost positive the warrior was covering something up. Xena rarely stumbled in her explanations, yet she wasn't going to protest. "Thanks." She twisted her head some until Xena pulled her hand away.

Xena rolled onto her back and started to get up. "We need to get ready."

"Five more minutes," the bard joked, and she pulled the bedsheets over her head.

The Warrior Princess was out of bed. She smirked and pulled on the covers. "Come on, Queen Gabrielle... duty calls."

Gabrielle rolled over with the blankets. "You're a god now... go fix it."

Xena arched an eyebrow and decided on another method to wake the bard. She devilishly grinned and walked to Gabrielle's side of the bed. She easily yanked the blankets from Gabrielle, who protested with a yelp. "Now, now. I can't be a true god unless I have followers." She scooped up the bard. "You're my only follower, and luckily for you that requires keeping earlier mornings." Xena headed for the large washroom.

"Xena," the bard hotly complained, "don't do anything we'll both regret."

The god deeply laughed and taunted, "And what could I possibly do?" She entered the washroom and stood over the tub.

Gabrielle peered over her shoulder and grew bug-eyed at how the tub was mysteriously

filling with water. Then it struck her that she was about to be dumped into the water with her nightshift. "Xena, don't you dare. You'll have one less follower. I swear to..." She lost her words after she realized what she was going to say.

"You swear to who?" Xena tormented.

The bard smiled sheepishly and warmly asked, "You wouldn't, would you?"

"What you think?" the warrior challenged. She didn't wait for a reply and tossed the bard into the full tub.

"Xena!" the bard hollered. She splashed into the cold water and spilled out a better portion of it. She surfaced with wet bangs pasted to her forehead, which she yanked away. She glared at her partner, and her face was extremely dark.

Xena rested her hands on her hips and smiled quite smugly. "Good morning." She decided an escape would be appropriate because with or without a godhood, Gabrielle's temper was still dangerous to anybody's health. She made it to the doorway, paused, and looked back at the bard. She chuckled at the still fuming bard, yet she snapped her right fingers and completed the requirements for a good, warmth bath. She then left the washroom.

Gabrielle felt the water was back up to the rim of the tub. The water was also soothingly warm and rather perfect to Gabrielle's liking. Then a flowery scent filled the air and helped recede the bard's anger. The bard then spotted a bar of soap on the ledge. She dramatically sighed and decided to give into the warm bath.

The warrior was soon dressed in her leathers from yesterday, which were dry and somewhat stiff. She easily loosened them back up and stretched her boots back out once she had them on again. Finally, she hooked her weapons into place.

The bard emerged from her bath and displayed a more positive attitude. She quickly dressed into her Amazon leathers then left the hut with Xena at her side. She remained a bit quiet until they came to the dining hut. "You think we'll be able to meet with the Athenian commander?"

Xena nodded and let Gabrielle enter the dining hut first. "You and Ephiny should be able to meet him today."

Gabrielle had stepped into the food line, and she hesitated from grabbing a plate. "What about you?"

The warrior studied the bard briefly, but she picked up a plate. "There's no reason for me to go."

The Amazon Queen was silent and still for a beat, then she yanked a plate free and started down the line.

Xena sighed yet followed down the line before she backed up the Amazons behind her. She followed Gabrielle to a table and sat across from her.

Gabrielle pushed her food around on her plate.

The warrior mentally grumbled and asked, "What?"

"You know what," the bard argued. She set her fork down and decided to start with her flat bread. "I'll need your help with this commander."

"First," started the warrior, "I'm not an Amazon. Second, my presence may hinder the talks more than help. And third, I think you can handle it fine without me."

Gabrielle was between irritated and flattered. She set her bread down and picked up her fork again. "Xena-

"Gabrielle," the warrior cut off, "you know I'm right." She stopped eating and studied deep into concerned green eyes. "If the army knows I'm here, then they'll be more tense."

"They may also back off," Gabrielle offered.

"I doubt it, Gabrielle."

The bard sighed but quickly reminded her friend about another aspect. "They may know who I am Xena... that we're together."

Xena had hoped Gabrielle wouldn't bring that point up. Even she had noticed that people were growing accustomed to seeing them together, and Gabrielle was an instant target. "Don't get into that with him unless you can use it to your advantage somehow."

Gabrielle could tell her friend was serious so she nodded.

Xena then decided on a compromise. "Go with Ephiny. If that doesn't work, then we'll make my presence known." She hesitated but murmured, "Hopefully that won't back fire."

The bard sadly smiled and silently agreed to the plan. She went back to her breakfast and so did Xena. After she finished her meal, she and Xena left the hut and went in

pursuit of Ephiny. Gabrielle walked closer to her partner and inquired, "What will you do?"

"I'm going to see how Solari is doing with the traps and getting the Amazons ready."

Gabrielle nodded and was grateful Xena was helping. She soon found Solari and Ephiny down by the sparring fields and talking with a few other Amazons. Solari split away from Ephiny and took the three Amazons with her. Xena and Gabrielle planned out what Ephiny and Gabrielle needed to discuss with the Athenian commander.

Ephiny decided they had to go by horseback and that she would roundup several Amazons to accompany them. The regent headed off to find some able Amazons and left Gabrielle to get ready for the ride.

Once Ephiny was gone, Xena turned to her partner. "I want you to ride Argo."

"Xena, Argo and I don't exactly get along." Gabrielle leaned against her staff. "She and I..." She dropped her argument when Xena's face became quite serious.

The warrior touched the bard's side. "I need you to take Argo for me. If they try anything, which is possible then you need to be able to ride off fast enough."

The bard sighed and gazed off to the side. She straightened up and nodded. "Alright."

"Come on." Xena led the way to the stables, and she tacked up her mare. She and Gabrielle strolled out of the stables, and Xena took a beat to tie Gabrielle's staff down.

Gabrielle stepped up to the mare's side and grabbed the saddlehorn. She positioned her foot into the stirrup, but she hesitated and glanced at Argo.

Argo twisted her head around and studied the blond human about to get on her back. She huffed and switched her view to her mistress.

Xena raised an eyebrow at the warhorse, but she urged Gabrielle to climb into the saddle. She slightly tensed in case something went wrong.

Gabrielle sucked in her breath then hauled her body into the saddle. She easily made it thanks to her strong arms and legs. She received the reins from Xena, and she mentally recalled the riding lessons that Xena had given her in the past.

The warrior patted the horse's neck then started to walk to the gates.

Gabrielle carefully tugged on the left rein and tapped the horse's sides. She easily followed along side Xena. She slowly smirked and joked, "Now I realize why you ride

on the horse." She had a clear view of everything, which she hadn't thought of until now.

The warrior smirked and peered up at her partner. "That's not the only reason." She picked up the pace when she spotted Ephiny and seven other mounted Amazons.

"That's not the only reason...?" the bard muttered and thought hard about it. She tucked the idea away for later consideration. She halted Argo when she met the group. "Are we ready?"

"Of course, my queen," the regent teased.

Xena stepped closer to Argo and rested her palm against Gabrielle's muscular thigh. "Be careful out there." She hesitated but quietly reminded, "I'm not far if you need me."

Gabrielle smiled at the guarantee from her partner. She turned back to Ephiny when Xena stepped back. "Let's go." She directed Argo around the group, and they followed her out of the gates.

Xena briefly watched them leave, but she turned and hunted Solari down. She and Solari talked about the setup for the war, and they strolled out of the village into the woods. Solari and Xena marked out where the ground traps should be placed and any traps for Amazons to hide in too.

Midway through the conversation, Solari noticed how Xena became distracted. She stopped talking and asked, "Is everything okay, Xena?"

Xena had been having a nervous sensation in the pit of her stomach not long after Gabrielle left. She now felt it was increasing by the minute. "Yes, I'm sorry." She set aside her notice of the feeling and focused back on the topic at hand. "You were saying, Solari...?"

"Well," Solari started again.

Xena refocused on Solari's voice, but another voice broke through her concentration.

*Xena, I don't know if this is going to work out okay,* whispered the bard's voice.

Solari stopped speaking and peered up at the distracted warrior.

Xena's alarms were set off by the bard's directed thought to her. She stepped back once, towards the woods, and offered, "I have to go, Solari."

Solari became worried. "What's wrong?"

The Warrior Princess was about to turn and make a fast run for Gabrielle and the others. "I have a bad feeling about that meeting."

"Wait, I can get the horses and come." The Amazon was prepared to follow the warrior because she knew Xena's instincts were often right.

"There's not enough time," Xena protested. She quickly spun on her boots then started into a normal run into the woods.

"Xena, wait," Solari called, but she was ignored. "Gods damnit." She quickly raced back into the village and went for a few Amazons and horses.

Once Xena felt like she was deep enough in the woods, she used her godhood to run even faster. She became concerned that an Amazon on patrol may spot her so she used her invisibility to hide herself. She carefully focused on her run and dodged around trees, brush, and hidden roots.

Gabrielle tried to calm Argo, but the mare was as nervous as her.

Ephiny, like the other Amazons, was still mounted. She kept beside Gabrielle while the Amazons were behind her and Gabrielle.

The Athenian commander, his second in command, and several soldiers had rode up the valley to meet the Amazons. The soldiers were undoubtedly Athenian soldiers according to their attire. The commander wasn't the figurehead of the entire Athenian Army, but this commander was true to his job.

The commander stopped his horse a few paces away from the Amazons. He signaled his soldiers, who were on foot, to halt. "I'm Commander Jericho of the Seventh Unit from the Athenian Army."

Gabrielle adjusted Argo's reins in her hands. "I am Queen Gabrielle." She held out her hand to Ephiny. "This is my regent Ephiny." She retook the reins. "You're trending close to Amazon territory, commander. What is your business here?"

Commander Jericho grew annoyed at the Amazon Queen's harsh questioning. He narrowed his eyes and curtly informed, "Recently a temple to Artemis was destroyed by an Amazon. We have been dispatched to apprehend the Amazon or Amazons that defaced the sacred temple."

The bard leaned to her right in the saddle and observed the hefty army in the valley. She sat back in her saddle and remarked, "That's quite a unit to send out just to..."

apprehend an Amazon."

"I was given orders to use as much man power as is required to apprehend this Amazon," the commander coldly informed.

"So I see," Gabrielle muttered. She then raised her voice. "And exactly what are your orders if my nation does not come forward with this Amazon?"

Commander Jericho held back his smirk, yet his glinting eyes deceived him. "Then it is assumed that the Amazon Nation is punishable for this Amazon's mistake." He shifted in the saddle some. "I suggest, Queen Gabrielle that you bring forth the Amazon so that your nation does not suffer the consequences of her actions."

"And what if I told you it wasn't an Amazon?" The bard knew the response, but she felt like she had to hear it. She caught Ephiny's brief glance at her.

The Athenian commander chuckled and replied, "You expect me to believe that?" He went more serious. "There were several witnesses that saw her. She also killed the two guards of the temple."

The queen perked at the news and possibly found a way out of the mess. "How were they killed?"

Commander Jericho visibly became uneasy but shook it off. "This matter isn't about their death."

Gabrielle knew the commander had some information or he didn't, but she was betting on the latter. She then tensed when the commander rested a freehand on his sword hilt. She didn't like the commander's movement, and her gut feeling told her to back away. She instantly sent out a silent prayer to her partner.

"We expect you to fully cooperate and hand over the Amazon." The commander tilted his head and stared at the queen with hooded eyes. "It is your choice, Queen Gabrielle."

Gabrielle grew more nervous than earlier. There were only two choices left for her and handing over Velasca was impossible. She cursed the trapped goddess for getting her nation into this mess.

"I cannot do what you ask, commander," Gabrielle finally explained. "It is completely impossible. The Amazon you seek, Velasca, no longer is apart of my nation."

Commander Jericho darkly chuckled and replied, "I find that hard to believe. You're protecting her, Queen Gabrielle."

Gabrielle quietly huffed at the irony. She'd gladly hand over Velasca if she was here. "I can assure you that I am not and that she's no longer with us." She tilted her head and studied the tense commander. "Do you think we would really keep an Amazon that's destroyed a temple to Artemis? She is our patron goddess."

The Athenian second in command glanced at his commander, who merely ignored him. He licked his his dry lips and gazed back at the Amazon Queen, who truly seemed honest.

Commander Jericho prepared to respond, but he hesitated when a sudden gust of wind came and unexpectedly stopped again. He was briefly confused but focused back on the Amazons. "If you cannot willingly hand over the Amazon, then we'll have to work out other... arrangements." He swiftly withdrew his sword. "Get the them!" he hotly commanded.

The first line of six soldiers withdrew swords and started for the queen and regent.

Ephiny withdrew her sword, which caused the other Amazons to do the same. "Gabrielle, go!"

Gabrielle first tried to steady Argo, who reared up at the nearing soldier. The bard held on and let Argo scare off the soldier. When Argo was on all hoofs, she reached back for her staff. She wasn't about to leave her Amazons alone with the enemy.

"Get the queen!" the commander hollered over the din of swords. He moved his horse around his men and came close to the queen. He raised his sword, prepared to strike the queen, but he faltered at the odd whistle sound. Suddenly a round, flying weapon struck his blade and broke it.

Gabrielle had her staff ready for the attack, yet she was relieved to see her partner's chakram. She smirked at the commander's stunned face.

Commander Jericho watched the chakram return to its owner, who dropped out from a hidden spot in the trees. He became ridged when he noticed the female warrior's distinct armor. He gazed back at the Amazon Queen. "By the gods, you're that Gabrielle."

The bard was quite smug, and she replied, "You got it, Plato." She brought her staff up and swung the end at his head. Her staff solidly connected with the commander's face.

The commander almost fell from his saddle, but he just held himself in place by the horn. He reached to his belt and ripped a dagger free. He released the reins and angrily

cried out before he made the leap out of the saddle.

Gabrielle wasn't fully prepared for the attack. She raised her staff, but Commander Jericho never made it to her.

Xena's battle cry rang out just before she launched herself through the air. Her timing was perfect, and she crashed into the commander's body in midair. She hit the ground with him under her. She tried for the dagger, however, Commander Jericho was smart, and he tossed it.

Commander Jericho hastily punched the Warrior Princess in the jaw, which should have been a hard blow. He was surprised to find that it hardly affected the warrior beyond annoying her. He then rolled them before she tried to reciprocate.

"Fall back," the second in command ordered, "Back to the camp."

The commander didn't argue with his second in command for once. He climbed to his feet and ran, but he picked up his dagger.

Xena was up on her feet, and she slotted her eyes at the fleeing Athenians.

Commander Jericho was quite far, but he came upon his horse. He hastily mounted the horse, turned the gelding around, and he threw the dagger at the Amazon Queen. "You can't hide behind her, Queen Gabrielle!"

Xena sprung up and neatly caught the blade in her palm. She tightly squeezed it once she landed on her feet. She flipped the dagger in midair, caught it by the blade, and prepared to return it to its owner.

"Xena," the bard softly called. She didn't want her friend to kill the fleeing commander with a dagger to the back.

The warrior released the dagger, yet she'd recalculated her angle.

Commander Jericho galloped off, and his dagger dug into the ground just behind his horse's hoofs. He followed after his men.

"Gods. What's happened? Is everybody okay?"

Ephiny turned in her saddle at hearing the familiar voice. She felt relieved to see Solari and five other mounted Amazons. "We're fine, Solari."

Solari slightly calmed then looked to the queen. She recalled that Xena was coming too. "Gabrielle, Xena was headed this..." She lost her words, yet her mouth remained

hung open. She oddly stared at the Warrior Princess, who appeared by the queen's horse.

"It's okay, Solari," Xena informed. She touched Argo's side and willed her horse to settle down.

Solari closed her mouth and decided to let it go for now.

"We need to get out of here," Gabrielle ordered. She released the reins, removed her feet from the stirrups, and pushed back in the saddle. She peered down at her partner.

Xena silently agreed, and she efficiently mounted the mare. She became situated in the saddle and took the reins.

"Let's go before they return." Ephiny signaled the Amazons to ride back to the nation. She let Gabrielle and Xena go ahead of her, then she and Solari followed at the rear.

Gabrielle carried her staff in her right hand while she used her left arm to hold onto Xena. She could read how tense the warrior was from what'd happened earlier. She leaned in until her lips almost touched Xena's ear. "Are you okay?"

Xena didn't verbally reply, but she freed her left hand and covered Gabrielle's one on her stomach.

"Thank you for coming so fast," Gabrielle murmured. Xena squeezed her hand in response.

The warrior slightly turned her head and whispered, "Always." She returned her focus to the ride. She then tilted her head and picked out Solari's low whispers.

"Ephiny, I'm telling you it is impossible," the second in command insisted.

The regent sighed and leaned to the right in the saddle. "Xena is a fast runner."

"She's not that fast... nobody beyond the gods are that fast." Solari licked her lips and shook her head. "It doesn't make sense."

Ephiny thought about how Xena caught that dagger. She was surprised the warrior hadn't cut her palm, but Xena was fine, and it didn't add up. She decided it was best not to encourage Solari's curiosity. "She showed up and saved Gabrielle. I don't question that."

Solari grumbled because she wanted to know the mystery. She relented and went quiet.

Gabrielle noticed how Xena had been focused on something then stopped. She glanced behind and saw the tail end of Ephiny and Solari's conversation. She sat normal in the saddle again and quietly questioned, "They're talking about how you showed up so quickly?"

"Yes," the warrior murmured.

"They're going to figure it out." The bard dropped her head to the side. "Why not tell them?"

Xena faintly shrugged. "I rather keep it quiet."

Gabrielle opened her mouth to reply, but she said nothing because Ephiny came up to her side. She slightly grinned and mentally replied, "*How long do you think you can keep it quiet, Warrior Princess?*"

The god grunted at the directed thought from her partner. She glanced at Ephiny beside them.

"That went well, don't you think?" Ephiny joked.

Gabrielle sighed and shook her head. "I would say the commander has a specific agenda." She caught sight of Xena's profile. "They want us to hand over Velasca. No excuses allowed."

"Did you notice how the second in command doesn't seem to quite agree?"

The Amazon Queen quickly nodded at Ephiny's observation and considered it more. "Maybe we can use that to our advantage."

"As long as Jericho is in charge then nothing is changing," Xena stated.

Gabrielle leaned to the left in the saddle. "Couldn't the second in command sway Jericho?"

"How and when do you plan to win over the second in command and wait for him to sway the commander?" Xena paused and waited for any response yet there were none. "The Athenian Army doesn't work like a warlord army. Commander Jericho has his orders and so does the army."

"And he's pretty dead set on them," Gabrielle whispered.

The regent was quiet. She noticed that Solari now joined them on the other side of

Xena's horse.

"What about handing over somebody?" Solari shrugged and reminded, "They don't know what Velasca looks like. Then we can setup an escape plan for the prisoner."

Xena devilishly grinned and teased, "Are you volunteering, Solari?"

The second in command grumbled, but she honestly stated, "I will if it'll save the nation."

"Nobody is handing themselves over," Gabrielle snapped. She was relieved when Solari let the idea go. "Regardless of what's happened, we are responsible for Velasca's actions. She was an Amazon."

"Gabrielle, you can't be serious," Solari argued. "She was a psycho path."

"She was our psycho path," the queen hotly reminded. "We accept the good that the nation does... and we accept the bad too."

Solari sighed and held her tongue. She glanced over at Ephiny.

The regent hated the idea of going to war. "We better prepare the nation completely. There's no telling when the Athenian Army could attack."

"We'll do it as soon as we get back," Gabrielle agreed. She'd noticed that Xena remained quiet, which told her that her partner was working out an alternate plan. She mentally asked, "*What are you planning, oh godly one?*"

Xena developed a small grin, which she hid again. She squeezed the bard's hand in silent promise to discuss it later.

Ephiny moved ahead of Argo and so did Solari. The regent met Solari ahead of Xena and Gabrielle, but they were still in earshot of the partners.

Gabrielle lowered her head onto Xena's broad shoulder. She closed her eyes. She wanted to talk to Xena some, however, she knew Ephiny or Solari would probably hear her. She sighed.

"What?" Xena whispered.

The bard just grumbled. Then an idea came to mind, and she smirked. There was nothing wrong with a one sided conversation, right? Or rather a yes and no conversation. She focused her thoughts towards her partner. *Are you thinking of another way to handle the Athenian Army?*

The Warrior Princess softly chuckled at Gabrielle's idea to communicate. She kept her voice down and answered, "Yes."

Gabrielle opened her eyes and slightly grinned at the game between them. She liked this way of communicating. *Does it involve me helping?*

"Maybe," Xena muttered.

Gabrielle grumbled and voiced her opinion. "That means it doesn't."

Solari hesitated in her conversation with Ephiny and glanced back at Gabrielle. She shook her head when Gabrielle's words didn't make sense, and she focused back on Ephiny.

The bard chuckled that she'd forgotten to keep the conversation to her thoughts. *You damn well better tell me your idea. You know I hate being left in the dark much less behind. Do you still think we won't have to go to war?*

"Not sure," the warrior muttered.

The bard lifted her head off her partner's shoulder. She brushed her bangs back, but they returned. *We are getting a vacation after this is over, right?*

Xena just held back her laugh, but her smile wouldn't be refused. "Yes, promise."

Gabrielle dropped her head forward until her forehead hit the warrior's shoulder. "Thank the gods." She released a huge sigh. She briefly felt Xena's hand squeeze hers. *I do have one other question. Were you in my dreamscape last night?*

The warrior tried not to fidget, which was a foreign action for her. She was surprised Gabrielle pegged her so well. "Later," Xena only replied.

*That's a yes!* Gabrielle grew smug at the fact that she'd been right. *I knew it. You acted so guilty this morning. I didn't figure it out until after the bath.*

Xena's eyes fluttered as she tried to focus on both Gabrielle's thoughts, Ephiny and Solari's conversation, and the horse ride. She finally stated, "Now my other reason for riding Argo has been shot to Hades." She was happy when Gabrielle's directed thoughts came to a complete halt.

"What?" Gabrielle mentally repeated Xena's words. She quickly caught up that Xena was referencing back to earlier about why Xena rode the horse.

Xena removed her hand from Gabrielle's and massaged her burrow. "Just talk normal, please."

Gabrielle frowned and became worried. "Don't tell me you're getting a headache?"

The warrior took the reins into both hands. "What if I tell you that I am?"

"That's...impossible," Gabrielle stuttered, "but... everybody get's headaches." She wanted to slap herself for saying that with Ephiny and Solari nearby. She was quite worried and confused about how and why her partner was developing a headache. "Anything I can do?"

"Don't think anything," the warrior quietly begged.

Gabrielle sighed at Xena's hint. She whispered, "Sorry. I didn't realize..."

"S'alright," Xena replied, "I didn't either. Let's just enjoy the ride."

The bard understood that meant in silence. She rested her head against Xena's shoulder again and closed her eyes. She thought about the pending war and what could be done to solve it. She didn't see any options, and she could only guess what her friend had in mind.

The Amazon party soon arrived in the village and broke apart to the appropriate stables. Gabrielle and Xena then met up with Ephiny and Solari to discuss what to do next. They all huddled into the queen's hut and became as comfortable as possible.

The nation would be put on alert and the final preparations for war would be made. The normal patrol would be increased for extra precautions along with a few scouts, who would monitor the Athenian camp for any mobilization.

The conversation took several candlemarks but Ephiny and Solari left the queen's hut. They took care of setting the nation on alert and beefing up the patrol. Gabrielle and Ephiny had decided on the three scouts that could keep an eye on the Athenian Army. The three Amazons were excellent at hunting so they would be effective scouts.

Once the two Amazons were gone, Gabrielle sunk deep into her chair and groaned. She leaned the back of her head against the chair, turned it to the left, and stared at her friend. "How's your head?"

Xena considered her head then nodded. "Better."

"What caused it?"

The warrior sighed and stretched out her legs before she answered. "I was trying to listen to what Ephiny and Solari were saying, listen to you, and watch Argo."

Gabrielle smirked and teased, "Not so godly, oh godly one." She received a glare for her smart remark, but she went more serious. "How can you get a headache? It doesn't make sense."

"I guess even the gods are prone to them," Xena muttered.

"At least this god is." Gabrielle was concerned about that factor because it didn't make sense to her. She couldn't imagine how a god could get a headache. She straightened up and turned in her chair so that she faced her partner. She propped her left arm up on the back of the chair's back. "So what's your idea?"

"It's pretty simple," Xena replied. "I'll have a little talk with the commander tonight."

"Xena, that'll probably just piss him off."

"Maybe," the warrior muttered, "maybe not."

"And if it does," Gabrielle started, "then I'll be promised a war." She bit her lower lip and lowered her head some. "This is ridiculous... for them to send an Athenian unit to punish the Amazons over a temple." She shook her head. "Velasca must have really destroyed it."

"Most likely," the warrior agreed, "but we know how serious it is to deface much less destroy a temple."

The bard huffed and muttered, "This must have been Velasca's plan all along."

The warrior stood up and stated, "She hasn't won yet." She came over to Gabrielle and stood in front of her. She held out her hand in silent offer.

"Well," the bard rambled, "with a godly Warrior Princess on my side, I can't see how I'll lose." She collapsed the warrior's hand and was hauled up from the chair. She gazed deep into the blue eyes she seemed to be falling for more each day. "After this, we have to figure out what to do about this godhood."

Xena debated whether to say it, but she finally stated, "I'm not too concerned about it." She stepped around Gabrielle, who turned on her boots.

"Not too concerned about it?" Gabrielle put her hands on her hips. "As in you don't plan on fixing it, right?"

The warrior picked up the staff by the door and turned her head sidelong. "If it's another alternative to helping protect you, then it's worth it."

Gabrielle approached her partner and took in the seriousness of her partner's words. "Xena, this isn't a weapon or... or... some skill. This is a godhood."

Xena gently sighed, and she set the staff back against the wall. She faced her friend and took in the bard's worried features. "I know that... and I know what it could mean." She hesitated but added, "What it does mean."

Gabrielle swallowed against the soft lump in her throat. She stared at the floor and whispered, "It means that when I'm in my sixties you'll still be in your thirties." She peered back up at the calm warrior. "Xena..."

"I know," the warrior murmured. "We'll decide later." She slightly grinned and offered, "We'll weigh the pros and cons."

Gabrielle stepped around her friend, grabbed the staff, and opened the door. "You mean flip a coin, right?" She listened to Xena's chuckle behind her, yet she headed out the door.

Xena followed out and noticed the sky was darkening from the sunset. She could tell the bard was thinking heavily about something.

"It's strange," the bard mentioned, "that you haven't lost any emotions or feelings. And you get headaches?" She shook her head, but tried to figure out the mystery. "Your eyes are blue instead of white... not that I'm complaining." She grinned up at her partner, who mirrored back the grin. "I prefer the blue far more than the white."

Xena shrugged and replied, "Maybe it's different for mortals that become gods."

"That still doesn't explain why your eyes are blue." Gabrielle shifted closer to her partner. "Velasca's eyes were white."

"Personality differences?" Xena joked.

Gabrielle grunted but remained serious. "I don't think the ambrosia is selective."

"And I don't think we're going to figure it out tonight, Gabrielle." Xena touched her friend's midback. "Right now the Athenian Army is our major problem."

The Amazon Queen stopped in front of the hut door. She waited until a few Amazons passed, then she stated, "Don't think for a second that I won't forget your godhood."

Xena held up her hands in defense. "I'd be hurt if you did, my follower." She dropped her hands.

Gabrielle rolled her eyes and smacked Xena on her stomach. "Come on, Warrior God." She disappeared into the dining hut.

The Warrior Princess smirked and followed her friend. She took a spot in the line behind Gabrielle and collected her food. She was none surprised when Ephiny came up to her side in the food line. "How goes it, Ephiny?"

"We're pretty well prepared."

Gabrielle bent forward and met Ephiny's gaze. "Where's Solari?"

"She's finishing up with the traps. She'll be here shortly." Ephiny walked down the line and collected her food.

Xena picked up a metal bowl of very steamy soup. She easily cupped the bottom of the bowl in her left hand. Gabrielle finished putting food on her plate for her.

The regent made a grab for a bowl of soup too, but she hissed when it was too hot. She hesitated after a thought occurred to her. She stared oddly at Xena and Gabrielle, who were headed to a dinner table. She narrowed her eyes at the fact that Xena so easily carried the extremely hot bowl. "What in..."

Ephiny was holding up the line so she gathered up her plate, filled it, and hurried to the table. She arrived in time to see Xena set the soup bowl down and there were absolutely no red marks left behind. She bit her tongue before her words came out. Several things didn't make sense, and Ephiny recalled one of them when she met the warrior's extremely blue gaze.

Solari soon arrived and joined the group. She had plenty to report about the traps being prepared. She mentioned that the scouts were sent out a few hours ago. She promised she only need a brief word of command, and the Amazons would be prepared for the war. It was a command that Gabrielle did not want to give.

After dinner, Xena and Gabrielle quietly walked back to the hut. Gabrielle was fairly worn, but she still had some fight in her. She urged Xena to let her follow her to the Athenian camp.

The warrior was close to the queen's hut. She hesitated from replying in case somebody overheard them. She entered the hut and closed the door once Gabrielle followed. She loudly closed the door and stated, "I'm doing this alone."

"Xena, you almost got caught last time," the bard argued.

The warrior didn't need the argument from her partner. She moved away from the door and approached the bard, who had her back to her. "It's dangerous, and I can-"

"And you can move faster without me, right?" Gabrielle snapped. She spun around and dared the god to rebuke or agree to her point.

Xena sighed and waited a beat so that Gabrielle would calm. She gently grabbed the bard's shoulders. "That's not it." She squeezed Gabrielle's tense shoulders. "If something happens to you..." She let go of her words and only added, "There's a lot at stake. If I screw up tonight then that puts me against seven hundred soldiers."

"That's about eleven minutes," Gabrielle tried to joke. She recalculated with her Skill Formula. She didn't smile though after her joke and let out a deep sigh.

"Eleven minutes or not," Xena reminded, "it'll be dangerous."

The bard softly grumbled and dropped her head against her staff. "I just..." She closed her eyes and honestly confessed, "Since you've come back... I've just had a hard time letting you out of my sight." She opened her eyes again and became lost in the concerned, bright blue eyes above her. "Call it separation paranoia." She faintly grinned.

Xena also had a small grin. She lifted one hand off of Gabrielle's shoulder and instead touched Gabrielle's soft cheek. "I know... and thank you." She read the confusion in the bard. "For caring."

Gabrielle nodded and raised her head off the staff. "Just be careful." She rolled her eyes when Xena became smug. "I know, I know." She chuckled and straightened up more. "You should go soon... it's dark enough."

"In a minute," Xena replied. She took Gabrielle's staff and walked it over to the door. She propped it against the wall then came back to Gabrielle. "Sit down."

The bard was perplexed about Xena's immediate plans, but she took a chair. She then slowly raised an eyebrow when Xena squatted in front of her.

"About your dream..."

Gabrielle perked up at Xena's mention. "I'm listening."

"For once," Xena muttered. She slightly jumped when Gabrielle landed her a smack to her arm. She chuckled yet focused on the topic. "I saw that you were having a

nightmare last night so I entered your dream."

The bard leaned back into the chair and stared at her partner. "You can do that?"

"It looks like it," the warrior agreed.

Gabrielle was silent, and she replayed her dream from last night. "That explains why you just suddenly got up during that fight." She watched Xena's nod. "That was you? I mean you, you... not just a dream you?"

Xena touched the bard's knee. "It was me."

The bard was amazed, and she thought back to the one other time her and Xena shared a dream. She shook her head and muttered, "It was like the time with Morpheus." She focused back on the present. "You remember how you entered my dream then?"

"I do... but this is different."

Gabrielle slumped against the chair and leaned her head against her right hand, which was propped up by her elbow on the chair arm. "Gods." She then pushed her bangs back with her hand and straightened up. "You were there the entire... the entire time?"

The warrior observed Gabrielle's paled features, but she honestly replied, "Yes until you woke up."

"Xena, my dreams they're..."

Xena quickly dove into the conversation before the bard became upset. "I know they're personal. I'm sorry, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle took a beat to settle down so that she could think clearly. She realized her friend was trying to help her sleep better and not nose into her more subconscious mind. She recalled that she'd kissed Xena during the dream just as she had several previous dreams. It was a recently reoccurring element in her dreams that she tried to ignore but miserably failed when Xena kissed her in that alternate reality.

"Gabrielle," Xena called. She had Gabrielle's focus back on her, and she had to tread carefully. "I know about a lot of what you're feeling... have been feeling." She couldn't believe she was having a personal, deep conversation, but she figured she could wing it. "I had some ideas before. I didn't realize how true they were until I entered your body to help you fight Velasca."

Gabrielle bowed her head and considered the information. She realized that Xena's entry into her body did mean that Xena now knew her most intimate details and

feelings. She closed her eyes and whispered, "Xena, I don't..." She lifted her head and revealed her brimming eyes. She moved her hand off the chair arm.

Xena sadly smiled and lifted her right hand off of Gabrielle's knee. She caught Gabrielle's hand into hers. "Gabrielle, it's okay."

The bard shook her head and argued, "Everything has been upside down... ever since Perdicus and I married." She dropped her head back against the chair. "Gods I should have never married him." She lifted her head and sadly explained, "That's when I started to feel certain things towards you. I figured you'd never reciprocate so when Perdicus asked me to marry him, I accepted. I just..." She shook her head.

"You settled," the warrior summarized.

"Yeah," Gabrielle murmured. "I thought I would be happy to be with him. I mean doesn't every woman dream of a loving husband, a house, some land, and later kids?" She dipped her head again. "Why is everything about me not normal?"

"Gabrielle," Xena urged, "you and I both know how boring normal is anyway." She was relieved when her joke paid off, and Gabrielle softly chuckled. "It broke my heart to watch you marry Perdicus, but I figured you knew what you wanted."

"I knew what I wanted and couldn't have," Gabrielle stated. "I settled for Perdicus, the normal life, and Callisto reminded me just how wrong I was to think I could have those things." She bitterly laughed and whispered, "I don't know whether to thank her or curse her."

"I had to learn to stop carrying her weight around, Gabrielle." Xena squeezed the bard's hand and offered, "Maybe you have to learn to forgive her."

Gabrielle thought it over then nodded. "You're right."

Xena felt slightly lighter at Gabrielle's agreement, but she let out a sigh. "That still doesn't solve the other issue."

Gabrielle had a dark face and shook her head. "We don't need to get into it, Xena. I understand."

"And I don't think you do," Xena fought. She found curious, green eyes upon her. "I was honest about what I said in your dream." She tilted her head and reminded, "I came back from Tartarus because you needed me... that was my inspiration." She waited and let her words sink into the bard's mind. She then finally added, "You've been my inspiration for a lot of things, Gabrielle. I was going to lay my sword down just outside of Potidaea... I only picked it up because I saw your spirit to fight Draco's

men when you had little chance."

Gabrielle deeply considered Xena's words. She softly questioned, "I always thought about that day and how you were in nothing but your boots and shift." She shook her head. "It didn't make sense at the time, but later I've realized you were going to kill yourself." She didn't need a verbal answer from Xena, but she saw the confirmation in those sky eyes she'd long ago fallen for. "Everything happens for a reason, doesn't it?"

"Mmmm," Xena softly accepted.

"Why did you kiss me in that alternate reality?" Gabrielle was confused and tried to understand. "Or was that my creativity again?" She knew her joke wasn't that funny.

"It was me," Xena promised. "And do I really need to spell it out, Gabrielle?"

The bard felt her heartbeat pick up, but she nervously joked, "Well you're doing so well at this sensitive chat. Why stop now?"

Xena half glared, but she grinned and whispered, "I have a better idea." She carefully lifted up on her knees and brought her face in closer to Gabrielle's.

Gabrielle was glad she was sitting because her knees were already weak. She couldn't believe this was real and not just another dream repeating for her. She closed her eyes when Xena's lips were close to hers.

"Gabrielle," called Ephiny's voice. The regent barged into the hut and repeated, "I have... to... talk..." She lost her words when a very angry, kneeling Warrior Princess turned her fire blue eyes to her.

Gabrielle's eyes fluttered open, and she turned her head to Ephiny. She glanced at Xena, who she was convinced would killed her regent any second. "Ephiny."

The Amazon smiled impishly and looked between the queen and warrior. "I really have bad timing, don't I?" She knew the current position that Xena and Gabrielle were in was a very intimate one.

"You could say that," Gabrielle agreed. She switched her attention back to Xena.

Xena slowly stood up and faced Ephiny's direction. She looked as if she was going to attack the Amazon for the second disruption of lately.

Gabrielle gingerly touched her partner's tense arm.

The Warrior Princess broke from her anger and peered down at Gabrielle. "I'm going

to check on Argo..." She returned her dark glare to Ephiny and finished, "Again." She felt Gabrielle's gentle brush over her arm, which soothed her temper. She passed Ephiny, went out the open door, and closed it. Once she was outside, she released an annoyed breath, but Gabrielle sent a thought to her.

*Sorry about Ephiny, Xena. Be careful in the Athenian camp... don't take them all for yourself. I'll see you soon.*

Xena slightly grinned at her partner's words. She hurried off towards the gates.

Ephiny sat on the bed and released a loud groan. "Sweet Artemis, I thought she was going to kill me."

"I can't promise you she won't if you do it a third time," Gabrielle informed.

The regent huffed and shook her head. She brushed back some of her curly locks.

"What did you need?"

"We heard from a scout... there seems to be some mobilization going on," Ephiny replied.

Gabrielle tensed at the news. "You think they'll strike tonight?"

"I doubt tonight but at dawn it could be another story."

"We are completely prepared, right?" Gabrielle leaned forward and rested her elbows on her knees.

Ephiny nodded. "Everybody knows their position and jobs." She paused and shook her head. "I just don't know how we'll stop them."

"I think with Xena here, we'll be okay." The bard lifted her gaze from the floor.

Ephiny opened her mouth, but she hesitated for a second. She sighed and honestly asked, "What's going on with Xena, Gabrielle? She's... she's not herself."

Gabrielle felt her stomach pitch at Ephiny's words. "She's her usual tall, dark self." She saw Ephiny's dubious expression. "Ephiny-"

"Gabrielle, I'm serious." The regent stood up from her spot and walked away. She turned and stated, "How did she fight Velasca and come out unscathed? It doesn't make sense because we all saw how she dislocated her arm here in the village before you two left."

"And she fixed it," Gabrielle debated.

"That's not the point." Ephiny came back to the bard and stood in front of her. "She hurt her arm in the first fight... Hades it was an escape even. Why didn't she get hurt later, Gabrielle?" She wait for a response, but Gabrielle wasn't forthcoming. "Her eyes are blue. She made it to the Athenian camp in no time and didn't even break a sweat."

"Ephiny, I don't know." Gabrielle's defenses were rising, and she didn't like how Ephiny was corning her. "I don't know all of Xena's tricks."

"Centaur shit," Ephiny snapped. She knelt down until she was eye level. "What are you hiding, Gabrielle?" She could almost shake it from the bard, but she could see she was on the losing side. "Gabrielle, we're friends and I'm asking you not to hide anything from me that you may know."

The Amazon Queen sighed and dropped her head forward. She lifted her head again and ordered, "Sit down, Ephiny."

The regent slightly smiled when Gabrielle gave into her. She took the vacant chair and patiently waited for an answer to her question.

"You remember what I told you about how Xena and Velasca were fighting on the bridge?"

"Over the lava pit," the regent recalled.

"Well Xena didn't exactly make it across the bridge," Gabrielle explained. "Velasca used her powers to throw Xena out over the lava pit. Luckily Xena caught the rope bridge and held onto it. I was already on the other side, but I wasn't going to cut the ropes until Xena was safe." The bard stopped and pulled up her memories. "Just before Velasca threw Xena out on the bridge, Xena managed to rip the small pouch off Velasca's side."

"The pouch that had the ambrosia?" Ephiny became wide eye. "She didn't..." She dropped her shoulders at Gabrielle's nod. "She's a god now?"

"It was Xena's only choice at the time. Velasca would have killed her and me."

"Xena could have let go of the bridge rope and..." Ephiny halted her words at Gabrielle's dark face. She realized her mistake because Gabrielle was still dealing with Xena's death and rebirth. "I'm sorry, Gabrielle. I didn't mean..."

"It's okay," Gabrielle promised after a second. She let go of her anger. "I think Xena

knew if she died then I would have gave up too."

Ephiny silently conceded. She'd hated witnessing how torn Gabrielle had been after Xena's death, and she'd been plenty glad that the warrior was back. She just wasn't sure how she felt about the warrior now being a god. "Well, I suppose we won't have to worry about losing the battle."

The bard quietly huffed and nodded once.

Ephiny thought more about the predicament then asked, "How are you two going to fix it?"

"We don't know," the queen replied. Slowly her lips thinned, and she revealed, "I don't know if Xena wants to fix it."

The regent's eyebrows hiked up at the news. "That's unlike Xena."

"It is," Gabrielle murmured.

"The godhood is going to her head?" she carefully questioned.

The bard shook her head and focused on Ephiny. "I don't think so. She's actually seems more focused than normal. I can't explain it, Ephiny, but I think she's more aware about everything."

"Well she is a god," the regent reminded.

"That's not what I mean." Gabrielle turned in her chair then put together her thoughts. "You know how the gods really don't have much emotional depth?" After Ephiny's nod, she continued to speak. "Well the opposite has seemed to happen with Xena. She's more open about talking, and she's really aware of my emotions all the time. She just knows."

The Amazon lowered her head and massaged her brow. "This doesn't make sense."

"You're telling me." Gabrielle became brighter at the mention of things not making sense. "You know another thing that's odd. On the ride back from the Athenian camp, she started to get a headache."

Ephiny laughed but mostly because she found it hard to believe. "She must have not ate enough ambrosia."

The bard leaned back in her chair. "I don't know, but it's really strange. She doesn't seem to mind it either... and what scares me is that a part of me isn't frightened by her

staying as a god."

Ephiny furrowed her eyebrows and studied her friend carefully.

Gabrielle brushed her hair back then sighed deeply. "I don't know, Ephiny."

"I think first we just need to worry about the Athenian Army."

The Amazon Queen slowly nodded and broke away from her thoughts. "You're right. Xena's godhood will just have to wait until after."

Ephiny stood up and approached her friend. She patted the bard's hand and offered, "Get some sleep. Tomorrow might be Hades."

Gabrielle glowered up at the regent. "Thanks." She grinned at Ephiny's low laugh. She watched Ephiny head to the door, but she called, "Goodnight, Ephiny."

"Goodnight." The regent briefly waved then slipped out of the hut.

The bard studied the bed and debated whether to stay up, work on her scrolls, and wait for Xena. She continued to debate with herself, and she thought about her partner.

The Warrior Princess was carefully moving through the Athenian camp. She was invisible, but she was far too use to being cautious. She didn't need to be accidentally noticed. She neared the commander's tent and hesitated by the tent flap. She heard two voices inside, and she knew it was the commander and his second in command. She wondered if she could pass through the tent flap without moving it.

Xena dared fate and walked straight towards the tent flap. Gradually a smug look passed on her face when her body merely passed through the tent flap as if she was a ghost.

"This is ridiculous, commander," the second in command argued.

"Listen, Calchas you follow my orders. We have orders to return with the Amazon that destroyed the temple or we wipe out this nation for protecting her."

"And I still say it doesn't make sense why an Amazon would attack a temple to Artemis." Calchas ignored the commander's fiery gaze. "If we make a mistake then that'll bring all the Amazon Nations against us. We could lose serious treaties."

"Save the politics for Athens," the commander snapped.

"I'd prefer to save lives." Calchas straightened up when the commander came at him

with a dagger.

Jericho placed the dagger's tip against the soldier's low throat. He stared deep into his eyes. "Does that include yours?" He stepped closer and growled, "Follow my orders, Calchas or I'll find somebody that can."

Calchas knew when to hold his tongue. He nodded. "Yes, sir."

The commander quickly turned and threw his dagger at a map mounted on the other side of the tent. His dagger drove into the spot that represented the Amazon Nation. "We attack tomorrow at first light. Go and prepare the men for tomorrow." He turned his head sidelong to the second in command. "I want the onagers prepared to wipe that village out."

Calchas nodded then bowed his head. "As you command, sir." He turned and marched out of the tent.

Xena had stood aside and idly listened. She stared at Commander Jericho and was quite tempted to run her sword through him without him seeing her. It was tempting, but she knew the results of murder. She instead came up with a new plan, and she left the commander's tent.

The warrior moved quickly through the camp once she spotted her destination. She made it to the small corral of warhorses and workhorses. She neared the three onagers that would be used to siege the Amazon village and most likely destroyed the gates. She knelt down beside the rear of the first siege weapon and scanned her local surroundings. She waited until a few guards passed.

Xena gripped the wood rail that held the arm, which would shoot the heavy boulders. She gritted her teeth then forced her arms and muscles to crack the beam. Soon enough her ears filled with the sound of wood cracking under her strength, but she didn't break it all the way through.

The warrior climbed to her feet and went to the other two onagers one by one and repeated the process. She hoped that when the Athenians try to use them tomorrow that the arm's powerful swing would fully break the beam and render the siege weapon useless.

Xena hurried back into the camp and went on a hunt for a certain soldier. She was able to locate the second in command, and she tracked him back to his tent. She slipped into the tent after Calchas and took a seat in a wood chair. She crossed her legs and briefly watched him unhook his sheathed sword and set it down.

Calchas had his back to Xena, but he soon faced her and never saw her. He reached up

and removed his helmet, turned, and set it down beside his sword on the bed. He walked to the other side of the tent and reached up to the large clasp of his armor.

"Your commander is a bit stubborn, isn't he?"

Calchas spun around and became shocked to see the Warrior Princess in his tent. He observed her casual manner and how she sat in the chair like it was her tent. "How did you..."

"I have many... many skills," the bemused warrior smugly stated.

Calchas briefly glanced at his sword on the bed. He was further from it than Xena.

"I wouldn't." Xena tilted her head and nonchalantly began to swing her crossed leg. "I just came to talk." She held out her hand to the free chair on her right. "Sit down."

Calchas didn't trust her so he folded his arms. "I prefer to stand."

"Suit yourself," Xena muttered.

"What you want?"

The Warrior Princess sighed and stopped swinging her leg. "Are you always this pleasant to your guests?"

Calchas had a dubious look at the warrior's joke.

Xena suddenly stood up and approached the second in command, yet she kept herself between him and his sword. "Don't you find it strange that the Amazons would destroy a temple to Artemis?" She placed her hands on her hips. "It's even stranger that an Athenian commander was given orders to wipe out the Amazon Nation if they didn't hand over the Amazon."

Calchas narrowed his eyes. "What's your point?"

"My point is," Xena explained, "that you will be punished if Commander Jericho isn't stopped. You and I both know how severe the Athenian Army's punishment system is today. The second in command's job is to keep the commander in check."

Calchas walked away but faced Xena again. "Tell me what happened?"

Xena actually smiled at the second in command's offer. She briefed Calchas on what'd happened and gave him the real but glazed version of the story. She wasn't about to reveal that she was a god because it was her only advantage point right now.

"So this Velasca is dead?"

"More like trapped," Xena corrected. "She's not a problem."

Calchas lowered his head and considered all the information he now had from the warrior. He trust her too because he'd heard that she'd changed dramatically within the past year. He also could tell that Queen Gabrielle was a honest person. He mostly feared what would happen if Commander Jericho allowed the war to proceed.

"I'll see what I can do," the second in command resolved.

Xena finally stepped around Calchas and closer to the tent flap. "A lot of people will die otherwise, Calchas and needlessly. I can guarantee you that."

Calchas carefully watched the warrior. "I know, Xena. I trust your words." He bit his lower lip then nodded. "I've heard how you've changed... what you'd done to help." He turned his back to the warrior and took a step towards the bed.

"Then do the right thing too, Calchas... stop the war before it starts." Xena took her opening and used her invisibility.

Calchas spoke while he turned around to the warrior. "I plan to... Xena?" He scanned his candlelit tent, but the Warrior Princess was gone. He rushed out of his tent and stopped dead just outside. He didn't see her anywhere, and the Athenian soldiers only continued to talk around their campfires. It was as if Xena was a ghost.

Deeper back in the woods, the Amazon village remained on alert. The patrol was heavy and the scouts were not far from the Athenian camp. In the queen's hut, Gabrielle was halfway on the bed and completely asleep.

The bard hadn't bothered to change because she didn't think she would have fallen asleep. She'd tried writing yet the stories haven't returned to her lately. So she'd merely sat on the foot of the bed then flopped down. She'd closed her eyes for only a minute, but a minute turned into ten and fifteen and eventually she drifted off to her dreamscape.

Almost a candlemark after Gabrielle fell asleep, Xena materialized in the hut. She stood a few paces from the foot of the bed, and she smirked at Gabrielle's sleeping form. She had to admit it that the bard was fairly cute, and she could imagine that Gabrielle had accidentally fallen asleep.

Xena stepped forward and knelt down. She untied the bard's boots and hoped Gabrielle wouldn't wake up. She set the boots aside then prepared to get ready for bed

too. When she was free of her weapons, boots, and armor she was only left with her leathers. She took a minute to wash her face in the washbasin, then she came back and changed out of her leathers and into a night shift. Finally she picked out Gabrielle's nightshift and came back to the bed.

The bard stirred when warm hands gently touched her. She was drowsy and murmured, "Xena?"

"Hey," the warrior greeted. "You need to change and get into bed."

"You mean I'm not?" The bard was confused and tried to focus.

Xena chuckled at the question that reminded her from not too long ago. "No, you're not." She lifted the bard up and helped her get ready. She easily sat down behind the bard and set the shift down beside her.

"Everything go... okay?" Gabrielle slowly worked her soft leather halter. She had a hard time with it.

Xena pushed Gabrielle's hands away and worked the clasp in the back of Gabrielle's top. "I think so." She finished the clasp just as Gabrielle unhooked her bronze shoulder straps. She and the bard finally had the top off.

Gabrielle was clearly tired. She just tossed her leather top onto the nearby chair, which caused a loud clank. She then fussed with her tied feather necklace.

Xena chuckled and swatted the bard's hands away. "I got it. Get your nightshift."

Gabrielle was again confused, but she realized Xena had set it beside her. She picked it up, organized it, and put it on after Xena removed the necklace. Last she wiggled out of her skirt and prepared to toss it to the chair too.

The warrior snatched the skirt from the bard's hands. She slipped out of bed and took the skirt and necklace over to the table and chairs. She set the skirt down then picked up the top and put it on the skirt. Finally she set the necklace down on them.

Xena made quick work of the handful of lit candles then made her way back to the bed. She chuckled at Gabrielle, who flopped back down without getting under the covers. She crawled up the bed from the foot and grabbed up the bard. Xena easily pulled the bard up onto the bed then debated whether to fight with the covers or not.

Instead Xena drew Gabrielle into her warm body, which would be plenty for a summer evening. She smiled when Gabrielle snuggled her back deeper into Xena's front side. Xena tangled her legs with the bard's, and she kept her arms wrapped

around Gabrielle's upper and lower stomach. Xena rested her head on the pillow and closed her eyes. She wasn't tired, but she could at least rest her mind.

#### **Chapter 4 - The Goddess of Gabrielle**

Ephiny yelled a command to Solari, who was sprinting to the gates. She then ran off too and headed for the queen's hut. She was surprised to find Xena and Gabrielle hastily coming out of the hut and fully ready for a fight. "We have problems."

Gabrielle glanced up at her partner then back at Ephiny.

"The Athenian Army has only half mobilized." The regent adjusted her mask after she'd merely yanked it on this morning. "The scouts think something happen this morning between the commander and second in command. The army has split in half and Jericho is headed here."

"We better go," the bard commented.

Xena didn't argue and started the fast walk to the gates. Ephiny joined her on one side while Gabrielle took her right side.

"Did you see if onagers were taken?" Gabrielle prayed that Commander Jericho hadn't gotten his hands on them.

The regent's face darkened. "He has them."

"Damn," Gabrielle whispered, but Xena had explained earlier that it wouldn't matter. Gabrielle was still concerned because they were the most dangerous to the village.

The three women made it to the gates where the Amazons were organizing for the war. The Amazons were better prepared because they knew they stood a chance against half the army. Gabrielle and Ephiny gave the order for everybody to take their positions. The only ones left were a few guards for the gates, Xena, Gabrielle, and the regent.

Ephiny focused on Gabrielle and explained, "I'm going to help Solari get ready. I'll get a team together to stop those onagers."

"Ephiny, wait." Gabrielle grabbed the Amazon with her freehand. "Last night Xena sabotaged the onagers."

The regent peered up at the Warrior Princess, but she asked, "Are you sure?"

"As soon as he uses them, they'll fail," Xena promised. This morning, Gabrielle had mentioned to Xena that Ephiny now knew of her godhood.

"And if they don't?" the regent argued.

The warrior smirked and promised, "And if they don't then I'll destroy them."

Ephiny finally gave in and nodded. "I'll take care of the archers."

"Solari and I will cover the ground," Gabrielle promised. She then urged, "Go, Ephiny."

The regent grabbed her friend's hand and ordered, "Be careful out there."

"You too." Gabrielle squeezed Ephiny's hand then released. She turned to Xena when Ephiny was gone. "You're going after Jericho, right?"

Xena sadly smiled when the bard read through her. She stepped closer to her partner and urged, "I want you to stay near the back of the battle."

The Amazon Queen's shoulders slumped. "Xena-"

"I know... I know." The warrior held up her hand and waited until she was sure Gabrielle would listen. "Just... watch yourself, please." She then rested her hands on Gabrielle's hips. "If you need me..."

Gabrielle relented and actually smiled. "I'll always need you, Xena."

Xena wanted a more romantic place, but she wanted Gabrielle more. She lowered her head and hesitantly sealed her lips over Gabrielle's.

Gabrielle grasped Xena's arm for support. She'd been lost in those blue eyes, then she came to life at the feel of Xena's full lips against hers. She brought her freehand behind Xena's neck and urged Xena to deepen the kiss.

The warrior answered Gabrielle's demand, and Gabrielle returned a pleased moan. Xena pressed her body into Gabrielle's just as her tongue slowly met Gabrielle's. She was amazed by how alive the kiss made her feel. She knew it'd been the right time.

Gabrielle slowly backed out of the kiss. She still held onto her partner and remained in a brief daze. She quietly cleared her throat and shyly peered up into searching blue eyes. "I'm glad that wasn't a dream."

Xena showed a smug smile and promised, "It won't have to be anymore."

The bard noticed that Xena's statement held questioning behind it. She smiled warmly. "I'd like that."

"Hmmm," Xena softly agreed. She straightened up then reminded, "There is a battle about to start."

"It'll start with or without us," Gabrielle joked.

The Warrior Princess chuckled and ordered, "Let's go." She brought the bard with her and headed for the gates.

The Amazon Queen followed then an after thought came to her. She opened her mouth to ask, but she fell short when Xena hefted Gabrielle's staff from its leaning position on the gate. She accepted her weapon when Xena held it out to her. "How'd you..."

Xena flashed a wicked grin then answered, "I have many, many skills."

"Oh for gods'..." Gabrielle sighed loudly and stepped around her partner. "You're something else, Xena."

The warrior laughed, but she hurried out of the gates with Gabrielle beside her. She broke into the forest and led the way to the front line of Amazons. She spotted them just ahead so she turned her head to Gabrielle. "Be safe."

Gabrielle smiled and promised, "See you soon." She broke away from Xena then raced up to the front line to find Solari.

Xena hurried through the forest and went in search of the commander.

"Are we ready?" the queen questioned.

"Yes, my queen." Solari stepped away from the line. She had her mask in place and her sword at the ready. "The scouts will be here to warn us of their location."

"I imagine they can't be too far," Gabrielle decided aloud.

"Right over there, my queen," an Amazon mentioned and pointed.

Solari turned and spotted the scouts riding hard towards them.

"Look there," called another Amazon. She directed her sword at the Athenian soldiers, who marched through the trees.

The Amazon scouts halted her horses in front of the queen and Solari. One scout spoke to them. "The other half of the army has mobilized too. They're headed this way."

Gabrielle cursed and hastily asked, "The second in command was leading?"

"Yes, my queen."

"Maybe it was a trick," Solari concluded.

"I'm not sure, but they're coming for us." Gabrielle lifted her staff and faced her Amazons. "Stay clear of the onager's range. They should fire them, but Xena has sabotaged the weapons as of last night. They shouldn't work after the first attempt." She scanned her Amazons' masked faces. "Be fast and strong, Amazons."

The Amazons cheered and raised their swords in agreement.

Gabrielle started the march for the Athenian Army. She sensed Solari's close presence,

and she was grateful for the Amazon's support. She signaled Solari to give the order for the Amazons in the underground traps to prepare.

Solari cupped her freehand over her mouth and gave a birdcall. Then she ordered the Amazon line to break into a charge.

"Kill them," Commander Jericho yelled to his men, "and bring me the queen." He darkly smiled when the soldiers started into a run for the Amazons. The onagers and the operators were beside him. He gave them orders to prepare the weapons and fire. He also told them to push the onagers as far forward and aim for the gates.

Commander Jericho then hurried to join his men in the battle. He came next to one soldier, who suddenly disappeared under ground. He cursed at the traps the Amazons had devised.

Solari heard the whistle of an onager's projectile. She yelled, "Incoming!"

Gabrielle raised her head up and spotted the large boulder that ripped through the tree branches overhead. She realized it was coming right for her and Solari. "Solari, move!" She cracked her staff against her opponent's face, then she made a jump for the Amazon.

Solari took a cut to her arm from her enemy, but she was knocked onto her back. She and Gabrielle rolled for several paces. Solari lifted her head from the queen's chest and looked at the boulder that'd come to a stop and taken out a few Athenian soldiers and Amazons. She peered down at the bard. "Thanks."

Gabrielle coughed and patted her chest. "No problem." She was helped to her feet, and she quickly stopped an Athenian from attacking Solari's back.

Xena landed on the last tree branch. She hoped she was quick enough, and she was in luck. The operators were about to set off the last onager. She heard the other operators screaming and hollering about the other two siege weapons breaking.

The warrior stood up on the branch and stretched out her left hand. She carefully observed the operator, who pushed down on the release lever. She held her breath and took aim.

The boulder was lifted up and flew out of the arm's cup. It caught more air, but suddenly a lightning bolt tore through the trees and struck the boulder. The huge rock shattered into small pieces and rained over the broken siege weapons and operators.

The operators became frightened and started yelling at one another. They believed it was the work of the gods and that the gods were angry. The operators were convinced, and they quickly fled from the battle.

Xena chuckled at the fact she'd easily chased off the operators. She then raised her eyebrow when she heard the distant sound of soldiers running on foot. She narrowed her eyes when the other half of the Athenian Army came into view. She also picked out Calchas's voice.

"Do what you can to arrest them, men. Avoid any attempt to kill them." Calchas soon came into Xena's view. He was running with his men. "And leave Commander Jericho to me."

Xena was relieved to know that Calchas was doing the right thing. The battle would be quite quick too. She let Calchas and his men pass under her then she jumped down. She followed behind the split army and withdrew her sword. She joined Calchas's men, and she worked her way to Calchas.

On the other side of the battle, Gabrielle remained busy with three soldiers that charged at her. She ran towards them, suddenly stopped, and knelt down with her staff coming up horizontally. She gripped the staff hard when the soldiers collided with her staff.

Several archers in the tree covered the queen and shot the soldiers. They received a few words of thanks from the queen, who stood back up.

Solari joined the queen and joked, "They seem to favor you, Gabrielle."

"I'm getting that a lot lately." Gabrielle raised her staff but ducked when an Athenian soldier's sword came at her head. "I think I prefer it when they target Xena."

Solari laughed, but she focused on her fight with two soldiers. "I'm sure she's getting her fair share."

"I'm sure too." Gabrielle took out her right opponent and focused on her left one. She grinned at his worn features, and she rammed her staff's end into his leather stomach. She was quite pleased when he stumbled backwards and another Amazon finished him.

"Hello, Queen Gabrielle."

"Gabrielle, watch out!" Solari hollered.

The queen dropped to her knees just in time before the blade caught her neck. She hurried onto her feet and raised her staff when her opponent came at her again. She wasn't at all surprised to find it was Commander Jericho.

Solari fought against three soldiers, and one was taken out thanks to an Amazon archer. She fought hard against the other two soldiers, and she noticed that Gabrielle was having a hard fight with Commander Jericho.

Gabrielle landed a solid hit to the commander's side, but it didn't much affect him because of his armor. She gritted her teeth, stepped back once, and prepared for the commander's strike. She parried his first attack then his second. She didn't expect his kick though, and she was hit hard at her stomach.

Solari saw the queen down, and she gave a wild swipe at her last enemy. She didn't care about him and came to the queen's aide. She stopped Commander Jericho's sword before it hit Gabrielle.

"Solari," Gabrielle yelled, but she wasn't fast enough. She watched in horror when the earlier soldier came up behind Solari and rammed his blade into Solari's back. She finally got to her feet despite the pain in her body. She slammed her staff end into the soldier's side then brought her other end around and into the soldier's throat.

"Solari!" hollered a panicked regent. Ephiny landed on the ground from the trees after she too had witnessed the scene. She cut through a few soldiers then protected Solari from Commander Jericho.

Gabrielle grabbed Solari, who fell to her knees. She covered the Amazon's wound and prayed the blood would stop flowing.

"I'm okay," the Amazon protested and tried to get up.

"Stay down, Solari," Gabrielle snapped. She sensed another soldier coming up behind her, and she stood up against her pain. "Ephiny, get Solari out of here." She fought against the soldier, who was rather weak from earlier fights.

Ephiny didn't listen and kept her fight against the commander. She had to admit he was fairly good too.

Gabrielle knocked her opponent unconscious. She then charged the commander and ordered, "Help her, Ephiny."

The regent gave in because she knew how dire the wound could be if it wasn't stopped. She hurried to Solari's side and helped her friend up onto her feet. "Come on, Solari. Stay with me." She helped her friend make it back towards the village and luckily other Amazons came to help them.

"You protect all your Amazons, don't you?" the commander snidely questioned.

"Just the good ones," Gabrielle shot back. She parried a few attacks then went on offense. She put her strength into her attack and manged a nice strike against the commander's temple.

Jericho stumbled back and almost dropped his sword. He was angry and lunged for the queen. He saw Gabrielle raise her staff, and he retaliated with a calculated kick.

Gabrielle hissed when her hand was hit hard. She watched her staff fly a few paces away from her. She returned her attention to the smug commander.

Commander Jericho raised up his sword and pointed the tip at the queen's throat. "If I can't have the Amazon that destroyed the temple, then I'll take you."

The bard slotted her eyes, but she felt her heart rate accelerated. She fisted her hands at her sides and thought of a plan.

"I wouldn't," the commander threatened, and he took a menacing step closer. He let the blade run close to the queen's throat.

"And I wouldn't either if I were you," snarled a dangerous voice.

Commander Jericho snapped his head to the left and was shocked to suddenly find the Warrior Princess beside him.

Xena grabbed the commander's sword and yanked it away from Gabrielle's throat. She raised the sword up and stepped between her partner and the commander. She soaked in the fact that the commander was not only dumbfounded by her presence, but he was also fearful. She showed a ruthless smile and very slowly bent the sword's blade backwards.

Commander Jericho was stunned, and he stared at the bent blade. His wide eyes rested on the angry warrior, and he whispered, "By the gods."

"You've got that right," Xena hotly snapped. She pulled back her fisted hand then let it sail at his face. She struck Jericho hard and sent him sailing a few paces until he smashed into a tree and fell to the ground.

Gabrielle sighed in relief, and her shoulders fell. "Any second later, and I swear..."

Xena watched the unconscious commander for a beat then she turned back to her partner. "I thought you could handle everything, Gabrielle."

The bard knew it was a smart remark, but she shrugged. "Well mostly everything."

The warrior slightly grinned and noticed that other soldiers were coming for them. She wasn't too worried because the battle was almost over. She ordered, "Get your staff. The fun's not over yet."

Gabrielle made a dash for her weapon and spun around to find her partner with her sword out. She hastily neared Xena and put her back to Xena's back. "Let's start counting now."

Xena spun her sword and bent her knees when her enemies came at her.

"And no cheating," the bard hotly reminded. She raised her staff when two soldiers came at her.

The warrior grumbled and complained, "Where's the fun in that?"

Gabrielle would have laughed, but she was too caught up in her fight. She did notice that Jericho's men were well thinned out. She was relieved because she was never much for battles unlike her partner.

Xena took out her two opponents quickly enough and declared, "Two."

Gabrielle hit her right opponent in the side then against his head and knocked him out. "One." She spun around her second opponent and struck him in the back of the head. "Two."

"Gabrielle-"

"I got it!" The Amazon Queen kicked behind and nailed a soldier between his legs. She smiled proudly and when the soldier hit the ground, she declared, "Three."

Xena smirked and came up to Gabrielle's side. She raised her sword when more soldiers came for them.

"There must be no real challenge for you," Gabrielle commented.

The warrior fought against one soldier while Gabrielle took the other. She replied over the din of weapons. "It's never challenging when it's Athenian soldiers."

The soldier, who fought Xena, became angry and swiped at her.

Xena laughed and jumped back at his attempt. She came back at him with her own attack. She easily finished him off then she glanced over at Gabrielle, who'd become surrounded by four soldiers. She cursed and hastily joined the fight.

The queen parried one attack, but she didn't expect the attack from behind. She was relieved when Xena stopped him and easily took him out. Gabrielle claimed two other soldiers, but she was tiring.

The god noted her partner was slowing down. She finished her opponent easily then saw that Gabrielle had knocked out her enemy and there was one left.

Gabrielle was hit on her side by the soldier's kick. She knew he'd come at her again, and she moved her staff around to catch his blade. She'd miscalculated, and his swing was aimed at her side.

Xena was a brief blur, but she came to a stop near Gabrielle's side. She clenched her hands when the sword blade went into her stomach.

The stunned soldier held his sword still in the Warrior Princess's stomach. He couldn't believe his dumb luck at striking the famous warrior.

Xena smirked at the soldier, grabbed the blade with her freehand, and she slowly extracted the blade. She straightened up and revealed her unharmed stomach and perfect leathers. "Nice try." She kicked his sword from his hand then stepped closer and rammed her hilt against his temple.

"Queen Gabrielle!" An Athenian soldier was calling for Gabrielle and rushed through the battle field.

Gabrielle shook off her initial shock that Xena had been hit. She lowered her staff's end to the ground and instantly recognized Calchas.

Xena took her partner's side; she still gripped her sword hilt.

"Are you okay?"

The queen offered a faint smile and nodded. "We are... thank you for the help."

Calchas lowered his bloody sword to his side and replied, "I'm sorry this happened." He glanced at Xena but asked, "Where's the commander?"

"Just over there." Gabrielle pointed with her staff at the unconscious commander. "I'm glad it wasn't any worse."

Calchas mutually felt the same, and he stepped forward with his hand coming up.

Queen Gabrielle switched her staff into her left hand then moved forward. She tightly collapsed the second in command's arm.

Xena scanned the battle field and noticed that Amazons remained or Calchas's men. Either way, everybody was hastily assessing who needed medical attention. She focused back on Gabrielle and Calchas, who were talking back and forth about what'd happened.

The battle had started and ended quickly. There were few deaths on all sides, which was a relief to Gabrielle. The Amazons first took care of their wounded then helped the Athenians with their own. Commander Jericho later woke up to the defeat and a set of chains around his wrists and ankles. Calchas planned to return Jericho back to the head of the Athenian Army where he'd find due justice for his actions.

By the late afternoon, Gabrielle was finally able to see Solari. She was happy that Ephiny had taken Solari back to the village where the healer was located. Solari had instructions to stay on a pallet for the next few days until her wound settled down, and she had her strength back. Solari had cursed up a storm because she wanted to move around and help the nation. Only after Ephiny gave her lecture did she stop her protest.

Close to sunset, Gabrielle and Xena arrived back in the hut finally. The bard was exhausted and only wanted a bath to help her wind down. Xena promised to repeat her trick from yesterday and fill the bath tub with warm water. Gabrielle then won out and bribed her partner to join the bath.

The bath helped Gabrielle clear her head and sooth her tense body. She could tell it even helped the warrior despite Xena insisted she was fine. Afterwards, Gabrielle put on her nightshift and planned to try her writing again.

Xena finished pulling her leathers on and went to her boots. "Do you want dinner?"

Gabrielle was seated on the foot of the bed, and she was brushing her hair. "You know, I'm not that hungry."

The warrior furrowed her eyebrows, but she knelt down just after she slipped her feet into her boots. "You were hit in the stomach."

"I feel fine though," the bard argued.

Xena hastily laced her boots then came over to the bard. "Lay down." She could tell Gabrielle might protest so she ordered, "Lay down."

Gabrielle grumbled, set her brush aside, and flopped back into the bed. She closed her eyes and let Xena's probing fingers check over her stomach area and sides. She couldn't find anything wrong or detected anything thanks to her godhood. She was pretty confident that Gabrielle was just fine.

"Anything?" the bard inquired. She tucked her hands under her head. Xena shook her head, and Gabrielle shrugged. "I feel great, honestly... I mean besides tired."

"And not hungry?" Xena raised an eyebrow but reminded, "You haven't eaten all day."

"I know." Gabrielle sat up and then offered, "I'll eat something... I just don't feel like going to the hut."

The warrior patted her partner's knee. "Get started on your scrolls." She walked to the door and quietly left the hut.

The Amazon Queen softly smiled because she knew Xena would get some food. She hopped off the bed and collected her scroll satchel. She extracted her most recent scroll that was the most difficult for her lately. Not because the storyline was hard, but she could never focus on it.

Tonight Gabrielle was able to better focus on her story, and she figured it was because the stress of the Athenian Army was past now. She felt calmer and more in control than what her life had been recently. She broke from her writing when her partner reentered the hut with a full tray of food.

Xena set the tray on the table and observed the bard's dubious expression.

"I'm not that hungry."

"I know." Xena stared down at the large tray of food.

Gabrielle set the scroll near the tray and peered up into sharp, bright blue eyes. She noticed how Xena had a distraught look, and she asked, "So why the big tray of food?"

Xena was silent for a beat then she focused on Gabrielle. "Because I'm really hungry." She moved and sunk down into the empty chair. "I don't know what happened. I was picking out the food, and it just hit me." She gazed over at the listening bard. "I feel like I haven't eaten in days."

"Well," Gabrielle reminded, "you haven't."

The god slotted her eyes at the bard.

Gabrielle shook her head and pushed back her damp bangs. "Why does this keep getting weirder?" She picked up a flat bread and handed it to Xena. She grabbed the other and worked on it slowly. "Blue eyes, headaches, and now hunger." She gave Xena a skeptic look but offered, "Maybe it's wearing off."

Xena picked up a bowl of soup and dipped the bread into it. "I don't think it works that way, Gabrielle. I'm suppose to get more powerful."

"It doesn't seem to be working." Gabrielle also grabbed for a bowl.

"Gabrielle, it's hot." But Xena's words were too late. She knew Gabrielle would drop the bowl so she hastily shot out her right hand to get the falling bowl.

The bard waved her hand in the air to calm it. "Gods damnit." She watched Xena put the bowl back on the tray. "I'm glad your reflexes haven't dulled." She clenched her hand and opened it up again. She had watery eyes, but she focused on her aching palm. She felt it was already settling down.

"You alright?" Xena was gazing over and noticed Gabrielle's open hand was fine.

"Yeah... thanks." Gabrielle clenched her hand briefly then looked back at the tray. "I'll stick to something not hot." She grabbed the bowl of grapes instead.

Xena chuckled and went back to her meal.

Later that evening, the partners found themselves in bed, and Gabrielle was quite tired. The bard rested on her side so that she faced her friend. She was slightly nervous for some reason, and she opened her eyes when the warrior crawled into the bed beside her.

The warrior settled onto her back like always. She brushed her bangs out of her eyes.

"I need to cut those," the bard muttered.

Xena raised her eyebrow.

Gabrielle had her eyes closed again, but she imagined the look on Xena's face already. "You cut them too short," she reminded. "Then they stick up and with the summer humidity they really will."

The warrior pucked her lips and joked, "I didn't know my mother was in the hut." She shot out her hands at the right moment and caught the bard's hand.

Gabrielle lifted her head and observed how Xena had caught her hand. She slotted her eyes at the god.

Xena smirked then laced her fingers through the smaller ones. Her other hand came to rest on her stomach.

"Hmmm." Gabrielle rested their linked hands in the small space between them. "So what you do while I sleep?"

The goddess tilted her head then teased, "I sing and dance."

Gabrielle groaned and closed her eyes. "I liked you better before the godhood." She made Xena wait for her explanation for a beat then revealed, "You talked less."

Xena unexpectedly growled and did a fast roll to her right. She found herself over top of the petite blond, and she straddled small hips. She now pressed the flat of her palms on either side of bed, next to Gabrielle's shoulders. She leaned over the bard.

Gabrielle smiled sweetly and greeted, "Hi." The only response received was a glint coming from the warrior's beautiful blue eyes. She cleared her throat then reached up. She grasped Xena's muscular arms and briefly glanced at them. "Did I mention how lovely your eyes are now?"

Xena said nothing but slightly inclined her right eyebrow. She lowered her head and easily held the bard's staring gaze.

The bard gave a sharp inhale, and she squeezed the warrior's biceps. She then tensed out of anticipation when Xena's lips came even closer to hers. Her eyes fluttered then finally closed.

Xena smirked at Gabrielle's presumption. She suddenly rolled back to her spot, and Gabrielle squealed because she was taken too. Xena settled into her spot contently and adjusted the bard's lightweight on the half of her body.

Gabrielle calmed and once she was up to speed with the changes. She settled down against Xena's body. "Xena?"

"Mmmm?"

"I like how much you talk."

"Mmmhmmm."

"At least most of the time," the bard muttered. She adjusted her right arm over the warrior's chest. "Xena?"

"Mmmm?"

Gabrielle chuckled, but she seriously offered, "If you get bored tonight... you can always enter my dream."

Xena slowly smiled at the bard's words. She tightened her right arm around Gabrielle's waist briefly in a half hug. "Thanks."

Then a thought occurred to the Amazon Queen. She popped her head up and displayed her confused face. "Did you sleep when you were in my dream last time?"

The warrior hadn't considered it until now, but she answered, "I did actually."

Gabrielle stared oddly at her partner then stated, "That's so bizarre." She lowered her head back down. "This godhood doesn't make sense, Xena."

Xena had to admit that certain aspects were not adding up, but she didn't have the luxury to think over it. She turned her head towards Gabrielle's and whispered, "We'll

figure it out. Get some rest."

The bard relented and settled down for the night. "Goodnight, Xena."

The warrior kissed her partner's forehead and murmured, "Sleep well." She closed her eyes and merely listened to the bard's soft breathing. She was able to focus her hearing on Gabrielle's heartbeat, which gradually began to match Xena's.

Xena's right arm slowly began to loosen from its hold on the bard. She couldn't control it or even realized it was happening until she discovered herself crossing into Gabrielle's dreamscape. She hadn't even meant for it to happen, but it was as if it'd called her. And the bard happily received Xena in the dreamscape without question.

The following days, the warrior and bard remained in the Amazon village and helped the nation get settled after the battle. Xena also kept an eye on the Athenian Army until they returned back over the lava pit bridge. Once Queen Gabrielle felt that the nation was calm, she handed her powers back to Ephiny. The dawn of the next day, Gabrielle and Xena were up early and tried to pack for what adventures may rest ahead of them.

The next adventure though was being delayed by an early morning argument. Gabrielle had brought up the topic about the godhood and what to do about it. She mostly argued that it needed to be removed, but Xena was obviously reluctant to the idea. The bard repeatedly brought up the fact that Xena would never age now.

The warrior set the saddlebags on the foot of the bed. She turned towards the washroom and called, "Nothing is forever, Gabrielle."

The bard stomped out of the washroom with her small pouch of belongings. "Well isn't that a comforting note." She stomped over then tossed the pouch at her partner.

Xena easily caught it in her right hand. She quickly understood how Gabrielle took it. "There are some exceptions."

Gabrielle shook her head and kept her back to Xena. She just rammed her scrolls into her satchel. "Maybe Ephiny is right."

"Right about what?" The warrior slightly darkened.

"That the godhood has gone to your head," the annoyed bard muttered. She shoved her quill into the bag then turned, but she slightly jumped because Xena was right in front of her now. She covered her pounding chest. "Xena-"

"You really believe that?" the warrior cut off.

Gabrielle read a mix of anger and hurt in the warrior's eyes. She cooled her temper, and her shoulders fell. "I just don't understand why you want this godhood. You've always spoken ill of the gods."

"And I'm not an Olympian god, Gabrielle." Xena folded her arms. "This could help us... and others."

"You would have never wanted it before," Gabrielle argued. "What makes it okay now?"

The warrior dropped her arms at the excellent point her partner brought up.

"What made you change your mind?"

"The fact that I can protect you better now," Xena argued. "I don't mind this and mostly because I know I still have my emotions... my identity. If I lost those, then I would be determined to rid of this."

Gabrielle sighed and looked away for a moment. She peered up into determined blue eyes. "And what are you going to do when I finally die?" She shook her head and coldly joked, "Stop by in the Underworld for visits?"

Xena sighed, but she grabbed the bard's arms and reminded, "There are ways to kill a god."

Gabrielle swallowed at the honest statement. She bowed her head and whispered, "I don't... I..."

"We'll have our next life together," Xena promised.

Gabrielle shook her head and tried to imagine her life years and years down the road. All she could see was her feeble and failing body then Xena's unaged self beside her. She closed her eyes and tried to seriously consider the benefits against the cons. She also had to think about the amount of good Xena could do as a god. Was she being too selfish?

Xena felt all the string of emotions that flooded the bard. She lowered her head and retrieved the bard's lips for a sweet kiss. She slowly pulled back after the kiss and whispered, "Let's just see how it goes for now."

Gabrielle hesitated then nodded her head. Then she moved in and hugged her partner tightly.

Xena was surprised by the hug, yet she quickly returned it. After the hug, she urged the bard to finish the packing so they could go.

About an hour later, Ephiny met the couple just outside of the stables. She strolled along side the queen and warrior, who were headed to the gates. "So, have you decided on a solution for the godhood?"

Xena was going to reply, but Gabrielle beat her.

"We're not in any rush," the bard replied. She then shrugged and added, "It may be useful."

Ephiny's eyes widened slightly. "Really?" She look between her friend and the warrior. She cleared her throat, put her hands behind her back, and rationally thought

it out. "It does have its advantages." She thought it over and moved closer to the pair. "It hasn't affected you in any negative ways?"

Xena truly tried to come up with any negative effects, but she couldn't pinpoint any. "I've felt great since."

"You know what was odd," Gabrielle brought up to Ephiny. "The night after the battle, Xena was famished."

The regent blinked and stared up at the goddess. "That's not right."

"You're telling me," Gabrielle muttered.

"Maybe it's wearing off," the regent commented.

Gabrielle glanced up at Xena, who rolled her sky blue eyes. Gabrielle giggled and turned back to Ephiny. "We don't think it's that."

"What else could it be?" Ephiny spotted the gates just ahead, and she walked slower. "Well, your secret is safe, Xena."

The warrior came to a stop and turned to the Amazon. "I would prefer it that way."

The regent shifted her weight to her right foot. "I doubt it'll stay that way for long."

Gabrielle smirked and leaned against her staff lightly. "A bard knows what details to tell... or skip." She peered up at her partner, who had a faint grin hidden. She returned her attention to Ephiny. "We'll stop back soon, Ephiny."

"No you won't," the regent teased, "Not until another crisis hits."

The queen sighed and straightened up from her staff. "We will," she promised. "Xena loves to visit." She heard a snort behind her so she quickly swatted her partner's leather stomach.

This time, Xena let it go but promised to turn it back on Gabrielle later.

"Anyway," Gabrielle continued, "keep the nation safe, Ephiny."

The regent slightly bowed her head. "Always, my queen." She showed her smile when she brought her head up. "Be safe, Gabrielle." She stepped forward and met her friend for a warm hug.

Gabrielle tightly squeezed and murmured, "Thank you for everything, Ephiny."

Ephiny swayed in the hug, but she whispered, "Don't thank me, sister." She pulled back from the hug then approached the Warrior Princess. "I don't need to tell you to be safe."

Xena only arched an eyebrow.

Ephiny chuckled and shook her head. "Thank you for the help, Xena. It would have ended far worse."

"Well I do have..." Xena lost her words when she caught Gabrielle's sour look. She smiled back at Ephiny and finished, "I have fun helping."

Ephiny pivoted on her foot and glanced back at the bard.

Gabrielle instantly smiled innocently and only lost it when Ephiny turned back to Xena.

The regent held out her arm, which was accepted in a brisk shake. "Come back soon." She knew it was the warrior had to be inspired to return to the nation more than Gabrielle.

"Oh I will," Xena joked. She released arms but urged, "Take care, Ephiny." She walked off and signaled her mare to follow.

The bard briefly watched her partner go, then she sadly smiled at Ephiny. "I'll miss you, Ephiny."

The regent smiled at the sentiment. "For once, I'll miss you." She jumped when Gabrielle tried to slap her. She chuckled yet went serious and sincerely stated, "I'll see you soon, my friend."

Gabrielle gripped the Amazon's arm for an instant, then she turned and walked towards the gates.

Ephiny folded her arms and watched Gabrielle sprint after her tall, dark friend. She tilted her head when Gabrielle took Xena's side. Then gradually a grin formed on her lips when Gabrielle hit Xena's thigh. Ephiny laughed at Xena kicking Gabrielle back in the butt.

"A couple of kids," Ephiny muttered, and she walked off to check on Solari.

Gabrielle enjoyed the serene woods that would lead them to the road outside the Amazon territory. The muses began to speak to her and danced around in her head about the latest adventures. She happy at the fact that her stories were coming back to her finally. She shaped a beautiful smile on her lips and became engrossed in her latest adventures about her and Xena.

The warrior quietly walked along side, but she touched her forehead with her freehand. She glimpsed at the bard, who she could tell was in full story mode. She groaned extremely loudly which saved her.

Gabrielle's mental story came to a screeching halt, and she glanced at her partner. "What's wrong?"

Xena dropped her hand to her side. "Do me a favor?" She waited for Gabrielle's nod then ordered, "Just recite the story aloud instead of in your head." She sighed loudly and mentioned, "I think I can handle that better than listening to your thoughts."

The bard laughed when she realized what was wrong. She touched her partner's arm and honestly stated, "I'm sorry, Xena. I didn't think about it."

The warrior grunted at Gabrielle's ironic reply.

Gabrielle tilted her head then offered, "How about we play that guess who game?"

Xena smirked at this idea. "Alright. You think of who, and I'll guess."

The bard considered it, yet she quickly caught up to the warrior's sneaky idea. "Oh very funny." She shoved the warrior away from her then shot a glare at the chuckling warrior. "I guess we can only play the game one way."

"Alright." The warrior relented. She thought of somebody, and inspiring person's name came to mind. She held back her wicked grin and stated, "Alright. Go ahead."

Gabrielle pucked her lips and thought of the right question. "Am I male or female?"

The warrior turned her head to the right, scanned over Gabrielle's body, and she smirked when the bard reddened. "Oh you're male."

The bard growled and hit Xena's side with her fisted hand. She knew Xena's automatic response so she jumped away just in time. She laughed and pointed a finger at her partner. "Missed."

Xena smirked and tormented, "I only missed because I wanted to miss."

Gabrielle laughed and slowed down until she was near Xena's side but not too close. "Sure." She tilted her head and asked, "Am I mortal or god?"

"Mortal."

"Hmmm." The bard considered it for awhile, but it just wasn't enough information. "So where are we headed?"

The warrior shrugged then answered, "There's this area of Greece I haven't been to." She noted the bard's surprised look, which she ignored and continued to speak. "I thought we'd go there. I hear it's a quiet area... just a few little villages."

Gabrielle thought it out then nodded. "I'm sure we'll run into a warlord on the way... or something."

"Most likely," the warrior muttered.

"Did you think of a title yet?" Gabrielle randomly inquired.

Xena had a thin smile and answered, "No. Anymore bright suggestions?"

"Similar to the milk idea?" Gabrielle shot back.

The warrior chuckled and shrugged. "I thought it was pretty creative."

"Maybe for a five year old," the bard remarked under her breath.

Xena released Argo's reins and suddenly jumped for her partner. She scooped up the bard and threw her over her right shoulder.

Gabrielle screamed and dropped her staff in the process. "Xena!" She tried to push out of the warrior's strong arms, but it was useless. "Put me down! I'm not a gods damn sack of olives!"

The Warrior Princess laughed and teased, "No, you're a little cuter than that."

"Oh that's a real compliment," Gabrielle snapped.

Xena smirked, but she knew Gabrielle's mood would deflate any moment if she didn't set her down. She spun around once then set her friend onto her feet.

Gabrielle had a hot temper and mostly because she hated to be bested all the time. She pointed a finger at the god and prepared to wipe that smirk off Xena's face.

Xena was faster, and she sealed the bard's open mouth with hers. Briefly Gabrielle fought, but it quickly stopped and small hands slipped around her neck. She and Gabrielle exchanged soft moans between the long kiss, and they only broke away when they needed to catch their breaths.

Gabrielle had a dreamy expression, and the anger was gone. She was lost in Xena's deep blue eyes, and she didn't want to move out of Xena's arms. She slowly came out of daze and whispered, "Don't think for a minute that you can do that all the time and get out of something."

Xena flashed a grin and teased, "Oh I know."

Gabrielle didn't believe the warrior though. She cleared her throat and casually asked, "Am I short or tall?"

"About average," the warrior whispered.

"Hmmm." The bard nodded then slipped out of her friend's arms. She was going to retrieve her staff, but she forgot where she'd dropped it. She turned and Xena stood there with the staff. She took her weapon and replied, "Thanks."

Xena softly laughed and went to Argo, who snorted at her. She grabbed the dangling reins then continued down the road.

Gabrielle walked along side. She had a blank mind and still tried to catch up from the earlier kiss.

The warrior stepped closer to her friend and mentioned, "I have it now."

The bard blinked and came to the present. "What's that?"

The god smirk and her voice filled with amusement. "My title."

Gabrielle had a grin too. She had to hear this one considering Xena's earlier, creative ideas. "I'm listening."

Xena waited and let it draw out for Gabrielle.

"Xena," the bard demanded.

Xena chuckled and proudly declared, "The Goddess of Gabrielle."

Gabrielle stopped walking and watched Xena go another two paces.

The warrior paused and glanced back at her partner. She enjoyed the dumbfounded look written all over the bard's face. She held out her hand and softly offered, "Come on."

Gabrielle walked a few steps then took Xena's hand into hers. She softly smiled as she thought of Xena's title idea, and she had to admit it was romantically creative. She studied the forest with new eyes and a bright smile.

Xena enjoyed the silence in her and the birds that talked around her. She squeezed Gabrielle's hand for a moment and received one back. She realized that she had her skills as a warrior that meshed with her godhood, but none of that gave her the one thing she wanted. It was her heart that could only give her what she'd always wanted. Xena turned her head to the right and lowered her gaze, and she observed what or rather who she'd always needed and wanted.

Gabrielle felt those rich blue eyes on her, and she met them. She mirrored her warrior's incredible smile, and Gabrielle felt her upside down world suddenly turn right side up. She would never settle again, and she would never accept anything less. Whether Xena was a god, mortal, or dead Gabrielle decided Xena would be hers just as she would be Xena's.

"Am I Hercules?" Gabrielle's voice broke the silence.

Xena smirked and replied, "No."

"Am I blond?"

"Well," the bemused warrior started.

"Xena," the blond bard warned.

Xena's laugh filled the air then faded out, but Gabrielle's voice took over. The couple continued the loved game while they followed the trail to the road, and the god and bard still held hands.

**The End**