

~ Trying to Fall in Love ~

by Queen Karena & Red Hope

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Subtext: We definitely are subtext writers.

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Chapter One: **The Morning**

Red Hope

Xena sighed and continued waiting beside the door of the tavern. She folded her arms and leaned against the wall beside the door. She stared through the empty tavern. Sunrise had begun about a candlemark ago and she wanted to head off.

Last night had been chaotic for the group. They had ended up with a small room and not enough money to get a second room. Xena had offered Gabrielle to take the bed while she would sleep on the floor. That's when the entire debate began.

"Xena, let me sleep on the floor," cut in the warrior-bard.

"No." The Warrior Princess helped up her hand. "I will; you sleep on the bed."

"What about me?" asked Joxer suddenly.

Both warriors turned to the wanna-be warrior and considered.

"You can sleep in the bed with Gabrielle," suggested Xena with a sly grin.

"Ooooh no." The warrior-bard spun around and faced her friend. "Joxer is not sleeping in the bed with me." She folded her arms. "I'd rather sleep with Argo."

"You can't, its too cold." Xena just cut off an option.

"Hold on." Joxer looked at Gabrielle. "Why won't you sleep in the bed with me?"

The Amazon Queen cringed; she hardly hid the cringe. "I just... can't."

The man put his hands on his hips and nodded while saying, "I see, what you think I have kutties or something?"

"Yeah something like that," muttered Gabrielle under her breath. She held her hands up. "I don't mean any offense but it's just that... I... well... I have problems with... male species." *That just came out totally wrong*, mused Gabrielle. *I'm toast.*

"Like what?" probed the man. He corked an eyebrow. "Do you like women more?"

Both Xena and Gabrielle's eyebrows shot up above their bangs.

Gabrielle started coughing and patted her chest. "Not quite like that, Joxer." She cleared her throat and said carefully, "I just get a little... nervous being around men let alone sleeping in a bed."

The wanna-be warrior sighed. "I won't do anything. I'll stay on my side."

"Yeah Gabrielle, he'll stay on his side," taunted the warrior with a grin.

The warrior-bard glared at her partner. "You stay out of this." She narrowed her eyes in warning before facing Joxer again. "I don't feel comfortable, Joxer. Its simple as that." After those words, she rotated on the heels of her boots and smirked at Xena. "Xena, why don't you sleep in the bed with Joxer while I sleep on the floor."

The Warrior Princess scowled her friend. "Not on your life."

"What's wrong?" teased the smaller woman. "There's enough room on that bed for you."

Xena's eyes narrowed instantly. "Don't even."

Gabrielle grabbed her friend's arm. "Excuse us, Joxer... we'll be back." She dragged Xena out of the room and closed the door quietly behind. "I'm not sleeping in the same bed with him," she growled lowly.

"Gabrielle, he won't do anything." The warrior put her hands on her hips.

The Amazon Queen sighed and ran a hand through her short hair. "Xena, please... I can't do this." She peered up. "Let me sleep on the floor."

"No," stated the warrior. "You need to sleep comfortably tonight."

"It's not going to be comfortable with Joxer a breath away," the younger woman hissed.

The older woman sighed and gazed everywhere but at Gabrielle.

"Xena..." The warrior-bard grasped her friend's arm. "Be my hero." She smiled innocently. "How about... we all sleep in the bed?"

Xena look at her partner instantly. "No-"

"Please," Gabrielle begged. "If I have to suffer, you can suffer with me." Her hands slipped down and touched her friend's hand on the leather-clad hip. "Please, Xena," she whispered.

The Warrior Princess sighed and lifted her hands off her hips. She covered Gabrielle's hand with her two larger hands. "You owe me."

The warrior-bard studied her friend's hands covering her own. She smiled softly before placing her free hand on top of Xena's hands. "Thank you," she said sincerely.

"You're welcome."

Gabrielle smiled then gave her friend a long warm hug.

That was when the debate had ended and Xena failed miserably to win the debate. Well, wasn't failing more like submitting to Gabrielle's will. She grinned at that. She just loved submitting to Gabrielle when it felt just right. Last night had been one of the times. One thing she knew, Gabrielle could get anything she wanted from Xena if she just asked. Anything.

But needless to say, Joxer that night never even so much as twitched in the bed. He was too fearful that if he moved an eyelid; Xena would have hurt him for it. Joxer was not about to anger the warrior especially when he knew how protective she was over Gabrielle.

So, Gabrielle slept very well last night. Even more so considering Xena had slept on her side, facing Gabrielle, and her left arm dropped on the warrior-bard's stomach. It had merely been by accident, so they both justified and went with it. How else would they explain it? That they had deeper feelings for each other? No, that wasn't a topic on hand between them right now.

Xena whipped out of her thoughts and heard somebody coming down the steps.

Gabrielle reappeared at the bottom of the steps and spotted her best friend by the door. She flashed a smile briefly. Only briefly because of their traveling company, whom Gabrielle was sick of being near. But, she went over to the warrior and folded her arms. "He's coming."

"Wonderful," mumbled the Warrior Princess.

"Horses saddled up?" asked the small warrior.

Xena nodded. "We're ready to go other than..." she trailed off.

The Amazon Queen nodded and stood silent. She reached down and adjusted her leather belt of her orange skirt.

The older woman grinned and taunted, "Still getting use to the leathers?"

"No," stated the younger woman. She arched an eyebrow at her friend. "I've been wearing them for most of the year, I'm use to them."

The Warrior Princess chuckled and lifted her eyes at hearing a clanking coming down the stairs. She sighed dramatically.

Gabrielle glanced over.

Joxer came bustling down the steps with his armor making a ruckus all the way down.

The warrior-bard groaned quietly. "Here we go again," she mumbled to her partner.

Xena chuckled inwardly. "We'll be okay."

"Yeah but see..." Gabrielle leaned towards Xena, "he has a crush on me... not you."

The Warrior Princess bit her lower lip. "True," she agreed. "Just kiss him and maybe he'll stop," she teased.

"I don't think so," growled Gabrielle yet she smiled warmly when Joxer was closer. "Glad you finally made it."

Joxer coughed and rested his hand on his sword hilt. "Sorry, takes awhile to get all this armor on." He peered up at Xena. "Right Xena?"

The warrior straightened up and replied, "No." She smirked, opened the door, and left.

The wanna-be warrior dropped his shoulder. "Well for us male warriors... it takes longer," he stated with bravado.

Gabrielle slammed her right hand on his chest plate. "Sure, Joxer." She grinned and left the tavern.

Joxer sighed and followed but made sure to close the door behind.

The group soon had their horses out of the stables and mounting them. They headed on the road in the blustery day, which made them pull their cloaks out. It was a calm, relaxing day in the early morning.

Chapter Two -**The Day**

Queen Karena

The only sounds that could be heard were the clip clop of the horses' hoofs and the clanking of Joxer's armor. *Gabrielle is very quiet this morning*, Xena pondered. Her mind kept wandering back to the comment that Gabrielle had made last night. *"I have problems with the male species."*

Xena looked at Gabrielle's profile. Gabrielle looked really great with short hair. Made her make so much more mature. Xena loved the way the sun highlighted her hair. To be honest she loved everything about Gabrielle.

Xena's musings returned to the conversation from last night. *I wonder why she said that. Does she prefer woman? What does she think about me ...* Xena shook her head. *Let's not go there! Easier said than done though. I need a diversion. I bet she is hungry. It has been a few candlemarks since breakfast.*

"Let's stop shortly and have something to eat," Xena informed the others.

"Good idea, Xena, I am feeling a bit hungry." Gabrielle turned to Xena. "And don't you say anything about my appetite." She grinned at her best friend.

Xena laughed at the running joke and nudged Argo into a gallop. Gabrielle urged her horse to match.

Joxer valiantly tried to keep up but he was not as accomplished on his horse. He decided to concentrate on just staying on and catch up with his two friends shortly.

Xena and Gabrielle rode for another half a candlemark until the sound of running water saw them slowing their horses back to a walk. Gabrielle was the first to notice that Joxer was not with them.

"We seemed to have lost Joxer."

"And you say that like it is a bad thing?" Xena grinned.

Gabrielle laughingly nudged her horse closer to Xena and gave her a quick backhand. "You are just sooo bad, Xena."

"Don't worry. He will catch up with us shortly. I don't think he is quite up to galloping on his horse yet." Xena smirked. "Must be all that armor."

"So what are you going to feed me, Warrior Princess?" Gabrielle cheekily inquired.

"Depends on what that stomach monster of yours has a fancy for," retorted Xena.

"Ooooh, my choice. Now lets see, fish, rabbit or bird. So many choices. Hmmm, I think I would fancy some fish. Unless it is too cold for you to go for a dip..." Gabrielle knew making the challenge would result in her getting her choice.

Xena was enjoying the gentle banter. She had missed it all morning. "I think I could brave the cold for you as long as you promise to warm me up afterwards," she purred. *Oops, did I just say that out loud?*

Gabrielle did a double take. *Did Xena just say what I think she said? Nah, she wouldn't have meant it like that.*

"Hi Ho friends, is this where we are stopping?" yelled Joxer as he rounded the corner.

Gabrielle breathed a sigh of relief. *I will file that away for looking at later.* "You go get the fish, Xena, and I will get a fire going. Joxer, why don't you get some more wood?" The others nodded and set about their respective tasks.

Gabrielle quickly got the fire ready and sorted out the herbs to use with the fish. She could hear Joxer crashing through the undergrowth on his hunt for wood. Her thoughts returned to where they had been all day. *Everything is so strange since we came back to life. There is a closeness about us that wasn't there before but there is also something else. It is like a need that I can't identify. I just wish I could talk about it with Xena but without knowing what it is, what would I say?* Gabrielle's forehead wrinkled in consternation. She was a bard that couldn't articulate what was happening to her.

A crash brought her attention back to the present. She looked over to see what it was. Joxer was sprawled on the ground surrounded by tree branches.

"I'm fine I'm fine. No problems," Joxer warbled. He had really wanted to do this task right to show Gabrielle that he was not incompetent. He knew that it was always going to be difficult to get her attention when she traveled with such an awesome person. However, he knew that he just had to. Her death at the hands of the Romans had made him realize just how much she did mean to him. And he needed to tell her that.

Gabrielle let out a frustrated sigh. *Joxer being here isn't helping either. Can't he see that we need some time on our own just to sort through what happened? Of course not, Joxer is never the brightest when it comes to things like that.*

"Is everything okay?" Xena asked softly. She placed the fish by Gabrielle and knelt down to face Gabrielle. She had heard the sigh from her friend and was starting to get

really worried. Something was definitely wrong and Gabrielle wasn't talking about it. This was something that was happening more of late and Xena did not know how to breakthrough. Talking was something that had always been Gabrielle's forte.

"Oh yeah, everything's fine," Gabrielle answered absently whilst picking up the fish. *C'mon Gabrielle, get on board here. You are worrying her.* "These fish look great, thank you." She smiled warmly at Xena.

Xena grinned back. "I'll go and see to the horses while you turn these fish into one of your normal masterpieces."

Gabrielle's smile got bigger. Xena's compliments always had a way of warming her even on the coldest of days. Their eyes had not moved from each other and there was a softness in both.

"Ahem, what do you want me to do, Gabby?" Joxer interjected. It had felt as if they had forgotten he was there. And the looks on both of their faces as they turned to him seem to reiterate that fact.

"Ummmm." Gabrielle was at a loss at what to say. For the briefest of moments everything had seemed so right and then the interruption. She wasn't even sure she could remember what he had asked. Her eyes reflected her confusion.

"You can help me with the horses," Xena briskly replied. She quickly moved away from Gabrielle to allow her time to gather her thoughts. Gabrielle smiled a warm thank you to Xena. Xena winked back and walked away.

The fish did not take long to cook and soon they were all sitting around the fire enjoying the food.

"So, where as we headed, Xena?" Gabrielle asked.

"Amphipolis." Xena looked at Gabrielle. "I thought we would catch up with mother, let her know that we are okay. You know how fast rumors spread about us. If you want we can go to Potidaea after that."

"Sounds like a plan. It will be good to see your mother again. And I do love her cooking." Gabrielle smiled at Xena. "And my parents do need to know I am all right."

"How many days ride is that, Xena?" Joxer wondered apprehensively. He hoped it wasn't far as his riding ability was not the greatest. He hurt in places that he had no intention of mentioning to his two friends.

Xena and Gabrielle laughed at the look on his face. Gabrielle remembered all too well the pain involved when you weren't used to riding a horse for long periods of time.

"Only a couple of days at a slow pace, Joxer," Xena warmly answered. "We are all quite tired so we won't push it."

Joxer's face showed his relief. "Well then, my fine friends, let's go. A soft bed and good food is calling us."

Xena quickly put out the fire and Gabrielle tidied up the campsite. They all remounted their horses and headed off again; all deep in their own thoughts.

Chapter Three -**Warrior Pillow?**

Red Hope

Xena slowed her horse down and glanced at her partner beside her.

Gabrielle came up along side the warrior and flashed a smile.

The warrior chuckled and gazed ahead. Far behind, she could hear Joxer catching up with his rattling armor. "We better wait up," she mentioned and gestured the slow warrior-wannabe far behind.

The warrior-bard sighed and nodded. "He has the worst timing anymore."

"I know," muttered the Warrior Princess. She reached over and patted her friend's knee. "How you holding up on your horse?"

The small woman chuckled and grinned. "I'm fine." She looked away and said quietly, "Alright... I'll admit I'm a bit saddle sore."

The warrior smirked but lost it. She shifted uncomfortable in her saddle.

Gabrielle caught this and teased, "So are you."

"Never," stated the older woman. She shot a smug look. "A warrior is never sore."

"Uh huh." The small woman grinned evilly. "You'd be reaping the benefits if you were sore."

Xena corked an eyebrow at hearing her friend's words. "What... benefits would that be?"

"Hmmm... something like a nice... massage," uttered the warrior-bard with a low tone.

The Warrior Princess's eyebrow arched even higher. She leaned towards her partner, preparing to say something very sensual but the moment was broken.

"Howdy, pal gals," greeted Joxer. He came right up to his friends and noticed the funny scene. He cleared his throat. "What's the hold up?"

Xena closed her eyes and held back her anger. She sat upright in her saddle again.

Gabrielle answered back before her partner could. "Just waiting for you." She paused then added, "We're going to go a little further then break for camp." She noted that Xena was quiet and still calming down. *Wow, I hope she doesn't plan to shove her chakram up Joxer's-*

"Well, let's go then," cut in Joxer's voice. "I am pooped here."

The warrior glanced back at the man. "Why don't you go ahead of Gabrielle and I."

"Sure." Joxer flashed a silly smile and tapped his horse in the sides. He went ahead of them and continued trekking down the road.

"You okay?" whispered Gabrielle.

"Yeah." Xena laughed deeply in hopes to let the moment go. "He's got rrrreal bad timing."

"Ummm can we..." The small warrior stopped, feeling a little odd in the request.

The older woman raised an eyebrow. "Go on."

Gabrielle laughed. "Let's walk."

The taller woman nodded and dismounted her horse.

The younger woman did the same and took her horse's reins. She walked beside her friend down the road. She felt uneasy since the first time she'd met Xena. It was if another door stood before her like when she had the option to leave Potidaea with the warrior.

Xena certainly picked up on the quiet, uneasy atmosphere. She wanted to reassure her friend but before she could, Gabrielle cut in.

"Hey... thank you for last night," mentioned the warrior-bard. "I know you didn't have to do that and..." she trailed off.

The warrior smiled softly and walked closer. She rubbed her friend's upper back along her shoulder blades. "Not a problem." She dropped her hand.

"I tell you, he didn't move at all." The Amazon Queen chuckled and grinned.

The Warrior Princess snickered. "Well... after you went to sleep I told him not to even breathe on me or he'd be on the floor in agony."

Gabrielle laughed then asked, "Did you really?"

"No," answered the warrior in an amused tone. "But I think it was established none the less."

The small woman chuckled deeply and nodded. "He's still scared of you even after..."

"Three and half years," finished the warrior.

Gabrielle huffed. "Its been that long?"

Xena nodded. "Makes you feel old huh?"

"Nah," brushed off the younger woman. She peered up with an evil grin. "Make you feel old?"

"Gods, yes." The warrior sighed dramatically. "I still recall those days you were just a kid tagging along."

The Amazon Queen glared and pushed her friend. "I was a usefully tag along."

"Yeah sure... if you say so," teased Xena.

"Ha, ha."

The warrior sighed and smiled warmly. "You were just what I needed... will always need."

"Somebody has to keep you inline," muttered the short warrior.

Xena laughed. "Rrrright."

Gabrielle went silent while having thought about last night and today. "You know... I slept real well last night."

"Oooh?"

"Yeah." The small woman looked up. "And it had nothing to do with the bed."

The Warrior Princess knew where this was leading too, she couldn't believe it either. "Then what was it?"

Gabrielle blushed, she tried hiding it but really could not. "Hey... have I ever mention how comfortable your body is?"

Xena took in a shaky breath and responded, "No," quietly.

"Well... you are."

The warrior grinned and asked, "Care to try it again tonight?"

Gabrielle grinned back. "If you're offering."

"Oooh yeah." The older woman laughed deeply. "My body as your big pillow."

The warrior-bard laughed hard and said, "Xena the Warrior Pillow."

"Oh no," groaned the warrior. "I shouldn't have said that."

"Don't worry." The small woman patted her friend's stomach. "I won't tell anybody."

Xena smirked. "Such reassurance you give."

"Don't I?"

The warrior laughed and kept walking.

Gabrielle smiled at her accomplishment because she was now able to sleep in her friend's arms. Oh, she was getting just a little closer in each step she took.

Chapter Four: **A Declaration is Made**

Queen Karena

Joxer eased his horse to a stop. He had been riding for ages and his friends still hadn't caught him. He pondered the last few days. *Something is different. I wonder if they even know I am here sometimes. The looks they give me are like I am intruding. It has never been like that before.*

He worried that he had left it too late to tell Gabby just how much he loved her. *My plan was to impress her with my new and improved skills. How can I do that when I am either going on ahead or trying to catch up? I will just have to make the time. I will tell her tonight.*

Joxer felt better knowing he had made this decision. His mind started fantasizing how it would be. He just knew that once Gabby realized how deep his feelings went that she would fall into his arm. The possibility that she might not love him back did not enter into his mind.

Xena and Gabrielle came around the bend just in time to see Joxer's horse walk off to the side of the road and start nibbling on the grass. The movement startled Joxer out of his fantasy. He madly grabbed at the saddle horn but his flailing arms missed the target. His eyes just registered the presence of Xena and Gabrielle as he tumbled off his horse.

Xena caught him just before he hit the ground. "Are you alright, Joxer?"

"Just great," Joxer muttered under his breath. "I get saved by the Warrior Princess. My day just continues to get better."

Xena raised her eyebrows. Her hearing had caught Joxer's words and she wondered where they had come from. She made a mental note to talk to him about it later.

"Is it Amarice?" Gabrielle's question interrupted Xena's musing.

"Nope. You only have four questions left, Gabrielle. Are you sure you don't want to give up?"

The return to twenty questions had been a surprise to Gabrielle especially because Xena had initiated it. The game had such pleasant memories for her. It was always a good indication of how close they were. It had been absent in the last few months leading up to the crucifixion.

"Of course I don't want to give up. I must be close if you are asking me that!" Gabrielle grinned up at Xena, her eyes sparkling. This brought a corresponding smile to Xena's face.

"Ummmm, Xena. You can ... ah ... let me go now. I am fine." Joxer wriggled in Xena's grip to emphasize his request.

Xena removed her hands from his arms and moved away. "There are easier ways to dismount," Xena quipped. Gabrielle giggled and looked away.

Joxer sighed. "Thanks Xena, I did appreciate your help."

"No problem. We would hate to see you hurt." Xena smiled warmly at him then looked around at the location. "This is a good place to stop for the evening. You did well, Joxer."

"Anytime warrior chums," Joxer preened. There was nothing he liked better than getting a compliment from Xena. Okay, getting a compliment from Gabby would probably be higher on his list, but only just. This helped reinforce his warrior-status.

He had no intention of admitting that he hadn't even noticed the lake beside the road.

In no time the campsite was set. It was still early in the day and still quite warm.

"Let's go for a swim in the lake and cool off. It will also help with those aches and pains." Xena looked hopefully at the other two as she stripped down to her shift.

"I am definitely a starter for that!" Gabrielle grinned up at Xena. "I am not embarrassed to admit that I am a bit saddle sore."

"Warriors don't get saddle sore, Gabrielle," Xena stated emphatically. Gabrielle burst out laughing. "Right, Xena, I believe you." She quickly swatted Xena on the backside and took off running towards the lake.

"You will pay for that, Gabrielle!" Xena raced after Gabrielle. "Are you coming, Joxer?" she yelled over her shoulder.

"No no, you two go. I have something I need to do." Joxer quietly sat down on one of logs they had dragged up for seating. He wanted to work the words out just right so Gabrielle would know exactly what he meant.

"Is he okay?" Gabrielle cast a worried glance in his direction.

"He will be fine, Gabrielle. And that is more than I can say for you." Xena proceeded to splash Gabrielle big time. "Smack me on the bottom will you."

Gabrielle immediately retaliated and the water fight was on. *This is so great. We haven't played together for ages.* Gabrielle could tell how relaxed Xena was becoming. There had definitely been a shift since their re-birth. Xena seemed softer and more open. *More likely to let me in.* That last thought caused the edges of her mouth to crease upwards.

Xena could tell that something had distracted Gabrielle. Xena took the opportunity to study her friend. *Friend definitely did not describe how I see Gabrielle. She is my life ... my love.* The crucifixion had made Xena realize that she could not run from this anymore. Their lives were too interlinked. She wouldn't make the first move but she would not push Gabrielle away either. They both deserved happiness.

Xena quickly dove under the water and swam behind Gabrielle. She could tell when Gabrielle came back to the present because she started looking around for Xena. "Looking for me," she purred into Gabrielle's ear. Gabrielle shuddered from the warm breath caressing her neck. Before she had time to react, Xena quickly dunked her under the water.

Gabrielle came up coughing and spluttering.

"Paybacks are a bitch, Gabrielle. When will you learn?" Xena laughed and headed for the shore.

You shouldn't turn your back on me, Xena. Gabrielle's eyes turned to slits and an evil grin spread across her face. She quietly followed Xena until they were both in the shallows. Then she made her move, tackling Xena around the legs. Xena was taken completely by surprise and tumbled forward. She landed face first into the mud. Gabrielle quickly released her legs and fell back in hysterics.

"You think that was funny, do you Gabrielle?" Xena's voice dripped with menace.

Gabrielle had tears running down her face. She couldn't have spoken if her life depended on it so she just nodded.

Xena could not hold her laughter anymore and joined in. "You got me good, Gabrielle. That will teach me to be smart. Paybacks are a bitch." She executed a perfect dive back into the water to clean off the mud. Walking back to the shore, she offered her hand to Gabrielle who was still sitting in the water and hauled her back up. Arm in arm they walked out of the water.

They laid down on the shoreline until the dying rays of the sun had completely dried them both.

"How about rabbit for dinner?" Xena clipped on her chakram and her sword as she waited for Gabrielle to answer.

"Sounds great to me. I will prepare the vegetables while your gone." Gabrielle headed towards the saddlebags and retrieved the food and herbs she needed.

Xena waved to them both and headed out to hunt. Joxer started pacing around the low burning fire. The clanging of his armor caught Gabrielle's attention. Raising her head from the vegetables she was peeling her eyes followed his journey.

"What is the matter, Joxer?" Gabrielle inquired. He had not said anything since their return from the lake and that was so unusual for Joxer.

Joxer knew this was probably the only chance he would get to talk to Gabrielle without Xena being around. Now that the time was here, his nervousness increased ten-fold. Joxer focused on Gabrielle and started walking towards her. Unfortunately, he forgot how close he was to the fire and stepped in it.

"Oww ... oww ... owww." Joxer danced around the campsite, holding his foot. Gabrielle reacted quickly and threw water over his foot.

"Are you alright, Joxer?" Gabrielle was definitely worried. Joxer was normally clumsy but this was something else.

"I really need to talk to you before Xena gets back." Joxer looked everywhere but at Gabrielle.

'Ooookay, sit down. Let's talk." Gabrielle pointed to the log next to hers.

Joxer took a big breath. "You know that I care for you very much."

"I care for you as well, Joxer." Gabrielle encouraged him to keep talking. She could tell by his behavior that whatever it was it was very important.

Joxer started fiddling with his armor. He had rehearsed it all afternoon but now that the moment was here, the words all left.

"I ... I ... I ..." Joxer swallowed and tried again. "Gabby, I uh uh I un, dammit, Gabby I love you."

Gabrielle was shocked. Of all the things that Joxer could have said that was not what

she had expected.

"Do you mean like a sister?" Gabrielle hopefully asked. "Because I love you like a brother." *Please let him say yes to this. Please. I really don't want this conversation if it is going where I think it is going.*

"No Gabby, I love you like a man loves a woman." Now that he had explained it more clearly Joxer just waited for Gabby to throw herself into his arms and swear her undying love for him. And waited.

Xena had been lucky. She had managed to catch two good-sized rabbits without having to go very far. She was just about to walk into camp when she heard Joxer's words. She stopped immediately and waited. This was not the time to make her presence known.

Gabrielle looked at Joxer with compassion. She knew that she would have to hurt this man but she wanted to give him some dignity.

"I can't love you that way, Joxer." Gabrielle had taken his hands in hers and was softly stroking his hands.

"Why can't you love me like that? I love you." Joxer's voice had taken on a pleading element to it. This was definitely not going how he wanted. "It's Xena, isn't it? She is the reason why you can't love me. I just know it." His voice had a bitterness to it.

Gabrielle decided it was better to be honest with him. It was the only way to salvage a friendship over this. "Yes, Joxer, you are right. I can't love you as my heart belongs to Xena. I love her with everything that I am. You are a wonderful man and you deserve much happiness but it won't be from me. I am sorry, Joxer, but there is nothing I can do, or want to do, to change who I love."

"Does she know?" He asked softly. Joxer could not look at Gabrielle. It hurt too much.

"No, she doesn't. So please don't tell her. I will tell her when it is time. Promise me you won't tell her." Gabrielle forced Joxer to look her in the eyes. He could see the need in her eyes and the compassion.

"I promise. Can we still be friends?" He really needed to know the answer to this.

"I told you I love you like a brother. You will always be more than a friend, you are family." Gabrielle eyes shone with love for him and she pulled him into a big hug.

Xena could not stop the smile from spreading across her face. *She loves me.* Now that she knew how Gabrielle felt about her, she could wait. Xena's smile took a devious turn to it. *I will wait for her to tell me but I might up the ante a bit in the flirting stakes.* Life suddenly was filled with infinite possibilities.

Gabrielle broke the hug and looked Joxer in the eye. "Are you going to be okay?"

"Yeah. It will hurt for a bit but I will be the best brother you have ever had."

Gabrielle laughed. "Yes, Joxer, you will be." Joxer headed to the other side of the fire and started to mend his burnt boot.

Gabrielle had just restarted the vegetables when Xena arrived in the camp with her offering. Joxer was pleased that she hadn't arrived any earlier. The rabbits were added to the vegetables and everyone relaxed whilst the stew was cooking. There was a quietness to the camp but no one seemed to notice. Each was too involved in their own thoughts, absorbing all that had been said and heard.

Chapter Five: **Bedtime**

Gabrielle was silent while she leaned against the tree, she stared into the fire.

Xena sheathed her sword after having sharpened it for half a candlemark. She glanced over at her partner and studied her profile. She decided it was time to play with her friend and see what kind of reactions she would get. With a glance, she noted Joxer already settled into bed with soft snores. She stood up quietly.

The warrior-bard hadn't heard her friend moving about so she jumped out of her skin when the warrior sat down beside her. "Gods, Xena..." she rasped lowly.

The older woman chuckled and settled down beside her partner. "Sorry." She smiled softly at the younger woman. "Tired?"

"Getting there," admitted Gabrielle. "You know, I kinda feel like I am still tired from... from what happened. You know?"

Xena nodded slowly, she knew what her friend spoke of- the crucifixion. "I'm just happy we made it back," she whispered sincerely.

"Me too." The Amazon Queen smiled at her best friend before her attention went back to the fire.

"Hmmm, you were an amazing archangel," mentioned the warrior.

Gabrielle peeked up at the other woman from the random comment. "You're serious?"

Xena grinned. "Oh yeah. Those wings were cute," she teased.

"Whatever." The warrior-bard patted her friend's thigh.

"Are you calling me a liar?" challenged the Warrior Princess.

Gabrielle giggled quietly. "No." She leaned against her friend. "It was just random that you said that."

"Oh, hmmm." Xena nodded and wrapped her arm around her partner's shoulders from behind. "Can't I compliment *my* warrior?" Her deep voice emphasized the 'my' in her words.

The younger warrior lifted her glowing spring eyes to her friend. "I don't think I have much choice in the matter," she whispered. She'd certainly picked up on the strong ownership her friend had given.

"No you don't," teased the tall woman. "Come here." She shifted and leaned against the tree now and pulled her friend's head down into her lap.

The blond warrior folded her hands together over her stomach and settled her head in her friend's lap. "Hmmm, this is nice," she murmured and closed her eyes.

Xena chuckled and begun slowly running her fingers through the short blond hair. "These are nice leathers you picked out," she casually mentioned.

"I didn't think you had noticed," teased the warrior-bard.

"How couldn't I?" whispered the Warrior Princess in a sensual voice.

Gabrielle opened her eyes instantly and looked up to try and confirm her suspicious of her friend's passionate voice. She studied blue eyes that were rather calm and unreadable. *Is she flirting with me or not? Hell if I can tell.* "What's that suppose to mean?" she whispered in hopes to get her partner to reveal more.

The dark warrior chuckled and grinned. "Exactly what it sounds like... you look good in them."

The warrior-bard knitted her eyebrows together. "You're a piece of work," she joked as a grin spread across her lips.

Xena laughed softly and stopped stroking her friend's hair. She placed her hand down on Gabrielle's chest. "Feel like getting some sleep?" she asked quietly.

"Not yet," whispered Gabrielle. "Are we traveling bright and early tomorrow?"

The older woman shrugged. "Doesn't matter either way." She moved her fingertips over her friend's chest lightly. "I take it you want to sleep in?" She revealed an evil grin.

"You know me too well." The Amazon Queen gave her own grin and reached for her friend's free hand. She grasped the larger hand and held onto it. "You know, I was scared I wouldn't get you back from Hell," she whispered.

Xena swallowed and nodded. "Me too," she admitted quietly. She smiled but a bit sadly. "But we made it." She traced her fingertips along her friend's collarbone. "Right?"

"Yeah," whispered Gabrielle and her eyes drifted shut. She shivered from the sensation of Xena's touch on her chest. "Xena?" she uttered and opened her eyes.

The warrior's fingertips stop traveling right along the edge of her friend's leather top. "Yes?" she whispered in a silky voice.

The Amazon Queen closed her eyes as the battle of control waded through her. "I can't..." she trailed off but began sitting up.

Xena was surprised by the action and very scared she'd done something wrong. She quickly made a decision and pushed her friend back down in her lap. "It's okay," she reassured quietly and smiled. "Relax," she whispered warmly. She watched as the remains of the fear disappeared from her friend's eyes. She removed her hand from Gabrielle's chest and went back to stroking her hair.

Gabrielle chewed her lower lip as she debated on what to say. "Why so physical?" she

whispered so quietly that she had to wonder if Xena even heard her.

The Warrior Princess sighed and brushed blond hair behind her friend's ear. "Because I almost lost you somewhere between Heaven and Hell."

"And you've almost lost me somewhere between a lava pit and a fire pit but you never were as physical," stated Gabrielle.

"You're rubbing off on me," joked the warrior.

The small warrior curved an eyebrow up. "Really?"

Xena grinned and replied, "Later huh?" She caressed her friend's cheek. "Get some sleep."

Gabrielle sighed because she knew she wasn't going to get any real answers... just yet. "On you?" she mocked.

The tall woman smirked. "If I do recall you were the one that wanted to sleep on me."

"Not if you don't want me to," muttered Gabrielle as she considered sitting up again.

"I do," stated the older warrior. "So don't worry." She received a chuckle from her tiny friend. "How about you let me get my armor off and you can take care of the bedroll huh?"

"Sounds good." Gabrielle sat up but found herself on her knees. She faced her friend, leaned in, and hugged her tightly.

Xena was caught off guard for a second but quickly hugged her partner back strongly. "You okay?" she whispered when the Queen pulled back.

"Yeah, just needed a hug." The warrior-bard winked and stood up. She proceeded to get their bedroll ready.

The Warrior Princess took her armor off and strolled over to the bedroll that Gabrielle already laid in. She settled her armor down on the ground then placed her weapons close by. "Sais?" she motioned to them in the smaller warrior's boots.

"Whoops." Gabrielle laughed sheepishly, propped her legs up, and extracted them. "Not use to having them quite yet." She rolled onto her side and placed them near the bedroll. When she rolled back into her position, Xena was laying down. "Hi," she greeted shyly.

"Hi," replied the warrior with grin. She raised an eyebrow in question. "How would you like your warrior pillow?" she joked.

"Hold on, lets do some trial and error," taunted the warrior-bard.

"Oh wonderful," grumbled the warrior before she soon found the small woman crawling on her. "Gabrielle," she growled, however she was grinning from ear to ear.

The Amazon Queen settled on top of her friend and sighed contently. "This is perfect." She folded her arms on top of her friend's chest. "Oh yeah." She snuggled her body down into the large, leather clad, warm body. "Perfect."

Xena laughed quietly and brought her arms around her companion. "Happy?"

"Very." Gabrielle lowered her head onto her arms and closed her eyes. "Why didn't we do this sooner?"

"Because my idea of waking up to a sore back everyday isn't fun," mocked the older woman.

"Old woman," taunted the warrior-bard.

The warrior blew at her panther black bangs and said, "Yeah, couple of gray hairs."

"Whatever," retorted the small woman. "Gray hairs my ass." She sighed dramatically. "Go to sleep," she ordered.

Xena laughed, reached over, and pulled the fur blanket over them. "Thought that was my line."

"Key word; was," teased Gabrielle. "Goodnight, Xena."

"Sleep well, Gabrielle."

"Hmmm, I will." And to emphasize her point, she snuggled her body more into her friend's.

The warrior smiled softly. "I know," she whispered, lifted her head and kissed her partner's head.

Gabrielle raised her head up after the gentle kiss. She had a confused look.

Xena just smiled.

The Amazon Queen smiled back and rested her head back down.

Xena closed her eyes with her smile never faltering. She quickly went to sleep just as Gabrielle did.

Chapter Six: **Towards Amphipolis**

Queen Karena

Gabrielle felt the warm rays of the sun slide gently across her face. She burrowed deeper into her bedroll to avoid the inevitable wakeup call. A deep chuckle entered into her consciousness. *My bedroll is chuckling*. Gabrielle shook her head to clear the cobwebs. Something definitely wasn't right. She slowly opened one eye and found herself staring into Xena's beautiful blue eyes. Memories of the previous night helped her realize that Xena was her bedroll. *What exactly did I snuggle into then?*

Gabrielle quickly looked down. Both her hands were gripping onto Xena's breast. A blush quickly spread up into her face. She could even feel the tips of her ears burning.

"Have a nice sleep, did we?" Xena laughingly asked.

Gabrielle could only nod.

Xena was thoroughly enjoying her friend's embarrassment. She had been laying

awake just enjoying the feeling of Gabrielle being so close when she had begun to sense Gabrielle's journey to wakefulness. Then suddenly her breasts had been grabbed and Gabrielle's head had burrowed into her cleavage. Xena could not get over the jolt this has given her. She had felt it right down to her toes. She knew she should have extradited herself from Gabrielle but she just couldn't bring herself to do it.

"Do you think you could let me go now? We do have to get Amphipolis sometime today." Xena purred her request into Gabrielle's ear. She felt Gabrielle's body shudder.

Gabrielle suddenly realized what Xena had said. She quickly removed her hands from Xena's breasts and swiftly sat up. She put her wayward hands onto her thighs and sheepishly looked down at Xena.

"Sorry about that." She got the rest of way up and offered her hand to Xena.

"Nothing to apologize for. I thought it was a lovely way to wake up. Feel free to do it again." With that, Xena grabbed Gabrielle's hand and hauled herself up. With a smile and a wink she grabbed the soap and headed down to the lake.

Gabrielle just stood there watching Xena disappear to the lake. *Feel free to do it again. What was she referring to when she said that?* Before she had time to think about it more deeply she heard Joxer start to stir behind her. Her mind went into automatic as she started the early morning chores. In no time she had a fire blazing and water on for some tea.

"Joxer, please keep an eye on the fire while I go and wash up." Gabrielle asked Joxer distractedly. Her mind was still mulling over the events of this morning.

"No problem, Gabby." Joxer watched Gabrielle head off to the lake. He was quite pleased to have this time to himself. He still found it difficult to believe that Gabrielle didn't love him back. In all his fantasies her not loving him had not really been an option. *Maybe she is just confused and using Xena as an excuse. Now that she knows I love her it will just be a matter of time before she realizes it is me that she loves. I will just show her how much I love.* Joxer started humming his theme song. He felt better now that he had worked out the problem. He would just make sure that he stayed close to Gabrielle.

Gabrielle arrived at the lake just as Xena was emerging from her bath. The sight took her breath away. She would never get over just how incredibly beautiful Xena was. Her body was such a contradiction of strength and softness. Her eyes slowly traversed Xena's naked body until they reached her face. Xena smiled at Gabrielle as another blush slowly crept up Gabrielle's face. She smiled back at Xena, embarrassed to have been caught staring.

"The water is reasonably warm. We will head off to Amphipolis as soon as you have washed up. We can eat travel rations as we go. This way we should be at Mom's inn for lunch." Xena made no mention of noticing Gabrielle staring at her body.

"Sounds good to me. It will be great to see Cyrene again." Gabrielle was pleased that Xena hadn't teased her. Her equilibrium was just a bit out of kilter and she needed to regroup. This morning's conversation had definitely thrown her. However, it also gave her hope that her declaration of love, when she finally made it, would not be

received badly.

"There is water on the fire so why don't you make us some tea while I quickly wash up. And go easy on the honey this time, Miss Sweet Tooth." Gabrielle couldn't help giving Xena a friendly jibe about her habit of putting in lots of honey in their tea.

"I would if you really meant that. But as you drink my tea twice as fast as yours I think your tooth is just as sweet as mine." Xena jumped out of the way just in time as an elbow jabbed at her ribs.

Gabrielle grinned sheepishly at Xena. She did have a relevant point. One that she had hoped Xena hadn't noticed. But of course Xena would notice. How could she have thought otherwise.

"Move it, my Warrior Bard, the day is a-wasting." As Xena headed back to the campsite she heard joyous laughter then the splashing of water. She stopped behind the bushes and watched as Gabrielle played in the water. *It is really good to see her so happy. She is truly beautiful. I hope she doesn't take too long to tell me how she feels. This could be torture; knowing but unable to do anything about it. But it has to be her move.*

Gabrielle felt such a great rush of joy. *Xena called me hers. That is the second time in as many days. We definitely need some time alone Xena when we are in Amphipolis. I think it is definitely time for us to have a talk.*

Gabrielle finished her bath and jogged back to the campsite. Xena had finished packing up all their gear and loaded it on the horses. She handed Gabrielle her cup of tea with a definite glint in her eye. Gabrielle took a sip and her eyes grew wide.

"Was there any room for the tea in this cup of honey, Xena?" Gabrielle couldn't believe how sweet the tea was. Xena was such a brat sometimes. *Should have known she would get me back for my comment.*

Xena burst out laughing. Joxer looked at them both quizzically. "What is going on with you two? You have both been giggling and carrying on all morning. Was there something in the tea I didn't know about?" Joxer felt quite put out. Neither of them had said hardly anything to him. He really felt like a third wheel.

Both women stared at Joxer in stunned silence. Had they really been acting that way? They both shyly smiled at each other. Yes, they had. Then they burst out laughing. The tears started streaming down their faces.

"Sorry, Joxer," Gabrielle gasped out. "It is just really good to be alive." She walked over to Joxer and gave him a hug. "Let's head off to Amphipolis and see what wonderful meal Cyrene can cook up for us. I am starved."

Xena warmly watched the way Gabrielle included him. Personally, she would have liked for him to ride one way and then the other. But if it wasn't for Joxer she would not have known how Gabrielle felt. She would give him some leeway, but when they got to Amphipolis things would definitely be different.

"Let's move it people. We have a hungry bard to feed." Xena jumped on Argo. Turning to Gabrielle, she threw her some trail rations. "Hopefully this will tide you

over until we get there."

Gabrielle eagerly grabbed the rations and started nibbling on them. She climbed onto Horse and followed after Xena.

"Wait up, warrior chums." Joxer clambered onto his horse and trotted up behind Gabrielle. The three friends headed off towards Amphipolis in single file, the road being too narrow to ride any other way.

They had been traveling for a few candlemarks when Xena suddenly stopped. Something seemed out of place. She tilted her head to the right and then to the left. It was the absence of birds that bothered her. She raised her hand to stop the others. In the distance she could hear the sound that she was listening for.

"How many, Xena?" Gabrielle softly asked.

"Six, maybe eight. They are on foot. And from the smell of them they are your typical thugs." Xena smiled at Gabrielle - the joy of a good fight shining in her eyes.

"Don't hog them all," Gabrielle shot back as she leaned down to remove the sais from her boots.

"You can have anything that you want," Xena saucily replied.

Gabrielle's eyebrows flew up to her bangs. "Is that a promise?"

"Oh most definitely," purred Xena.

"What about me, what do you want me to do?" Joxer thought this would be a great chance to show Gabrielle that he was the one for her, not Xena.

Turning to Joxer Xena shortly answered. "Stay out of it, Joxer. We can handle this. The last thing we need is you getting injured so closed to Amphipolis."

Before he could argue, eight men came around the corner.

"Well, well, well. What do we have here?" The men were leering at the two women.

"Can't they ever say anything original, Xena. These lines are getting seriously boring." Gabrielle grinned at her friend.

"Tell me about it. I am sure if these men ever had an original thought it would kill them." Xena smirked back at Gabrielle.

The men weren't sure what these women were saying but it was obvious they were being insulted. "Get them," yelled the leader of the pack.

"It would appear that you have to be the ugliest to be the leader of this pack," quipped Xena as she intercepted the first man. Xena couldn't help but smile. There was nothing much she liked more than a good fight.

Gabrielle grinned at her friend. *Okay, maybe there is something I definitely like better.* Xena smiled back then leapt into action.

It didn't take long before the leader realized they were outclassed by the two women. He circled his way around the women towards the weak link, Joxer. *This is my big*

chance. Joxer squared his shoulder and clambered off his horse. I will take down the leader and Gabrielle will realise that I am just as good as Xena. The leader only took a moment to disarm Joxer and swung his sword downwards in a killing stroke. Just as the blade was about to strike a pair of sais intercepted the blade and flung it to the side. A foot impacted with his chest and the next thing the leader knew, he was laying on the ground with a short-haired blond woman grinning down at him.

"That was not very nice. Joxer is our friend and I don't take kindly to people trying to hurt our friends," growled Gabrielle.

Xena leaned against Argo enjoying the view. *Gabrielle sure is sexy when she fights.* Gabrielle climbed off the leader and he took off running. Looking up, she noticed Xena staring at her with darkened eyes. There was something about her eyes that set her heart racing. *Oh, we **definitely** have to talk, Xena. That absolutely looks like desire in your eyes.* Turning to Joxer she held out her hand to help him up.

Joxer could not believe it. His great chance and Gabrielle, of all people, has to save him. *Who am I kidding? Of course she would love Xena. The two of them together are absolutely awesome.* Joxer sighed as he took Gabrielle's hand.

"Are you alright, Joxer? He didn't hurt you did he?" Gabrielle was quite concerned. Joxer seemed awfully quiet.

"No, I am fine. Let's just go."

Xena and Gabrielle exchanged looks then nodded. There was something up but they would deal with it later. They climbed on to their horses and headed off to Cyrene's where they knew a nice hot meal would be waiting for them.

Chapter Seven: **Arrival in Amphipolis**

Red Hope

Xena released her mother slowly and had a smile on her lips as she pulled back. "Its good to see you too, Mother."

Cyrene stepped back and studied her daughter. "You look rather well."

"I am," agreed the warrior, she was about to add more but heard light footfall behind her. She caught her mother's expression suddenly brightening up again.

"Gabrielle," greeted the innkeeper happily. She instantly engulfed her second 'adopted' daughter in a hug.

The warrior-bard laughed and squeezed Xena's mother tightly. "Hi, Cyrene."

The tavern owner quickly pulled back and stated, "Mom, please."

Gabrielle chuckled and corrected herself. "Hi, Mom. How are you doing?"

"Very well," replied Cyrene, and she stepped back again. "Oh you look well too, pumpkin."

The Amazon Queen smiled softly and nodded. "I am, Mom... both Xena and I."

"I've noticed." Cyrene smiled happily but suddenly got a confused look. "Who was the young man that rode in with you?"

"Oh." Gabrielle shook her head and grinned. "That is Joxer."

"That's right, I recall now."

Soon as his name was spoken, he entered in with rattling armor. "Hi... Cyrene?"

Cyrene moved to the young man and said, "Its good to see you again, Joxer."

Before the warrior wannabe could say anything, he was pulled into a hug and it seemed to make him feel a little better.

Gabrielle peered up at her partner and raised an eyebrow.

Xena caught the look so decided to rub her friend's back in reassurance to talk to him later.

"This is wonderful," announced Cyrene and smiled at the group. "How long is everybody staying?"

"We're no sure, mother," stated Xena, "For awhile though."

The innkeeper nodded her approval and put her hands on her hips. "Well then, best that everybody gets settled in. Dinner will be in a candlemark or so."

"Sounds good to me," agreed the Amazon Queen.

"When food is involved anything sounds good to you," chided the warrior.

Gabrielle suddenly rammed her elbow into her friend's stomach.

Xena's eyes bugged out, and she coughed hard.

The warrior-bard smirked up at her partner. "Serves-"

"You right," finished Cyrene in a saucy voice.

The Warrior Princess rubbed her side and asked, "For what?" A small grin touching the corner of her lips.

"Never make jokes about one's appetite," answered Cyrene, "Dangerous thing to joke about."

"I noticed." The warrior huffed and added, "Especially with Gabrielle." Her smirk reappeared.

"Xena," growled the warrior-bard quickly brought up her elbow again.

Xena moved faster, caught her friend's arm, and grabbed her opposite in a quick motion. Without question, she picked up her partner into her arms and cradling her.

"Xena, put me down this is no fair," growled the small woman.

The Warrior Princess grinned at her mother. "And she gets grumpy if she doesn't get

enough sleep."

Cyrene laughed and shook her head.

"Xena..." Gabrielle trailed off after catching sight of passion in Xena's eyes.

"Yes?" uttered the warrior.

"Uh..." The Amazon Queen squirmed a little. "Nap time."

"Thought so," teased the tall woman. She glanced at her mother. "We'll be back for dinner."

The innkeeper laugh gently and watched the pair go upstairs.

Joxer folded his arms and huffed before silently walking outside.

Xena's mother watched him briefly and felt an ache in her heart for the young man. "They better talk to him." She sighed and headed into the kitchen.

Gabrielle struggled to get out of her friend's arms some. "Xena, come on I can walk."

The warrior laughed and kicked her bedroom door open. "Do you really want to get out of my arms?" she asked quietly.

The warrior-bard looked up into gentle blue eyes about to answer but thought different. "No," she whispered honestly.

"Uh huh." Xena grinned then winked. She neared the bed's side and bent over it. She suddenly dropped Gabrielle.

"Aaah!" The Amazon Queen hit the bed and rolled into the middle. "Thanks," she muttered.

The warrior smirked before walking to the other side. She sat down and started working her armor off.

"Here." Gabrielle grabbed her friend's hand and lowered them to her lap. "I got it."

"Thanks," uttered Xena and a content sigh escaped her.

The warrior-bard sat behind the warrior and started unsnapping the clasps. "What we doing about Joxer?"

The Warrior Princess shook her head and stared down at her hands. "We need to talk to him." She stretched out her fingers, watching them.

"And about what exactly?" The small woman huffed. "That you and I are suddenly in flirting mode?" Her hands stopped working the clasps, and she closed her eyes while mumbling, "Shit."

A small grin curled up in Xena's expression. "And when aren't we flirting?" she whispered sensually.

"Xena," warned Gabrielle as she went back to unhooking the last clasp. "We're... flirting a lot more now... more openly."

"Hmmm," agreed the warrior. She felt the last clasps go undone so she took off her armor. "And you're complaining?" she asked as she turned to her partner.

"Um." Gabrielle sat back, legs propped up, and eyes locked with her friend's. "No," she admitted.

Xena's lips slipped into a warm smile. "Good," she whispered and her eyes lowered into a gentle softness.

The warrior-bard just studied her friend as the silence increased. Without much thought just instinct, she moved to sit on her legs and touched Xena's cheek.

The warrior closed her eyes and leaned into the warm touch.

Gabrielle leaned in gradually and covered her lips over Xena's.

They kissed very slowly at first and with just lips against lips.

The Warrior Princess moved one hand to rest against her friend's side. She released a quiet moan of pleasure.

That's when the short warrior made the kiss stronger.

Xena moaned only again but this time she held both her friend's sides and gave a tug.

Gabrielle moaned at that, she followed the signal and found herself sitting in the warrior's lap. She pulled back from the kiss and just stared at Xena.

The older woman smiled and brushed back short blond hair. She then leaned into Gabrielle.

The warrior-bard opened her mouth when Xena's mouth sealed over hers. She quickly felt Xena's tongue enter into her mouth. At the end of the long, hot kiss, she smiled warmly.

The warrior smiled back but more shyly at what happened.

"Oh gods..." Gabrielle's eyes widened, and she practically fell out of her partner's lap but large hands saved her.

"What, what?" asked the warrior, worry filling her.

The Amazon Queen scrambled off her friend and fell down on the bed near the foot of the bed. She was breathing heavy, head dropped forward, and her hand over her chest. "Oh gods..."

Xena shook her head, her heart racing in fear. "Gabrielle, I'm sorry."

"No... no." The warrior-bard held up her hand then just one finger. "Just give me a second." She dropped her hand to her lap and took large breathes followed with gradually releases. "Oh gods." She covered her forehead with her left hand, eyes closing.

Xena brushed back her bangs and whispered, "Gabrielle, I didn't mean anything. I thought..."

Gabrielle nodded and looked up. "No, its okay, Xena." She saw her friend wasn't reassured so she held out her hand and revealed a warm smile.

Xena carefully took the much smaller hand and clung to it. She nodded and asked, "Are you okay?"

The Amazon Queen nodded before lacing her hand through her friend's. "Yeah... that just took me by surprise." She laughed nervously. "Sorry about that."

The warrior grinned at the smaller woman. "Don't be... you kiss real good."

The younger warrior flushed and looked away. "Um thanks."

Xena chuckled and squeezed the small, warm hand. "What's wrong?" she asked in worry.

Gabrielle brought back her attention to her friend. "Nothing wrong... just was fast, ya know?"

The warrior nodded and licked her lips. "I've been instigating things all day," she admitted quietly. "I... I heard what you said to Joxer last night."

"Oh gods... you did?"

The tall woman nodded and rubbed her thumb over Gabrielle's. "I did... thought I'd help you along."

The small warrior-bard laughed and replied, "You did do that." Her head bobbed while she thought. "Um... so exactly what's going on?" She lifted her eyes and locked them on Xena.

The Warrior Princess studied their hands before answering. "Serious talk huh?" She grinned at her partner.

Gabrielle chuckled. "Yes, help me out here, Xena."

Xena sighed and whispered, "I'm... I'm in love with you, Gabrielle." She raised her head and locked her eyes with Gabrielle's. "I have been... for awhile now."

Gabrielle held her mouth closed but just stared at her friend in surprise. She shook her head and asked, "Xena, are you saying...?"

"Yeah," replied the warrior with a tiny grin.

"Oooh gods..." The warrior-bard laughed and felt relief wash over her. "I... I... well..."

"Not really sure," cut in the warrior. Xena pressed her lips together in thought. "Just think about it."

"It?" Gabrielle shook her head and raised an eyebrow. "It as in... having a love relationship with you?"

The Warrior Princess nodded. "You know how I feel... its up to you, Gabrielle."

The Amazon Queen tilted her head and grinned. "The Warrior Princess's girlfriend huh?"

Xena laughed a little herself. "Guess so." She paused then stated, "Just think about it huh?" She gave a sad smile. "I know you need time."

The gentle smile reappeared on the warrior-bard's lips. "I do... and thank you, Xena."

The warrior laughed softly and nodded. "You're welcome."

Gabrielle shook her head, her smile never faltering. She quickly moved and kissed her friend on the cheek. "I do love you, Xena."

"I know," whispered the warrior as she squeezed the small hand. "Take your time, I've waited this long."

The warrior-bard nodded. "Not too much longer though." She squeezed her friend's hand back.

Xena smiled and said, "Let's get some sleep."

"Agreed."

The pair quickly removed their weapons, boots, and crawled into bed.

"Hey?"

Xena rolled onto her back and turned her head to Gabrielle. "Yeah?"

The warrior-bard propped herself up on her elbow and a smug look crossed her expression. "Where's my warrior-pillow?"

The warrior laughed and pulled her friend on top of her. "Better?"

Gabrielle twined her legs with Xena's and replied, "Much." She rested her head on Xena's shoulder and closed her eyes. "We still didn't figure out what to do about Joxer?"

"Later," whispered the older woman. "Time for sleep right now."

"Rrrright," teased the Amazon Queen.

"Go to sleep," ordered the Warrior Princess.

Gabrielle laughed but fell silent and let herself drift off while being kept safe in her friend's arms.

Chapter Eight: **Confessions all round**

Queen Karena

Gabrielle did not remain asleep long. Her mind was in turmoil over what Xena had said to her. This was moving a lot faster than she expected. *Is it moving faster than I want?* She knew that Xena would wait for her but did she want to. She could still feel

Xena's lips on her, her tongue inside her mouth, the fire burning through her body as a result. That was what had scared her. She had never experienced anything close to that. Her one night for Perdicus was seriously lacking if this was any indication.

She looked down at her best friend, her confidant. *Am I ready for the next step?* She thought back over the last few days. It had felt good when they were flirting. More importantly, it had felt right. As did laying here in Xena's arms. *So what's the problem? I am scared it will change things and I will end up losing her completely. That is always a possibility even if we don't take this final step. Then again, our commitment to each other is such that everyone thinks we have anyway. Except Joxer. Okay, I don't think I will go there just yet. Xena and I will sort that little problem out later.*

"What are you thinking about?" Xena had woken up to feel Gabrielle's eyes on her. She could tell Gabrielle was deep in thought. Part of her wasn't sure whether she should interrupt or not, but the majority of her wanted to be there for Gabrielle.

"Us ... Joxer ..." Gabrielle didn't mean to be so vague and gave an apologetic smile down at Xena. "Well, not much about Joxer actually. Decided you and I could work that issue out later."

"Mmmm, I definitely do think we need to. He is not coping with ... us at all." Xena caught herself at the last moment. She didn't want to pressure Gabrielle or make assumptions about any changes in their relationship.

Gabrielle had picked up the slip and realized how hard this must be on Xena. She had been brave enough to say all that was in her heart. She gently caressed the side of Xena's face. *Let's be honest here, you coward. You want this as much as Xena does. You're just scared because you have no idea what to do. Just be open with her. No more secrets.* With that insight, Gabrielle knew what she had to do.

"Yeah, he always thought that once he confessed his love that I would become his. Unfortunately, he couldn't see what half of the known world already has. I am yours. I always have been and I always will be." Gabrielle watched Xena as the words sunk into. Her eyes lit up like a child at solstice and her smile could have lit up the whole room. "I love you, Xena, with all that I am." She sealed her words with a very thorough kiss that left both of them panting.

"Are you sure about this, Gabrielle?" Xena had no intention of doing anything that Gabrielle didn't want. She was happy for everything to move at Gabrielle's pace.

"I am sure that I love you, yes. I am sure that I am in love with you, yes. As to what we do about it. In that, I don't have a clue. I would like to take that part of our relationship slowly, if that is okay with you. But I do want there to be an 'us'. I want to be able to flirt with you, to snuggle into you, to kiss you, without hesitation or fear. And I know my body definitely wants to do all those things and more. I just don't want to rush into it. I want to savor the change." Gabrielle punctuated every statement with a light kiss to different parts of Xena's face. After the last comment, she light kissed her lips.

Xena lightly kissed Gabrielle back then pulled her tighter against her body in a bone-crushing hug. "I love you, my warrior-bard. And I want all those things too. You set the pace, my love, and I will happily follow." She released Gabrielle from her hug and

let out a very contented sigh. "Do you want to talk about Joxer now?"

"Nope, I am going to just relax into my very comfortable pillow and doze to the sound of your heart beating." Snuggling in deeper, she closed her eyes. It did not take long for Gabrielle's breathing to even out.

Xena just held onto Gabrielle as she slept. She had no desire to move at all. She could not imagine a time when she was happier. Every now and then she kissed the head of her precious cargo. When the sun slowly started to sink into the horizon Xena knew it was time to rouse her partner.

"Gabrielle ... Gabrielle, time to wake up." She gently shook Gabrielle in the hopes of waking her up. Instead, Gabrielle just tightened her arms around Xena and continued sleeping.

Xena considered tickling her awake then changed her mind. She didn't want to startle her. Well, not today anyway. So instead she used her hands to massage her into wakefulness. The patterns she created over Gabrielle's back were feather-light but broad. She also placed butterfly kisses on the side of Gabrielle's face that was exposed. Xena noticed the change in Gabrielle's breathing at the same time that Gabrielle started moving into the caresses. The unexpected result was Gabrielle slowly gliding over Xena's body as she arched her back. Xena breathing quickened and her body came to full alert. This was not what she had in mind when she had decided on this particular technique. The soft moans coming from Gabrielle indicated that it was obviously having a similar effect on her. *Slow. Slow. She wanted slow.* Xena knew that desperate measures were necessary to maintain any semblance of control. Unfortunately her mind was coming up completely blank as to what these measures could possibly be. *Kiss her.* She wasn't sure where that thought came from but who was she to argue. She quickly leaned down and captured Gabrielle's lips. Gentle at first, the kiss suddenly deepened when Gabrielle returned it with fervor.

Gabrielle could not believe the sensations that were racing through her body. She had actually woken up when Xena had started playing with her back but it was so nice she didn't want it to end. However, her body had wanted further contact and Gabrielle had seemed powerless to stop it. She knew she had been the one who wanted it to go slowly but she didn't want the feelings to end. Then Xena had kissed her. Although enjoying the gentleness at first, Gabrielle quickly wanted more. She wanted to share with Xena all the feelings that were currently racing through her body. Her hands entangled themselves into Xena's hair as she deepened the kiss. The sound of Xena's moaning heightened the pleasure she was feeling.

Xena suddenly broke the kiss and looked into eyes filled with such passion that it stopped her breath. It took all her willpower not to reclaim those lips. But Gabrielle had said, slow and she was going to ensure that happened, no matter how cold baths would be required. She let her eyes show all the love she was feeling for Gabrielle and watched as Gabrielle's eyes gradually followed suit.

"What a wonderful way to be woken up. And thanks for pulling us back there. I don't know if I could have stopped by myself." Gabrielle really did appreciate what Xena had done even though her body was calling her all the names under the sun.

"I would just like you to know that my body is not very happy with my mind at the moment. But a quick bath should sort that problem out." Though Xena sounded

exasperated, the loving smile was enough for Gabrielle to know that there was no recrimination here.

"I would suggest joining you but that may very well defeat the purpose." Even though Gabrielle was teasing she knew that if they were to recommence again, there would be no stopping next time for either of them.

Xena chuckled at Gabrielle's comment. "I think individual bathing would be a good idea at the moment. I will go first to give you time to wake up completely and then we will go down and grab some dinner." With that, Xena gently lifted Gabrielle off her body and laid her down on the bed beside. She lent over and chastely kissed Gabrielle on the lips before vaulting off the bed. "See you shortly."

Gabrielle watched as Xena grabbed a towel and headed off to the bathing room. *That really was a wonderful way to wake up.* Climbing off the bed, she grabbed the saddlebags and sorted out some clean clothes. The fears she had earlier seemed really inconsequential now. All she had really needed was some time to make the transition in her head from friends to lovers. *Somehow I don't think this is going to go anywhere near as slow as Xena thinks I want. Of course, now I am going to have to deal with her iron control but that could be fun as well.* Gabrielle laughed softly to herself. It was just so good to finally be able to acknowledge their feelings and build from there. On that happy note she grabbed her own towel and headed off after Xena. *Just because we can't bathe together, doesn't mean I can't watch. Bit of tension never hurt anyone.*

Xena had just settled into the tub when the door burst open and in walked Gabrielle, wearing nothing but a towel.

"Gabrielle ... what are you doing in here?" growled Xena. She was only just starting to get her body to calm down and the last thing she needed was Gabrielle in here heating it all up again.

"Relax, I am not going to jump in there with you, no matter how much I would love to." Gabrielle saucily winked at Xena as she walked past. "I just figured we needed to sort out this stuff with Joxer before we go downstairs. I will fill up the other tub then we can discuss our plans to deal with it."

Xena was secretly pleased to have Gabrielle's company. She missed her as soon as she had walked out the door. It had taken all her reserves to stop herself from going back and grabbing Gabrielle. It was also quite nice to be able to openly watch Gabrielle as she wandered around. She had spent so many years looking at her through half-closed eyes it had almost been automatic for her to drop her eyes as she watched. Gabrielle might be seriously sexy in her new leathers, but she sure looked absolutely fantastic wrapped in just a towel. Xena moaned and dipped herself deeper into the tub. *This is sheer torture. How I love that woman.*

Gabrielle looked over her shoulder in time to see Xena disappear under the water. She quietly chuckled to herself. She waited until Xena was starting to surface then she dropped her towel. Xena's eye locked onto her body and moaned again. Gabrielle could not control her giggling any longer and laughed out loud. She quickly jumped into her tub.

"You are truly evil, Gabrielle, you know that, don't you," Xena remarked good

humouredly. Though it was torture, she was thoroughly enjoying every minute of it. Her previous sexual encounters were always about control but this was so different. This had love involved.

"Yep, I am, and you love it. Now, what are we going to do about Joxer? He is not coping with us at all." Gabrielle started to wash herself as she contemplated the situation. She waited for Xena to answer but there was only silence from her corner. Looking up, she noticed that Xena's eyes were transfixed on the washing cloth. Every time her hand moved, so did Xena's eyes. As quick as a flash, she flicked the cloth in Xena's direction and scored a direct hit.

"Sorry," Xena sheepishly stated.

"Don't be, warrior mine. It is nice to know that you find me desirable. Never feel embarrassed about looking at me. I like it, a lot. Actually, I love it. It makes me feel very special." Gabrielle couldn't stop the blush that traveled up her body.

"You are very special to me, Gabrielle. You are my reason for being. Everything about you makes me want you. You have my heart, my body, my mind, my life in your hands and I couldn't think of a safer place for them to be." The intensity of Xena's feelings was evident in her eyes.

Gabrielle could no more stay in her own tub then she could stop the moon from rising. Within seconds she was holding the person she held most dear to her chest. "You are just as much a part of me, Xena. The love I feel for you just continues to grow and I can never imagine a time when that will not be the case." She kissed Xena with all the love she possessed. It wasn't about desire, it wasn't about lust, it was completely to do with love. After the kiss came to a finish, Gabrielle rested herself back into Xena's body and pulled her arms around her. "Now, let's talk about Joxer."

"Well, that subject is definitely a passion killer." Xena's face was completely devoid of emotion but she could not hold it. A smirk slowly crept across her face before she broke into a deep laughter. It was only moments before Gabrielle joined in although she couldn't resist a quick slap to Xena's thigh for even saying such a thing.

Xena grew serious as she considered what they were going to do about their friend. Joxer had been a part of their life for a number of years and she had a real soft spot for him. He may not be the most coordinated person but his heart was definitely in the right place. "Either one or both of us needs to talk to him. It appears that your not loving him back has really rocked his confidence in himself. We need him to understand how important he still is to us and the he will always have a place with us."

"Hmmm, your right, Xena. And I think it should be both of us. He needs to see us together and understand the depth of our feelings for each other and still know that he is a part of our family. Mom hugging him helped, you could see it in his face. He doesn't know where he belongs anymore." Gabrielle mused some more the problem. "It will have to be tonight. We don't want him wandering off to hide his hurt."

"We should finish washing up and head on downstairs, then. We will play it by ear as to when we tell him but I do agree it has to be tonight. And you can go back to your own tub. I can guarantee it would be very difficult to wash myself with you leaning all over me!" Xena stood up to lift Gabrielle out of the tub. She smacked her gently on

the backside when she put her down. "Now scat, you troublemaker."

Laughing happily to herself, Gabrielle complied with the request without argument. Just leaning into Xena as they had talked had been difficult enough on her body. It would have been almost impossible to restrain herself if they had been washing themselves or each other in such close proximity. It was hard enough being in the same room.

With unspoken agreement they both finished washing up then exited the bathroom. As they dressed in the bedroom, they talked some more about Joxer. It was decided that Gabrielle would begin the conversation and Xena would be there as backup. Conversation slowly moved towards Xena's mom and whether they needed to say anything to her as well. Xena was quite adamant that her mother had already guessed but Gabrielle persuaded her that it would still be nice to actually tell her. After a lot of grumbling, Xena acknowledged that she would also have that conversation tonight.

They arrived downstairs in time for Gabrielle to help Cyrene with the final touches over dinner and for Xena to stack up the wood in the kitchen. Joxer was nowhere to be seen but everyone expected him to turn up at dinner time.

Once the final preparations had been completed the three women sat down for a quiet drink before eating. Gabrielle nudged Xena under the table with her foot and smirked at the resulting glare from the Warrior Princess. With a raise of her eyebrows in Cyrene's direction Gabrielle imparted to Xena that now was the time. With a resigned sigh, Xena quietly acquiesced.

"Mother, there is something I, well we, need to discuss with you. It's about us. As in Gabrielle and me." No matter what Gabrielle and her had discussed, part of her was very worried that her mother would not cope with this news. She knew her mom loved Gabrielle but would that be enough.

Cyrene could sense Xena's hesitation. She had a pretty good idea what Xena was going to say. She had always believed that Xena and Gabrielle loved each other but that they did not seem aware of it. Today, however, their interaction led her to believe that the declarations had finally been made. Looking closely into Xena's eyes she could see the fear there. That was enough for her to decide that the best thing was to relieve the pressure immediately.

"Does this mean that you two have finally got around to telling each how you feel and there will be a joining ceremony in the very near future?" The look on both girls' faces was priceless.

Xena could not believe it. *Well that means she is not going to reject us.* "Well, yes, that we are together was what I was going to tell you. As to the joining ceremony, it may be a bit premature. We only made the declaration today."

"Today! For gods sake, you two are terribly slow aren't you? Okay, I will let you off the joining ceremony for now, but don't think I will forget. I will get you married one way or another, Xena. It is every mother's dream." With that comment, Cyrene finished her drink and headed back to kitchen to dish up dinner. "And find that young man you brought with you. He was looking very depressed this afternoon. He kept looking up the stairs and sighing. Dinner will be ready in a quarter of a candlemark and I expect all three of you seated when I bring it out." The door closed behind her

leaving two stunned warriors behind.

"Told you she guessed." Xena couldn't help the smug tone that snuck into her comment. Even though the resultant smack to the bare thigh really hurt, she did not make a noise and kept the smirk on her face. "Your turn now. Let's go find Joxer." Xena strutted her way to the front door.

"You are such a brat sometimes." Gabrielle ran after her and jumped on her back. The moment of surprise was enough to cause Xena to stumble forward but not enough for her to fall. She twisted around and proceeded to dump her unexpected addition to the ground in a very unladylike manner. The door opened and Joxer stood there in surprise. The last thing he expected to see was a laughing Xena helping up a scowling Gabrielle from the floor.

"Are you all right, Gabby, you are not hurt are you?" Joxer was really worried and could not believe that Xena was laughing at poor Gabrielle.

"Only my pride, Joxer, only my pride. That will teach me to jump into a brick wall and expect it to move."

Joxer looked around and couldn't see a brick wall anywhere. Maybe she was more hurt than she realized. "Ummm, Gabby, there are no brick walls here." He tried to say it as gently as possible. The last thing he wanted to do was hurt her anymore.

"She's standing right in front of you, Joxer, a 6-ft brick wall." Gabrielle mock-glared at Xena who continued to laugh. This was just getting better and better.

Joxer was definitely confused now. "Ummm, Gabby, umm ... could you ... um ... explain what you mean." He really did want to know. Something had happened to Gabby but he couldn't quite work out what it was.

"Okay, Joxer." Gabrielle really didn't want to explain this as it would only give Xena more to laugh about but it looked like this could not be avoided. "I jumped on Xena's back with the intention of knocking her to ground. I would not have got hurt because I would have landed on top of her. Unfortunately, I forgot for a moment who I was jumping on. Needless to say her majesty over there managed to maintain her balance and proceeded to dump me on my royal butt instead. Have you got it now?" Xena's laughter was enough to get Gabrielle to smile.

Joxer, unfortunately, was still looking bewildered. "Why would you want to jump on Xena's back?"

Gabrielle started shaking her head in dismay. "We were just playing around, Joxer. Don't worry about it." The last thing she could do was to explain the situation leading up to her suicidal jump. "We were just coming looking for you. Dinner is about to be served and I am starved."

"You were coming to look for me." Joxer could not believe it. He was sure that they would have nothing to do with him now.

"Of course, Joxer, can't have a family dinner without all the family there, now can we." Xena put her arm around the wanna-be warrior and directed him to the table. There was a slight straightening of the shoulders as Joxer's depression started to lift. There was a way to go, but the start had been made. As they walked past Gabrielle she

gave Xena's back a quick rub to let her know how proud she was of the way Xena handled it so matter of factly.

The smell of dinner stopped all further conversation as the three realized just how hungry they all were. It had been a while since they had eaten. Cyrene had put out plenty of food but that didn't stop Gabrielle from stealing food off Xena's plate. Laughter surrounded the meal as the antics of the pair continued through to dessert. Xena managed to get to the nutbread before Gabrielle and decided not to share.

Gabrielle lunged at Xena but she just kept it out of her reach courtesy of her long arms. Realizing that was not going to work she put on her most pleading face but to no avail. To really push the point home, Xena actually broke a piece off and waved it under her nose before eating it. The self-satisfied look on Xena's face was the final straw. Drumming her fingers on the table, Gabrielle contemplated the best way to attack this problem. The frontal attack had failed, as had her other attempts to get that nutbread. *What to do. What to do.* An evil smirk slid across her face. She lunged at Xena knowing very well that she would raise the nutbread above her head. Instead of going for the nutbread, she leapt into Xena's lap and kissed her. It was only a mere moment before Xena's arms enclosed Gabrielle and she started kissing her back. When Xena was completely involved in the kiss, Gabrielle quickly spun around and grabbed the nutbread.

"Ha ha ha, got it." Gabrielle happily broke off a piece and shoved it into her mouth before Xena could retaliate. Xena, for her part, sat there completely stunned. Gabrielle couldn't help but smirk at Xena. "What's the matter, Xena? Not use to loosing." To emphasize the point, she ate another piece of the nutbread.

Cyrene could not control her laughter anymore. "That is definitely one way of getting what you want, Gabrielle, but I wouldn't try it with anyone else. I don't know how my daughter would cope."

"No worries there, mom, that is definitely a maneuver I would only use on Xena." She smiled at Cyrene.

Xena came out of her stupor and shook her head. "You will pay for that, bard." With that, she quickly snatched the nutbread back and stuffed the remainder into her mouth. The frustrated look Gabrielle gave her was priceless and she almost spat the nutbread straight back out as the laughter bubbled up inside her. It took all of her concentration but she finally managed to swallow it.

"Okay, we are even. I can't believe you got that all in your mouth." Gabrielle admitted defeat with a sigh and turned to the others as the table.

Xena nudged her shoulder and whispered into her ear. "Oh, I don't think so, my bard. I will think of a suitable punishment for that little display. Ever heard the saying about paybacks." Xena slyly nipped her ear before moving back in her seat. She didn't have time to get comfortable before she jumped in shock as a small hand suddenly slid up her inner thigh.

"Are you all right, dear." Cyrene had seen her jump but could not think of any reason for it to occur.

"Uhhh ... yeah ... I am fine. Just some crumbs on my chair that needed moving."

"Do you want me to check if there are any more?" Gabrielle asked innocently. She almost lost it at the glare she received for her comment.

"No, thanks, its fine." Xena grabbed the wandering hand and held it in place on her thigh. She curled her fingers around Gabrielle's hand and gave it a quick squeeze to let her know she wasn't upset with her.

Joxer had grown very quiet as the evening had progressed. It was nice to be included as part of the family but his thoughts were still on what couldn't be. He had almost come to the decision that the love they had for each other was platonic when Gabrielle had kissed Xena. There was no confusing that kiss with platonic friendship.

Obviously Gabrielle had told Xena of her love and it was reciprocated. *Of course it would be. Who couldn't love Gabby? What am I going to do now? I can't stay here. I know they called me family but they don't really mean it. I will definitely be seen as the third wheel whenever we travel. Where am I going to go, what am I going to do? I really enjoy hanging out with them.*

"Joxer." Gabrielle saw the expressions on his face and knew she had to talk with him now. She hadn't given him any thought when she had kissed Xena and part of her regretted that. Not the kiss. She would never regret kissing Xena. She just should have told him before she had done it. Though that would be a good place to start. "Joxer." Still she got no reply. "JOXER."

"Oh sorry, Gabrielle, I was just thinking." Joxer pulled himself away from his thoughts to listen to Gabrielle.

"Firstly, I want to apologize for my behavior before. I had planned on telling you tonight that Xena and I have admitted our love for each other and are together. I didn't mean for you to find out by public display. I got so carried away with retrieving the nutbread that I didn't consider anyone else." Gabrielle appreciated the gesture as Xena rubbed her hand in support.

"That's okay, Gabrielle. After our discussion I assumed it would only be a matter of time before you told her." Joxer didn't want Gabrielle to know how much that had hurt.

Gabrielle was really concerned. Joxer was just not being ... Joxer. *This must really be hurting him. How are we going to make it better?* With a deep breath she carried on. "What I do want you to know is that we were very serious earlier. You are part of this family. Family is more than just blood. Family is about loyalty, about trust, about faith, and about love. You are all those things to us. Do not think because we are together that there is no place for you in our lives. You will always have a place in our lives and you will always be welcome to travel with us. Sometimes we might disappear for some privacy but we will always come back for you. Do you understand what I am saying? We don't want you to up and disappear on us."

During her talk she had grabbed Joxer's hand with her free hand. She lifted both her hands up so all three people could see that they were linked. "We are a family, Joxer, and nobody or no thing can change that." She squeezed both hands to stress the point.

Joxer was having problems seeing through the mist in his eyes. Words failed him but his heart felt at peace for the first time since his declaration of love had been gently

rejected. All he could do was smile his quirky grin and squeeze her hand back.

Xena lent forward and tapped him on the head with her free hand. "What she said." That was enough to break the tension and Joxer leaned forward and grabbed them both in a hug. Of course, Joxer being Joxer, nothing was quite that simple. His home-made armor caught on the table cloth and sent everything crashing towards the floor. He also managed to hit Cyrene in the side of her head with his hat. But they were small prices to pay to see Joxer smiling again.

"You guys are just so great." Joxer sobbed into both their ears. "I am proud to be part of your family."

It did not look like he had any intention of letting go any time soon. "Okay, Joxer, that's enough now." Xena still could not cope with long group hugs. She was not a huggy person, except where Gabrielle was concerned. *Gabrielle was the exception to the rule, of course. She can hug me as long as she likes.* But Joxer was not letting go. Finally, she couldn't take anymore so grabbed Joxer and sat him down.

"So what are our plans while we are here, warrior chums?" Joxer happily asked the question.

"We are just going to take each day as it comes. See what it brings. Right now, Gabrielle and I are going to bed as this has been one crazy day." She looked lovingly at Gabrielle, who nodded her head in agreement.

"Goodnight, Joxer. We will see you in the morning." Gabrielle and Xena rose as one. They hugged Xena's mother goodnight and headed up the stairs.

Chapter Nine: A New Meaning of Bedtime?

"Well... that didn't go so bad," mentioned Gabrielle between her yawn.

Xena grinned, grabbed the doorknob and opened the door. She held open the door for her partner. "Nope."

The warrior-bard nodded and entered into the room.

The Warrior Princess came in next and closed the door behind. She stared at her friend's back as she stared down at the bed.

Gabrielle ran her fingers through her hair and whispered, "Bedtime now or write?" She put her hands on her hips, still debating. "To write or not to write, that is the question."

Xena shook her head with her grin. She quietly came up from behind and snaked her arms around her partner's waist.

"Hmmm." The small warrior smiled in softness and leaned back into her warrior. Her arms and hands rested on top of Xena's while her head rested against Xena's chest.

The warrior lowered her head and asked, "Comfortable?" quietly.

"Oh yeah," replied the younger warrior gently. Her body faintly shook from Xena's light laughter.

Xena, without consideration, began brushing her lips against her friend's neck.

"Mmmm." Gabrielle tilted her head and exposed her neck more to Xena.

The warrior pressed her lips more against Gabrielle's neck with the tip of her tongue rolling over the smooth skin.

The warrior-bard moaned and her right hand came up to the back of Xena's neck. "Gods," she whimpered and turned around in Xena's arms. Her fingers laced up into Xena's panther, black hair, and she pulled down her partner for a long kiss.

Xena hesitantly pulled away and held onto her friend's sides. "Slow," she reminded.

"Hades," growled the warrior-bard, "you had to mention that huh?"

"Yes." The warrior lowered her head again, her forehead leaning against Gabrielle's. "Slow is a good idea."

Gabrielle grabbed her partner's larger hands and held them. "Can we just forget about that detail for a couple of candlemarks, hmmm?" She grinned and tilted her head, she started lightly kissing Xena.

"Hmmm." Xena responded to the kissing at a slow pace. "No," she muttered between the kissing, "we... can't."

The warrior-bard pressed her tongue into Xena's and pressed her body against Xena's more.

The warrior moaned faintly but quickly grabbed her friend's wondering hands. She pulled back from the kiss and stepped back. "Later huh?" She raised an eyebrow while

lacing her hands through Gabrielle's. "I promise, the wait is well worth it."

Gabrielle brought in a deep breath and nodded. "You're right." She laughed at herself and said, "I sure can't follow through with my own ideas."

Xena grinned a little. "I'll take it as a compliment."

The small warrior grinned right back. "It is."

"C'mon, let's get some sleep." The Warrior Princess nodded at the bed.

The Amazon Queen flashed back a small smile and nodded. "Sounds good." She then had a second thought. "I think I'll write some."

"Yeah?" Xena squeezed her friend's hands then released them.

"Yeah." The warrior-bard headed over to the saddlebags and started milling around for her scrolls.

The Warrior Princess headed for the bathroom. "You haven't written in quite awhile," she mentioned before going in.

"I know... trying to get back into it," called back the small warrior. She found her latest scroll and her quill. She came to the bedside, dropped two new scrolls on the bed with her quill and sat down next to them. She lifted one boot at a time and unlaced them.

Xena came out of the bathroom after washing her face so her bangs were still a bit wet. She sat down in a chair next to the table. She started removing her boots as well. "It's good to see you back into writing."

The younger woman settled her boots on the floor then sat up straight. "It feels good to be back into my writing." She shook her head. "Been too long."

The Warrior Princess set her boots aside and stood up. "Gabrielle, I think you needed that small break."

"Why you say that?" The warrior-bard got up from the bed and came behind her friend. She began working the buckles.

"You needed that break to realize how much you loved writing," explained Xena. She removed her gauntlets.

The Amazon Queen paused in her unhooking of armor and said, "Distance makes the heart grow fonder."

The warrior nodded, and she sensed the buckles coming off. She stepped forward and slipped out of her armor. Turning around with the armor in her hands, she said, "And it worked like a charm." She grinned and dropped the brass armor on the table with her gauntlets. Next she started removing her arm bracers.

"Wait." Gabrielle pointed a finger at her friend as she grinned. "You were not worried for a second that I would stop being a bard." She watched Xena shake her head. "Oh gods... you knew, didn't you? Damn well knew I'd start writing again because I'd miss it so much."

Xena chuckled and held up her gauntlets, pointing them at Gabrielle. "People come full circle in life." She tossed the gauntlets onto the table. "And you so happen to go full circle a lot faster than most."

The warrior-bard turned her head back and forth in amazement. "Huh... you're good." Her hands were now on her hips.

The Warrior Princess shrugged and replied, "I just know you, Gabrielle."

"Yeah?" Gabrielle stepped closer to the taller woman. "What else you know about me?"

"That you're going to start writing right now," she stated to Gabrielle.

The small warrior laughed softly and nodded. "I will." She pressed the palm of her hands against Xena's leather-clad stomach. She stood on her tiptoes and kissed her warrior tenderly.

The older warrior returned the kiss then watched Gabrielle climbed into the bed afterwards. She grinned while studying how her friend settled into a sitting position with her scrolls and quills. So she climbed into bed and easily slipped in behind Gabrielle in a sitting position as well. Instead though, she scooted closer to Gabrielle then propped her legs up on either side.

The small warrior grinned and sat back into Xena's body as Xena rested against the

headboard. "Not bad," she commented.

Xena laughed softly and wrapped her arms loosely around her partner's waist. Her right hand, however, moved and rested on Gabrielle's bare stomach.

The Amazon Queen shivered from the warm hand caressing her stomach soothingly. She tilted her head and peered down at her scroll, trying to concentrate. She subconsciously lifted the point of her quill and started chewing on it. That sly grin slipped along her lips as her quill met the parchment. Slowly her quill glided across the parchment in a scratchy sound, words flowing out of the ink.

The Warrior Princess's smile seemed to grow in each word she saw appear on the scroll. She continued rubbing her friend's stomach lightly while watching her bard work.

For a good candlemark, the pair stay exactly like that; Gabrielle writing and Xena holding while watching.

Gabrielle's quill came to a gradually stop then came down to make a dot as the period of a sentence. Then she stopped, lowered her quill onto the scroll, and sat back into Xena.

The warrior smiled at the full scroll before lowering her head and nuzzling the Amazon Queen's neck. "Finished?"

"Uh huh." The content warrior-bard smile down at the scroll. "That was real nice."

"I know," whispered the older woman. She kissed Gabrielle's neck then lifted her head back up. "Glad to see the bard back."

"Hmmm," agreed Gabrielle with a nod. She picked up the scroll and rolled it back up. She then placed both her scrolls and quill on the night stand. She settled back into her partner's arms. "Thanks, Xena."

"For what?"

"Just always being there for me." The short warrior dropped her head back and smiled up to the older warrior.

Xena revealed a warm smile. "Always here for you, Gabrielle."

"Hmmm, I know." Gabrielle reached up and pulled down Xena's head for a long kiss.

Xena licked Gabrielle's lips at the end and lifted her head a little with a smile.

The warrior-bard smiled back and said, "I think you can call me your girlfriend."

"Oh?" teased the Warrior Princess.

"Only if you want to," whispered the small warrior.

Xena's smile fell into love. "Only if I can be yours."

"Definitely," replied Gabrielle quietly.

"Then you are mine," stated Xena in a deep voice.

Love found its way in Gabrielle's smile, and she whispered, "I love you, Xena."

"I love you too, Gabrielle." Xena locked her lips with Gabrielle's carefully and started a gentle kiss of promise.

Chapter Ten: A New Day

Queen Karena

Morning came around quickly. Xena had watched the sunrise but nothing could entice her to move from the bed. With a light kiss to her love's head she had succumbed to her body's desire just to snuggle down and resume sleeping. She tightened her arms around her bard and let her eyes slowly close. Her last thought was the same as her first. *Love you Gabrielle.*

Gabrielle could not believe that she was awake before Xena. This just did not happen.

But the proof was lying beneath her. Consideration was given to surprising Xena with breakfast in bed but the thought of moving from her comfortable spot stopped

that thought before it went any further. Instead her eyes adoringly looked at her partner. Xena looked so much more youthful when she was sleeping. There was a peacefulness about her that was not present when they were on the road. It was like her body knew that she was safe and let her rest completely.

Nature stopped any further musing on Gabrielle's behalf and forced her to release her warrior pillow. She placed a light kiss on Xena's lips and headed off to the bathroom.

Her stomach demanded attention as well so she went with her earlier thought of bringing Xena breakfast in bed and headed to the kitchen.

"Hello, sweetie, what can I get for you this morning?" Cyrene was surprised to see Gabrielle up first.

"Morning, Mom. Thought I would grab some breakfast and surprise your daughter. It is a rare occurrence when I am the first one up. She must be getting lazy in her old age."

"Who are you calling old, bard." Gabrielle jumped at the voice. Spinning around she came face to face with an evilly smiling Xena.

"Heee heee heee, Xena, I ... ah ... thought you were still sleeping." She tried to hide the blush that was creeping up her face but was unsuccessful.

"How could I stay sleeping when someone took away my nice warm, exceptionally cozy, blanket?" Xena could not help but tease her partner. She was rewarded as the blush deepened on Gabrielle's face.

"You haven't answered my question yet, Gabrielle." Xena tried to close the distance between them but Gabrielle backed away. There was something about the glint in the warrior's eye that made her wary. They matched each other step for step. Unfortunately for Gabrielle she was fast running out of room.

"Now, Xena, I was only joking. You know that I don't see you as old. In fact, I will probably get gray hairs before you. I mean, look at you. Your hair is such a beautiful black. Not a trace of gray anywhere. Nope, not a one. You can't see any can you, Mom." Gabrielle looked pleadingly at Cyrene. She knew her time was limited as she felt her back hit the table. Hopefully she could get some help before Xena pounced.

Cyrene looked between the two. It was just so nice to see them both so happy. "Are you saying having gray hairs defines you as old." With a wink at her eldest daughter Cyrene passed her hands through her graying hair.

Gabrielle sighed. "Now I see where you get your evil sense of humor from, Xena."

That was her last comment as she dissolved into hysterics as 6 feet of warrior princess attacked Gabrielle's ribs with her long fingers.

"Do you apologize for calling us both old, hmmm, my bard. Do you?" Xena didn't give Gabrielle any time to answer as she mercilessly tickled her. "I can't hear you, Gabrielle, best you speak up."

Tears were streaming down the bard's face from the laughter. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, please stop. I didn't mean it. I was joking."

Xena slowed her tickling to a gentle caress. "You are forgiven." Wrapping her arms around Gabrielle she smiled lovingly at her partner. "Now what do you say we get some breakfast and plan out the day."

Cyrene took the hint and moved back towards the stove. "I have plenty of everything, so why don't you two sit down and I fill up a plate each."

They had just started tucking into the food when the back door opened.

"What does it take for a man to get some service around here?" Standing in the doorway was the masculine version of Xena.

Cyrene rushed to the door and enveloped her only son into a bear hug. "Toris, you are home. My whole family is home."

"Heard a rumor that my sister had died. I made my way here as quickly as I could to be with you but it seems my dead sister beat me. How typical. Never could beat her at anything." There was no animosity in his voice, just relief at seeing his sister alive.

Xena grinned back at her older brother. The familiar teasing felt good. "You always were a bit slow."

Toris glared at his sister then turned to her partner. "Hello, Gabrielle. I am truly pleased that the rumors of your death were greatly exaggerated." Part of him had fallen in love with the bard when he had first met her all those years ago. If it hadn't been for her, and Xena of course, he would have made a terrible mistake with Cortese.

Xena watched Toris quite closely. There was something in his eyes when he looked at Gabrielle. *Well, isn't that just great. Someone else who is lusting after Gabrielle. She just picks em up all over the place.* She trusted Gabrielle implicitly. It was just the complication of it being her brother. She had wondered last time they had met. His eyes had followed Gabrielle all over the place. However, she couldn't be sure.

Admittedly, she had been too busy trying to hide the fact that her eyes followed Gabrielle all over the place. The frustration turned into a wry smile.

Gabrielle watched her partner with amusement. She would definitely have to ask later what had been going through her mind. The last look was priceless. Moving closer to Xena, she slipped her arm around her waist and let all the love she felt for the warrior show in her eyes. Shaking her head slightly, Gabrielle lent forward and lightly kissed Xena on the lips before turning her head back to Toris.

“The stories weren’t exaggerated, Toris. We did die on those crosses. And it was one of the most traumatic times of my life. I would have given anything not to have seen the pain on your sister’s face. I thought the cell had been bad enough but that was so much worse. But then we were both given a second chance at this life. I believe it was our love that enabled us that chance and I don’t intend to waste it.”

Xena hugged Gabrielle so close and buried her tear-filled eyes into her partner’s hair. “That goes both ways, my love.” Xena whispered the comment into her loved one’s ear. She knew that Gabrielle had heard the comment when she felt her arm squeezed.

Toris watched the interchange with some sadness but was not surprised. Part of him had always known that Xena held Gabrielle’s heart. That was why he had never tried to pursue anything. The Xena he now knew was someone he didn’t want to hurt.

“I can see how your two’s love would do that. I am just glad you are alive, Gabrielle. And I am very glad that you are too, Xena. I don’t want to lose another sibling.” Toris moved towards the table and engulfed his sister and Gabrielle in a bear hug. “Now is there any food left for me or did Gabrielle manage to polish it all off.” The laughter relieved the tension and soon they were filling each other in on their lives since the last time they had seen each other.

“So what are your plans for the day?” Cyrene looked between the two women. “And does it involve that young man who is moping around the place?”

“Ummmm ... actually ... I do have some ideas as to what I want to do today and they really only involved Gabrielle and me.” Xena was uncharacteristically flustered. She had wanted to invite Gabrielle on a picnic but didn’t want to do it in front of everyone.

“Can I help out with your friend? There are plenty of things that need doing around the Inn. I could use the help of another person.” Toris looked questioningly at Xena.

“That’s a lovely thought, Toris. Part of me would love to take you up on that kind offer but I would really like the Inn to be still standing when we get back.” Xena and

Gabrielle exchanged knowing grins.

“Whatever do you mean?” Toris quizzically looked at Xena whilst Cyrene just raised her eyebrows in confusion.

Before Xena could give her answer, Gabrielle stepped into the breach. “Joxer has a heart of gold and he really means a lot to both of us.” She looked around to ensure that he was not close before continuing. She didn’t want to hurt his fragile ego at this time. “The problem is that he is a disaster waiting to happen. If you put him on the roof, the chances are that he will fall straight through and land on your best furniture to boot. If you have him fixing fences, the whole lot will come down. Get him to look after animals and he will lose the lot. If you ...mffffph.” Gabrielle had gotten on a roll and Xena did the only thing she could think of to stop her. She shoved a piece of bread in her partner’s mouth.

“I think they get the picture, Gabrielle.” Xena kissed the bard’s nose as an apology to offset any problems.

“No worries, Xena, I am sure there is plenty I can still get him to help me with.” Toris was absolutely sure they were exaggerating.

“Don’t say we didn’t warn you, Toris, but I do appreciate the gesture.” Xena smiled warmly at her brother.

Just as Gabrielle and Xena were about to head out the door to make plans for their day, Joxer wandered in.

“Hi, warrior chums. What are our plans for today.” Joxer felt much better after a good night’s sleep and was looking forward to spending the day with his two bestest friends. He grinned his trademark grin at the table and waited.

Toris was gobsmacked. What kind of person chose to wear what Joxer was wearing.

He looked over at Xena and was sure he saw a smug smirk briefly pass across her face. Maybe they weren’t exaggerating after all. What had he got himself into? It was too late to get out of this now as he could feel everyone’s eye on him.

“Hi, my name is Toris and I’m Xena’s brother.” Toris held his hand out in the typical warrior fashion and waited for Joxer to grasp it.

“I am Joxer the Mighty.” Unfortunately as he stepped forward to grab Toris’s arm his foot caught the edge of a chair. The last thing Toris remembered seeing was the tip of Joxer’s helmet just before it hit him in the forehead.

Xena managed to catch Toris before he fell. She examined the cut above his eye and decided it wasn't serious. "C'mon bro, wakey wakey. Lots to do."

His sister's blue eyes were the first thing he focused on as he came back to consciousness. "I will get you for this, Xena," he whispered. "Gabrielle did try and warn you." Xena's grin got even bigger. "Hope you enjoy your day."

"Is he alright? I didn't mean to hurt him. What can I do to make it up to him?" Joxer was quite worried.

"He will be fine. Of course, he did have a number of chores he was meant to do to help mother around the Inn. I think someone should stay with him to make sure he is okay ..." Xena looked up at Joxer and waited.

"I will help him. No problems."

"Thanks, Joxer, you are a good friend." Xena clapped him on the shoulder then stood up. "Would you like a hand up, Toris, or can you manage it by yourself?" She couldn't help but tease her brother.

"I will be fine, thanks. Why don't you and Gabrielle enjoy your day while Joxer and I do all the work around here."

"Don't mind if we do. Have fun." With that, Xena grabbed Gabrielle's hand and strode out the door. Gabrielle waved her hand over her shoulder as she trotted after Xena.

"So what's the plan for the day?" Gabrielle asked her partner.

"Well, I thought I would I invite my girlfriend on a picnic." Xena suddenly got all shy. "If you want to, that is."

"I think that sounds like an absolutely excellent idea, girlfriend." Gabrielle could not believe the thrill that word invoked. "Let's go to the market and get some food."

Gabrielle waited for her hand to be dropped but all she got was a loving smile from Xena as they walked off hand-in-hand.

Chapter Eleven: **Trying to Fall In-Love**

Red Hope

"So uh..." Joxer swallowed, his eyes still wide as he watched Toris bring the axe down on the wood. "You been a warrior long?"

Toris released the axe; the blade left embedded in the chopping block. "Most of my life... like Xena." He dropped his head to one side. "Why?"

"Oh, oh no reason... just wondering." The wannabe warrior took a few steps to his right and leaned against the side of the inn. "Enjoy it?"

The warrior picked up another piece of wood to chop, placing it in the center of the chopping block. "Yes, for the most part." He grabbed the axe again and lifted it high over his head. "You much of a warrior, Joxer?"

"Ah..." Joxer straightened up off the side with a proud smile plastered into place. "Of course I am." He grabbed at his sword and tried desperately to unsheathe it with grace yet the sword would hardly come out. "Come on, you stupid sword," he growled lowly while glaring at the weapon.

Toris chuckled a bit and put his axe down before leaning it against the side of the chopping block. He came over towards Joxer, watching the warrior wannabe struggling to extract his sword. "Hold on," he ordered.

Joxer growled louder this time and stopped fighting with the sword. He released the hilt and didn't really look up to Toris.

"This is how you do it." The warrior came around behind Joxer, reached around and across Joxer, and seized the sword. He pulled the sword up at a vertical angle instead of straight up like Joxer had done.

"Oh! I see it now."

Toris chuckled deeply and resheathed the sword once again. He came back around to face his friend and said, "Give it a try now."

Joxer now had a smile as he started pulling his sword out but he did it too quickly and his hand smashed into his chin. "Owe!" He dropped his sword to the ground and rubbed his chin. "Dumb thing."

Toris shook his head. "Not much of a warrior, huh?"

Joxer lowered his eyes, a sigh escaping him. "No... not really," he whispered quietly. "I'm better at healing than killing," he muttered.

Toris folded his arms together. "Good... we need more healers than killers."

Joxer raised his eyes up and locked them on Toris. "Yeah?"

"Uh huh." Toris gave a soft smile much like Xena's. "People need them more than the warriors." He paused before adding, "I'd rather save the weak than kill the strong." He turned and strolled back over to the chopping block.

The wannabe warrior furrowed his eyebrows and considered the other man's words. He looked up and asked, "A healer rather than a warrior?"

Toris nodded and picked up the axe. "Yes, much rather... I have more respect for a healer over a warrior."

Joxer was silent for several minutes, just staring at the grass in thought.

Xena's brother however continued with chopping the wood, he could tell his friend was in a life changing debate with himself. He smiled though because he already knew the outcome of the debate.

The wannabe fighter suddenly looked up and called, "Toris?"

Toris glance over with a questioning look.

"Feel like taking a break?" Joxer smiled warmly as he walked over. "Can I show you this book I've had for a real long time. Has every herb known in it that can be used for healing."

The warrior dropped the axe and replied, "I'd love to, Joxer."

The smaller man smiled warmly at Toris, his eyes locked with baby blues.

Toris mirrored the smile right back.

For many seconds, the two men just studied each other without moving before one of them broke the moment.

"So where's this book?"

Joxer came out of his trance. "Oh come on, up in my room."

"Lead the way." Toris waved his hand towards the front of the tavern.

The wannabe warrior chuckled and strolled ahead with a tiny bounce in his walk and a new smile. "Its really interesting," he mentioned.

"I can't wait to see it." Toris flashed a smile and came around the front of the inn with Joxer.

Gabrielle's head bobbed up and down in approval. "Nice view, Xena."

The warrior came up beside her partner and gazed out across the rolling, grassy hills. "Not bad at all." She watched for a few minutes as the breeze came along and swayed the tall grass. "Its very relaxing here."

"Mmmm, it is," agreed the bard. "Thank you."

"For?"

"Sharing this place with me." Gabrielle smiled up at her girlfriend.

The Warrior Princess revealed her own smile and leaned down to place a gentle kiss to her friend's temple. "Only with you."

The short warrior chuckled and stepped closer, wrapping her arm around Xena's waist

and dropped her head down against a strong arm.

The warrior lifted her right arm and brought it behind Gabrielle's shoulders, pulling her partner in closer. "How you feeling?"

"Very happy," whispered the warrior-bard.

Xena smiled softly and lowered her head some, placing a soft kiss to Gabrielle's temple. "Me too."

The bard hadn't lost her smile as she studied the view around her. "You know though, I feel bad about Joxer."

"Mmmm yeah." The Warrior Princess tilted her head to one side and added, "But not meant to be."

The Amazon Queen nodded her agreement. "I just hope he'll be okay."

"Knowing Joxer, he'll be just fine," whispered the warrior.

"Mmmm true." Gabrielle then looked up at her warrior. "So what did you get for lunch in the market?"

Suddenly a devilish grin broke out across Xena's expression.

Toris closed the book slowly and glanced over the front of it again.

Joxer squirmed a bit next to the warrior, he was sitting beside Toris on the foot of his bed. "Pretty interesting huh?"

"It really is actually," commented Xena's brother. "And you know how to make every medicine in here?"

The warrior wannabe's eyes widen. "Oh yeah, pretty much." He smiled brightly. "I just pick it up for some reason."

"For some reason?" Toris held the book out. "Sounds like a good reason to get into it,

Joxer."

"You really think so?" Joxer took the book back carefully and held it in his lap.

"Yeah, I really think so." Toris stood up and walked over to the wall, and he leaned against it right next to the door. "You should give it a try."

Joxer smiled happily and said quietly, "Maybe I will." He peered up at Xena's brother. "Thank you, Toris."

"You're more than welcome, Joxer."

The warrior wannabe fiddled with his book a bit before saying, "You know... you can call me Jox if ya want." He shyly smiled at the other man. "All my good friends do."

Toris grinned a bit and replied, "I'll remember that."

"Yeah well... you know you're a good friend now." Joxer was still fiddling around with his book, his eyes glued to the book.

Toris's grin shifted more into a warm smile. "One of mine too... Jox."

The warrior wannabe looked up again and saw the smile; he instantly mirrored it back.

Chapter Twelve: **Love Wins Out**

Queen Karena

Gabrielle looked up at Xena quizzically. *Whatever could she be up to that has caused such a diabolical smile to ease across that beautiful face?*

"Are you sure you want to know, Gabrielle?" Xena purred out the question as she slowly advanced on her bard. Her eyes had darkened to a deep blue and seem to look

right into Gabrielle's soul.

"Ummm, yeah, umm, I ... uhhh ... do." Gabrielle couldn't help but stammer out the words. The look on Xena's face was causing tremors to race through her body.

"That's not what your eyes are telling me, my love." Xena's voice was barely above a whisper but Gabrielle heard the words quite clearly. As Xena closed the distance between them, the bard was finding it very difficult to breathe. Her eyes shuttered closed as Xena's hand softly stroked the side of her face, her body automatically leaning into the hand.

"I love you, Gabrielle, with all that I am." The words caressed the bard's ears as Xena's lips lightly brushed her lips. Neither woman could control the moan that automatically followed this contact.

The bard slowly pulled away from Xena and smiled lovingly at the warrior, her eyes lightened by the unshed tears. "I love you too, Xena. You are part of my soul." She stepped back into Xena's space, placed her hand behind Xena's head, and pulled her face down for another kiss. There was nothing light or teasing about this one. When the need to breathe overtook their other senses, they slowly pulled apart.

"Hmm, you are seriously good at that, my warrior." Gabrielle lowered her head against her partner's chest and listened to the rapidly beating heartbeat.

"You are not too bad yourself, my bard." Xena tightened her arms around her love and just breathed in the smell that was so distinctly Gabrielle. It just felt so good to finally be able to just hold her in her arms without fear.

Gently pulling her partner down, Xena leaned back against a nearby tree and wrapped her arms around Gabrielle. The bard happily snuggled back into Xena and peacefully watched the sunlight dance off the lake. They gently whispered their love to each other and their hopes for the future. A light rumbling interrupted the pair causing Xena to stretch out and grab the picnic basket.

"Now, lets see what we have in the basket to feed such a hungry monster." Xena began pulling out the bread, the different cheeses, an assortment of meats, and some olives. Gabrielle was tempted to backhand her mate but decided to pounce on the food instead. Xena had gotten some surprises for Gabrielle but decided to leave them in the basket for now. She did remove the wine before quickly closing the lid.

"Something else in the basket, huh, Warrior?" Gabrielle looked over her shoulder at Xena.

“Whatever makes you think that?” Xena tried for the innocent look but failed miserably.

“You closed the lid. If there was nothing else in there, you wouldn’t have bothered.” Gabrielle looked smugly at her partner.

Xena sighed deeply. She knew she was caught. Trust Gabrielle to be so logical. “Alright, there are some other things in the basket, but you can’t have them until you have eaten something healthy.”

Gabrielle tossed up whether to push the issue or eat what was currently in front of her. Her stomach won the argument so she smiled sweetly at her warrior then proceeded to eat everything in front of her at an alarming rate.

“Slow down, Gabrielle, it’s not going to go anywhere.” Xena was constantly amazed at both the speed and the amount that Gabrielle managed to pack her food away.

“U wnnngt mddy shhrpffrz,” mumbled Gabrielle as she chewed on another mouthful.

“Hold it right there, swallow that mouthful, and say that last comment again.” Xena couldn’t keep the amusement out of her voice.

Gabrielle made a big point of swallowing her mouthful then turned her head towards Xena and slowly enunciated each word. “I said I want my surprise.”

Xena burst out laughing. “Eat away then, my bard. Never let it be said that I came in between a woman and her surprise.” Xena quickly grabbed some food before it was all devoured and contentedly watched her loved one clean up the rest. Her mind drifted to where they were heading next. She didn’t have anything against her partner’s hometown. They just didn’t seem to like her very much. Well, Lila did. Xena smiled warmly as she thought back to the surprise birthday they had thrown for Gabrielle last year. *‘Nothing ever goes smoothly when my bard is involved.’*

“What are you smiling at, my love?” Even saying that made Gabrielle feel warm inside. It just felt so right.

“I was remembering the last time we were here.”

Gabrielle smiled warmly back. “It was lovely of you to throw a surprise birthday party for me, even if we did have to solve a mystery first. But as that is what we do best it probably was quite fitting.” The thoughts of her birthday flowed on to Lila.

Without knowing this was where her warrior had started, Gabrielle started thinking about their upcoming visit to Potidaea. She knew it was important for her parents to see that she was alive, but she had to admit she wasn't looking forward to the visit at all.

“Could we make the visit to my parents reasonably short? We do have to go to the Amazons and let Chilappa know that we are alive as well?”

Xena could not believe what she was hearing. *‘Was Gabrielle mind-reading now? Maybe she is doing this for me? I must let her know that it is okay to stay as long as she needs to. I will cope as long as I am with her.’* Taking a deep breath, she verbalized her thoughts. “They are your parents, Gabrielle. You can visit as long as you like. Don't feel you have to leave because of me. We will be there together, and that is all that matters for me.”

Turning around, Gabrielle took Xena's face in her hands. “Thank you for that offer but you are not the reason. Well, not completely.”

Xena raised her eyebrow quizzically at Gabrielle.

“I know my parents don't like you much. Well, actually, I think it is more my father than my mother. She is just not very good at standing up to him. He blames you for all that has happened to me since I have been with you.” Gabrielle quickly put her hand across Xena's lips. “Don't you dare say that he has every right to feel that way. I know you, Xena. You want to take the blame for everything bad that has happened to me. But it is not your fault. I made the choice to go with you and I don't regret one moment of it because it led me here, with you. You are everything I have wanted in a partner and just being able to say that I am yours makes me all warm inside.” Gabrielle lent forward and laid a gentle kiss on Xena's lips before continuing.

“My parents will never understand my love for you. I am sure Lila thinks we are already lovers so nothing will change there. I need to tell them I am alive and I do want to do that face to face. However, I have no intention of hiding my love for you. It has taken us too long to get to this place, and no way am I going back to us just being good friends. If I want to cuddle with you, like this, then I intend to. I can already see my parents disapproving looks so I know one night will be quite sufficient otherwise I, or them, may say something that we all would regret. So, it's not because of you, it's because of us and that is the most important thing as far as I am concerned. Now, hand over the basket so I can see what else is in it.”

Xena just sat there stunned. *‘What have I done to deserve her love. Obviously something monumental that I am not aware of.’* Before Gabrielle had time to grab the basket, Xena engulfed her in a bear hug. “We will stay as long or as short as you like, my bard.” There was so much more she wanted to say, but she just couldn't find the

words.

Gabrielle, who was very versed in 'Xenaspeak' knew what the warrior was trying to say. Leaning in to kiss her, she softly spoke the words, "I love you too, Xena." Xena closed the distance between their lips and let her soul finish the conversation.

As she gently laid her bard back onto the grass, her kiss deepened to one of passion. Gabrielle quickly met the intensity of the kiss and pulled Xena tighter to her body. Both sensed that neither was going to stop this time. Xena had to be positive that this was what her bard wanted. "Are you sure, Gabrielle?" The whispered words only seemed to inflame the bard more. She pressed her body deeper into her warrior's, moaning at the glorious feelings that this small act incited.

"Stop now, Xena, and you could seriously regret it." Gabrielle's voice had deepened with desire and left no doubt in the warrior's mind that this was something that Gabrielle definitely wanted. *'What Gabrielle wants, Gabrielle gets'* was her last coherent thought as their desires took over.

"Hey, Jox, you want to pass me up the hammer?" Toris smiled down at the young man.

"Sure, Tor. Shall I bring it up?" Joxer had the hammer in his hand and was making his way towards the ladder.

"No, I think it would be safer for both of us if you just pass it to me from the bottom. You may be good at medicines, but you can't fix yourself up."

They had been exchanging this hammer for most of the afternoon. For some reason, Toris couldn't bring himself to leave the hammer up on the roof. The first time Joxer had tried to deliver it to him he had slipped on the third rung and fallen down to the ground with a loud thud. Toris could still remember the thundering in his heart as he had raced down the ladder to make sure Jox was okay. From then on, Toris had made the trip up and down the ladder to get or give the hammer to his friend. It should have been a chore, but it never felt that way.

Joxer laughed at his friend's teasing as he handed him the hammer. He could feel the tingling continuing after their fingers had stopped touching. What had started out to be a bad morning had turned out to be a great day. He stopped looking at his hand and shyly looked upwards to see his friend smiling at him. Toris hadn't moved back up the ladder and it was as if he was unaware that he had the hammer in his hand. With a shake of his head, he laughed at himself and climbed back up the ladder. A job that should have only taken a candlemark had now stretched into two and was no closer to

being fixed. Strangely enough, he just didn't care.

Cyrene couldn't believe how painfully slow this roof repair was. Deciding that she needed to check on her son, she stuck her head out of the window in time to see the exchange of the hammer. Silently, she retreated back into the Inn and smiled to herself. *'Love is definitely in the air today. I think both of my children have found happiness. I think I will make a special meal tonight.'* Whistling to herself, she headed off to the kitchen to start planning the menu. She was pretty sure that Xena and Gabrielle would head off tomorrow and who knows when she would see the pair again. Therefore, nutbread would definitely be on the menu. And those red dumpling things that Xena likes so much. *'I won't be making radish stew for Joxer, that is for sure. There are some things that just shouldn't be made!'* She couldn't help giggling to herself as she remembered the tale that Gabrielle had spun about that particular event. It was good that they could laugh at themselves. Secretly she was pleased they hadn't come visiting at that time. The last thing an inn needs is people who don't look the healthiest.

"Xena?"

"Hmmm, Gabrielle."

"Can I have my surprise now?"

"What, again? I am not sure I have the energy at the moment ..." Xena moved quickly in anticipation of the elbow in the ribs and grabbed the basket. "You wouldn't hit a woman with food, now would you?" The innocent look did not last long before they both burst into laughter.

Gabrielle snuggled back down into her warrior pillow. It felt even better when they were both naked, something she had not thought possible.

"Close your eyes, Gabrielle. And no peaking." Once they were closed Xena opened the lid of the basket and pulled out a strawberry tart. Breaking off a little piece she touched it to her lover's lips. Gabrielle's tongue scooted out and grabbed the offering.

"Hmmm mmmmm mmmm, this tastes almost as good as you." Gabrielle suddenly blushed when she realized what she had said. She didn't take it back, however,

because it was true. Plus she enjoyed Xena's delighted laughter.

"You are incorrigible, my bard." Xena broke off a piece of the tart and nibbled on it. "This does taste nice, though. Want some more."

"You even have to ask?" Gabrielle looked at Xena disbelieving. Of course, Xena had another piece in her hand headed for the bard's mouth so she just smiled and accepted the peace offering. It didn't take them long to polish off the tart.

"We should be heading back before mom wonders where we are and sends the boys out to look for us." The regret was quite evident in her voice. This afternoon had been truly special.

"Sad to say, I agree with you. The last thing I want is for Joxer to see me in a state of undress." Gabrielle slowly eased herself up off the warrior.

"I would be more worried about my brother, personally. He hasn't seen me naked since I was 6 and I don't want that to change anytime soon." Xena allowed herself to be hauled up by her partner and they began the hunt for their various items of clothing. Once they were dressed, Xena whistled for Argo and they headed back towards the Inn.

Toris had just hammered in the last nail when he saw his sister and Gabrielle ride back into town. He waved to them before descending down the steps. "Xena and Gabrielle are back," he mouthed to Joxer who nodded in understanding.

Together they walked back into the Inn and headed for the bathroom to wash up. Cyrene watched them as they walked past, almost shoulder to shoulder. Her smile deepened when the front door opened to reveal her two girls. Their timing was perfect. Dinner was just ready.

The meal passed quickly as each talked about their day.

"I don't think Joxer will be coming with us." Xena whispered the words in Gabrielle's ear as she leaned over to grab some desert.

"I think you are right, my warrior," the bard whispered back.

Xena decided it was time to make their intentions clear. "We will be heading out tomorrow to go to Potidaea as we need to let Gabrielle's parents know we are still

alive. Then we will be heading off to the Amazons because they also need to know.”

Cyrene sadly smiled at her daughters. She had guessed correctly but part of her still did not want them to go. “I understand your need to leave but I am going to miss you terribly. Please try and get back a bit sooner next time, huh. And no dying in between times. Promise me.”

Walking around the table, Xena bent down by her mother and embraced her in a loving hug. “That’s a deal.”

Joxer realized it was time to make a decision. One look at Toris and he knew there was no competition. This may not go anywhere but there was definitely something there and it deserved a chance to grow.

“If you don’t mind, warrior chums, I may ahh stay ahh here for a while. I ahhh spoke to the village healer and he needs an assistant. His son has had to go away for a few moons.” Joxer knew he was stammering but he couldn’t seem to help himself.

“That’s fine, Joxer. I think that is a great idea.” Xena rescued her friend. “I am sure my family will keep an eye on you, won’t you Toris?” The tenseness in the knee beside gave away the fact that Gabrielle was trying her hardest not to giggle.

“Yes, we will, Xena. Now, why don’t you two head off to bed. I am sure you will want an early start in the morning.” Cyrene gave her a hard stare. She knew exactly what her daughter was up to, no matter how innocent she tried to look. And Gabrielle was no better. She could see the young bard’s shoulders shaking from here. Cyrene’s look was the last straw and Xena burst out laughing. Gabrielle followed moments later and they collapsed onto each other.

“Oh, ha ha ha, sister. You obviously didn’t forget to take your happy pills this morning.” Toris grumped at his sister. Joxer lightly touched him on his shoulder and smiled.

“It’s okay, Toris. They tease me all the time. I know they love me, really.” Joxer smiled over at his friends as well. There was no animosity in his look.

“You are so right, Joxer. We do love you. Now come and give us a group hug. You won’t be up before we leave.” Gabrielle had to grin at the pained expression that slid across Xena’s face. Her warrior was really not into group hugs at all. They got up to reduce the distance Joxer had to travel. He was still Joxer, after all.

Taking Gabrielle’s hand, Xena headed off to her room. They stopped at the top of the stairs, and looked down. Joxer and Toris were still sitting shoulder to shoulder with

her mother sitting opposite them as they talked softly amongst themselves. The occasional laughter traveled up the stairs.

“C’mon, my bard, we have a long day tomorrow. We need to get some sleep.”

“Sleep, oh yeah, you will sleep, but not right away.” Gabrielle pinched her warrior’s butt then ran the rest of the way to the bedroom.

“Yep, truly incorrigible.” Xena had to smile before running after her.

And well, we all know what happens from here...

The End