

~ Which Way to Sway ~

by Red Hope

Disclaimers:

Violence: There might be.

Subtext: Oh, always a yes!

Copyright: We know that Universal owns Xena, Gabrielle, Ephiny, Solari, and Argo. However, I own the interesting story line.

Time Frame: Fifth season Xena and Gabrielle. And yes, Ephiny and Solari are in this despite they should be dead. Can't have Amazons without them. This is the Xenaverse.

Any feedback, which I love, will happily be taken at... redhope@redhope.net

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

Section One

~*Part 1*~

Xena sighed before leaning against her mare. Her left arm came up and rested on top of the saddle; she drummed her fingers on the saddle. She was extremely bored. She and Gabrielle had been traveling all day with no attacks and no games between each other. It was dead dull and there was a need for entertainment. Slowly, she creased her lips with a wild grin.

The warrior unsheathed her sword and straightened up from Argo. She shifted away from the mare, bent her knees, and jumped. She silently disappeared in the trees above.

Gabrielle came trudging through the woods while combing her short hair with her fingers. She sighed and came up onto the road. "Xena?" She gazed around after only noticing Argo was around. "Where the Hades did that warrior get to?"

The Warrior Princess bit her lower lip and narrowed her eyes.

The warrior-bard walked behind Argo, directly under Xena, and peered through the woods. "Xena?" she yelled. *There's more here than meets the eyes.* Gabrielle folded her arms. *She's been bored all day that can only mean one thing.* Slowly, she bent down and unsheathed her sais.

Xena let a cat grin shape her lips. *She knows...* She shifted a little and the tree branch squeaked in protest. *Oh Hades.* She didn't move and swayed up and down on the limb while waiting to see if Gabrielle noticed.

Licking her lips, the small warrior took a step back. "Xena?" she yelled in pretend. "Xena, this is getting ridiculous." She flipped the blades up, and dropped her head back and smirked. "Don't you think?"

The warrior's eyes widened.

Gabrielle laughed and threw her sais up at the older warrior.

Xena gave her warcry and backed flipped out of the way. She landed on the ground behind Gabrielle.

The warrior-bard dropped and rolled away. As soon as she was on her feet, her sais dropped back down and she caught them. She shifted into her battle stance. "Play games with me huh?"

"Oooh come on," taunted Xena. "We need a little fun."

The warrior-bard shook her head with a laugh. "Only you would." She moved like lightening and kicked Xena in the chest.

The warrior stumbled back, taking the blow, and she twirled her sword. Reaching down to her chakram, she held it up and grinned.

Gabrielle's expression fell into surprise. "Oh shit," she whispered.

The Warrior Princess laughed and threw it towards her partner, making sure her partner could easily get out of the way.

The short warrior duck then heard the chakram slam into the tree behind her. She knew Xena let that happen but she was going to take advantage of things. So standing back up, she walked backwards, and reached back. She jerked Xena's chakram out of the tree. "Want this?" She slipped her right sai between the chakram and it's handle. She twirled the chakram around her sai and smirked. "Come on, Xena. I know you want your toy back."

The warrior laughed deeply before having advanced on her opponent. "And I'll get it back."

"Oooh, we'll see," teased the smaller woman. She sheathed one weapon quickly, tossed the chakram into her left hand and kept a sai in her right hand. "Get some of that energy out of you."

With each step, Xena's eyes twinkled more.

Oh boy, she's got aaaa lot of energy, thought the warrior-bard. When her partner neared, she slashed out with the chakram. "Come on."

Xena had jumped back from the swipe but had took more menacing steps. She prepared her sword, having anticipated Gabrielle's next swipe with the chakram. It happened, Xena had simply moved her sword quickly and slipped her sword through the chakram. She yanked it out of Gabrielle's hands and slid the chakram down her blade. "Thanks," she teased and put the chakram in its home.

"That's it," Gabrielle growled. She sheathed her sai, glared before screaming, and had broke of running.

"Gabrielle," Xena yelled and held out her freehand. She shook her head, knowing what her friend was going to ram her. She sheathed her sword just in time before

Gabrielle slammed into her.

Both women crashed to the ground on the edge of the road. They slipped off the elevated road and tumbled down the small slope in the fall leaves.

When they came to a stop, Gabrielle was on top. She whipped her head up, grabbed her friend's arms and pinned them down. She shifted the rest of her weight against Xena's legs to hold her down.

The warrior opened her eyes finally and stared into breathless spring eyes.

Gabrielle lowered her head with her teeth clenched. "Don't mess with me," she snarled with flashing forest green eyes.

Xena bit her lower lip, her face turned bright red as she tried to hold the laughter back.

The younger woman noticed this and closed her eyes from laughing off the entire escapade. Gradually, she laughed softly.

The Warrior Princess couldn't hold it back, she let the laughter escape from her lips. Just the mere image of Gabrielle getting angry with her made her laugh hard.

Gabrielle joined her and fell down on top of her companion. The side of her head rested against Xena's and her hands still held onto Xena's arms.

Xena settled down with her laughter. "You know, you're cute when you're angry," she teased.

The warrior-bard sighed and stopped her laughter. "Warrior's aren't cute," she muttered and closed her eyes.

"Mmm, you're an exception." The warrior wrapped her arms over her friend's torso. She let the feeling of Gabrielle against her body intoxicate her. She closed her eyes and let this moment go on.

The smaller warrior wasn't about to move she hardly was able to touch her friend let alone hug her. This was a moment she wouldn't break. At first, she didn't shift but Xena's essence was taking her without her knowing it. She turned her head and grazed her silk lips over Xena's warm neck.

The warrior instantly felt the jolts shoot through her body. She contained the moan, which had tried bubbling up.

Gabrielle's breathing was heavy from excitement. She pressed her lips more against her friend's neck and sucked on Xena's neck.

Xena breathed sharply and tightened her arms around Gabrielle.

The short warrior lifted her head and trailed her lips to the front of her friend's smooth neck. She opened her mouth slightly and her tongue slipped out, tasting the spicy tainted skin.

The warrior propped up her right leg while she arched her neck out. Carefully, she slipped her right hand between her body and Gabrielle's muscular stomach.

Gabrielle moaned faintly and lifted her left side. She felt the heat tear through her body when the hot hand touched her stomach. She kept her eyes closed, letting the feelings possess her.

Xena had tried controlling her breathing but couldn't as her right hand trailed up Gabrielle's stomach. Her fingertips slipped under the smaller woman's leather top.

The warrior-bard moaned again and reached down. She laced her fingers through Xena's. But suddenly, her thoughts slammed her into reality. *I'm about to have sex with my best friend.* Her heart stopped once this thought grabbed her. She instantly pulled back, and half fell, half rolled off Xena. She tried to get up but stumbled backwards and fell down on the ground. She dropped her head, breathing in a gasp, she held up her hand. "Oh gods..." she rasped and rested her other hand on her chest. She closed her eyes.

Xena was past shock; she was in fear. She rolled onto her knees with the largest look of confusion. Her voice failed her because her heart sunk at her friend's unexpected reaction.

Gabrielle propped her legs up and had begun relaxing again, gaining control. She breathed deeply and released it gradually. "I'm sorry, Xena," she whispered finally. Lifting her head, she added, "I shouldn't have done that to you."

The Warrior Princess shook her head and brushed her bangs back with a shaky hand. "My fault not yours." She relaxed again and placed her stoic expression back into place.

"It was my fault." The warrior-bard grabbed the side of her ankles and said, "I made the first move."

"Yes, but I didn't have to react, Gabrielle."

The small woman dropped her legs, and fell back on the ground. She covered her face with her hands and groaned. Her body was still jumping from the searing touches and she wondered if they would ever stop. "I led you on... I'm sorry," she repeated.

"I'm easy to lead on," joked the warrior in hopes to lighten things.

Gabrielle chuckled deeply but it didn't truly help.

Xena got up from her knees, and came closer, she knelt down beside her friend. "Are you okay?" She touched her friend's arm just faintly.

Gods! Gabrielle screamed mentally as the shots of passion roared through her body even from that small touch. "Yeah, fine, thanks." She pulled her hands away from her face. "How about you?"

"Fine," responded the warrior quietly. She smiled sadly and removed her hand. "Think you can keep traveling?"

"What kinda question is that?" teased the small woman. She rolled onto her stomach then hopped up on her feet.

The pair just brushed off the scene from earlier like it never happened, especially

Gabrielle. What was she thinking by doing that with her best friend? Doing that with another female? But she had tried shaking it off despite she really could not.

Xena grabbed her mare's reins and had started trekking. "We'll go another half of candlemark."

Gabrielle nodded in answer. She kept silent while having considered things as they traveled.

The warrior sighed inwardly. *This isn't going to be good. How am I suppose to explain to her why I didn't stop her?* She chastised herself for not being careful. *I know she doesn't look at women like that.* She sighed, having known she was going to need a good explanation later when this came up again.

~*~*~*~

The warrior-bard finished setting camp up. She glanced over at her partner. "Hey, I'm going to go watch the sunset by the lake."

"Alright."

Gabrielle sighed then asked, "Do you want to come with me?"

"I will in a second." Xena continued brushing her mare down.

The small warrior sighed and headed for the lake. She came right when the red of the sun reflected off the mirror lake. She smiled at the scenery and found a huge rock. She sat down on it.

The Warrior Princess had finished with Argo and afterwards she joined her partner down at the lake, as promised. Coming up from behind, she grasped her friend's shoulders softly.

Gabrielle jumped out of reaction from being deep in her thoughts.

"Sorry," whispered Xena, she squeezed her friend's shoulders before having released them.

The small woman sighed and whispered, "Was somewhere else."

"I noticed." Xena grinned and peered up at the sunset. "Mmm, the sun makes the best shades of red."

"Uh huh."

The warrior's eyes flicked down at Gabrielle then back up. How tempting it was to just slip her arms around Gabrielle and pull her in. What a bad idea, she added mentally. "Gabrielle," she whispered. "I'm sorry again about earlier."

The younger woman sighed and responded, "It wasn't your fault, Xena." She shrugged, propped up her legs, and hugged herself. "I shouldn't have done that, considering I don't... sway that way with women."

Xena closed her eyes momentarily. She relaxed and questioned, "What do you think of me being that way?" Her voice was quiet.

"It's personal," Gabrielle stated with a shrug. She lowered her chin onto her knees. "I've known that about you, Xena, it's no surprise." She sighed. "That's what makes me feel so bad... feel like I was about to use you." She paused. "Give you the wrong impression." Her eyes stayed fixed on the sunset. "But it makes you the better person," she whispered.

"The fact I like women as well?" inquired the warrior; she was intrigued by that.

"Yeah sure." The small woman sighed. "You can accept anybody without caring about the body."

The warrior chuckled and leaned down, she whispered, "It's all about the body for me." She rose back up. "You know that too."

Inwardly, Gabrielle shivered from her friend's sensual voice. "Yes, but when you hold love you like to express your love physically."

Oh boy, is she going to see my true colors? Only if she puts that last bit together.
"Very true," agreed the warrior.

Xena only expresses her love physically. Gabrielle rethought what she'd said. *Xena was expressing her love sexually to me.* Her heart stopped yet again. *Oh... nnnno.*

Xena noted how quiet her partner was then she saw a tiny flinch come from Gabrielle. *She figured it out.* After having sighed, she walked past her friend and went down to the beach. She bent down and picked up a few smooth, flat stones. She held one up between her index finger and thumb; she threw it.

The stone skipped across the water and left small ripples along the red water top.

The warrior sighed sadly and skipped another stone.

Gabrielle slipped off the rock and joined her companion. "Xena?" She grasped the warrior's arm. "I'm sorry."

"No, I am." The Warrior Princess stopped and glanced back. "I let certain emotions get me." She shrugged. "Just... have to destroy them." She narrowed her eyes and threw another stone.

"Come on, you know I love you, Xena."

Xena smiled sadly and nodded. "I know just not..." She chuckled another stone.

"The same way," finished Gabrielle. Her heart ached for the other woman.

"Yup," agreed the warrior. She walked down the shore a little more and found a few more rocks. She tossed the stone between her hands. "If you want to leave, I'll certainly understand."

The warrior-bard shook her head and came over. "Hades no, I'm not leaving."

"Just giving you an..." Xena turned to skip a stone. "Out," she growled faintly.

"Thank you but no thank you." Gabrielle smiled partially. She reached up and pulled Xena's head down by the back of the neck. "I'm not freaked out." She kissed her

friend's cheek then let go of her. "I'm glad you could tell me."

Xena nodded and skipped another rock farther. "Just call me Joxer," she joked.

The small warrior groaned. "Don't remind me about him." She shook her head. "He's ridiculous."

"Tell me about it."

The younger warrior went back the main topic; feeling like it still wasn't settled. "Just a friendship," she stated her thoughts.

The warrior nodded. "A friendship as always," she agreed.

"I get enough out of a friendship with you." Gabrielle smiled.

The warrior flashed a small smile and turned a stone. "Well... you'd get a lot more if you were my... girlfriend," Xena half joked but was half-serious. She skipped this rock hard.

Gabrielle watched it- it went across the red water and it was the farthest one yet. She knew why too. "I know," warrior-bard whispered.

"You don't know what you're missing," teased Xena with a halfhearted smile.

The small warrior chuckled but went serious again. "I know." She moved closer and wrapped her arms around Xena.

The Warrior Princess sighed and hugged her friend. "Thank you, Gabrielle for understanding," she said sincerely.

"Thank you for understanding too." Gabrielle squeezed her friend tightly then looked up. "I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize for who you are," replied the warrior. She leaned down and kissed her friend's forehead. "Why don't you go back to the camp." She paused. "I need a little time huh?"

The small warrior nodded and relinquished her hold. She tried giving a loving smile but it faltered somewhat. She turned and headed back to camp.

Xena kept her eyes on her friend till she disappeared in the forest. Turning back to the remains of the sunset, she squatted down. She stared at the red water of a lover's romance. Her eyes dropped and she shook her head. "Never been refused," she uttered and gazed up again. "I didn't think that would have happened." She laughed bitterly and covered her mouth with her hand. Her soul weakened from the agony she felt at being refused by the one she loved the most. By the one that saved her and created her. She had never expected this blow that sent her on her back; leaving her struggling for air to breathe. Gabrielle just stole her air.

The sunset came to an end, and disappeared over the horizon taking its red rays of love. The red light set on Xena.

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Gabrielle became extremely concerned when her friend didn't return to camp after the sunset. Well concern wasn't the word, more like worried. She went down to the lake but didn't find Xena anywhere.

Having gone over to the spot they'd talked, she found no traces of her partner. *Oh no...* Fear exploded in Gabrielle. She knelt down and had tried looking for tracks or something but it was hard with no light. After having squinted and looked from the corner of her eyes, she noticed there were another set of tracks and not her own. "Oh shit."

The warrior-bard jumped up and raced back into camp. Right when she entered, she found a sword at her throat.

"I wouldn't move if I were you," said the large man. He grinned.

The small warrior glanced over and spotted ten other men with Xena chained. *I can't believe they caught her. She must have been in too much thought.* "Look, what do you want?"

"We're taking both you and Xena to a friend of ours." The man tilted his head. "Aren't you excited?"

"Oh, I'm ecstatic," she replied dryly.

"Good." The man paused. "Your weapons please." He held his free hand out.

Gabrielle slowly bent down and unsheathed her sais. She held them by the tops of the handle.

Xena narrowed her eyes, tensed her muscles up, and was prepared to fight as soon as Gabrielle made her move.

"Hey Xena?" asked Gabrielle with a grin.

"Yeah?"

The men all drew swords by the way they were talking in a taunting voice.

"Relax," ordered their leader. "They ain't gonna do anything."

Gabrielle gave a smug look to the leader. "Think I should really give *them* my sais?"

The Warrior Princess grinned. "Yes."

"Good idea," agreed Gabrielle. She suddenly jumped back, threw her right sai at the man closes to Xena.

That man crashed to the ground, dead.

The leader ordered his men to guard Xena so they all stood in front of her. He came at Gabrielle. "We have extra chains."

"Ooooh, but you gotta get me first to put them on me," taunted Gabrielle. She stepped back and went into battle stance.

The leader growled and twirled his sword.

Xena saw her partner stalling for time. Her arms were chained in front of her body with the lock dangling in front of her hands, which made everything easy. She squeezed her shoulders inward and her breasts tightened. Instantly, her breast dagger flew up without a sound. She just caught the dagger in her hands and began picking the lock. Peering up, she watched Gabrielle.

The warrior-bard was fighting the leader while the men watched. She let her opponent think he was winning to keep him distracted.

The Warrior Princess upper lip twitched when the lock came undone. Her eyes darken and she shaped a primal grin on her lips. It was time for paybacks. Quietly, she removed the chains.

Gabrielle glimpsed to her partner and saw her nod faintly. "Let's go!" She laughed and went into full force on her opponent.

Xena reached up to the man in front of her. She jerked his head hard to the left and snapped his neck. Before anybody else could react, she slammed her breast dagger into another man's chest and kicked him to the ground. She jumped back and she laughed evilly.

The remaining seven man unsheathed swords and circled the Warrior Princess.

Xena knelt down, took the chains, and raised them over her head while having spun them around in a circle. "Come on boys."

Gabrielle's opponent growled at the change of tides. With no forewarning, he rammed his sword forward and managed to slice Gabrielle's side.

The warrior-bard stumbled back and looked at her side.

The wound oozed up crimson blood all the way down her side, through her skirt, and down her leg. She looked up with surprise and stared at the man. Her body was weakening from the extreme amount of blood it was losing. She fell to her knees with the sai in her right hand still.

The leader laughed deeply. He stepped closer and raised his sword.

Gabrielle growled and rammed her sai up into the man's heart. She jerked the sai and watched him crash onto the ground. She looked over at Xena when she fell onto her hands. "Xena," she whispered. The blood loss count was heightening and she was weakening.

The Warrior Princess was still fighting her enemies. She glanced over and saw all the blood coming out of Gabrielle's side. "Gabrielle!" she screamed.

That's when the warrior-bard fell to the ground and went unconscious. Her blood soaked into the grass.

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Gabrielle groaned and opened her eyes. She stared up and noticed she was inside. She

stared up at the ceiling having really recognized it. She sat up and soon found a warm hand had pushed her back down.

"Lay down and rest, Gabrielle."

The small woman peered up into amber eyes. "Ephiny?"

The regent smiled at her Queen. "Welcome back... pun intended."

"Am I in the..."

"Village, yes." Ephiny lost her smile. "Xena brought you to us."

"Oh gods, where's Xena?" Gabrielle spotted Eilis, the healer, joining them.

"She's not here," whispered the regent.

Gabrielle furrowed her eyebrows. "What? Where is she?"

"We... we don't know, Gabrielle." The regent could see the franticness come to life in Gabrielle.

"I gotta see her... have to find her." The Amazon Queen began sitting back up.

The regent pushed her Queen back down. "No, Gabrielle," she growled. "You need to rest more."

"I need to see Xena." Gabrielle struggled against her friend's hold even though she was too weak.

"Eilis, get me something to calm her down," she yelled.

The healer jumped over to her bag and pulled out a morphine. She knew that Gabrielle wasn't about to take an herb or drink any teas. This was pure desperate measures and pulled out a needle tipped with opium poppy.

"No, no." The small woman struggled more. "Please no, Ephiny," she screamed.

"You need your rest," yelled back Ephiny. She pinned down her friend by the shoulders. "Trust me."

Gabrielle growled. "Let go, Ephiny."

Eilis jumped over with the needle. She pricked her Queen on the side of the arm carefully.

The small warrior hissed but kept fighting.

Ephiny held on till she saw Gabrielle fall back to sleep. She sighed in relief and released her friend's shoulders. "Sweet Artemis... I should be glad she was weak there."

"I thought she was going to throw you across the room," stated Eilis.

"If she was in better shape, she would have." The regent shook her head. "I shouldn't have told her." She cursed herself.

"Gabrielle would have found out either way."

"I know and that was the worst time." Ephiny sighed and glimpsed at Eilis. "Thank you, I think everything will be okay."

The healer nodded and took her medicines. "Call me if you need me, Eph."

"Thank you again, Eilis."

"You're welcome." Eilis patted her friend's shoulder then left the Queen's hut.

Ephiny glanced back at Gabrielle. "Try to rest, my friend." She bent down and kissed Gabrielle's forehead. "You have a long journey ahead."

~*Part 2*~

"Xena?" she screamed and sat up in the bed in a flash. Her heart pounded.

Ephiny raced into the hut and found her Queen sitting in bed, breathing heavily, sweating, and fearful. "Gabrielle?" She came over instantly, sat on the bed, and pulled her friend in.

Gabrielle curled up in her friend's arms and cried softly. "Oh gods..." she whispered.

The regent rocked the smaller woman in her arms. "Just a nightmare, Gabrielle." She tilted her friend's head up. "Come on." She smiled lovingly.

The warrior-bard relaxed and shoved the nightmare away. She pulled out of the Amazon's arms. "Thank you," she uttered.

Ephiny brushed back her Queen's blond hair. "Okay?"

Gabrielle nodded and lifted herself up, she pressed her back against the headboard. "Yeah, I'll be fine."

"How's your side feel?"

The small woman sighed and actually inspected her side. "Looks good, just a huge scab." She chuckled. "Who did the stitches?"

"Xena," whispered the Amazon.

Gabrielle looked up slowly, waiting for more information.

The regent sighed and grasped her friend's hand. She squeezed tightly. "Xena brought you here, after some fight you two were in. She and Eilis took care of your wound then she... left." Her eyes dropped. "I tried to make her stay, Gabrielle." She lifted her eyes. "I tried to get her to at least tell me what was going on." She shook her head. "I haven't seen her that cold before." She paused. "What the Hades happened out there?"

The Queen combed her short hair with her fingers. "A lot," she whispered. She dropped her head against the headboard and studied her friend. "Xena is in love with me," she stated.

Ephiny smiled brightly at that. "Really?" She dropped the smile at picking up on what

may have happened. "You're... not?"

"I don't know," muttered the small woman. "Ephiny, I don't look at women like that."

"And you're our Queen?" Ephiny teased with a grin.

The Amazon Queen huffed. "Explains how I'm not a true Amazon." She shook her head and went serious. "Xena offered me a love relationship." She stopped there.

Ephiny gawked. "And you refused?" She got a nod in response. "Gabrielle, are you insane?" she whispered harshly. "Do you understand how many Amazons here would die to be with her?"

"Then they have a chance," replied the warrior-bard hotly.

The regent sat back and crossed her arms. She examined her friend's eyes, trying to read her. "You realize you refusing her is going to... destroy her."

"What?" Gabrielle shook her head. "We're still friends."

"Sure," agreed the Amazon. "But just think if you were Xena." She shrugged. "Madly in love with the person that saved you from darkness." She leaned towards Gabrielle. "Then you're refused by her." She corked an eyebrow. "You tell me how you'd feel."

Gabrielle gave no response.

"Exactly," stated the regent. She squeezed her friend's hand and released it. "Well, you have your morals to stand by." She shrugged. "You don't go in for same sex relationship, its understandable." She dropped the topic now, she decided Gabrielle had enough things to consider. "How about something to eat huh?"

"Yeah," muttered the small woman. "How about going to the food hut with me?"

"I'd be honor to accompany my Queen." The regent stood up and held a hand out.

The warrior-bard was helped out of bed and she found her boots and sais. She put her boots on then slipped her weapons in their home. She left the hut with her friend.

"Wooo, look who is out of bed!" teased Solari as she passed by. She stopped and grinned at her friend. "Look at that sweet thing, out of bed and strutting her queenly stuff around." She whistled.

Gabrielle laughed and shook her head. "Alright, I've heard enough, Solari." She smiled and gave her second in command a huge hug.

The second in command smiled at the end of the hug. "Good to see you back on your feet after the scare." She sighed. "Three days you've been out."

The Queen flashed a look at her regent for forgetting that detail.

Ephiny shrugged.

"Thank you, Solari." Gabrielle chuckled. "Good to be back."

Solari winked, squeezed her Queen's shoulder before having said, "Gotta get back to

patrol." She flashed a smile and waved. She strolled off.

"Three days?" growled Gabrielle.

"Hey, what do you expect? Two minute recovery these days?" Ephiny huffed and continued the journey for the food hut.

They went inside together and found some food. They sat together and ate silently at first.

Gabrielle glanced at her friend. "I'm going to go find Xena."

Ephiny nodded. "I know." She sighed. "Wait till tomorrow, at least."

The Queen was about to protest.

"Please." Ephiny sighed and added, "Just relax today and tomorrow go after her. You can take some horses and Amazons."

"I don't need any Amazons to come," stated the Queen. "I go solo if I don't have Xena."

"Not this time," growled the regent. She calmed down and uttered, "After what just happened and the gods only know what state of mind Xena is in." She narrowed her eyes. "Three Amazons will go with you for protection. Either they return without you knowing you're safe with Xena. Or you return here with them. Is that clear?"

Gabrielle blinked at the way the regent put her foot down. *That crown has gotten too big on her head. No, her love for me has gotten protective.* "Alright," whispered the small woman.

"Thank you." The regent's voice was sincere.

The pair ate silently for the rest of the meal.

Gabrielle, after breakfast, returned to her hut. When she came in, she noted, for the first time, her old scroll bag. She went over to it and opened it. All her scrolls were inside then she noticed one with a red ribbon tied around it. She became confused and pulled it out. Her hand, having held the scroll, warmed as if her body knew who held the scroll last.

She sat down and unrolled the scroll with her body shaking. She instantly knew whose handwriting it was, not hers. Her eyes focused on the letter, before her, and she read carefully.

Gabrielle,

I apologize that I am not there with you right now. I have only one reason as to why I am not there with you. The one reason I never imagined would be. As you know, I am truly in love with you and have offered my heart and soul to you. You've decided to decline the... offer.

Gabrielle stopped reading and paused. She breathed calmly, trying to gain control over her emotions. She swallowed before returning to Xena's letter.

I've respected your wishes not to do anything... intimate with you. I understand that you must stand beside your beliefs. That is your decision. Now, I am asking you to respect my wishes. My wishes are for you to not seek me out. I cannot stay beside you, knowing what I know... knowing what we know about each other. It is too much of a slap in a face to look at you each day, knowing you don't feel the same way. As I said, respect my wishes to not come after me, it'd be too dangerous anyway.

Stay with your Amazons. Remember, I'll always love you. You saved me from the darkness inside. I owe you my life. Please never forget our friendship.

Love,
Xena

Gabrielle let the tears go down her cheeks. She slowly rolled up the scroll while her head bobbed. "Have I ever listened to you, Xena?" she whispered and squeezed the scroll with all her strength.

~*~*~*~

"Get in here, you two." Ephiny went serious and sat down on the corner of her desk.

Eponin and the second in command closed the door and shuffled over.

"What's up, Eph?" asked Solari.

"I need you two to do some... instigating."

"Ooooh, I like the sounds of this." Solari grinned evilly and winked at Eponin.

The weapons master chuckled and glanced back at the regent. "What you need?"

Ephiny folded her arms. "Tomorrow Gabrielle is going to leave with three Amazons to find Xena." She paused. "I want you two to go." She breathed deeply then went to the key element of her idea. "Now, what I need you both to do, starting tonight till when you find Xena, is stay on top of Gabrielle."

The two Amazon exchanged curious glances.

Ephiny chuckled. "What I mean is, stay close to Gabrielle physically." She grinned. "Let her get to know what its like being near women."

Solari laughed and asked, "Does she have a female species fetish?"

The regent huffed. "Yes, actually."

"Now, how'd we get her for our Queen?" joked Eponin.

The three Amazons laughed together briefly but went back to the topic on hand.

"Look, I'm serious," stated the regent. "I want you both to touch her a lot." She sighed. "Brush her shoulders, ruffle her hair, lean on her, touch her stomach, and thighs but lightly." She paused. "Nothing intimate or seeming to be intimate like kisses or lingering touches." She shrugged. "If she asks why you're being so touchy feely say its an Amazon thing."

"Ain't that the truth." Solari snickered.

Ephiny chuckled and said, "Just get her gone. I want her head turning towards women... she's never taken a look at women before."

"Oooh this is some good instigating." The second in command laughed deeply. "This is going to be fun."

"Trying to get Gabrielle to join the dark side?" teased Eponin. "If Solari and I convert her, do we get a free sword?"

The regent laughed hard and shook her head. "I'll give you both two days off from patrol."

"I'm up for this." Solari looked at the weapons master.

"I'm game." Eponin grinned. "Two days off sounds good and all we have to do is touch a sexy woman." She laughed.

"But I am serious about this," stated Ephiny sternly. "I think she likes women, and doesn't want to see that about herself." She straightened up off the desk. "If you see that she doesn't respond at all, leave it be, then we know the truth. But if Gabrielle starts responding and enjoying it then we know she doesn't just like men." She paused before asking, "Is this clear you two?"

Eponin and Solari nodded.

"We know," stated Solari. "It's a pretty serious thing."

"Exactly," agreed Ephiny. "A few jokes are good but we three know damn well know how this works."

"Hmmm, not a torch you can light and unlight," mumbled Eponin.

Ephiny nodded. "Well if my assumptions are right, Gabrielle should show response to you both."

Solari was shaking her head. "That's what I don't understand. Why would she never consider being with another woman, considering who she travels with." She raised an eyebrow. "You'd think she would have thought about it at least."

"Maybe she has," suggested the weapons master. "I mean think about it, Solari." She shrugged. "She was raised in a village where they never mention those things... scorn same sex relationship. If she was raised here, it may be different since its perfectly normal." She shrugged. "Either she doesn't really like women or she's just in denial because of social standards."

"I agree," said Ephiny. She folded her arms. "Let's put this to the test." She raised an eyebrow. "Remember this isn't... converting her... it's not like a religion."

Solari chuckled but nodded. "We know, we'll see what we can do."

"Perfect." Ephiny grinned. "So touch her, wink at her, flatter her, flash smiles, twinkle your eyes, and strut those feathers. Understood?" Her grin fell. "But be careful."

Eponin and Solari nodded and chuckled quietly.

~*~*~*~

Gabrielle sat down and began eating dinner.

Ephiny came over and sat down across from her friend. "How are you doing?"

The Queen shrugged. "Alright."

"Ready to leave tomorrow?"

The small woman nodded. "I'm past ready." She peered up. "Who's coming with me?"

"Eponin, Solari, and Eilis."

"Eilis?"

The regent nodded. "Incase anybody gets hurt."

The warrior-bard didn't respond to that, she just went back to eating.

Eponin nodded at Solari.

Solari wiped away the evil grin and strolled over to the table with the weapons master. She sat on one side of Gabrielle while Eponin sat on the other side.

Gabrielle watched her two Amazons sit down on either side. She noted how close they were and how their shoulders just brushed hers. "Hey you two."

"How are you?" Solari beamed a huge smile.

The Queen raised an eyebrow so slowly. "What's the huge ass smile about?"

"You know how Solari is." Eponin nudge her Queen. "She likes smiling at pretty women."

Solari rolled her eyes.

Gabrielle chuckled and shook her head. "Don't flirt with your Queen," she stated to Solari.

"Ooooh, is that a threat?" Solari nudge her Queen now. "Taken hmmm?"

"No." The warrior-bard smirked. "I'm just not... pure Amazon."

The two Amazons laughed together and grinned.

Ephiny was looking away, turning bright red. She stood up. "I gotta go." She left, ditched her dirty dishes, got out of the tent, and fell over laughing.

"What was that about?" asked Gabrielle. She shook her head.

Solari shrugged. "You know Eph, always gotta do something." She smiled warmly. "You hear we're coming with you tomorrow?"

The Queen sighed dramatically. "Wahoo, let me tell you." She shot a smug look at her

Amazons.

"Oh it won't be that bad." Solari wrapped her right arm around behind her friend's shoulders. She tugged her in close. "You'll llllove it."

"We promise," stated the weapons master. She stood up with her empty plate and reached over. She ruffled Gabrielle's hair before strutting off to get more food.

Solari released her friend and dropped her hand down. She pretended to accidentally touch Gabrielle's thigh before placing her hand in her own lap. "So, do you know where we're going tomorrow?"

"I think Amphipolis first."

The weapons master came back but this time sat across the table where Ephiny had. "Where to first?"

"Amphipolis," replied Solari.

Eponin nodded and stretched her legs out. Her legs brushed against Gabrielle's. "You think she'll be there?"

"I don't know," stated Gabrielle. "Hoping so, or hoping she at least passed through." She shrugged. "Best place to start."

Eponin nodded in agreement. She lifted on leg over and now had both Gabrielle's legs between hers. She let her legs both brush Gabrielle's.

The Queen arched an eyebrow at the eating Amazon. "Try to take my foot space?"

Solari snickered and leaned towards her Queen. She brought her warm lips close to Gabrielle's ear. "She likes to flirt," she whispered sensual. Just faintly, Solari let her lips brush Gabrielle's ear before she pulled back.

"I heard that," growled the weapons master.

Gabrielle had turned red between the comment and Solari's faint touch. She gazed at her weapons master. "Ep doesn't flirt." She grinned.

"Yeah, what the Queen said." Eponin stuck her tongue out at Solari.

"Don't stick that tongue out unless you plan to please with it," joked the second in command.

"Ooooh gods." Gabrielle lifted her arms on the table and dropped her head down. "This is going to be along adventure to find Xena."

"Buck up." Solari reached down and patted her Queen's stomach. "At least Masika isn't coming with us." She grazed her hand across Gabrielle's stomach before pulling away.

"Rrrright." Gabrielle rubbed her stomach, trying to remove the heat Solari developed there. "I'd rather go with a grumpy, old Amazon right about now than you two."

Eponin laughed. "Nah, we're more fun."

"Yup," agreed the second in command. She placed her right hand on Gabrielle's back and began rubbing it. "We'll keep you chipper." She grinned across at Eponin.

The weapons master grinned evilly and chuckled at how much Solari was instigating.

"Mmm." Gabrielle moaned softly. "That feels good."

"Yeah?" Solari perked up with an evil grin. "You know, Ep gives these great back massages."

The weapons master took the cue. She stood up and came around. She grasped her Queen's shoulders and whispered with a deep, silky voice. "Sit up."

The second in command removed her hand and watched Gabrielle sit up.

The warrior-bard felt strong hands grasp her shoulders and begin massaging them.

By now, the food hunt had been cleared, nobody around and everybody headed back to patrol duty or to their own huts. So here in the center of the room was just these three rooms. It let Gabrielle feel comfortable somewhat.

Eponin continued massaging the small woman's strong shoulders. Even this woman intoxicated her.

Solari watched Gabrielle close her eyes slowly and relax into the feeling. She broadened her grin. "Lean back into Ep," whispered the second in command sensually.

The weapon master flashed a glare. But none the less, she felt Gabrielle's strong, warm back press into her stomach. She held down her moan and continued massaging the Queen's shoulders.

Solari tried calming down. *Nothing intimate... nothing intimate*, she reprimanded herself.

Eponin lowered her hands and massaged Gabrielle's upper back, working the area over the shoulder blades and in between.

The small warrior was just lost in the feelings streaming through her body. She could feel Solari's eyes on her and she realized she had all the attention right now. She grinned. *They like what they see*, she realized with a satisfied feeling.

The weapons master brought her hands down farther. Now she worked Gabrielle's mid back.

Solari just stared at the Queen. She was beyond tempted to just lean over and... kiss her passionately. But she knew the rules and knew the price if she did. She knew that Xena already took Gabrielle even if the warrior-bard didn't agree. Death was not on her list of to do.

Eponin came to Gabrielle's lower back and massaged over the lower torso muscles. She tried controlling her breathing from taking the perfect woman. She clamped her jaw down and finished the massage but trailing her fingertips up Gabrielle's back. She leaned forward and whispered into Gabrielle's ear. "You're done."

"Thanks," uttered the Queen. She opened her glossed eyes. "Not bad."

The second in command chuckled "Not bad." She huffed. "Ep is the best massager around this village."

Eponin laughed deeply. "Yup." She grinned. "Ready to head back to your hut?"

"Yeah, we're getting an early start tomorrow." Gabrielle shifted out of the seat and stood up.

Solari got her Queen's plate and sauntered off with her own and Eponin's.

The weapons master and Gabrielle waited over by the door.

Solari came over and left with the group.

The Amazons accompany their Queen to her hut, wished her a goodnight with a hug and kisses to the cheek.

Gabrielle went inside, closed the door, and leaned against it. "Ooooh gods." She sighed and slid down the door.

Solari and Eponin strolled along together.

"That was close," whispered Solari.

"Uh huh." The weapons master sighed. "Too close." She shivered up and down.

"Gods, she's intoxicating."

Solari laughed it off. "This is going to be harder than we thought."

Eponin laughed deeply. "We'll be fine." She grinned. "Just more careful."

"Yeah, I know I don't want my head lobbed off by Xena."

The weapons master was silent for a second then said, "You know, if this works out right it means Xena and Gabrielle will get together." She put her hands behind her back while walking.

Solari smiled softly at that. "I hope so," she whispered. She grinned. "That's what Eph is planning."

"Let's just hope we catch Xena in time and awaken Gabrielle before hand."

The second in command nodded. "I don't think we can... awaken Gabrielle but at least whisper words in her ears."

Eponin chuckled. "True, Xena would be the only one that can awaken her with a kiss." She sighed. "That's where the love is."

"Yup, the love between them can break her denial," stated Solari with a grin. "That's what she needs."

Eponin grinned back.

~*Part 3*~

"Are you ready?" asked Ephiny

"I think so." Gabrielle came out of her bathroom and stretched. "Ep, Solari, and Eilis ready?"

"Yes and getting some horses together."

"Good, time to find my soul mate." The Queen walked over to the table.

Ephiny's eyes widened. She grabbed her Queen's arm and whirled her around. "Excuse me?" She narrowed her eyes. "Did you say... soul mate?"

The warrior-bard blinked. "Yes."

The regent shook her head. "How can you say?" She leaned towards her friend. "You're just her friend... remember?"

Gabrielle stiffened up. "She is my soul mate too. Xena and I have known about that for a year."

Ephiny grasped her friend's shoulders. "Listen to yourself, will ya?" She shook her head. "You're calling Xena your soul mate, something eternal, and you can't even have an intimate relationship with her?" She laughed lowly. "I can't believe that." She paused. "You have no problem calling her your soul mate but if it comes to a lover ooooh no. Don't want to hear it." She released Gabrielle's shoulders. "You should think that one out." She went to the door.

"Ephiny, it is possible to have a soul mate and not be physical with them."

"No it is not." The regent studied her Queen. "If you're her soul mate then you'd have an endless amount of love. And that love you would try your hardest to show to her in any way, shape, or form." She opened the door. "You can't be her soul mate if you don't want to be her lover." She left the hut and closed the door quietly behind.

Gabrielle sighed, grabbed her stuff, and left the hut. She headed for the stables and found her Amazons waiting with horses. "Ready?"

The three Amazons nodded.

Solari handed her Queen the reins for her horse. "You ready?"

"Yeah," whispered Gabrielle. "Got a leather-clad warrior to find." She grinned half heartily.

The second in command squeezed her friend's shoulder before mounting her horse.

Ephiny strolled up behind Gabrielle. "Why don't you three go ahead, I need to talk to Gabrielle alone."

The Amazon nodded, already mounted, and they signaled their horses to head out.

"Look, I'm sorry about earlier Gabrielle." The regent sighed when her friend faced her. "It's just hard to understand... for me."

"What?" Gabrielle tilted her head. "Why somebody like me, so close to Xena, won't

jump her?"

"No," whispered the regent. "I can't understand why you're scared."

"I'm not," stated the Queen. "I just do not look at women like I do men." She shrugged. "Simple as that."

"What's the difference, Gabrielle, other than the body?" The Amazon sighed when she got no response. "I'd never guessed you to be biased." She shrugged. "Almost makes me feel unclean," she uttered.

"Ephiny." The warrior-bard grabbed her friend and hugged her. "I have nothing against it, you know that." She pulled back and kissed her regent's forehead. "You know I love you like a sister. You're important to me... even if you eye women." She grinned.

The regent grinned back. "Good." She sighed. "You know, if I were you... I'd at least give it a chance with Xena."

Gabrielle opened her mouth but Ephiny cut her off.

"I know... I know those morals." The Amazon sighed deeply. "Just try something new, it would do anything wrong. You'd figure out more about yourself." She paused. "Well its up to you."

"Thank you." The small woman smiled.

"Just one thing?"

Gabrielle corked an eyebrow.

"Have you ever kissed a man?"

The Queen laughed at the question. "Of course."

The regent put her hands on her hips. "A woman?"

The small woman gulped. "Nope." She suddenly tensed up when Ephiny grasped her sides and leaned in and kissed her deeply. She was so shocked, she didn't respond. Then she was going to refuse but couldn't help but return the kiss. She moaned faintly and encircled the regent's waist. Reality grabbed her and pulled her back with a good struggle. Gabrielle pulled away and stepped back.

Ephiny was left breathless and trying to calm her body. *I think I just broke her safety zone rules.*

Gabrielle shook her head and gained control. "Well... that was new."

The Amazon grinned and chuckled. "Sorry, slip of the lips."

"Right." The warrior-bard grabbed her horse's reins and mounted. "You were just saying, 'goodbye' right?"

The regent chuckled and nodded. "Exactly." She came over and patted he friend's ankle. "Be safe huh?"

"I'll try." Gabrielle turned her horse around. "Thanks for your help, Eph." She grinned. "And the kiss."

Ephiny laughed and grinned momentarily. "Just find Xena huh? She needs you... more than you realize, I think."

The Queen nodded and kicked her horse into a gallop. She disappeared out of the village and in hopes to catch up with her Amazons.

The regent watched her go. "Well, that sheds some light on her denial." She grinned. "I'll just pray Xena never finds out." She chuckled and went back to her duties.

~*Part 4*~

Gabrielle entered the inn first followed by her three Amazons. "Cyrene?" She glanced around in the empty tavern. She went to the kitchen door and opened it. "Cyrene?" She poked her head in.

Cyrene looked up from her cooking with a smile but dropped the smile upon seeing who it was. "Gabrielle?"

"Hi, do you have some time?"

"Of course, sweetie." The innkeeper forgot about her cooking and came out. She saw the three Amazons.

"Um, these are some of my Amazons." The Queen held out a hand to her second in command. "This is Solari, then Eponin, and Eilis."

"Please to meet you three."

The Amazons smiled back and nodded.

"Can we talk, Cyrene?" questioned the small warrior. "We've been looking for Xena."

Cyrene rubbed her hands on her apron and said, "She's... been through here. Its best we talk alone, sweetie."

"We'll... go take care of the horses," suggested Solari. "Go ahead." She smiled softly at her Queen.

"Thanks," whispered Gabrielle.

The Amazons left the tavern.

After they were gone, Cyrene pulled Gabrielle instantly into a powerful hug. "How are you, sweetie?" She rocked her body with Gabrielle's.

This point broke Gabrielle, she fell into strong sobs in the woman's arms.

"Ssssh, sweetie." The older woman held tightly onto Gabrielle. "Everything will be fine."

The warrior-bard straightened up and wiped her eyes. "Sorry, this... this been a stressful week." She laughed bitterly.

"Let's sit down." Cyrene walked over to a table and pulled one out for Gabrielle.

The short warrior sat down, facing the innkeeper. "Xena has been here?" She sniffed and wiped her eyes again to get the fuzziness out.

"Briefly to say hi." The older woman took Gabrielle's hand. "What happened, sweetie?" She squeezed the small hand. "Xena wouldn't tell me but I have my ideas."

"It was just crazy." Gabrielle shook her head. "I haven't had time to think about it all." She took a deep breath. "How was she?"

"Dark, very dark."

"Oh gods..." Gabrielle stared at the floor.

"Sweetie, talk to me." Cyrene got the young woman's attention again. "I couldn't reach Xena but if I can reach you then you can reach Xena."

Gabrielle nodded slowly. "Alright."

~*~*~*~

"You didn't even give her a chance?" whispered Cyrene.

The small woman shook her head and really did feel small now. "No," she uttered.

Xena's mother squeezed Gabrielle's hand. "Sweetie, I understand morals or preferences." She paused. "But I also know you." She smiled softly. "You're the kind of person that looks beyond the body. Sweetie, you give people chances at anything." She sighed. "Have you changed that much over the year? You're failing to tell something here."

Gabrielle slumped in her seat.

"What is it, Gabrielle?"

The warrior-bard closed her eyes. "Cyrene, you know society."

"Oh hog wash." The innkeeper shook her head. "Don't tell me this is what its about?" She released the younger woman's hand after patting it. "Society is nothing when it comes to love."

The short warrior sat up. "Cyrene, I have... I have those morals placed in me. Not to be with another woman." She paused. "I can't get rid of them."

"Yes you can if you want too." The tavern owner sat back in her chair. "Besides that, society already thinks you and Xena are lovers."

Gabrielle gawked. "You're... kidding me?"

Cyrene chuckled. "Sweetie, you must have heard the rumors?" She grinned. "I certainly do." She lost the grin. "Two women traveling alone together, neither with a man, and both willing to risk their lives for each other... over friendship? It doesn't sound right. Over love sounds right."

The small warrior huffed.

"Please, give it a chance." Cyrene shrugged. "Give Xena a chance, give yourself a chance and forget about society for once. What do you have to lose now?" She made her expression more pleading. "Try it for me, sweetie. If you don't take Xena then the darkness will take her." She paused as the fear came over her. "I can't lose my daughter to the darkness again."

Gabrielle slowly nodded. "I know," she whispered. She peered up. "And you're telling me, you wouldn't get disgusted by something like that?"

"About you and Xena being together?" Cyrene shook her head. "Never, not when there's so much love between you two." She sighed. "Stop here, Gabrielle, forget about social standards. Think only about how you feel for my daughter." She took the warrior's small hands. "Do you wish to be with her? To show her all the love you have for her?" She leaned towards the warrior. "Do you feel complete around her and only her?"

Gabrielle smiled sadly and nodded. "Yes, I mean even in the first second our eyes met. It was amazing." She chuckled. "And she's so damn beautiful, it just blows my mind." She grinned. "Have ever seen her smile where it just lights up her eyes?"

Cyrene chuckled. "Of course."

"I get those every time she looks at me." The warrior-bard fell into her emotions. "We could be surrounded by tons of people and she'd be the only person I'd see or hear." She shivered right there in the seat over the thoughts.

Cyrene smiled at the sight. She released the small hands. "Well sweetie, I think its high time you rethought your preference." She smiled softly. "Decided whose preference it really is... yours or society's?"

Gabrielle nodded slowly. "Yeah." She smiled. "I will." She paused. "I don't know how I'll do it."

"Ask Xena," suggested Cyrene. "She'll help you and you know that."

The Amazon Queen nodded. "Just got to find her." She stood up.

"You will, just follow your heart." The mother smiled. "I'm glad you came."

"Thanks for the talk." Gabrielle chuckled. "You shed some light on the subject."

"That's what mothers are for." Cyrene smiled and gave the younger woman a strong hug and whispered, "Find her and yourself."

"I will," whispered back the warrior.

~*~*~*~

The small warrior cracked up laughing and she fell back in her seat.

Eponin and Solari laughed hard too.

Solari leaned back in her seat and rest her hand on her Queen's thigh. She settled

down and patted her friend's thigh. "But it was true."

Gabrielle nodded and wiped the tears away from her eyes.

The weapons master gazed around in the tavern again.

They had left Amphipolis and traveled in the direction Cyrene said Xena left in. Now they were in a small village, it was dark, and they decided to stop for the night. They all had a room together and Eilis was back in the room, resting. This bunch went into the tavern to drink and eat.

Solari stood up. "I'm going to get some more drinks." She strolled off.

"I wonder if she knows what to get?" muttered the weapons master.

As if on cue, Solari returned with a silly grin. She put her hands on the table, leaned forward, and locked her dark brown eyes on Gabrielle. "I forgot, what do you want... to drink?"

Gabrielle had tried chuckling but couldn't from the amount of cleavage she saw in front of her face. "Well..."

The door of the tavern opened and somebody stepped in.

"HMMMM?" Solari lowered her chest more; she revealed more cleavage.

Could you be more noticeable, Solari? Wondered the weapons master.

"Solari!" boomed a deep, angry voice.

The three women at the table stopped breathing.

Solari closed her eyes and felt her pulse race and her body shook. Slowly, she turned her head to the left towards the door.

Xena stood there with flashing, navy, blue eyes. Her upper lip twitched and her eyes narrowed.

"Oh no," whispered Eponin.

The second in command rose up and waited for her payment to come.

The warrior came through the tables with her anger growing as she neared. She came right up to the second in command, grabbed her by the neck, lifted her up, and slammed her against the wall.

Eponin and Gabrielle jumped up.

"Xena, no."

All the people in the tavern went silent at the scene before them.

"Xena," yelled the warrior-bard. She grabbed the warrior's arm trying in hopes to control her. "Let go of Solari."

Solari dangled her feet and had tried gasping through the hold on her neck. She

wrapped her hands around Xena's hand and closed her eyes.

Gabrielle looked deep into haze blue eyes and picked up on the scent of ale. *Oh no, she's been drinking.* "Xena, please let her go," she whispered.

"I've seen her on top of you for the past few days you've been traveling," Xena growled lowly. "I'm sick of it."

"You think this'll solve anything?" The Amazon Queen squeezed her partner's arm. "Please, Xena." She tried to think frantically over this. "You're going to kill my Amazon because she was flirting over something that's not yours?"

The Warrior Princess's grip on Solari loosened some.

"Xena, let her go," she said soothingly. "I know you're confused and you're not sober so you can't think straight." She paused. "Just trust me, please... let her go."

Solari fell to the floor in a heap.

"Thank you," whispered the short warrior.

Xena turned to Gabrielle. "I told you not to follow," she growled.

"Have I ever listened to what you say?" she joked faintly.

The warrior wasn't about to laugh. "You've disrespected my wishes." She lowered her head closer. "Take your Amazons and go back to the Nation." She narrowed her eyes. "You're looking for something that's gone."

"I don't believe that," stated Gabrielle. "I don't believe the person I love has just disappeared in that mass of darkness."

Eponin quietly moved over to Solari and helped her while having listened to the conversation of the warriors.

The warrior shook her head and just ignored Gabrielle. She had begun walking off.

"No you don't." Gabrielle jumped and grabbed her friend's hand. "We need to talk."

"We're done talking."

"No we're not." The warrior-bard squeezed the large hand. "Xena... if you truly love me you'll give me another chance." She shook her head as a few tears came down her cheeks. "Gods please, just give me another chance," she begged in pain.

Xena dropped her head back and closed her eyes. She breathed deeply then squeezed Gabrielle's hand. She looked back down at her. "Alright," she whispered.

Gabrielle smiled sadly and then whispered, "Where are you staying?"

"Across town."

The Queen turned around to her Amazons. "I'm going to stay with Xena tonight." She saw the objects coming. "Queen's orders." She grinned. "Go stay with Eilis and I'll catch you two tomorrow." She nodded at Solari. "How's the neck?"

"I'll be fine."

The weapons master gave a reassuring smile. "Go Gabrielle, she's yours." She winked.

The short warrior nodded and turned back to her partner. "You ready?"

"Yeah," whispered the warrior. She signaled Gabrielle to go.

The small woman walked through the tavern with Xena behind her. She went outside and folded her arms against the cold chill in the air.

Xena walked beside her but she was in a bit of daze from all the ale in her system. "How are you doing?" she whispered.

"Been better." Gabrielle rubbed her arms and moved closer to her friend, hoping to feel some of the heat radiating from Xena.

The warrior noticed this and sighed. She lifted her right arm around Gabrielle's shoulders and pulled her in. "How's the wound?"

"Almost healed."

"Good." Xena couldn't feel the cold, since the amount of ale she had drunk tonight and the other nights. "You've been tracking me for a few days."

"Three days," whispered Gabrielle. "You were there the entire time?"

"I was watching, yes." The Warrior Princess grinned briefly. "Watching over you."

Gabrielle chuckled and smiled. "Never fail to protect me." She dropped her head at the statement.

Xena gazed up and spotted her inn. "I'm going to need your help getting up the stairs," she admitted quietly.

"That bad?"

"Yes, things are spinning and fuzzy."

"Oh great." Gabrielle saw the steps coming ahead to get into the inn. "Wrap your arm around my waist."

The older woman did just that and felt Gabrielle's arm come around her own waist.

Carefully, they took their time up the steps. Then into the inn they went to another set of stairs.

"Next time you plan to get drunk, stay at an inn on level ground."

Xena actually chuckled at the joke. "I'll try to put that on top of my list next time." She had kept climbing up the stairs slowly. "Mmmm, I wonder how long it would have taken me on my own."

"You wouldn't have made it." Gabrielle grinned. "You'd passed out on the steps."

The warrior huffed.

"Okay, which room?" Gabrielle glanced down the hall.

The Warrior Princess closed her eyes, she thought. "Not... sure." She opened her eyes and watched things spin. "I think... third."

This is bad. Gabrielle sighed at the thought and went down the hall. She opened the third door and spotted Argo's saddlebag. "Good call." Having led Xena to the bed, she made the warrior sit down. "I'll get your armor off."

"It's okay I-" She was silenced by Gabrielle's hand over her mouth.

"Just be silent, relax, and let me take care of you. Got me?"

Xena nodded slowly and felt the hand leave.

Gabrielle came around the bed, sat down, and had begun taking the armor off.

The warrior closed her eyes so she didn't have to watch things spin and focus then unfocus.

"You think you can hold down the ale tonight?"

"Yes," whispered the warrior.

Gabrielle stood up and carried the armor and weapons over to the table. She came back over, knelt down and took her friend's boots off.

"Are we going to talk?" asked the warrior.

The small woman chuckled. "Yes but tomorrow when you're all here."

Xena grinned briefly then lost it. "Why'd you come after me?"

Gabrielle picked up the boots while having stood, she leaned forward and kissed Xena's forehead. "Because I love you," she whispered.

The warrior opened her eyes and watched her partner put the boots under the table.

The warrior-bard came back over and pushed Xena's chest. "Lay down, get some sleep."

The older woman moved down the bed and felt Gabrielle pull the covers over her.

The small woman came around the bed and sat down, untying her boots. She then crawled into bed and half laid on Xena.

The Warrior Princess felt the warm body on hers, she couldn't ignore it even in her dazed state. "Why are you sleeping on me?" she asked quietly yet she wrapped her arms around Gabrielle.

"Because you need it," Gabrielle answered then paused before adding, "And because I need it." She lifted her head and met blue eyes. "Tomorrow, okay?"

Xena sighed, knowing her partner was right. "Go to sleep."

The warrior-bard chuckled and closed her eyes.

The older woman slipped her eyes shut and drifted off, she was content with her friend in her arms.

~*Part 5*~

Xena came out of her dreams and a pounding head greeted her. "Oh gods," she mumbled. She couldn't remember a thing, well a few things. She recalled almost had killed Solari, Gabrielle carrying her up a number of steps, and... going to bed with Gabrielle in her arms. Slowly, she opened her eyes and peered down. She smiled at the sight of Gabrielle sleeping contently on her.

"Go back to sleep," grumbled Gabrielle.

"Oh?" whispered the warrior.

"Yes, or I'll yell and I know you won't like it." The small warrior adjusted her body more onto Xena. "This is really comfortable anyway."

"Don't yell, whatever you do," whispered the warrior. She touched her pounding forehead.

The warrior-bard rubbed her partner's stomach. "You going to be okay?"

"Yeah." The warrior brought her hand onto Gabrielle's back. "Try and get more sleep."

"You better too."

Xena chuckled faintly and closed her eyes. She soon drifted back to sleep, as did Gabrielle. They slept for another good two candlemarks before they awoke to the late morning.

The warrior was the first to wake up. She decided to move a little, and sat up against the headboard a bit. She drew Gabrielle in cautiously. The feeling of having the small warrior in her arms was perfect, as she knew it would be. What she had yet to know was if it would be preeminent or if Gabrielle was doing this to humor her.

Xena studied her partner and ran her fingers through the blond hair. She sighed sadly while a sad smile slipped across her lips. After tilting her head, she studied the wound on Gabrielle's side. It was certainly almost healed over, still scared, and still red but it looked a lot better than when she left Gabrielle. Reaching out, she grazed the scab and felt how rough it was.

Gabrielle stirred now and tightened her arms around Xena. Lifting her head off the warrior's chest, she smiled at Xena. "How you feel?"

"A little better." The older woman grinned.

"Feel like talking?" The warrior-bard cocked an eyebrow.

The Warrior Princess removed her arms and said, "Yeah, let's get this over with."

The short warrior rolled off her partner and out of bed. She grabbed her boots and put them on. She walked over to the table and sat down in chair. She bent forward, tying her boots.

Xena sat up more against the headboard, not wanting to get up just yet. "Explain to me why you came?"

"A couple of reasons." Gabrielle finished tying her boots so she sat up and became serious. "Since I've been at the Amazon village, I've had Solari and Eponin on top of me."

The warrior corked an eyebrow.

The Queen rested back in her chair. "And I don't mean like that." She grinned and added, "They've been rather... touchy." She chuckled but stopped. "Xena, what I am saying is they've... broaden my horizons."

"Positively or negatively?"

Gabrielle grinned briefly. "That's the interesting part." She paused. "They've certainly shed some light in the darkness I've created." She shifted in her chair. "I can't deny what I like from you."

"And that is?"

"Your love." Gabrielle smiled warmly. "Your smiles, your eyes, your mind, your touch, and your soul." Her eyes glossed over. "You."

"Then you understand how I feel about you," stated Xena, "but of course we still have those morals."

"Exactly," whispered the small woman. "I wasn't following my morals." She shook her head. "I was following society's morals... traditions." She huffed. "That's the hypocritical thing I did. I left Potidaea so long ago so I could escape that but here I am still following them." She met Xena's sky eyes. "If you hadn't touched me earlier and showed me the other side, I wouldn't have opened my eyes." She stopped in thought. "I wish I'd know sooner..." she whispered.

"How much do you want now?" asked Xena with a deep voice.

Gabrielle got up from the chair and came over. She sat on the edge of the bed and collected Xena's hands into her own. "All of you." She paused. "Bit by bit till I become you and you are me." She squeezed Xena's hands. "But only if you want the same." She flashed a grin. "And if you can be patient with me."

"I'm the queen of patience."

The Amazon Queen rolled her eyes. "You have patience like I have no temper." She grinned and laced her hands with Xena's before smiling. "Yes or no?"

Xena lifted herself up and bent forward to place a kiss on Gabrielle's cheek. "Yes," she uttered. She sat back with a smile.

Gabrielle felt the tingle on her cheek. That was the sign she couldn't refuse, she didn't want to refuse. She released one of Xena's hands and placed it on the warrior's leather-clad stomach. Yes, her heart raced and her mind fought back the fears those words of society. Her love for the warrior roared up and fought against those traditions. It was time for Gabrielle to feel safe in this special love.

Xena saw the inward battle taking place. She waited, yes she would be patient. She held tightly to Gabrielle's hand. Then she decided to help Gabrielle and whispered, "I love you, Gabrielle."

The small warrior's lips eased into a brilliant smile and she came out on top. She leaned towards Xena and felt a warm hand snake around to her back.

The warrior kept a reassuring smile. A smile that said this was right and that she would see.

Gabrielle leaned in more with her left hand sliding more onto Xena's side. Her lips were so close, she could feel the heat from Xena. Could almost taste the warrior's lips and it sent a shock through her.

Xena's smile never faltered as she brought her hand up and brushed back Gabrielle's blond hair. Her hand returned to Gabrielle's back.

Gabrielle smiled warmly and finished the distance with her eyes closing.

The warrior's eyes closed on connecting with silky lips. Her right hand entangled in Gabrielle's hair in the back.

The Amazon Queen had all the control of the kiss. She kept it light with heat lips against consuming lips.

Xena opened her mouth in submission for her partner.

Gabrielle carefully slipped her tongue through and tasted more of Xena. Her tongue was met by Xena's in the passion. Her body screamed with shivers of desire.

Xena moaned softly while letting the younger woman explore her mouth. Gradually, she pressed onward and carefully glided her tongue into the other woman's mouth.

The warrior-bard greeted it in her own strong moan. She sensed her chest tightening from no air but she wanted more.

Xena sensed it and gave more for the last seconds. She knew herself now, there was no going back. She gave small moan and began pulling away.

Gabrielle did the same and smiled.

The Warrior Princess smiled back and didn't need to say anything.

The short warrior squeezed Xena's hand she still held. Moving, she laid down on Xena.

The older woman wrapped her arms around Gabrielle.

"This will take awhile," uttered Gabrielle.

"I know." Xena kissed her partner's forehead. "You have your fears to work through." She smiled. "I'll help, be part of the solution instead of the issue."

"No, you were part of the solution earlier." Gabrielle sighed. "If you hadn't left, I wouldn't have thought hard about it." She chuckled. "We'd still be tromping around

the world with me in denial about women."

"Oooh, so now you like women better?" teased the warrior.

"Well on the bases of what I can compare. You know how to kiss and know where to touch while the men I've known haven't." The Amazon Queen grinned but lost it. "It's just a matter of experience for me to decide."

"I'm the guinea pig too." Xena grinned. "I can't wait."

"You have such confidence." The small woman lifted her head with a smirk. "Why?"

Xena tilted her head and emotions floated in her eyes. "Because I can see I already have you." She smiled with care. "Wait till you see it all, you'll be amazed," taunted the warrior in sensual voice. She leaned forward and pressed her lips against her friend's forehead.

Gabrielle chuckled and rested her head back down on her partner's chest. "Thank you for understanding."

"For you, of course." The warrior grinned. "Anybody else I would have-"

"Blocked them out ten thousand leagues away." Gabrielle laughed deeply but went serious at a thought entering her mind. She sat up out of Xena's arms. "Why would you do that for me?"

"Because I love you, Gabrielle." The warrior had a worried look. "Please understand that above all." She shook her head. "Do you?"

"I do but still... you've loved other people and..."

"I know," whispered the warrior. "I've never shown them another chance." She sighed. "I can't explain it, it's just the way I feel about you." She paused. "Just like the way you felt when I died two years ago." She took Gabrielle's hands. "Or that moment I came back to life. The way you feel when I turn and smile at you. When we're in a crowd, I close in on you while you stand there waiting. You notice nobody but me and that feeling you have." She noticed Gabrielle closed her eyes in memory, those feelings washing over her. Xena sat up and leaned forward. Her lips brushed Gabrielle's. "You know how I feel, when this happens." She sealed her lips with the warrior-bard's.

Gabrielle chuckled after the kiss. "Oh yeah, you have me pegged."

"Good." The Warrior Princess smiled then released her friend. "Let's go find your Amazons before they think I did something to you."

The small warrior chuckled deeply. "Yeah." She got up out of the bed and grabbed her partner's armor.

Xena came over and felt her partner slip the armor on her. She began buckling one side while Gabrielle did the other side. "Thanks."

Gabrielle smiled when she came around and held out her friend's weapons.

The Warrior Princess put them in their places and brushed back her black bangs. "I

still have a headache."

"Hold on." The warrior-bard went to the saddlebags and dug through the medical kit. "Are we going to leave today?"

"Yeah if you're ready." Xena sat down and grabbed her boots. She slipped them on and laced them up. "I take it you want to head back to the Nation."

"I better, Ephiny was worried about everything." Gabrielle grinned while coming over with two white pills. "Especially about trying to... convert me."

The warrior stopped tying her boots and peered up. "What?"

The warrior-bard chuckled and squatted down. "I could tell she sicked Solari and Ep on me to see if I was in denial or if I really don't have an interesting in women."

Xena cocked an eyebrow. "Convert?"

Gabrielle dropped her shoulders. "Funny ha ha." She grinned. "Can't ya take a joke?"

The older woman smirked. "Of course." She went back to tying her boots. "So, you think they... converted you?"

"Oh so funny." The Queen sighed. "You realize it'll be a joke in the Nation for a lllong time."

"Uh huh." Xena sat up. "Ep and Solari will romp around saying they converted you to the dark side." She took the pills from Gabrielle.

"What is that?" Gabrielle sat down on the corner of the bed. "The dark side?" She grinned.

The warrior chuckled. "Probably their idea of a crack back on society." She shrugged.

"Probably." The small warrior chuckled but had begun thinking. "You know, it is a person's choice in the end."

"About their preference?" questioned Xena. She tilted her head back and popped the pills in and were swallowed.

"Yes... somewhat." The Amazon Queen paused. "Emotional and physical attraction it isn't their choice." She shrugged. "But it is the person's choice in the end who they go to bed with."

"They just may not like it," stated Xena with a small grin.

"Yeah really." The younger woman chuckled. "What about us and public?"

The Warrior Princess sighed deeply. "We'll keep this private right now, okay?" She paused. "Neither of us need that pressure for starts let alone you."

Gabrielle nodded in agreement. "Definitely." She grinned a little. "I have to admit though, you kiss a lot better than Ephiny."

Xena did a doubletake. "Ephiny?"

"Uh oh..." The small warrior cringed. "That was a real slip of the lips." She held up her hands momentarily. "I think she did it to just show me what a kiss with a female could be like."

The warrior arched an eyebrow. "And I'm suppose to believe this?"

Gabrielle looked hard and noticed her partner's blue eyes were twinkling. "Yesss." She mock glared. "You know she didn't mean anything by it."

"Uh huh." Xena laughed it off and stood up. She came over and stood tall. "Ready to go?"

"You're not going to do anything to Eph huh?"

"Nahhh." The older woman grinned.

The warrior-bard gave a skeptic look. "I'd hope not." She grinned back.

The warrior smiled softly. "Come on, let's go." She held out her hand.

Gabrielle took the large hand and felt herself hauled up. She couldn't help but notice the huge smile on her partner's lips. "You're really excited about this."

Xena nodded. "I am." She grinned. "Aren't you?"

The small woman weighed that and had to agree with a smile creasing her lips. "Yeah, I am too." She paused. "I'm just glad it is with you, feel safer."

"Good." The warrior kissed her partner's forehead then grabbed her saddlebag.

Gabrielle opened the door and waited.

The taller woman went out and heard Gabrielle follow behind. She came down the steps and went down them briskly. Her soul was revived and awakened by her new findings.

The warrior-bard saw the bounce in her friend's walk; it made her grin. Yet inside herself, she couldn't deny her excitement and the completeness.

Xena headed for the stable and found Argo. She left the saddle in the stall and came back out.

Gabrielle waited outside and had begun moving once Xena was out. They were silent on the way over but the physical talked more. At first she hadn't noticed, then Gabrielle picked up on the fact she had walked closer to Xena than normal. She chuckled at this.

"What?" asked the warrior.

"You aren't noticing?"

"How close we're walking together?" The warrior grinned.

Gabrielle looked up then nodded. "Yeah, exactly."

The Warrior Princess rubbed her friend's back for a moment and went up the steps for

the inn the Amazons were staying in.

"I hope this works out."

"It will," promised the warrior.

~*Part 6*~

Gabrielle came into the hut and groaned. "Gods, thought they'd never let us go."

"Really," grumbled the warrior. She shut the door roughly and put the saddlebags over on the table. She placed her weapons on the table.

The small warrior entangled her fingers in her hair. "They didn't stop with the questions. Gods!"

Xena grinned finally and turned around. "It's okay, they'll be off our backs for a few."

"You really believing that?" The Queen dropped her hands but her hair was still askew.

The Warrior Princess laughed quietly at the sight. She neared and ran her fingers through the blond hair, having straightening it out. "Yes because if they don't..." She didn't need to finish the sentence.

Gabrielle smiled at the protection. She shivered at the feeling and closed her eyes.

"Are you okay?" asked the concerned warrior. She grasped her partner's shoulders.

"Yeah." The Queen opened her mint green eyes. "I just like that."

The older woman raised an eyebrow in question. "The protection?"

"Uh huh."

Xena grinned and said quietly, "Wait till the ownership comes." She let go of her friend and strolled off.

"Hey, I don't remember signing any agreement about ownership." Gabrielle grinned at her joke.

"Not yet," responded the warrior. "Wait till later." She walked over to the bed and hopped on it. She stretched out her legs and crossed her one ankle over the other. She laid her head down on her hands and closed her eyes.

"Need to take naps in your old age?"

The warrior grinned and opened her eyes. "Yup, care to join?"

"Sure." Gabrielle climbed into the bed and had begun crawling over the larger body.

Xena grinned and grabbed Gabrielle's sides.

"Yaaaa!" The small warrior felt herself lifted up then tossed onto her back in the middle of the bed. Her body was then pinned down by Xena. "Alright, you're a little bigger than me, I don't think this is fair."

The Warrior Princess grinned while having held the small woman's wrists. "You just need to figure out how to control me."

"Well that's not possible." The younger woman grinned.

"Mmmm, you could if you wanted too."

Gabrielle thought then slowly smiled. "Lie down on me."

The warrior grinned and carefully lowered her body on top of the other woman's smaller frame.

The small woman felt the cool brass touch her skin and she shivered. She wrapped her arms around Xena and soaked in the feeling of having Xena's body entirely cover her.

Xena tucked her head into her partner's neck and whispered, "Comfortable?"

"Uh huh." The Queen sighed contently. "I feel pretty well safe."

The warrior chuckled but what she knew Gabrielle didn't realize, was that she kept some of her weight off the smaller woman. She wasn't about to put her full weight with armor on Gabrielle.

"So, tell me a little about two women."

Xena laughed softly and inquired, "What you want to know?"

"I don't know." Gabrielle shrugged. "How is it different compared with a guy... relationship wise?"

"Not much relationship wise." The warrior fell silent but added, "Maybe more emotional."

"Yeah that's true." The small warrior sighed sadly. "I'm nervous about this," she admitted quietly.

The warrior lifted her head. "Don't be." She reached up and brushed back blond bangs. "Just enjoy it."

"Yeah but I know how you feel about me, I'm freaked I'll hurt you."

Xena grinned. "Its hard to dent this warrior's armor."

Gabrielle shot a skeptical look. "Come now, we both know that's not true."

The older woman laughed quietly. "Alright maybe you can dent my armor out of anybody." She lowered her head and without warning, she rolled to her right and brought Gabrielle with her.

The Queen found herself on top of Xena now. "New view."

"Don't mind?"

"Oh no." Gabrielle crossed her arms on Xena's chest then lowered her chin. "This won't be easy."

Xena shifted her mind back to the topic earlier "No but it won't be hard as it could." She shaped a grin on her lips. "We do know each other... known for..."

"Four plus years," finished Gabrielle with a chuckle.

"Has it been that long?" whispered the warrior. "Huh, it has." She huffed and focused her attention back on her partner. "Four yours, so we know what each other is about."

"Oh come on." The Queen gave a questioning expression. "You can't tell me you're a little different as a..."

"Girlfriend," teased the older woman.

"Girlfriend, significant other, whatever you want to call it. But you can't tell me you won't treat me differently?"

"I will," agreed the warrior. "Everything is just heightened. My love, protection, ownership, my touch, everything."

Gabrielle grinned. "Even the jealousy?"

"Especially the jealousy," Xena joked back.

"Oh boy this spells trouble."

"Only for the people that..."

Gabrielle chuckled at the unfinished sentence. She closed her eyes and relaxed. "Dinner is going to be soon."

Xena sighed. "Yes and I didn't get my nap."

"Old woman," taunted the warrior-bard.

"Takes one to know one," teased back the warrior.

"Whatever," grumbled the small woman. "I'm young and full of life." She faintly yawned. "And I say this as I yawn."

Xena laughed and then had begun running her fingertips up and down the small woman's back.

"Mmmm that's nice." She laid her head down on her partner's chest. "Darn, there was something I wanted to say and can't remember what."

The older woman corked a grin. "Old woman."

"Sssh, don't tell me that... I'm just having a senior moment." Gabrielle licked her lips and tried to remember. "Oh gods I can't remember." She had started giggling. "This is sad."

Xena chuckled and closed her eyes. "You realize we'll need a plan for tonight?"

"Hmmm with the Amazons?"

"Uh huh."

"We'll stay here." Gabrielle had second thoughts. "No, my stomach won't let me."

"Nor will your Amazons."

"Xena, I'll just let you do whatever you want with them."

Xena evilly grinned. "Really?"

"As long as they're still alive." Gabrielle lifted her head. "Then again, you'd do something evil."

The tall woman batted her eyes. "Never."

"Cha'right." The younger woman lowered her head. "Mmm, you know it was funny what happened to us earlier."

"What was that?"

"When you tried jumping me from the trees and we ended up on top of each other." Gabrielle snickered. "I really jumped off you."

"I was about to have a heart attack." The warrior revealed. "I thought you were angry or I just plain did something wrong."

"Nah you did the right thing, I just didn't know it at the time." Gabrielle breathed deeply and relaxed again. "Kinda funny now."

"Wasn't at the time."

"It is now."

"Then it wasn't."

Gabrielle looked up and laughed. "Just admit its funny now."

Xena grinned. "If you admit it wasn't funny at the time."

"Oh gods." The warrior-bard groaned and dropped her head onto her partner's chest. "Stubborn," she taunted.

"Just like you."

Gabrielle huffed and moved her hands to push down on her friend's stomach. She found the stomach hard and solid. "I knew you had a hard stomach, but gods."

Xena opened her eyes again and grinned. "You're the one to talk."

"I know I have muscles but not like you." The warrior-bard pressed down again.

The warrior groaned like she was in agony.

The small woman glared but grinned as well.

Xena tweaked her lips with a loving smile.

Gabrielle smiled back and her eyes softened. She leaned down and kissed her partner

gently.

The Warrior Princess sighed contently. "Ready for dinner?"

"I think sso." The Queen rolled off her partner and bounced onto her feet.

Xena got up and went to the table. She clipped on her sword and hooked her chakram.

"I'm amazed," whispered Gabrielle. "My sais didn't bite you."

The warrior glanced back and chuckled because she just realized too that Gabrielle didn't removed her sais in the bed. "I'm lucky." She grinned.

"Sorry about that." The small warrior came over and hesitant, at first, but encircled the warrior's waist. She studied the older woman while having reached up to caress the warrior's face. Her eyes continually searched and she whispered, "You are really beautiful."

Xena smiled very warmly. "Not quite like you," she responded quietly. She lowered her head and whispered, "You're an amazing woman, Gabrielle. You do realize this?" She tilted the small woman's head up carefully with her fingertips under the Queen's chin.

"No," answered Gabrielle. "It must be in the eyes of my... beholder."

Xena smiled warmly and lowered her head closer. "I love you." She finished the distance and lightly kissed her partner.

Gabrielle smiled and only faintly because she had yet to return the sentiment Xena gives her. She knew the only reason she did not return it was because she felt like it would bind her to Xena. Was she prepared for that just yet? That was her wondering question inside.

The warrior could see this, and she wouldn't demand a thing from her partner. She would give the patience Gabrielle asked for with no argument. "Ready?"

"Yeah," whispered Gabrielle.

The Warrior Princess kissed her friend's forehead before leaving the hut.

The Queen followed behind and shut the door on the way out.

Together they walked along towards the food hut. Before they even made it there, they bumped into Solari.

The second in command shot the biggest smug look. "Looky looky, it's the girlfriends."

Gabrielle groaned and whispered to her best friend, "Hide me."

Xena grinned then glanced at the Amazon. "Solari, how's that neck?" She grinned while having rubbed her own in tease.

Solari coughed and cleared her throat. "Its fine." She grinned. "I'll take that as a hint." Her eyes focused on Gabrielle. "You know, Ep and I are pretty proud we got to

convert you."

The Queen's shoulders dropped. "Ha, ha." She glared. "I knew this was going to be a joke."

The second in command suddenly went serious. "Truthfully, we're glad you decided to be yourself... not listen to all the society ruckus." She smiled. "I know I'm happy about it, Eph was ecstatic... her feathers were flying high."

"Well, its not official," stated the Queen.

The Amazon corked an eyebrow and grinned. "You're telling me, you're gonna pass up somebody like Xena?" She peered up at the warrior.

The Warrior Princess just smirked back.

Gabrielle grabbed her second in command's shoulders. "No, but I just need to be comfortable." She squeezed the woman's shoulder and gave a small push while having released her.

The Amazon chuckled. "Right of course... something new; understandable."

The Queen grinned. "Thanks." She looked up at Xena. "Ready?"

The warrior nodded.

"We'll catch you at dinner, Solari."

"Yeah." The Amazon watched the couple went then she called, "We're having a party tonight!"

"Oh Hades!" yelled Gabrielle after having cringed.

~*~*~*~

Eponin slid down the log and bumped her side against her Queen. "How's it gone?"

Gabrielle grinned. "Alright, how about you?" She looked back at the fire.

"Not too bad." The weapons master drank a little of her ale and then asked, "How are you and Xena doing?"

"Ep, Xena and I haven't seen you in what... three candlemarks. Nothing much has changed."

"Yeah right," muttered the weapons master before having snickered.

The Queen rolled her eyes. "Talk about gossip central around here."

"Got that right," chided the Amazon. Suddenly, she felt strong hands slam down on her shoulders and squeeze roughly.

"Eponin, mind scooting down?" said Xena with a sweet voice. "I wouldn't mind sitting beside my partner."

The weapons master thought her shoulders would pop. "Yeah sure," she squeaked.

She stood up. "Take the whole log." She whirled around and grinned at the warriors. She tipped her mug at them and said, "Have a lovely evening." She snickered then strolled off.

"Gods I want to leave," muttered Gabrielle.

The warrior sat down and wrapped an around Gabrielle's waist. "Yeah?"

"Uh huh." The small woman rested her head on Xena's shoulder. "These guys are getting overly nosey, Xena."

The older woman sighed in agreement. "Want some personal space?" she whispered seriously.

"Yes, actually." Gabrielle closed her eyes. "Kind of uncomfortable with them all eyeing us twenty four seven."

The Warrior Princess crinkled her nose up. "Yeah, I agree." She lowered her head onto Gabrielle's. "We'll leave tomorrow huh?"

"Sounds good, thank you."

"You're welcome," whispered the warrior.

The small warrior stayed silent but then decided she wanted to feel more of Xena. So she shifted a little, having wrapped her arms around the warrior's body and dropped her head down on Xena's chest.

Xena smiled and kept her right arm secure around her partner. "How you feel?"

"Bit tired." Gabrielle grinned a little while having watched the Amazons ahead dancing around the fire, chanting. "I think I need to sit here and watch women dance."

The older woman laughed. "Broaden your horizons?" she teased.

"Exactly." The warrior-bard sighed after having a grin. "Who looks good up there?"

The warrior peered up and chewed on her lower lip. "That one." She pointed with free hand.

Gabrielle watched that Amazon for a moment and how she danced, the way she used her body. "She's good but... not as good as that one two behind her."

Xena's blue eyes flickered over to that Amazon. Yeah well, Xena had to agree, she hadn't noticed that Amazon. "She's definitely better."

"Mmm, she's pretty hot too," teased Gabrielle.

The warrior gave a skeptic look. "Now you're just saying that."

"Fine, I'll just go... kiss her. She wouldn't refuse the Queen." The Queen started standing up.

The darker woman grabbed Gabrielle's wrist at the last second while having stood up. "I don't think so." She grinned and pulled Gabrielle in. "Remember the jealous part?"

She cocked an eyebrow.

"Oooh, is it kicking in?" Gabrielle grinned.

"Very," said the warrior lowly. She stood tall, head tilted down, her cobalt eyes piercing, and brass armor flickering from the fire. Slowly, she shaped a grin onto her lips. "You don't want to make your girlfriend jealous."

The smaller warrior had cracked up laughing over the joke. "But you're so cute when you're jealous."

"I'm not cute," stated the warrior.

"You're cute," returned the small woman. "Very cute."

Xena huffed and rolled her eyes. She moved closer and encircled her friend's waist. "Only in the eyes of my... beholder."

Gabrielle grinned and was about to move in for a kiss but realized she was in public.

The warrior saw the hesitation. "Your call," she whispered.

"Oh Hades," growled the Queen. "We're with the Amazons." She reached up and pulled Xena's head down lower.

Xena's lips were captured in a passionate kiss. She drew the other warrior in closer, having tried to keep her feeling safe.

Gabrielle pulled away gradually and whispered, "That wasn't bad."

The Warrior Princess laughed deeply and smiled. "Nope."

The younger woman pulled Xena in and held her.

The tall woman had a soft smile while she held Gabrielle. She kissed the small warrior's temple. "I love you," she whispered. She sensed a smile from Gabrielle. "You want to head back?" She nuzzled her partner's neck. "I know you're tired after today."

"And considering us old folk had no sleep," teased the short warrior.

"Especially that."

Gabrielle chuckled and said, "I'm ready but I don't know if I'll make it to the hut." She kissed Xena's chest lightly because it felt right. "Darn tired."

Xena had begun shifting her arms.

The Amazon Queen found herself lifted up into her partner's arms. "Wooo, jeez." She laughed faintly. "This is new." She wrapped an arm around Xena's neck.

"I've done it before."

The warrior-bard grinned. "Yeah, when I was injured."

"Same difference." Xena shrugged and turned. She headed for their hut at a mild pace.

"I'm not that heavy."

"You weigh tons," Xena teased.

"Oh boy, there goes my confidence down to Tarturus."

The older woman laughed and kissed her friend's forehead. "I can feel the difference in weight since the last time I carried you, yes. You have a lot more muscles, Gabrielle." She grinned. "Muscle weighs more than fat."

"Really?"

"Uh huh." Xena grinned. "Odd huh?"

The Queen chuckled. "Yeah, kinda is." She glimpsed over and saw their hut. "Oooh think you can make it?"

"Sure, maybe I'll do some flips on the way over." The warrior suddenly found her partner clinging to her.

"I still hate heights."

The Warrior Princess laughed and neared the hut. "Mmm, remember when you almost fell into the lava pit?"

"Gods, how could I forget?" Gabrielle reached over and opened the door. "I wonder how Velesca is doing down there." She chuckled.

"I'm sure she's plenty warm." Xena went in, and kicked the door closed. She went over to the bed and laid Gabrielle down. She knelt down then untied her friend's boots.

"I can do that."

"It's alright." The warrior grinned. "So can I. Relax and go to sleep." She watched Gabrielle settle back down before having continued untying the boots. After having the boots off, she stood up and tossed them aside. She noted Gabrielle's eyes close and relaxing.

Xena went over to the table, took her weapons off, boots, and then armor.

Gabrielle the entire time watched. She studied the tall, dark, blue eyed warrior shift through the room with such power. Then she looked with her heart and saw nothing but pure love flowing off the warrior. Finally she searched Xena with her soul and saw the warrior was missing half her soul. Gabrielle knew where the other half of Xena's soul laid.

The warrior turned around after having taken her armor off.

Gabrielle climbed out of bed. Her eyes were soft mint green and her expression emotional.

Xena became worried immediately. "Gabrielle?"

The warrior-bard came right up and wrapped her arms around Xena.

The Warrior Princess quickly pulled her partner in tightly, worried. "What's wrong?" she whispered.

The Amazon Queen dug her head into Xena's chest and had begun crying.

The warrior then knew what was going on. "Ssssh, its okay."

Gabrielle lifted her head and smiled warmly.

Xena smiled back and carefully wiped her friend's tears away.

The small woman smiled more and pulled Xena's head down for a soft kiss. At the end of the kiss, she kept her hand behind Xena's neck and whispered. "I love you so much, Xena."

The binding had begun.

Xena took her turn to cry and kissed Gabrielle back with pure love. After the kiss, she lifted Gabrielle up.

The warrior-bard wrapped her legs around the warrior along with her arms.

The dark warrior backed up and sat on the bed. She pulled Gabrielle in and settled her into her lap.

They held tight to each other, no distance between them.

"I want you, Xena," whispered Gabrielle. "To Hades with society."

"Thank you," uttered the warrior. She tilted Gabrielle's head up and kissed her with her soul's desire. She smiled once the kiss was over. "Bit by bit, Gabrielle... as promised."

Gabrielle smiled back. "Until you become me."

"And I become you."

"Then we'll be one," whispered the small warrior.

Xena had a pure smile. "Soul mates."

"Only in the eyes of my soul mate, exactly." Gabrielle laughed quietly and had begun another warm, long kiss.

For Xena and Gabrielle such a mere time as forever was only the beginning to the endless end of love. The soul mates were sent into the eternal, completion cycle of love.

The End