

# ~ The Dawning ~

by Red Hope

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**Disclaimers:** Violence ~ Yup, just some violence and little more. Otherwise it wouldn't be Xena *Warrior Princess* eh? Won't be to bad in this first part, little blood and guts.

Subtext ~ Isn't subtext here, it's the real thing here. All maintext. If you can't handle that sorta thing, I feel sorry for you. Just go check out another one of them stories that's general.

Emotional ~ I'll tell y'all this is planned to be emotional. Don't think it'll be like Titanic thing, but it's doing the whole emotional thing.

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Note ~ This is fast forward in the seasons compare to the rest of my stories. I think everybody can figure out relatively where I set it. The only thing is, there's two... three differences to the season I'm on. I think you'll be able to figure them out too, real fast.

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If anybody has comments about my story please let me know at:

[redhope@redhope.net](mailto:redhope@redhope.net)

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## Part 1

### Section 1

~\*Part 1\*~

"It feels so good to be going home."

"Going home in more ways than one."

Gabrielle smiled to her friend, they kept walking. Ahead they heard Amarice and Joxer talking. Both Xena and Gabrielle are glad that pair is ahead.

"Thanks, Gabrielle."

The Amazon Queen looked up to the warrior. "For what?"

"Pointing the way back to my rotten old self."

Gabrielle smiled but a bit of a grin slipped in. "It's a pleasure ... Did I do that?"

Xena nodded, her voice a bit serious now. "I didn't think about it at the time, but when

I asked for a sign to show that I was doing the right thing, you showed up."

The smaller woman chuckled. "You know what they say -- timing is everything."

The warrior shrugged her shoulders then grinned. "Yeah, well, not everything."

Gabrielle nodded at that. Neither had much to say after that. The pair kept their pace of walk up but enough to stay behind Joxer and the Amazon.

Gabrielle looked up to the trees then back again. "You know this is a pretty area. The weather is nice too."

Xena looked from the road to her friend. The sterling jewels in her hair twinkled from the sunlight. "It is."

"It's a shame to leave it. But it'll be good to be back in Greece, I've seen enough of Rome's Empire."

The Warrior Princess nodded. "Same here."

Gabrielle nodded her head. She took a deep breath, the air filling her lungs, she slowly released it. Looking to Xena, she took in her friend's clothes. She actually liked them. Xena wearing something different. "You know, you look good in that."

Xena arched an eyebrow at the smaller warrior. "Yeah? You don't think it clashes?"

The Amazon Queen broke out laughing. "Xena since when did you care about how you looked?"

"I thought I'd start now."

Gabrielle nodded with a grin. "Uh huh, right."

"Actually I'm ready to get back into my leathers."

The smaller warrior nodded her head. "Me too."

"Mmm, so you'd prefer my leathers over this?"

Gabrielle stopped walking, as did Xena. The smaller warrior looked up and down the length of Xena. "Yeah I think so." She looked back up to Xena and smiled.

The warrior smiled back. "We find Argo, we find my leathers." She then began to grin. "I like your leathers you picked out."

Gabrielle grinned back. "You don't think it clashes with my short hair?"

Xena chuckled, shook her head, then smiled. "Come on." The warrior brought her right hand up to Gabrielle's back. The pair continued on their journey to Greece. Away from Italy where everything happened.

*"We're going to be together ...for Eternity."*

Promises are promises. Aren't they?

~\*~\*~\*~

Xena poked at the fire. She then looked up to see her friend across from the fire. Joxer sat with her on the right, Amarice on the other side. Xena wasn't taking much of a liking to Joxer now. He... threatened her relationship with Gabrielle. But she'd never speak out. No, she'd rather help him because she knew she could only bring pain to Gabrielle's life. Joxer wouldn't do that to Gabrielle.

Gabrielle nodded something to Amarice then looked up to catch Xena's gaze on her. She smiled and stood up from the log. Walking to the other side, she came to stand next to Xena. "Xena?"

The warrior smiled. "Yeah?"

"You think we can head to the Amazons?"

"That's going to be a long trek Gabrielle."

The small warrior nodded her head. "I know but Amarice wants to head back to the Amazons. Besides I think it would be good for us to go back. I'm sure Ephiny is wondering what's happened to us."

The taller woman crossed her arms against her chest. She thought for a moment. "Why don't we stay there for a while too."

Gabrielle brightened up at that. "Yeah? I think we both could use a break."

Xena nodded at that. "Yeah that was my thinking."

The younger woman smiled. "Thanks Xena."

The warrior nodded her head. "I'm going to go get us something to eat. Stay here huh?"

Gabrielle nodded. "Yeah, be careful."

Xena smiled. "Always." The warrior then shifted from the fire and headed into the dark woods. The sun had set about a quarter of a candlemark ago.

Gabrielle watched her go, crossed her arms against her chest. She sighed and turned back to Joxer and Amarice, she slowly walked over to them. Joxer. Gabrielle sighed at the name and man, recalling his words.

*"Hi ... um ... Gabrielle ..."*

*The small woman sighed. "Joxer, about what you said ..."*

*Joxer quickly cut Gabrielle off, his hands going up defensively. "It's alright, you don't have to say anything. You don't have to say a word. It just ... I ... I ... um ... I just wanted to ... uh ... let you know. I just wanted to let you know. No strings."*

The small warrior sighed at that. Right no strings? There're strings for sure. She took a few more steps and sat back down in her seat originally, in the middle.

"What did Xena say?"

Gabrielle looked to Amarice. "She's fine with it."

The Amazon smiled. "Great, I can't wait to get back. Thanks Gabrielle."

The Queen nodded her head. "No problem."

"Hey Gabby?"

"Yes Joxer?" Gabrielle turned to look at the man, her face masked with a fake smile.

"When will we get to the Amazon Nation?"

Gabrielle shrugged. "Probably in five days."

"So that's three days to get back to Greece?"

The small woman nodded. "More or less yeah. Why?"

Joxer's eyes widen. He reached behind to the back of his neck. "Um well..."

"Yeah?"

"Well you see Gabby, I just don't wanna... you know. Go into that Nation."

Amarice leaned forward a little to look to Joxer. "What's wrong with the Amazon Nation?" Her words were in a growl.

Joxer jumped in his seat. "Oh nothing Amarice. Its just..."

The Amazon narrowed her eyes. "Its just what? That there's a bunch of women?"

The man put his hands up. "Oh no no, it isn't that."

Amarice opened her mouth to say something.

Gabrielle cut in, she hates this middle. "Amarice." The Amazon looked to Gabrielle, the small warrior smiled and went on. "What Joxer is trying to say is... well he doesn't like travelling that far. He thinks the Nation is a little to Far Eastern." Gabrielle then looked to Joxer. "Right Joxer?"

The wannabe warrior had a confused look for a moment, then he nodded furiously. "Right Gabby." He looked to Amarice. "That's right, I don't like travelling that far. You see... my mom is in the southern part. I wanna go visit her. You know haven't seen Mom in a while."

Amarice nodded her head slowly. "Okay." She then sat back.

Joxer looked to Gabrielle and gave her a smile in thank you. The small woman just nodded back. Then the air filled with the sound of twigs breaking straight ahead. Gabrielle looked to the woods to see the warrior return. She stood out from her red clothes and the jewel glistening in the moonlight.

Gabrielle stood up from the log and walked over to Xena. "Hey."

Xena smiled. "Hey, got some quail."

The small warrior smiled. "Really?"

The warrior nodded her head. "Yup." Xena then lifted up three sticks in her hands. Skewered on them were eight cleaned quail.

Gabrielle smiled and took them. "Great." She then walked over to the fire, she placed them near the fire. The ends digging into the ground. They'd roast on one side then would be turned later.

The night went on. For everybody, they were tired. Between the fighting and the traveling, it was all catching up. So they went to bed fairly early. Mainly after dinner. Xena and Gabrielle slept beside each other on one side of the fire. The other side was the grumbling Amazon and Joxer.

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By morning the group had risen from their furs. The weather thankfully was good. Only a few large clouds here and there, no signs of storms. They had to move early though. Xena for her part figured they'd be back in Greece by mid tomorrow. That was more than fine with her. Right now though, they were walking along a road head southeast. Xena and Gabrielle walked beside each other, a little ways behind was Joxer and Amarice.

Joxer sighed, he looked up to Gabrielle and Xena. He smiled to himself. Picking up his pace he came to walk beside Gabrielle.

"Hey Joxer."

The wannabe warrior looked to Gabrielle with a smile. "Hey Gabby."

"What's up?"

He shrugged his shoulders, his... armor clanking from the movement. "Nothing. I was wondering if I could talk to you... alone?"

The small warrior looked away from Joxer to Xena.

Xena looked to Gabrielle. She sighed and nodded. Her pace slowed up and she came to walk beside Amarice.

Amarice looked from the road to Xena. "How are you?"

Xena kept her eyes pinned on Gabrielle and Joxer. "Alright, you?"

The Amazon nodded her head. "Not to bad."

Silence took over. They kept walking. Xena continued to watch Joxer and her best friend talk. Her eyes narrowed a little.

"What's going on with those two? Are they two love birds now?"

Sapphire eyes looked away from the pair ahead to Amarice. "No they're not."

Amarice's right hand went to her hip. "How you know?"

The warrior looked away. "I just do."

The Amazon kept staring at Xena, sizing her up. She then looked back ahead, her

right hand falling back to her side. She studied Joxer and Gabrielle. As she watched the scene she saw Joxer bring up his left hand to grasp Gabrielle's closes arm.

"What's the deal then? Is it one of those, he loves her but she doesn't love him?"

Xena's cold eyes stay pin on Joxer. "Something like that."

"Hmmm." Amarice looked away from the pair ahead to Xena again. She could see Xena's jaw tight, her eyes only slits. "You don't like it either huh?"

The warrior didn't respond right away, she watched as Joxer released Gabrielle's arm. The small warrior in turn crossed her arms against her chest. Xena looked down to Amarice. "No I don't."

The Amazon kept staring up at Xena. "Why does it matter anyway to you Xena? Its-" Amarice stopped talking as she saw Xena's eyes go dark and flash to her. "Okay... never mind." She looked away, Xena doing the same. That's when Amarice knew she was missing a piece of the puzzle. A rather huge piece as we know.

The rest of the day was rather quiet. The group had made good time. The warrior was sure then that they'd be entering Greece. Hopefully that's when Joxer would leave. Although Xena couldn't be sure on that one. In the end, she knew she had to let go of her jealous, it wouldn't do any good. But is it jealous? Or is really ownership?

~\*~\*~\*~

Gabrielle took a deep breath, she climbed a little higher on the ridge, the road running along the top of the ridge. They'd entered into Greece about a candlemark ago, the weather was looking a little bad. Some dark clouds had moved in, but Xena figured it wouldn't do anything. Just make things a little dark. They all were happy about being in Greece again.

Gabrielle looked down now and sucked in a breath. "Gods. Xena!"

The warrior heard her name being yelled. She broke out into a run, coming up the ridge. Gabrielle had been the first one up there. Once she came up she spotted what her friend was staring at.

Below the ridge was a small town. There were huge screams and yells coming from the town. Smoke rising up with the fire clearly in sight. People running. Men on horses back or on foot with swords, killing whomever they could.

"Hades." Xena then looked back down the road to Amarice and Joxer. "You two hurry up. There's a town below its being attacked. Gabrielle and I are headed down there." She turned her head to look back to Gabrielle. "You ready?"

The small warrior looked to Xena with a grin. "Is there ever a ready around you?"

The Warrior Princess grinned. "Nope. Let's go."

The pair then broke off into a run, heading straight down the ridge. Xena's warrior cry filled the air. As soon as she entered, her chakram was in the air. It struck five riders, sending them to the ground.

Once Gabrielle came into the town, she ducked. A sword swept over her head. She

reached to her boots pulling her sais out. She rose back up and kicked, hitting the raider in the stomach. Coming at him, she managed to catch him off balance. Her sai cut him in the arm. He stumbled back then recovered, his sword thrusting forward at Gabrielle. The small warrior stopped the sword with one sai then the other came at his stomach. She just missed. The raider removed his sword. But Gabrielle used that time and did a roundhouse kick. He went reeling through the air and hit a barn, falling down unconscious. She grinned and spotted another raider.

Xena brought up her chakram, it stopped the sword. She then kicked at the raider's sword hand. The sword went flying sky high. She leaped into the air and caught it. Once she landed she placed the tip of the sword to the man's throat. He froze. The warrior laughed evilly. Xena quickly brought the sword down and did a high kick to his face. The raider fell to the ground as he blacked out.

"Watch it Joxer!" Amarice stopped the raider's sword with hers.

Joxer stumbled back a few paces, he pulled his own sword out. It fumbled in his hand for a moment. A raider came at him. "Oh gods," he mumbled. The wannabe warrior stopped his sword.

Amarice punched her raider. He fell to the ground and she stabbed her sword into his chest. She whirled around to see Joxer get his sword knocked from his hand. Amarice shook her head and came up behind Joxer's raider. She brought her sword up and in front of the raider. She slit his throat. "Be careful Joxer!"

Joxer nodded his head as he leaned down to pick up his sword. He looked around quickly for other raiders. Amarice laughed and saw a horseback raider coming at her.

The fight raged on. Xena and Gabrielle stayed near each other, taking care of numerous amount of raiders. Joxer and Amarice paired up. The Amazon for the most part watching Joxer's back. Knowing fully well he was no fighter.

Gabrielle spun around. She was a good distance from Xena. Her emerald eyes scanned around and spotted Xena. She was fighting three raiders at once. She sighed. That's the warrior for you.

Looking to her left she saw a raider on horseback coming, fast too. He had his sword unsheathed. His target, Xena.

"Hades." The small warrior frantically looked around. She looked behind herself and spotted a ladder up to the roof of this barn. She quickly sheathed her sais, climbed the ladder and looked down and off to her left. She saw the raider coming. Looking to the right she saw Xena, still contending with three raiders. The warrior having know idea of this horseback man coming at her.

Gabrielle watched as the horse came, she bent her knees. Her adrenaline filled her blood, her head buzzing. Her mind began to calculate the distance. She sucked in a deep breath. A scream escaped her lips and she ran a little then jumped off the edge of the barn. Her body sailed through the air as she stretched her arms out in front. Her eyes watch as she closed in at the raider.

That's when it all came, the pain. She crashed into the horseback man. They went tumbling to the ground. The horse rearing up and stamping away. Gabrielle then

began to feel an immense pain in her left shoulder. She wasn't sure why either. But they rolled a little on the ground. Once they stopped, the small warrior came to find herself on her back.

The raider was on top of her. He brought his head up and glared down at Gabrielle. "Why you little-" He stopped, he brought his right fist down and punch the woman in the face. Her head snapped to the left, but she was still conscious.

The small warrior brought up her right fist to punch him back. He fell onto his back, his legs tangled with Gabrielle's. She untangled her legs, pulled her sais out as she stood. Blood trickled down from her nose as well as from a cut over her forehead.

The raider stood up, he had blood on the top of his sword he held. That's when the Amazon Queen knew where the pain in her left shoulder came from. The raider though, he was a massive man. He made good use of that as he brought his sword down on Gabrielle. The small warrior held her sais up to stop the blade. But he pressure down, pinning her. Gabrielle felt no strength in her body, most of it gone from early. Hence she fell to her knees, still trying to hold the sword up.

The man grinned. He then kicked hard at Gabrielle's face. She went crashing to the ground, her eyes closing. The raider narrowed his eyes at the woman.

"Gabrielle!"

He looked up to see the woman warrior running towards him. Her speed was fast. So that left him no time to kill the small woman. It did though give him time to kick her in the stomach. The raider then turned to his right as Xena's sword came at him. He wouldn't live much longer.

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A moan escaped her lips. Her right hand came up to her forehead.

"Don't touch that."

Gabrielle quickly felt the wound on her forehead. She moved her hand back down to her side. Her ivy eyes slowly opened and found sky filled ones staring down at her. "Gods what happened Xena?"

The warrior smiled. "You got knocked out."

"I figured that much out."

Xena grinned. She brought down a cloth soaked in wine. It went to Gabrielle's shoulder wound. Gabrielle hissed and gritted her teeth, her eyes closing again.

"You should have been more careful."

The small warrior opened her eyes again. She talked through clenched teeth. "Right."

The older woman sighed, she dabbed away at the shoulder wound. She saw Gabrielle fighting the pain. "Sorry but it needs to be clean."

Gabrielle slightly nodded her head. "I know."

Xena pulled the wine cloth away. She placed it on a table in front of her. Gabrielle

though laid on a smooth wood pallet. The warrior reached into a bowl, pulling out another cloth. She rung out the water then brought the cloth to Gabrielle's shoulder wound.

"How you feel?"

Gabrielle opened her eyes. She looked to Xena, but Xena was looking at the shoulder wound. "Like I got kicked in the head by a centaur."

The warrior grinned, her eyes shifting to Gabrielle. "We'll take care of that in a minute."

The Amazon Queen nodded, her emerald eyes closing again. "Where are we?"

"We're still in the village. This is a healer's hut."

Gabrielle nodded a little. "Where's the other two?"

"They're outside helping people."

Silence took over for a little. Xena stopped dabbing at the shoulder wound, then went to Gabrielle's forehead, cleaning it. The cloth went back in the bowl. The warrior pulled out a wrap.

"Think you can sit up?"

The younger woman opened her eyes. "Yeah I think so." She began to push up with her hands, Xena helping her. Gabrielle then rested her back against the wall of the hut.

Xena reached to the table grasping a small cup filled with water. She handed it to Gabrielle then retrieved two small white pills from the table, hanging that to her small friend. Gabrielle took the pills down, then handed the small cup back to Xena.

The warrior began to use the bandage, wrapping it around the shoulder wound to protect it. "Thanks."

The Amazon Queen looked to Xena. The warrior looking to her. "For what?"

Xena grinned, she looked back to her wrapping. "For stopping that raider. I didn't know he was coming, till I turned around and saw you flying through the air."

Gabrielle chuckled. "Remind me to never do it again."

"I think I will."

The small warrior scowled Xena with a look. "You know I couldn't let him do anything to you."

Xena nodded her head. "I know."

Gabrielle took a deep breath, she quietly whispered out her words now. "Besides that I owe a lot to you."

The warrior stopped wrapping for a second, she looked to Gabrielle. "No you don't." She looked back to the wrap. "If anybody owes anybody, I owe you." Xena finished

the wrap.

"Xena for Gods' sakes. We both know that's not true."

Hard blue eyes lifted to Gabrielle. "I don't."

"Xena." Gabrielle's voice came out hard.

"Look Gabrielle, we've been through a lot. You've suffered the brunt of it all."

The younger woman straightened up more against the wall of the hut. "Xena no, I've hurt-"

The warrior's head lifted up in a flash. "Don't try to sway it Gabrielle."

"I'm not swaying it alright. I know the facts." She took a calming breath. "Just... just forget about it. I don't want to talk about." Gabrielle then shifted off the pallet and stomped out of the hut.

Xena closed her eyes. Her right elbow coming to rest on the edge of the pallet. She leaned into her right hand as she ran her fingers through her bangs. The warrior growled in frustration and stood up. Her hands went to her hips as she closed her eyes. She took a deep breath then slowly released it. Sapphire eyes opened again and stared at the small table by the pallet. Xena went about cleaning it. Her expression though began to look like a rock.

Gabrielle sighed as she leaned against the hut. Her lungs filled with air as she calmed her mind and body. Her eyes drifted shut for a moment. She then opened them again, she felt her body shaking as she straightened up from off the hut.

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The day of the fight in the town was long over. The rest of the day had passed by without anything else happening. The group had helped the village then left late in the afternoon to make camp a little ways farther southeast. Now it's the following day, late afternoon at that. They were getting rather close to Therra, by tomorrow Xena hoped to be there.

"Xena?"

The warrior looked back to Amarice. "Yeah?"

"Where did you leave Argo?"

"In Therra."

The Amazon nodded her head and she looked away.

The group had risen early in the morning. They all knew it would be a long walk till they entered into Therra.

Gabrielle walked in the front, her arms crossed against her chest. Behind her was Xena. The warrior took not to the fact Gabrielle walked alone and with her arms crossed against her chest. Almost as if in protection. It bothered Xena, which was for sure.

Joxer and Amarice walked behind them, together. The Amazon for her part was getting annoyed with the wannabe warrior and his creaking spaghetti noodle strainer chest cover.

Gabrielle now stopped walking, Xena walked up to stop beside Gabrielle. The other pair behind stopped walking, wondering what was going on.

"You hear that Xena?"

The warrior nodded her head. "It's about fifty paces ahead, around that bend." Xena then looked back to Gabrielle. "It's a horse."

Gabrielle arched an eyebrow at Xena. She then looked back ahead. "Let's go then." The small woman broke off running ahead.

Xena grinned and starting running behind Gabrielle. Amarice and Joxer decided to join in and jogged behind.

The small warrior came around the bend and stopped dead in her tracks, Xena came up beside her and stopped. Within a moment Joxer and Amarice came around the bend, stopping short. They watched the scene.

"Oh gods Xena look." Gabrielle pointed to the horse's left front leg. On it was a huge metal trap. Its teeth cutting into the horse's leg.

The horse nickered at the two women. He then threw his head back and tried to jump up, the trap stopping him. He scuffed at the ground with his hoof.

"Gabrielle, here's what we're gonna do. You slowly walk up to him, try to calm him. I'll try to sneak down and get that trap off his leg."

"Xena, I'm not good with horses."

"You're about to be."

Gabrielle looked to Xena to see her serious. She nodded to the warrior and looked back to the horse. Taking small steps to the horse, Gabrielle made her way closer. "Hey there fella. Everything is going to be fine." She kept moving. The horse jumped up again but not as high. He came back down and threw his head back. "Nobody is going to hurt you here. Its okay." She came closer. The horse seemed to calm some. "Hey." Gabrielle smiled to the large horse and she took another step closer. She held her hand out, palm up.

The horse turned his head from side to side, looking at her. He then lower his nose to the woman's hand, smelling her.

"Hey yeah, that's it. Its okay." Gabrielle began to slowly pet the horse's neck, patting lightly as well. "You'll be okay." Gabrielle looked down to the horse's left leg, Xena was bent down to one knee. She grasped the trap's sides and began to pull. Gabrielle looked back up. "Hang in there huh?"

The horse bobbed its head up and down as if he understood.

The small woman smiled and looked back down.

Xena gritted her teeth and the trap gave in. It wrenched and let go of the horse's leg, it opened up again.

The horse knew. He jumped up feeling himself free from the trap. He jumped up again as he threw his head back.

"Wahoo there. Hold on big fella."

The horse seemed to listen and stopped jumping, he settled back to the ground. His head still bobbing up and down.

Gabrielle smiled and ran her hand down the middle of his face. "Yeah there you go. You're okay now." She kept petting the stallion.

Xena though slowly stood up. She pulled her chakram out and cut the trap from the rope. She then turned to the woods. She hurled the trap at a tree. It snapped closed and fell to the ground. The warrior then followed the rope to find the other end attached to a tree. Cutting the other end with her chakram, she coiled it up. Xena walked back to the horse and her friend.

"Xena, what do we do with him now?"

The warrior looked to Gabrielle with a smile. "Let's find a stream or lake first. Clean up that wound, then we'll figure what to do with him."

The Amazon Queen nodded.

The entire time Joxer and Amarice had been watching. Surprised at how the horse calmed to Gabrielle's words and touch.

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Xena ran her hands down her stomach and to her hips. Shifting her shoulders up and down, the leathers and armor adjust to her body. She then brought her right hand to her left wrist, she straightened out her gauntlet. Looking back up, she smiled to her friend.

"She's back."

The warrior chuckled at Gabrielle. "Right."

"You should keep the jewels in your hair Xena."

The Warrior Princess brought up an eyebrow. "Gabrielle, that would not go with the brass in my armor."

The small warrior laughed a little. "They would clash huh?"

"Uh huh." Xena turned around in the stall. She walked to the wall and lifted the face tack for Argo.

Gabrielle took a deep breath. Her arms crossed on top of the stall door, her chin lowering onto her arms. She watched Xena tack up the mare.

"Mmm, be nice now that Joxer is leaving."

Xena had her back to Gabrielle, she grinned to herself. "Yeah?"

The small warrior chuckled. "Don't get me wrong, he's a good guy. But..."

"But what?"

The Amazon Queen grinned. "But there is no words to describe Joxer."

Xena chuckled, she placed the mouth piece in. "True."

"I think Amarice was getting sick of him."

The warrior nodded her head. "We both know she was." Xena put the crown on. She then went back against the wall to get the mare's saddle putting it on with the girdle.

"I don't know what I'm going to do about him."

Xena froze.

*"Yeah, your expectations."*

*A confused looked took over. "Huh?"*

*The warrior sighed. "See, right now it's all about getting a response from her. If you love her, why don't you just tell her? Don't attach any strings to it. Make it unconditional."*

*Joxer took a step closer to the tub. "But what if I tell her and she says 'Joxer, what are you thinking?'"*

*Xena sighed again as she shifted in the water. "Joxer, no strings, alright?"*

*Joxer quickly nodded "No strings. Got it."*

*The warrior watched him go, whispering to herself. "Of course, you could just kiss the girl."*

The warrior straightened her back out from tightening the girdle. She looked to Gabrielle, that's when the pain entered into the warrior's heart. She took notice to the wrap around Gabrielle's shoulder along with the gash on her forehead. She shoved the pain away. "What do you mean?"

Gabrielle sighed. "Xena, we both know I don't love him... like that. He's like a brother to me."

Xena nodded her head. She went to the stall's wall and hefted her saddlebags up, attaching them to the saddle. "Did you tell him that?"

The small warrior shook her head. "No." Her emerald eyes fell to the hay in the stall. "I need to huh?" She looked back up to Xena.

The warrior kept her hands on the saddlebags, she looked to Gabrielle. "Yeah."

The pair locked eyes.

*"Of course, you could just kiss the girl."*

Xena broke the contact with Gabrielle. She went back to strapping on the saddlebags.

*That was an odd moment.* Gabrielle shook the thought, her eyes still staring at Xena. She then looked away.

"Okay I think we're set." Xena came to the front of the mare, she held the reins in hand. "Hey girl good to see you again."

Argo nickered and threw her head up. Xena smiled and patted the horse's head, then rubbed behind Argo's ears. Turning back around the warrior found the stall door open, Gabrielle holding it open. They walked through then out of the stables.

Gabrielle walked to her right, there on a post was a chestnut stallion. His left leg bandaged up. Gabrielle untied the rope from the post and the stallion nudged against Gabrielle's shoulder. She smiled and patted the horse. She looked to Xena. "He needs a name Xena."

The warrior nodded her head. "Torqueo."

The younger woman furrowed her brows. "What?"

"Torqueo, its Latin."

The two friends began to walk into the town. They had to walk to the other end and meet Amarice there.

"Torqueo, I like that. What's it mean?"

"It Latin for wind."

Gabrielle nodded, she looked to the stallion walking beside her. "Torqueo, you like that?"

The horse nickered and threw his head up and down. He then nudged again at Gabrielle's shoulder, twice though.

"Guess so."

Xena smiled at the scene. "Well looks like we're a two horse family."

The smaller woman chuckled. "Yeah, nice."

The three women expected to arrive in the Amazon Nation by midday tomorrow. So far things had been quiet. Joxer had left them, heading south from Therra.

~\*Part 2\*~

Xena first brought her arms over her head. Gabrielle did next followed by Amarice.

Three Amazons fell from the trees to land neatly on the ground. They stood back up and pushed their masks back over their heads. Just a little sunlight fell to the forest floor considering the brown, orange, and yellowing leaves stopped the light along with the clouds.

"Queen Gabrielle."

Gabrielle smiled. She felt the Amazon engulf her in a hug. "Its good to see you too Teresa."

The Amazon pulled back and smiled. "We haven't seen you since the battle with Pompey."

They released each other. Gabrielle nodded her head. "I know, we thought we'd come back for awhile."

Teresa smiled. "That's great, Ephiny will be happy to see you."

The Queen grinned. "I know." She then looked beyond Teresa to the other two Amazons.

Teresa quickly caught this and looked to the Amazons. "Gabrielle this is Aster."

Aster was a normal height Amazon, gorgeous smile, which brighten even more. She had dirty blond hair and brown eyes. "Nice to meet you Queen Gabrielle."

Gabrielle nodded. "Please call me Gabrielle."

Aster nodded back.

Teresa looked to the other Amazon. "And this is Rodhiya."

Now this Amazon was interesting. She had dark red hair, straight that reached to her shoulders. Her face was constructed so to show anger. But her eyes told differently more soft and filled with sorrow. But as soon as she smiled to Gabrielle, her face seemed to light up. "Its great to meet you Queen Gabrielle. I've heard much of you from my tribe."

Gabrielle nodded. "My name seems to get around for some reason." Everybody chuckled. "It's just Gabrielle please."

Rodhiya nodded her head. Amarice then stepped up and looked to Rodhiya with a grin.

The other Amazon smiled to Amarice. "Its good to see you Amarice."

Amarice grinned, she then dropped it, her hands going to her hips. Her tone came out hard. "Yeah well I thought I'd catch you here Rodhiya. I don't know why you came."

Rodhiya shrugged her shoulders. "Maybe I should leave."

Amarice chuckled. "I'd hope not sister."

Rodhiya laughed and stepped forward. The two Amazons hugged tightly.

Gabrielle shook her head. "Should have known." She then looked back to Xena. "Hey you coming?"

The warrior nodded, her face was plain, it said nothing of her emotions. She held the reins to Argo and rope of Torqueo. She came up to Gabrielle's side and handed the rope to her. Gabrielle took it.

Teresa looked to Gabrielle. "Nice horse. Yours?"

The small warrior looked to the stallion then back to Teresa. "Yeah, his names Torqueo."

Teresa smiled. "That's a good name." The Amazon then spotted the bandage. "Look like he ran into a problem."

The Queen nodded. "Yeah we found him and his leg was caught in a trap. He seems fine now."

The Amazon nodded with a smile. "That's good you saved him from that." She then looked to her Amazon patrol friends. "I think we'll head off my Queen." She then looks back to Gabrielle. "Or would you like us to escort you into the village?"

Gabrielle shook her head. "Oh no, I think we'll be fine. Thanks though Teresa."

"Welcome my Queen. Talk to you later." Teresa then disappeared up into the trees.

Aster looked to the Queen. "It was great meeting you Queen Gabrielle. Goodbye." She also leaped and disappeared in the trees.

Rodhiya smiled to the Queen. "Bye my Queen." She then looked to Amarice. "I'll see you soon Amarice."

Amarice smiled. "See you sis."

Rodhiya then was gone. The three females began their trek to the village. Gabrielle quickly had picked up how quiet Xena was. Not to mention none of the Amazons acknowledged her. As she kept thinking about that, Gabrielle's temper began to increase. She was not about to stay in the Amazon Nation when they wouldn't accept Xena.

As soon as they entered into the village they spotted Ephiny and Solari talking to each other.

"Why don't you go see Ephiny, I'll take care of Torqueo."

Gabrielle looked to the warrior and nodded. She handed Xena the rope.

"I'll come and help Xena."

The Warrior Princess nodded her head to Amarice. They went to the stables.

Gabrielle walked across the village to where Solari and Ephiny stood. Ephiny had her back to Gabrielle, Solari though could see Gabrielle coming. As she came near she placed her finger up to her lips at Solari. The second in command looked to her then back to Ephiny.

"I agree Eph."

"Good. I think when Amarice returns we should send her back."

Gabrielle came up to stand next to Ephiny. "Actually Solari, I do not want Amarice sent back to her tribe. Especially considering her sister is here. That would cause some

trouble."

Solari nodded her head. "As you wish Queen Gabrielle." The Amazon then grinned.

Gabrielle grinned back and she looked to the regent. "Ephiny, once two sisters are together. It's not a good idea to separate them."

Ephiny grinned at the Queen. "I agree. But every time my sister comes, she seems to leave to go gallivanting across the countryside with her best friend. All to fight evil."

The Queen grinned. "That's why she came to visit."

The regent chuckled, she then grabbed the other woman. They hugged. "Damn good to see you Gabrielle."

They pulled back in the embrace. The small warrior smiled to the Amazon. "It's great to see you to Eph." She then looked to Solari. "Solari?"

"My Queen." The second in command bowed her head a little.

Gabrielle chuckled and took a step forward. She pulled the Amazon in for a tight hug. "How are you Solari?"

"I'm wonderful." Released each other and smiled. "How are you Gabrielle?"

The Queen nodded her head. "Not to bad. Been... busy."

"It's great to have you here." Solari then looked to the regent. "But I need to head off. Is there anything else you need Eph?"

The regent shook her head. "No that's everything Solari. Thanks."

The second in command nodded her head. "Okay great. Bye." The Amazon turned around and headed off.

Ephiny looked to her friend. "How have you been?"

Gabrielle crossed her arms against her chest. "Okay I suppose."

The regent nodded her head. "How are you and Xena doing together?"

The small warrior sighed. "We're... we're hanging in there."

"Better than before Gabrielle."

The small woman's eyes fell to the ground then looked back up to Ephiny. "Yeah I know. We've come a long way."

Ephiny let her right hand fall onto her own hip. "Yeah? How's Xena handling things?"

"She's surviving, we both are."

The regent then leaned forward a little, her right hand going up to Gabrielle's forehead. "How'd you manage that? Nice shoulder too."

Gabrielle chuckled as she opened her eyes once her friend's hand left her forehead. "I

had a bad run in with a raider. It'll heal over soon"

The Amazon nodded. "Interesting idea. You win?"

The Queen chuckled. "Sorta, Xena took care of him for me."

Ephiny smiled. "Good." The regent stared into her friend's eyes. She saw that deep sorrow in them. Ephiny then found it a good time to brighten things. So she grinned. "Nice leathers."

Gabrielle chuckled. She took a step back. "You like these?"

Ephiny nodded her head. "They look good on you. The deep red brings out your hair." Ephiny then looked farther down, she noticed the weapons. She looked back up to Gabrielle. "Sais Gabrielle?"

The small warrior shrugged her shoulders. "A change in weapons. I like them."

Ephiny nodded her head. She then narrowed her eyes a little. "By the way, I meant to ask you last time. But things did get a little... crazy."

"Understatement."

"Mmm, I agree." A pause. "So what happened to your staff? The one I gave you with the Amazon markings."

"Um." Gabrielle brought up her right hand behind her neck. "I kind of left it in India."

The regent nodded. She crossed her arms against her chest. "You left it or you lost it?"

"Kind of neither really Eph."

"Hmmm. So exactly what happened to it?"

The Queen took a deep breath. "Well uh... it's a long story."

"Oh I've got lots of time Gabrielle. Please share."

"Ephiny."

The regent took a step closer but quickly stopped as she noticed somebody tall, dark, and dangerous grin to her directly behind Gabrielle.

"Hi Ephiny."

The Amazon smiled. "Hi Xena. How are you?" She took a step back to her original spot.

Gabrielle took a deep breath and looked up to Xena with an appreciate smile.

The warrior looked down to Gabrielle nodded and looked back to Ephiny. "I'm fine thanks. You?"

"I'm wonderful."

Xena nodded her head. "So you wanted to know what happened to Gabrielle's staff

huh?"

Ephiny arched an eyebrow. "Yes actually."

The warrior grinned as she crossed her arms against her chest. "Let's just say Ephiny, it should be floating back here real soon."

The regent's face dropped. "It's in a river?" She looked to Gabrielle. "Gabrielle."

The Queen smiled. "Excuse me, I need to... go settle into my hut." A pause. "Bye Eph." The small warrior turned around and power walked off.

Ephiny reopened her eyes and looked up to Xena. "Did she really?"

"Uh huh."

"On purpose or by accident?"

"On purpose."

The regent's head bobbed up and down as her tongue ran across the front of her teeth. "Right." She turned around on her heels and stomped off. "Talk to you later Xena."

Xena grinned at the leaving Amazon. "Bye Eph." The warrior then quickly went after Gabrielle.

~\*~\*~\*~

Gabrielle held out an apple. The horse sniffed it then took a step back, he threw up his head.

"Come on Torqueo. It's just an apple." She leaned more against the stable door. Torqueo took a step back again.

Gabrielle sighed. She then dropped her arms. "Okay, fine. If you don't want the apple, I won't give it to you." She then began to take steps out of the stable, baby steps. "Bye." She kept listening to the horse. He didn't make any noise or protest. The small warrior then slowly made it to the doorway of the barn. She stopped there and dropped her shoulders. Whirling around she locked eyes with the stallion. "What you want huh? A bigger apple or something?"

"I know what he wants."

Gabrielle sighed at the familiar voice. She looked up to the warrior as she entered. "What's that?"

The warrior held out her hand. Gabrielle handed over the apple to Xena. Xena then reached up between her breasts to pull out her dagger. She then began to cut the apple up into slivers.

"Oh you've gotta be kidding me Xena?"

The older woman looked down to Gabrielle. "No." She grinned and handed the slices to Gabrielle. "Go try it again."

The Amazon Queen looked down at the apple slivers in her hands then to Torqueo. She sighed and walked back to the horse's stall door. She picked up an apple slice

from her palm and held it out to the stallion.

He nickered and took a few steps closer to Gabrielle. He then removed the slice from the small woman's hands.

"This is insane."

Xena chuckled at her partner's words. She came up to stand beside Gabrielle as she fed the horse. The warrior's breast dagger went back into its home. "Some horses get picky about that sort of thing."

The small woman looked up to Xena. "I can't believe you know this."

Xena grinned. "Well Argo likes her apples sliced in half then fed to her."

Gabrielle chuckled and looked back to Torqueo. "Good thing to know. Bonus points with your horse huh?"

The warrior nodded. "Uh huh." Xena then took a deep breath. "How about tomorrow we take Argo and Torqueo for a run?"

The younger woman looked up. "Yeah?" She looked back to Torqueo. "You think he'll be ready?"

"Yeah, we'll go steal some tack for him."

Gabrielle chuckled. "Sounds good." A pause. "Should we keep the bandage on his leg?"

Xena nodded. "Yeah keep it protect for awhile longer till it scabs over."

The small woman nodded. She looked up to Xena and smiled. The warrior looked down and smiled back. They locked eyes for the second time of the day. Oh gods how they felt that strong pull to each other.

*"Of course, you could just kiss the girl."*

Her own voice and words came to life clear in the warrior's head. She closed her eyes and looked away from Gabrielle. She opened her sapphire eyes again to stare at the stallion. "He'll be good for you. And you both already have a bond."

The small woman sighed as she looked back to her horse. *A bond right. I remember those. I still feel it Xena. Don't you?* But those words didn't pass her lips. "Yeah we definitely have a bond. They always make things easier."

The warrior nodded her head. "Yup." *Were we talking about the horse? Or each other?* She looked to Gabrielle. *The horse.* "Ready to go get something to eat?"

The small woman nodded her head, she still stared at the horse. "Yeah, let's go." They left the stables to head to the food hut.

~\*~\*~\*~

Gabrielle nodded her head. "Well it only took five days."

Epinion crossed her arms against her chest. "Really? You four must walk fast." She

then grinned.

The small warrior chuckled. "Yeah, well we all have to keep up with Xena."

The weapons master grinned. "I can imagine that one. Those long legs."

The Queen nodded her head. "Yup."

Epinion then sighed. "How you and Xena doing?"

Gabrielle looked to the floor of the hut. Then back up to her Amazon friend. "We're doing okay."

The Amazon nodded her head. "Yeah that's what I figured. Is she causing any problems?"

The Amazon Queen's eyes went a little hard now. "No. Why?"

"I was just wondering." She shrugged her shoulders. "There's a lot of things going around you know."

"Like what?"

"Just things Gabrielle."

"They're not good huh?"

The weapons master shook her head. "No they're not really." She sighed. "I actually been worried about them. They're rumors, people take them more as truth then anything."

Gabrielle's eyes narrowed. "Who's been starting these?"

"Nobody really. But..." The Amazon sighed. "Masika helps them along, I can tell you that much."

Gabrielle sighed. "Great." She then smiled a little to Epinion. "Thanks for telling me."

The weapons master nodded her head. "Yeah. Ephiny, Solari and myself have been trying to stop them. Especially Eph. We all know what's really going on."

The small warrior smiled a little more. "Thanks."

Epinion smiled back. "No problem, we figured you didn't want that centaur crap being spread."

"No." Gabrielle stared at the ground. "Anybody talk to Masika?" She then looked up to Epinion.

"Eph might have, I'm not sure really. You'd be better off asking her."

Gabrielle nodded. "Yeah. I think I'll go find her."

Epinion nodded. "I'll talk to you later Gabrielle."

"See you Ep. Thanks again." The Queen then disappeared through the crowd of Amazons. They were in the hut eating. Some had finished and were milling around,

talking to each other. Gabrielle for her part had eaten and not much at that. For her stomach still hurt from the raider kicking her. She didn't feel like having her food come back up later tonight, so she ate lightly.

She shifted through the crowds of people. She then spotted a curly blond Amazon at a bench table eating. Making her way over to Ephiny, Gabrielle grabbed her by the shoulder. "Hey can I talk you?"

The regent looked away from food and up to Gabrielle. "Yeah sure." She got up from her seat.

Solari had been sitting across from Ephiny. She'd gotten up to and made her way to the other side of the hut to get rid of her plate and utensils.

Gabrielle and the regent though went to the wall of the hut to talk.

"What's up?"

The small warrior sighed. "Are there rumors being spread about Xena and I?"

Ephiny nodded sadly. "Yeah there are. Solari, Ep, and I have been trying to stop them. But we're having little luck."

"That's what Ep told me. You talk to Masika?"

The regent shook her head. "I'm never able to catch up with her when I stop at her hut."

Gabrielle nodded, she reflected then looked back to Ephiny. "I'll take care of her." Her eyes then shifted beyond the regent to the other side of the hut. She spotted Xena leaning against the hut, she was talking to Solari. The Queen looked back to Ephiny. "Does Xena know?"

"I haven't told her. I know Ep and Solari won't tell her either."

The smaller woman nodded. "Well make sure Xena doesn't find out Eph." She looked away from Xena to the regent. "She doesn't need to hear that."

Ephiny sighed. She stared at the floor for a moment she then looked back to Gabrielle. "Gabrielle, she's not stupid. She'll figure it out for herself."

Gabrielle nodded, she crossed her arms against her chest. "I know Eph. Let's just not get it rubbed in."

"Well she'll notice Gabrielle. I think she already knows. Everybody has been ignoring her."

"I know." It came out low. Ephiny almost winced at it. Gabrielle stared at Xena across the hut for a moment. The warrior hiding back in a dark spot. The small warrior looked back to Ephiny. "We just can't let it get worse Ephiny. Okay?"

The regent nodded. "Alright." She took a deep breath. "Gabrielle, you do realize those rumors won't ever settle really. Especially since the second to last time we saw you both, Xena was dragging you out of here behind her horse."

Gabrielle's eyes closed for a moment then opened again. "Yeah I know. But keep reminding everybody that she helped us stop Pompey. None of us would be here now if it wasn't for her."

Ephiny smiled a little at that. "If neither of you were here Gabrielle." A pause. "I know Solari and I wouldn't be alive right now."

A lopsided smile crossed Gabrielle's lip. "We had some timing huh?"

The regent chuckled. "Yeah. If the two of you had been a day later I would have been dead with a sword in my chest."

The small warrior nodded. "Mmm, I think Solari is still counting her blessings that Xena stopped that one soldier from trying to kill her."

Ephiny chuckled. "Oh she is, trust me I know."

Gabrielle grinned. "Really, I don't wanna know."

The regent chuckled. "Sure." A deep breath. "Speaking of which, I think I'm going to go find her. Get out of here."

The Queen nodded. "Don't blame you, bit crowded. She was talking to Xena, but went to the right a second ago." A smile formed. "Thanks Eph."

The Amazon smiled back. "Hey no problem." The regent took a step forward and pulled Gabrielle into a hug. "Hang in there huh?"

Gabrielle nodded as she released her friend. "Yeah. Talk to you later."

"Bye."

The small warrior watched Ephiny leave. Her emerald eyes then drifted to Xena in the dark side of the corner. The warrior was looking at her. *Should I go over there?* Gabrielle sighed. *She's not mine anymore.* She started walking, heading for the exit of the hut.

As soon as she came outside, the brisk air surrounded her. She felt a shiver ripple up her back. Her arms crossed against her chest and she started walking to the backside of the hut. Walking a ways till she came to a dark spot. She leaned against the hut, hiding in the shadows. Her eyes shifted to stare up at the stars.

She then spotted three bright stars in front of her. She closed her eyes.

*"See those three bright stars a little ways above the tree line?"*

*Dazzling sea eyes looked up to those three stars. "The three that are right in a row?"*

*"Yup all about the same brightness." Xena released one arm and pointed to relatively near the three aligned stars. "Now look down a little see those other two." A nod of the small head. "Then looked above them you see the three almost make a triangle."*

*"Yeah...it sort of looks like a person."*

*The warrior's lips formed into a grin. "Look at the star to the far right, then there are*

*five other slightly faint stars that seem to make out a sword or a club?"*

*"Oh wow, I see it now."*

*Xena's large arm snaked back around the bard's waist. "It always reminded me of a warrior or a hunter." A deep breath from the warrior. "The three stars look like a belt."*

Gabrielle's emerald eyes opened again. She stared up at those three same stars. She saw that warrior up in the night sky. Her eyes began to burn.

*"It does, when did you notice it?"*

*A shrug of the shoulders. "Back when I was a pirate. I always used those set of stars to know when fall was coming."*

*"How?"*

*The tall woman grinned to herself over her curious bard. "Well when I saw the constellation I began to always look to it and began to notice during the fall season they would touch the southern horizon fast at night." A pause. "But by summer the stars were never around unless it was right before dawn."*

*Gabrielle stared at the diamonds caught in the sky that formed a warrior to her. She began to really like it, deciding the constellation will always remind her of her soulmate. "I guess that was helpful huh?"*

*"Yes, considering my ship could be at seas for months never seeing land to catch sight of the leaves turning."*

*The younger woman nodded her head and Xena lifted her head back up and ever so carefully Xena rested her chin on top of strawberry-blond hair.*

The small woman ran her right hand through her short hair. She took a deep breath, she felt a lump in her throat. Her eyes were watery but she held back. Her hand dropped from her hair, going back against her chest.

"Hey."

Gabrielle looked to her right to see Xena standing in the moonlight. "Hi."

The warrior smiled a little, she took a few more steps and stood close to Gabrielle. "You okay?"

The smaller warrior nodded her head. "Yeah." A sigh. "I think I'm just tired."

Xena nodded her head. "Saw you leave the hut, thought something was up since you didn't come get me."

A shrug of the shoulders. "No... just figured you could take care of yourself huh?" Gabrielle then looked up to Xena.

But the warrior didn't look down. "Yeah." She then looked down to Gabrielle. "How's the shoulder?"

"It's okay."

Xena nodded her head. "I'll change the wrap when we get back to the hut."

The small warrior nodded her head. Her green eyes then drifted back to the night sky.

The older woman noticed goosebumps on her friend's arms. "Kind of cold huh?"

"Yeah, winter will be here soon huh?"

Xena nodded her head. "Yeah, probably be a real cold one."

Gabrielle now nodded. "Figured as much." She took a deep breath, the cold air burned at her throat.

The warrior looked to Gabrielle. "We should head back to the hut huh?"

The Amazon Queen nodded, she lifted herself off the hut. She then began to move, Xena directly behind her.

The warrior's large hands went to her friend's shoulders. "Time to pull out the cloaks." She then lifted her hands from Gabrielle's shoulders.

Gabrielle closed her eyes for a moment as Xena came to her side, they kept walking. Her body though had gone from being cold to low roast. Her shoulders burned and that heat had swept through her body. *Gods after everything she still can do that.* But Gabrielle dare not let her thoughts develop around that. Only because she had no right to, so she felt she didn't. Not only that but she didn't want to get involved with Xena knowing she'd only hurt the older woman. "Guess it's that time."

The warrior nodded. They were silent as they kept walking back to the hut.

"Xena?"

"Yeah?" She looked to Gabrielle.

"I wanna apologize."

The warrior furrowed her eyebrows. "For what?"

The younger woman took a deep breath. "For how the Amazons have been treating you."

"Gabrielle, you're not responsible for their actions."

The small warrior looked up. "I am Xena, they're my Amazons."

"Gabrielle-"

The Queen cut her off. "No Xena. They're my Amazons, they're treating you wrong. I will not stand for something like that. I represent them and their actions. So I apologize for what they're doing."

Xena looked away. She knew there was no arguing with her friend. *Better to just go with it.* "Thank you Gabrielle."

The smaller female nodded her head. They entered into the hut. Gabrielle soon found her wounds checked over. Then the pair went to bed. Sleep though, that's a fascinating idea.

~\*Part 3\*~

Gabrielle felt the weight of the sword in her hand. She looked up from it to see whom stood in front of her.

"How could you Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle furrowed her brows as she stared at Xena.

"How could I what Xena? I don't... don't understand."

Xena slowly morphed into a demon angel. Gabrielle then realized that she had wings and armor on. She stared down at the armor then looked back up to Xena, the demon angel.

The demon angel glared at Gabrielle. "How could you betrayed me again? You've betray me three times now!"

"W-what? I... I don't... how did I betray you?" She took a step back from the demon angel.

The demon angel though came closer to Gabrielle. She growled out the words. "You choose the greater good over me! You promised to me you'd never choose the greater good over me."

"No." Gabrielle shook her head. "No Xena it wasn't like that."

"Then how was it Gabrielle. Enlighten me? You choose Michael and Callisto over me!"

"Xena I didn't choose them over you." Gabrielle quickly noticed she was floating in clouds. "Xena I didn't. Gods please believe me!"

The demon angel narrowed her eyes. "How can I believe you? After you've betray me." The demon angel took another step closer. Her next words came out low and hard as she bent forward close to Gabrielle. "I'd soon as kill before I trust you." The demon angel straightened back up and turned around, taking steps away. "I wanted to spend eternity with you."

Gabrielle gathered her wits. "In Hell Xena? Never."

The demon angel whirled around. "What difference does it make Gabrielle? We would be together for eternity! All you can think of is whether its Heaven or Hell! You choose other things and people over me."

"No Xena, I just..."

"Want the best for me?" The demon angel took a step closer. "Or the best for you? For yourself Gabrielle?" The demon angel took steps closer to Gabrielle. "For you Gabrielle?" She came right up into Gabrielle's face. "For yourself... Gabrielle?" The demon angel took a deep breath. "I'm that important... aren't I?" The demon angel

smiled and backed away from Gabrielle.

Gabrielle though closed her eyes, tears began to roll. She dropped her sword from her hands. It fell and fell through the clouds, it never hit the bottom. "Xena... I..."

"No Gabrielle. I don't want your excuses. I use to think Callisto was my greatest enemy or Caesar maybe even Ares. Now I know whom it truly is." The demon angel began to come back to Gabrielle. "Do you know who my greatest enemy is? Do you?" The demon angel grinned. "I'm looking right at her." A pause.

"You."

The demon angel kept her grin, her eyes twinkling. The demon angel then began to walk around Gabrielle in circles. "First you betrayed me by almost stopping me from killing Ming T'ien. Then after that... well lets see." The demon angel kept circling around Gabrielle.

Gabrielle had dropped her head. She closed her eyes. "I didn't mean all those things."

"Oh wait your turn Gabrielle. I haven't even gone down the list. After you betrayed me with Ming T'ien as soon as we get back to Greece I find out about Hope. Oh what a bundle of joy that was. Not only had you lied to me that you'd killed her but she killed my son." The demon angel took a deep breath as she kept circling. "Then quick to follow you tried to throw me over a ledge. But I will admit, it was a small nice jester of you to kill Hope. Throwing yourself in the pit like that. Oh that's right, she really didn't die. Then I had to take care of killing her. I don't know why I bothered to seek you out after you went over that pit."

The demon angel stopped circling and came to face Gabrielle. Gabrielle kept her head down as tears came out. The demon angel then lowered her hand under Gabrielle's chin, she lifted Gabrielle's head. "You know what I never told you?" The demon angel leaned down close. "I never told you how much I enjoyed killing your daughter." The demon angel grinned. "I could have stood there all day watching your daughter's blood seep out of her limp body. That was the only time I wanted to stand there and watch a carcass rot to its bones." Gabrielle closed her eyes. "That was a grand day."

The demon angel pulled her hand roughly from under Gabrielle's chin. She began to circle Gabrielle again. "So we went through all of this, rather I should say I went through all of this. Then we both ended up in Heaven together. Which I must say is wrong, you should have been in Hell more then anything." Silence took some of the time as the demon angel kept encircling Gabrielle. "What I find odd is I was the angel first and I go down to the depths of Hell to find you. You're saved but I'm left there as a demon no less. But you do not even come down there to save me. I asked you to join me. But you refused and choose Heaven over your soulmate. You'd leave me to walk the depths of Hell... alone." The demon took a deep breath as she grinned. "I ask you why Gabrielle? Why? I ask you this in your defense. Why?!"

Gabrielle closed her eyes tighter then before. "I don't know Xena." A pause. "I'm so sorry... Sorry."

"Oh you're sorry? I got that response earlier. First it was 'I can't' then it was 'I'm sorry.' And the answer still stays the same."

"I don't know why Xena. All I can say is I'm sorry. I didn't-"

"You didn't want to? Right Gabrielle. You keep telling yourself that and you might just believe it. I know I never will." The demon angel stopped circling and stood in front of Gabrielle again. "You're selfish Gabrielle. And you know what else?" The demon angel reached down and lifted Gabrielle's head up. They locked eyes. The demon angel leaned down close to Gabrielle's face. Their lips almost touching. "You're not my soulmate." The demon angel's red eyes narrowed. "You never were and never will be." The demon angel's eyes narrowed a little more as Gabrielle closed her eyes, millions of tears escaped. "You're not my soulmate Gabrielle."

"You're not my soulmate Gabrielle."

"You're not my soulmate Gabrielle."

"You're not my soulmate Gabrielle."

Gabrielle flew up and sat in the bed. She leaned forward and began to cry.

"Gabrielle?" The small warrior felt a warm hand fall onto her back. "Gabrielle are you okay?"

The Amazon Queen lifted her head. "Yeah I'm fine." She looked to the other woman. "I'm fine, just a bad dream you know."

Xena smiled sadly in the darkness. "Okay" A pause. "You need anything?" The warrior rubbed the smaller woman's back in comfort.

Gabrielle shook her head. "No, no thanks. I can take care of myself huh?"

Xena nodded her head as the needles of pain all crashed into her body at what Gabrielle said. She then whispered back. "Yeah." A pause. "Try to go back to sleep huh?"

The small warrior nodded her head. Xena nodded back and lay back into the bed.

Gabrielle took a shaky breath and looked up, she stared at the door to their hut. Her eyes closed again.

*"You're not my soulmate Gabrielle."*

"Maybe its true." Gabrielle had whispered that so low, Xena might not have even heard it. Her eyes opened again. She took another shaky breath and wiped away at her tears. She lay back in the bed beside her friend. Closing her eyes she tried to sleep, even though she really didn't want too.

Xena, Xena on the other hand. She knew what happened. But knew in another way. Her dreams had came the same way, but Gabrielle persecuting her. The warrior was all to happy for the darkness to not show her red eyes from crying.

The idea of sleep never was comforting to either of the women. They hated nights, hated sleep, hated dreams. Dreams are their form of torture during the long nights. That is if they ever slept.

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Gabrielle rolled out of bed. She looked to her right to see Xena still sleeping. She sighed and walked over to the end of the bed to put her boots on. After putting them on she went to the table, she found her sais there and inserted them into the catch on the sides of her boots.

*"You're not my soulmate Gabrielle."*

The small warrior's eyes closed for a moment then opened again. She looked from the wood table to Xena.

Her small hands went up to her left shoulder, she began to undo the wrap. Once it was off she noticed it was scabbed over. She figured it was about time to let it breathe, it'd heal faster then. The bandage was tossed in a small trashcan by the door. She then opened the door and went through. As soon as she closed the door, Xena's voice filled her mind.

*"How could you betray me again? You've betray me three times now!"*

Anger grew in Gabrielle. She hated herself more and more each day.

*"You choose the greater good over me!"*

The small warrior looked up to the sky. It was early dawn. She sighed and noticed not to many people up and about. She then headed out of the village and into the woods.

*"Xena, the greater good."*

*"I don't care about the greater good when it comes to you. We'll walk out of here one way or another if you want too."*

*"Okay Xena. I don't want to leave this one, nor probably any others later on. I couldn't..."*

*"But Xena?"*

*"Yes?"*

*"Just let me know if you ever want to walk away from any one of these adventures of ours. Alright?"*

*"Okay...thank you."*

Gabrielle picked up her pace through the woods. She stopped then and spotted a nice size tree.

*"Do you know who my greatest enemy is? Do you?"*

*"You."*

The small warrior narrowed her eyes. She began to pace back and forth in front of this tree. "Gods I'm so stupid." Her hands clenched up into fists.

*"I can't."*

*"Why not? Gabrielle, the love that we have, it's stronger than Heaven or Hell. It transcends Good or Evil. It's an end in itself. Our souls are destined to be together. Gabrielle, you can't let me walk through Hell alone."*

Gabrielle stopped pacing. Her right hand went up to her forehead. "Oh gods." She bent down. "We could have saved each other." She closed her eyes. "Our love transcends Good, Evil, Heaven, or Hell. And I treated it like it was nothing, nothing." She dropped her head forward, droplets began to slid down Gabrielle's face. Her voice was weak. "I betrayed Xena again. Gods."

Gabrielle growled and reached down to her right boot. She sprung up and threw the sai at the tree. It embedded directly in the middle. Reaching back down she pulled out the other one in her left boot. She threw it with her anger.

She stomped back to the tree and removed the sais. She tossed them up and down in her hands as she walked away from the tree. Turning back around with a whirl she threw one sai in. "Gabrielle you're stupid, you're a selfish bitch." The other sai dug into the tree. "You don't deserve Xena." She yanked the sais from the oak tree. Taking steps away from it. "I do belong in Hell." Both sais went sailing through the air with such force.

Gabrielle walked up to the tree again. She grabbed the handles of the sais. Her eyes stung. "You're not her soulmate Gabrielle." The small woman closed her eyes, she tightly clutched the handles. "I'm not her soulmate." Slowly her hands slipped from the handles. Her back leaned against the tree now, she slid down the tree. "I'm not Xena's soulmate. How could I be?" Tears came from Gabrielle's eyes. Her throat hurt while her body shook. She leaned forward as she propped her legs up.

*"You're not my soulmate Gabrielle."*

Gabrielle looked up. She took a deep breath and stopped her crying, although her body hurt. She stood up again and jerked the sais out. She took steps back and turned to the tree. She tossed one hard. "You deserve it Gabrielle." The other sai embedded into the tree. "Why'd I do it? You're so stupid to think you could protect her." The sais came out of the tree again. She took steps back again. "I betrayed her again. Ahhh!" Gabrielle threw both sais into the tree once more.

That's when she heard tree branch snap. Gabrielle whirled around to see Xena standing there.

"Hey."

Gabrielle nodded. "Hey." Her back went ridged as her mind went stoic. *How long were you there for Xena?*

The warrior stepped up beside Gabrielle. She quickly noticed Gabrielle's red eyes. Averting her eyes to the tree she spotted the sais in them. "A little practice?"

The smaller warrior shook her head. She walked over to the tree, pulling out the sais. "Sort of. Getting a little... anger out."

Xena nodded her head. She then moved to sit down on the ground. Gabrielle turned around from the tree. The warrior patted the ground beside herself. The Amazon

Queen shifted to sit beside Xena.

"You know I had that problem too this morning."

"Anger?"

The warrior nodded her head. "Yeah, but instead of..." She looked to the tree. "Hacking a tree." She looked back to Gabrielle with a small grin. "I did something you told me a long time ago to try."

The younger woman arched an eyebrow. "Yeah? What was that?"

Xena smiled warmly. "I thought about a good memory."

"Oh gods. What memory was that?"

Xena began to grin. "When you got into that henbane."

Gabrielle groaned. "Oh gods I remember that. Well not really."

The warrior kept her grin. "Oh I definitely remember it all quite clearly."

The smaller woman shook her head and chuckled. "All I remember was being in that cave with Icus one minute then the next I was falling down a well."

Xena nodded her head. "Yeah... well you said a lot of... interesting stuff under that henbane."

Gabrielle looked away from the tree and back to Xena. "Yeah? Centaur poop, you never told me anything about what happened."

The warrior nodded her head. "Well we never fell down that well so I couldn't tell you."

The Amazon Queen began to chuckle. "Gods, you remember me climbing over your body once we got to the top of the well."

Xena laughed. "Yes, then you fell to the ground."

"Oh no but I bounced back up, ready to go."

The warrior chuckled. "You did and mostly because you weren't hauling your butt up that rope."

Gabrielle grinned. "I know." A pause. "What did I say anyway?"

Xena grinned. "Welllll."

"Xena."

The warrior chuckled. "Let me think." She took a deep breath. "I remember when I first came into the cave, you were on the ground. Thought you were dead at first, scary. When I rushed down to you, I found out you were high on the henbane." Xena took a deep breath. "I lifted you into my lap and you came to... sort of." The warrior grinned to Gabrielle. "I asked if you were alright. Then you said 'I'm great. I can't see, but I'm good.' Then I said something like 'Try using both eyes.' You were drugged,

you said-

"Wait a minute, I think I remember Xena. I said... Oh, yeah, that's better."

"Think you can stand?"

Gabrielle chuckled and responded. "You mean I'm not?"

Xena nodded and grinned. "C'mon... there ya go."

The Amazon Queen thought for a moment then looked back to Xena from the ground. She blushed a little. "By the gods... you are beautiful. As I plopped down on the ground again." Gabrielle laughed at her own words.

The warrior grinned as she nodded. "You fell square on your ass. And you are drugged... with henbane if I'm not mistaken, so the effects should be temporary. But, we've got to get you... walking... come back here... Gabrielle... I need you to concentrate."

The Amazon Queen shook her head. "Okay I think I remember... Okay, yeah, but I think this is a big waste of time because I've been walking since I was one. You were holding me right Xena?"

The warrior nodded. "Yeah by the shoulders." A pause. "This is not about walking, Gabrielle, its about Icus. You do remember Icus, don't you?"

Gabrielle started to laugh. "Oh gods, and I remember your hard tone." She took a deep breath. "Okay I said something like... Of course I remember Icus."

"Good. Do you know where he is?"

"Where?"

"No, I'm asking you."

Gabrielle started to laugh. "I really was high on that henbane."

Xena nodded. "I'll agree to that."

The smaller woman arched an eyebrow. "You would." A pause as Gabrielle furrows her brows. "What was that whole 'others' thing Xena?"

The Warrior Princess started laugh again. "You mean your army... chorus... rocks?"

Gabrielle groaned again. "I didn't do what I think... did I?"

Xena took a deep breath, she grinned. "Hold on... I was leaving the cave."

The small warrior brightened up. "I think I remember... Um I said... What are we waiting for? Let's go! The rest of you follow me."

"Hold it."

"At ease. Yeah?" Gabrielle started to laugh.

"I've got a better idea. I'll go and get Icus while you and the... others try to... um..."

Gabrielle took some deep breaths. "I can't believe I was saying this." A deep breath. "Mmm work on our song? Yeah. Just between you and me, the altos are slightly flat."

Xena started to chuckle. She grinned. "Perfect. Gabrielle, don't let anyone leave the cave, understand? Stay here and wait for me to get back. Have I made myself clear?"

"No. You're a little fuzzy around the edges, so you keep trying, you'll get there."

Both the women started to laugh hard.

Gabrielle took a deep breath. "Gods Xena, like I said, if you ever catch me doing henbane again just kill me."

Xena took a long breath and looked back to Gabrielle. "Oh no, I'd rather watch you."

The younger woman sighed. "Gods that was so funny. I don't know why you kept me around."

The warrior smiled. "I knew what I had then, still do."

The small warrior did a double take. She just nodded her head.

The taller woman smiled. "Come on, let's go get some food and take the horses out."

They began to stand up.

Gabrielle looked to her friend. "Thanks Xena."

Xena smiled and wrapped an arm behind Gabrielle's upper back. "Anytime, that's what friends are for huh?" They left the small open area to head back into the village.

"Yeah." The smaller woman then slightly nodded.

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Gabrielle pulled back on her reins. She looked ahead to the mountains, it was late morning. She'd been riding for a good candlemark.

Xena pulled Argo to a halt as the mare stepped up beside the other horse. "Beautiful mountains."

The small warrior smiled and looked to Xena. "Yeah." She looked back to them. "They always are." Gabrielle sighed. "Remember when we fought Okeanos near here?"

The warrior nodded her head. "Yeah, seems like a long time ago."

The other woman nodded her head too. "Yeah it does." She sighed yet again.

Silence was heard.

Xena then looked to her friend again. "Wanna take a break?"

Gabrielle looked to her partner. "Sure."

The pair began to dismount. Gabrielle was first on the ground, she towed her stallion over to a tree. She tied the reins to the tree, Xena then did the same with Argo. The

two women then made their way from the horses, they sat down on the ground beside each other.

"He's a good horse."

Xena looked to her friend, she crossed her legs. "He seems to be."

The small warrior smiled. She propped her legs up, her arms then circled around her legs. "Yeah I like him."

"He's got some good speed."

Gabrielle chuckled. "The name must have gone to his head."

Xena grinned. "Must have."

"How old you think he is Xena?"

The warrior looked at Gabrielle, she then turned her head back to Torqueo. "He's probably about eight or nine." She looked back to Gabrielle. "Your lucky."

The Amazon Queen furrowed her brow. "Why you say that?"

"That he's that well trained for such a young age."

"You think he's been trained?"

Xena nodded. "He wouldn't be that obedient Gabrielle if he hadn't been trained."

Gabrielle nodded her head. She dropped her chin onto her arms.

Xena looked away from her partner and stared up to the mountains. She took a deep breath. Her eyes drifted back to Gabrielle. Xena took note of how Gabrielle sat. "You sit like that a lot."

The younger woman lifted her head from her arms, she looked to Xena. "Yeah I know." She looked away to the mountains again. "It makes me feel protected."

The warrior closed her eyes as she turned her head back to the mountains. Her eyes opened again, she sighed. "*It makes me feel protected.*" Gabrielle's voice filled Xena's head. She took a deep breath, that one stung.

The small warrior took in a large amount of air, she then slowly released it. Her eyes were captured on the mountains and the beauty of them. She began to speak, out of thought more than anything. "Don't you ever get the feeling that time might have forgotten about you?" Gabrielle then looked to Xena. "That you might not really have a destiny."

The warrior was staring at her best friend. She didn't know what to make of those words. She just simply nodded. They both then looked back to the mountains. The only thing that could be heard was the rustling of the leaves high in the trees.

"Hey you ready to get back?" After her words, the Warrior Princess looked to her friend.

A nod. "Yeah." She looked to Xena with a small smile. "I'll race ya?"

Xena brought up an eyebrow. "Oh really?"

Gabrielle grinned devilishly. "Yeah, I bet Torqueo could beat your old warhorse."

The warrior felt the back of her molars. "Really?"

The small woman began to stand up. She looked down at Xena. "Oh definitely." Her hands went to her hips.

Xena began to slowly stand, her back straightening up. Her large strong body towered over Gabrielle. "You're on." Her sky eyes twinkled down at Gabrielle.

The small warrior just grinned up to Xena, the intimidation wasn't working. "Good." Gabrielle's voice seeped with mischief. "Ready?" She brought up her hands. Her body tense, ready to run in a split second.

The warrior broke out sprinting. "Go!"

"Hades!" The Amazon Queen broke out running to her horse right behind Xena. "I'll get you for that one Xena!" She watched as Xena flipped up onto her horse. She reached forward jerking the reins from the tree. Gabrielle undid Torqueo's reins.

She was climbing into the saddle as Xena looked to her. "Sure you can Gabrielle, even if you can get on that horse." The warrior laughed and kicked the mare in the sides. Argo broke out into a gallop.

The small warrior shook her head as she frantically gathered the reins into her hands. She kicked the stallion into a fast gallop. She was right behind Xena. "We gotta beat her Torqueo." Gabrielle patted her horse on the neck then brought her left hand to the reins.

The horse seemed to understand. He leaped over a fallen log. Once his hoofs hit the forest floor he seemed to pick up speed. His breath was clear in the air, his head bobbing up and down.

Gabrielle pulled a little on the left rein, Torqueo gallop to the left some then went straight again. Gabrielle looked to her right to see Xena just a little ahead of her. "I'm catching up to you Xena!"

The warrior looked to her left at her friend. She grinned. "Right!" Xena spurred Argo a little, the mare picked up speed. "Let's go girl."

The Amazon Queen grumbled. "Come on Torqueo. Don't let that old warhorse beat you. You're younger. Come on boy. I know you can do it."

The stallion closed his eyes for a moment then opened them quickly again. He began to pour everything into his gallop. His breathing picked up.

The wind whipped by, blowing Gabrielle's hair back. She began to notice she was starting to become equal with the warrior and Argo. She laughed. "Hey Xena!" She waved to the warrior. Gabrielle kept her eyes on Xena.

The Warrior Princess shook her head. "Don't count your chickens before they hatch!"

Xena then looked ahead of her partner's trail. Her eyes widen. "Gabrielle!"

Gabrielle's quickly looked ahead. "Sweet mother of Zeus!" She frantically grabbed at her horse's mane. She went flying through the air with Torqueo a good high amount. They landed to the ground and Gabrielle took a deep breath. She looked back behind to see the fallen tree, she turned back around. They kept galloping. "Oh gods, never again."

Xena took a deep breath and sighed. "Don't get yourself hurt over this!"

The younger woman grinned as she looked across to her friend. "No worries Xena! Just testing you! I knew it was coming!"

"Right Gabrielle!" Xena looked back ahead. She spurred her mare again. "Let's go girl."

The smaller woman narrowed her eyes. "We can do this Torqueo. Give it your everything. I'll be slicing tons of apples for you. Promise." The horse nickered. He liked the sounds of that. Torqueo then went ahead of Argo, speeding past. "Yeah go Torqueo!" Gabrielle looked back to Xena. "Bye Xena! See you in the village!" She then waved to Xena.

The warrior groaned. "Damn youngsters huh Argo?" Argo huffed. "I agree. Let them go this time." The mare's head bobbed up and down. The warhorse then slowed a little. "Round one Gabrielle." Xena grinned to herself.

## **Part 2**

### **Section 2**

~\*Part 4\*~

Ephiny power walked over to the stables after seeing Gabrielle head in. She ducked into the stable and spotted Gabrielle. "Gabrielle, I need to talk to you."

The small warrior turned her head from her stallion to the regent. "Yeah sure what's up Ephiny?"

"The different Nations are having some problems."

Xena came out of her stall next door. Gabrielle continued to finish untacking Torqueo as she listened to Ephiny. "What's the problem?"

The Amazon sighed. "The tribes are quarreling amongst themselves."

The Warrior Princess leaned against the wall of the stable, listening as well.

Gabrielle placed the saddle away, the last item. She looked back to Ephiny. "What they bickering about?"

Ephiny shook her head. "The tribes seem to be calling each other names. Challenging each other left and right about which is better."

The small warrior nodded her head. She stepped out of the stable. "Is that it?"

"W-what?"

Gabrielle went real serious. "Is that the main problem?"

Ephiny nodded her head. "Yes."

The Amazon Queen nodded her head. "And I assume we are not quarreling with any of the tribes?"

The regent shook her head. "No we are not."

Gabrielle nodded her head. "Good." She then took a deep breath. "Ephiny, tell everybody in the Amazon council that tomorrow morning we have a meeting. Bright and early."

Ephiny furrowed her brows. "Okay, what's the plan?"

Gabrielle shrugged her shoulders. "We'll both find out tomorrow."

The regent nodded her head. "Okay, I'll take care of the council."

The Queen smiled. "Thanks Eph."

The Amazon nodded her head. "I'll catch you later." She disappeared out of the stable.

Gabrielle looked to Xena. "This is not good."

Xena lifted herself off the stall wall. "No it's not."

"Why you think they would be bickering to each other?"

The warrior shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know, if there's any sort of name calling going on. That'll ruffle each other's feathers."

Gabrielle nodded. "Yeah." She looked down to the floor. She then looked back up to Xena. "Hey I need to go find somebody. I'll see you later?"

Xena nodded her head. "Yeah."

The small warrior smiled. "Great. Bye Xena and thanks for the ride."

The warrior watched her friend leave the stables. "No problem bye."

~\*~\*~\*~

The Queen of the Amazons walked into the hut after knocking.

"Hi Queen Gabrielle."

"Hello Masika. How are you?"

The Amazon smiled. "Quite well. Please sit down."

Gabrielle smiled. "Thanks." She sat down in a seat at Masika's desk. "How have things been?"

The older Amazon nodded. "They've been fine."

The small warrior nodded. She sat straight in her seat. "Masika, I'm assuming you've heard about Xena and I."

The Amazon retorted with a hard tone. "You mean about you both not being together?"

The Queen nodded. "Yes... our not being together?"

Masika nodded her head. "Yes I have Gabrielle, everybody in this Nation knows."

"That's what I figured... can tell."

The Amazon arched an eyebrow. "Why do you ask then?"

Gabrielle crossed her arms against her chest. "I have concerns... that maybe somebody has been spreading rumors that Xena had done all the... wrong doing."

Masika looked away for a moment then back to her Queen. "You do have a right to be concerned."

The Queen nodded her head. "And why?" She leaned forward in her seat.

The head council member sighed. "Because I have been helping those rumors."

Gabrielle nodded her head, she sat back in her seat. "That's what I figured."

"Gabrielle it wouldn't matter if I helped them or not. To tell the truth, this nation is behind you no matter what. Whether they watched you beat Xena or not they would still say it was Xena's fault. She's a new Amazon that they haven't fully accepted." A pause. "Especially when Xena had you tied behind her horse and dragged out of the village."

The Amazon Queen took a deep breath. She closed her eyes then opened them again. "Let me tell you right now Masika, you better stop those rumors. I hurt Xena more than anybody could hurt another." Gabrielle leaned forward to lock eyes with the other woman. "Don't put the burden on Xena's shoulders. I will not have my Amazons looking at her as if she's the evil one, the enemy. She's not." The small warrior sat back in her seat. "I am the enemy here."

Masika stared at Gabrielle. She blinked and didn't know what to really say. "It wouldn't matter."

"Why?"

"Because as you said, they're your Amazons. Not Xena's."

Gabrielle took a deep breath. "Look Masika, stop those rumors and spread the truth. It'll help." She then began to stand up.

"Yes my Queen."

Gabrielle nodded her head and made her way to the door.

"Gabrielle?" It came out low.

The small woman's hands curled around the handle of the door. She looked to Masika. "Yes?"

"Did... did she hurt you a tremendous amount?"

Gabrielle looked away and to the door. "Yes." She then looked back to Masika. "But nothing compared to what I did to her." A pause. "I've made my bed Masika, I need to lie in it."

The Amazon nodded her head sadly. She had no words for that one. "Bye Queen Gabrielle."

The small warrior nodded back as she opened the door. "Goodbye Masika. And thank you for stopping the rumors." Then she was gone.

As soon as Gabrielle left Masika's hut she headed to the food hut. She went inside of the food hut then made her way back into the kitchen. Once inside, she noticed Amazons cooking away. She mingled through the people, nobody saying anything to her. That's when she spotted it. A huge bowl of fruit.

The small warrior power walked over to the bowl, she snagged two apples from the bowl. Looking around she began to search for something else. Then a cook Amazon came up to her.

"May I help you my Queen?"

Gabrielle grinned. "Yeah actually. I need to borrow a knife."

The Amazon nodded her head. "Sure. Is that it?"

"Mmm, do you have any honey too?"

"Of course. Just follow me."

The cook Amazon lead her through the large kitchen to the back. There were a plethora of drawers, the Amazon opened the top one. She pulled out a small cutting knife and handed it to Gabrielle. "Wait here for a moment and I'll get a jar of honey."

Gabrielle nodded and watched the Amazon disappear for a moment. The cook Amazon then came back with a small jar of honey, she handed it to Gabrielle. The small warrior took it in her right hand and smiled. "Thanks."

"You're welcome my Queen."

"It's just Gabrielle, please. And your name is?"

The Amazon grinned. "Logos."

The Queen nodded her head. "Nice to meet you Logos."

"It's great to final meet up with you too Gabrielle. I'm usually back here all the time."

"Really? Head Chef?"

The Amazon nodded her head. "I am. Let me know anytime if you would desire

something. I can definitely help you out Gabrielle."

Gabrielle chuckled. "Don't say that, I'll take full advantage of that."

The cook grinned. "Ah, so one of your weak spots is food?"

The small warrior nodded with a grin. "Quite a big one too."

Logos chuckled. "I know what you mean Gabrielle."

Gabrielle hefted the items in her arms. "I better get out of here. Let you get back to work. Thanks again."

"Anytime my Queen. Take care."

"You too. Bye Logos."

The Amazon cook watched as the Queen began to leave the kitchen. "Bye."

Gabrielle shot a smile back and disappeared out of the kitchen. Then headed right to the stables. As soon as she came in, Torqueo greeted her with a nicker. Gabrielle looked up to him and smiled. "Got your apples and brought an extra bonus."

The stallion threw up his head. He then stomped at the ground and looked up to Gabrielle.

The woman chuckled. She walked over to the stall door, she looked to her right to find a chair. Placing the apples down on it with the jar of honey. Gabrielle then carefully placed the knife down and opened the jar of honey. Lifting it, the honey poured out and went into the cap to fill it almost to the top. The female then grabbed an apple and the knife, she cut it up into a bunch of slices.

Torqueo stomped at the ground again. He then took steps closer to the stall door, hanging his head over it. The stallion looked to Gabrielle and then nudged at her.

"Hold your horses."

The horse huffed at her.

Gabrielle in turn chuckled. She then dipped the apple slices into the cap with the honey. Looking up to the stallion, she handed him a honey coated apple slice at a time. "You know we gotta stay on our feet with Xena and Argo." The horse nickered. The small warrior chuckled. "Right, I mean hoofs."

Torqueo bobbed his head up and down a few times. Gabrielle placed a few more honey apple slivers in her hand. He went at them.

"We may have won that round, but those two are going to race us again." Torqueo brought up his head for a moment then went to the last apple slice in his owner's hand. "Just because we won the battle doesn't mean we won the war."

"You got that right."

The Amazon Queen chuckled at the deep familiar voice. She turned around to see Xena, she smiled. "Hey."

Xena walked up to Gabrielle. "You're going to spoil him rotten."

Gabrielle nodded a few times. "Yup." She cut the last apple in half, she looked to her friend. Gabrielle then tossed it to her partner.

Xena caught it with a grin. She held it up for a second as she spoke. "Thanks, Argo will like it."

The small warrior nod. She then began to slice the other half of the apple up for Torqueo.

Xena though went to the other stall where her mare was. Torqueo the entire time watched the warrior walked to the other stall.

"Torqueo." The horse looked back to Gabrielle after hearing his name. "Its good to share."

The horse huffed and dropped his head over the stall door. He watched his owner dip the apple slices, he lifted his head as she brought them up in the palm of her hand. Torqueo quickly ate them.

By the time the stallion ate the honey apples, Xena came back around. The warrior looked to her right and opened a wood chest. Inside were rags and some medical supplies. She grabbed one of the rags and wiped her hands. Gabrielle turned to her, Xena handed the rag over and Gabrielle wiped her hands, getting the honey off.

"You should probably check his leg."

The small warrior nodded in agreement. "Are there wraps in there?"

Xena nodded as she took the rag back. "Yeah, I'll get you one." She turned back to the wood chest and dropped the rag in. She then found a clean wrap, took it, closed the chest and turned to Gabrielle. She handed it to her small friend.

"Thanks." Gabrielle then opened the stall door, Torqueo automatically took steps back. She then bent down to one knee at his left leg. Slowly the bandage was removed and the wound was revealed. "It's pretty much scabbed over Xena."

The warrior moved into the stall, door still swung open. She bent down next to Gabrielle. Her large hand lightly touched the wound. "Looks good. He'll be fine."

Gabrielle smiled to herself and she began to wrap the new bandage on. "You know he beat Argo with a wounded leg."

"Gabrielle." A deep octave.

The smaller warrior kept wrapping but looked to Xena with an innocent look. "I was just pointing out a fact. That's all."

Xena looked to Gabrielle and arched an eyebrow. "Right."

The younger woman chuckled then grinned. She looked back to the wrap and finished it. She stood up along with Xena. They both walked out of the stall and closed the door behind.

Gabrielle went to the small jar, pour the remaining honey back in the jar. She picked up the knife and jar. Gabrielle went to the wood chest again, she placed the old wrap in on top of the used rag. The honey jar and knife soon found themselves in there as well. She closed the lid and looked up to Xena. "I think I'm going to go find Eph."

The warrior nodded her head. "I'm going to head to the hut. I need to work on my leathers."

The younger woman nodded. "Alright. I'll see you at dinner."

Xena nodded. "Yeah." They began to walk out of the stable. Gabrielle started to walk off. "Gabrielle?"

The small warrior stopped and turned around to Xena. "Yeah?"

"Come by the hut and get me?"

Gabrielle nodded. "Yeah sure, I'll be there."

Xena smiled. "Thanks. Bye." She started walking again in the direction of her and Gabrielle's hut.

"Bye Xena." The Queen turned back around and went stalking for Ephiny.

~\*~\*~\*~

The small warrior shifted in her seat. She stared down at her food, she didn't feel like much eating. She didn't feel like much of anything right now. Besides that, she was amazed to realize her stomach still hurt from that raider's kick to her stomach. That didn't settle well with her. But she didn't have time to worry about it. Lifting her emerald eyes she saw Xena staring at her.

"You okay?"

Gabrielle nodded her head. "Yeah."

"You're not eating much."

The Queen sighed. "I know, just... not in the mood."

Xena nodded her head. "Hmmm." She didn't say anything after that. The warrior knew something was up. It wasn't like her best friend to not eat. Normally it either was large stress or something physical was going on. Or even a combination of both. One thing was for sure. Xena knew it had to at least be stress. The physical though, she couldn't be sure. She'd have to watch Gabrielle.

The warrior sighed. She brought up both her hands, her right hand pushing her empty plate away. She then clasped her hands together, her elbows on the table. Her chin dropped onto her thumbs, while her lips pressed into her fingers. She studied the people at their bench table.

Ephiny sat beside her on her left, Xena sat at the end. Gabrielle across from her, sitting beside Gabrielle was Solari. Epinion then sat to the right of the second in command. Across from Epinion and left of the regent was Teresa. Down a ways Xena caught sight of two red heads, definitely Amarice with, her sister, Rodhiya.

The small warrior looked from the regent down to the table. She became lost in the conversation. Gabrielle brought her right hand up to rub her forehead for a moment. Her hand went through her hair as she looked back up to her Amazons. She listened a little more, completely lost in the talking. She sighed, shifted some on the bench, and then stood up with her plates and utensils. "I think I'm going to go." Everybody looked up to her. "I'll see you tomorrow Ephiny."

The regent nodded her head. "Bright and early Gabrielle. That's what I told the council members."

The Queen took a deep breath and smiled a little. "Good. See you then." She then looked to her main friends. "Goodnight everybody."

Everybody said goodnight back, except for Xena. Gabrielle left and went to drop off her plate with fork and knife at the dishes table. She then left the hut.

Once she made it outside, she took a deep breath. The cool air cleaned out her lungs of the stuffy air from inside of the food hut. Also it flushed out the scent of food, it had almost made Gabrielle want to bring up whatever she had in her stomach. She looked to her left, she started walking that way. Her intent, the sparring field. As soon as she got there, she found it to be dark, no torches. Wasn't pitch black considering the half moon lit the ground.

Looking up she spotted the stars, here there she could see stars. The clouds hid them, in turn the weather was mostly cloudy.

Gabrielle sighed, she sat down on the ground then laid back, her legs crossing at the ankles. She gazed up to the stars, her mind working. Her mind mostly considering her options to find a solution with the other Nations' bickering.

She really couldn't come up with one. A possibility would be to stop the tribes from fighting, have them apologize to each other. Gabrielle bitterly laughed at that one. "They're Amazons, that won't work." She sighed and kept working at the problem. "I could just leave it alone." Another sigh. That wouldn't fall through for sure. She's Artemis' chosen, definitely not. Maybe forcing them to be nice would do something. Oh no, that wouldn't be the smartest thing to do. "Gods, what am I gonna do?"

Emerald eyes closed for a moment, she took a calming breath. Her eyes opened again. She shiver for a moment from the cold air. Her arms came up and her hands went under her head. Then another idea accrued to her. "I could take them over." Gabrielle then laughed at herself. "Yeah right."

"It's a good idea."

The small warrior looked to her right some and spotted her friend. The warrior wore her heavy cloak, in her right arm was Gabrielle's white wool and leather cloak. Gabrielle smiled.

Xena smiled back. "Thought you might need this."

The Queen nodded her head. "Yeah, thanks." She stood up and Xena helped her put it on.

The Warrior Princess then moved to lay down on the ground, Gabrielle followed her

same actions.

The younger woman looked to Xena. "So you think that's a good idea huh?"

Xena looked to her. "Yes."

Gabrielle stared at her for a moment, she then looked back up to the night sky. "I couldn't do it."

"You can do anything you want Gabrielle, just have to put your mind to it."

The smaller warrior sighed. Her hands went to her stomach as she thought. As she kept thinking about it, she kept liking the idea. But where could she go with the idea? How could she work the idea? How could she take over all the other tribes without spilling any blood? There is no way. Or is there?

She sighed at the rut she is in. She kept staring at the stars. She'd always believed the stars created dreams and tales. Funny idea... maybe.

Xena looked to her friend. "How have you been feeling?"

"Fine." Gabrielle then looked to her partner. "Why?"

"You don't seem yourself Gabrielle."

Gabrielle looked away, back to the stars. She quietly whispered. "I wouldn't know what that is." She took a deep breath. Her words now came back out in normal tone. "No, I'm just... feeling out of it Xena."

The warrior nodded a little, she now looked back to the night sky. She'd heard what Gabrielle said earlier in response. Taking a deep breath, a reply came. "Well, if it has anything to do with being here. Then maybe we should leave."

Gabrielle quickly looked to her. "What?" A pause. "Why Xena?"

"Because." Xena turned her head to look to the other woman. "I'm not going to stay here for a break if it's going to stress you out. You don't need that."

The Amazon Queen narrowed her eyes a little. "Xena I need to be here. Look at what's going on between the tribes. I'm not going to leave my Amazons to contend to this. Don't forget you're apart of this nation too."

"Gabrielle, don't-"

The small warrior quickly cut her off with an angry tone. "Don't you Xena." She stood up and stared down at Xena. "I will not abandon them. I don't care how stressed I get. This is my Nation, my people, and my... my last home. I'm going to stay here to help them. You can leave if you want to Xena, I don't care." She then walked away from Xena, going to the edge of the sparring field.

Xena closed her eyes. She took a deep breath then stood up. Her eyes drifted over to Gabrielle, she had her back to Xena with her arms crossed against her chest. The warrior walked over to her. "Gabrielle."

The small warrior turned around, her cheeks were slightly glistening, her eyes tinted

with redness. "Look I'm sorry Xena. I'm just... I don't know."

The warrior nodded. "Its okay, you had right. I'm just worried about you. I don't like seeing you stressed. If you get stressed Gabrielle, you won't be able to handle this problem between the nations."

Gabrielle nodded her head, she looked up from the ground to Xena. "Yeah well, I don't have much choice right now Xena."

The older woman sighed, she looked away then back to Gabrielle. "I know. Just..."

Gabrielle started shaking her head so Xena had stopped talking. "Xena... I don't wanna talk about this anymore." She swallowed, feeling a lump in her throat. She looked away from Xena as she spoke. "You know, I'll just do whatever I need to, I can't worry about anything else." Her eyes then looked up to Xena. "I don't want to talk about this though." A deep breath. "I guess... I can't... I can't handle talking about to many things anymore. You know? It just kind of... it kind of builds on you after awhile. I can't handle talking. I can't." A few tears began to escape. She looked away again as she wiped away at the tears. "Look I'm just going to go back to the hut. I need to get some sleep. I'll... I'll see you there." She then crossed her arms again and walked off, her head down low.

The warrior turned to watch her go. Xena kept watching till Gabrielle disappeared in the darkness. She then closed her eyes, they began to sting. Her right hand came up and pulled her bangs back over head. She kept her hand up like that. "Gods." A shaky breath. "What am I going to do?" Xena brought her hand back to her side as her bangs fell forward. Her eyes opened again and a few tears slipped down her cheeks. "Gods Gabrielle." She closed her eyes again, dropped her head, her arms crossing as more droplets escaped from her eyes. "I'm so sorry I did this to you Gabrielle." Lifting her head she looked to the direction Gabrielle went. Xena took a deep breath to calm herself. She closed her eyes again and found that safety spot hidden in that dark corner of herself. Once her eyes opened again, they were cold. She began to walk back to the hut.

~\*Part 5\*~

Xena slowly walked into the temple, it glowed with firelight. She quickly spotted Gabrielle in front of a stone altar. She recognized the temple.

Dahak's temple.

Xena noticed a dagger in Gabrielle's hand, it was long and thin. On the ground in front of Gabrielle's feet was another person that looked exactly liked Gabrielle.

Hope.

Xena looked up from Hope to Gabrielle. She walked up to Gabrielle. "Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle's red eyes looked up to Xena. "Xena... why'd you leave me?"

Xena stared into Gabrielle's eyes. "W-what?"

"Why'd you leave me in Dahak's temple? Was killing Caesar more important to you?"

Xena brought up her hands to Gabrielle's shoulders. "No... no."

Gabrielle dropped her head. She stared down at the dagger in her hands. She then noticed Hope's body. "No!" The dagger fell from her hands and landed to the stone temple's floor. Gabrielle fell to her knees beside Hope. She looked up to Xena. "You left me! You betrayed me!"

Xena shook her head. "No..." She bent down to be eye level with Gabrielle. "I didn't leave you."

"Yes you did!" Gabrielle looked up to Xena now. Her eyes now burned with a deep fire, a fire of rage. "You left me in this temple. Then you betrayed Hope and I. How could you?"

"Gabrielle we both know Hope was a-

"Vessel for Evil?" Gabrielle's eyes narrowed. "Xena the only reason she was evil was because you made her out to be. You never even gave her a chance."

"She killed my son!"

"That is your fault! You left me here to be raped by Dahak! What did you expect?"

"She is a thing Gabrielle."

Gabrielle's eyes narrowed. "I could have said the something about you! I could be sitting here telling you, you were a vessel for Evil. By the gods Xena you were a warlord and killed thousands of people. Hope hardly did that. People showed you a second chance. But you couldn't even give her one to start with."

"No Gabrielle."

"Yes Xena, and you know it! You killed my daughter! And admit it, you loved it? You enjoyed it?"

"No Gabrielle I didn't." Xena stood up and took a step back.

Gabrielle stood up now, she stepped over Hope. "Yes you did Xena. Admit it!" She pointed a finger at Xena, her eyes narrowing. "I saw that look of utter satisfaction when Hope and her son lay died in that barn. I bet that was the happiest moment in your life!"

Xena shook her head. She took another step back. "Gabrielle, no it wasn't like that at all. I-

"I felt bad, sad... depressed I had to kill Hope." Gabrielle bitterly laughed. "Right Xena, like I'd believe that. You only know revenge and killing. You know nothing of love!"

"That's not true Gabrielle, you know that."

Gabrielle laughed again with sarcasm. "Do I really? I bet you were faking everything to me. Our love, wasn't real." Gabrielle took another step closer, her body pressed against Xena's. "Tell me Xena, who would you be, would you be me?" Gabrielle took a few steps back, she grinned. "I wanna know, would you be me?" Gabrielle laughed

again. "I bet everything between us was fake, even when you were under my skin." Gabrielle's grin went evil as she stepped up to Xena again. "I bet you liked me even more when I was faking it." She only laughed again, took a step back.

"So tell me Xena, would you be me?"

"Would you be me?"

"Would you be me?"

"Would you be me?"

The warrior's eyes shot open, she was staring up to the ceiling of the hut. She took a deep breath to calm herself. She closed her eyes again and took a few deep breaths. Her eyes opened again. She rolled to her right, her back now to Gabrielle on the other side of the bed.

*"Would you be me?"*

Xena closed her eyes. *"Would you be me?"* Her eyes closed even tighter. She then took control of her mind, she rammed the thought deep down. Sighing, her eyes loosened some but kept close. Maybe, just maybe she'd go back to sleep.

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Gabrielle rolled out of bed, her bare feet hitting the wood floor. *Oh yeah, wood for once, not that cold stone floor.* She chuckled at her own musing. Walking to the foot of the bed, she found her boots from last night. She quickly put them on and laced them up. On the table were her sais, just where she left them as well. She put them down in their home on her boots. Once she rose back up, she heard her partner's voice.

"Leaving for the meeting?"

Gabrielle looked to Xena as she straightened her back out. "Yeah."

The warrior nodded, she then got out of the bed. She was just in her leathers. "I'll come."

"Xena, you don't need too."

The older woman nodded as she came to the table, her brass armor and bracers there. "No, I'll come. Might need my help."

The smaller warrior nodded her head. That's when she felt uncomfortable, she shifted away from Xena. She went to sit on the end of the bed, waiting.

Xena was use to Gabrielle helping her, but she still managed to put her armor on fast. She came to the foot of the bed near Gabrielle. She slipped into her boots then brought one leg up at a time to the frame of the bed. She tied the laces easily. Her eyes shifted to her friend, Gabrielle was staring at the floor. "Feel like getting something to eat?"

"No." The younger woman then looked to Xena. She saw Xena's eyes weren't warm yet they weren't bitterly cold like they could be. They're are... dull, they contained no emotions. "There's no time."

Xena nodded she dropped her foot and brought up the other one to tie it. "Just have to

get a big lunch."

The small woman nodded a little. "Maybe."

The warrior looked away and walked over to her side of the bed. She went to the wall, she lifted her sword and chakram. They quickly found their homes. "Ready?"

The Amazon Queen stood up. "Yup. Let's go."

The warrior nodded. The pair left the hut and made a beeline to the council's hut.

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"Queen Gabrielle, I don't know if that's a wise idea."

The Amazon Queen looked away from the council member and looked to her regent, sitting beside her. "Ephiny?"

The regent looked to Gabrielle. "Yes?"

"When was the last time all the Nations were together as one?"

The regent's face went a little surprised. "I... I have no idea Gabrielle."

Gabrielle nodded she then looked up to Xena, the warrior leaning against the wall, listening. "Xena do you know?"

The warrior sighed, she tightened her arms against her chest. "Wasn't during my time Gabrielle. But my guess it was over a hundred and fifty years."

The small warrior nodded. "Thanks." She smiled a little then looked back to the council members. "You see, hardly anybody knows when the tribes were all together last."

That same council member replied back. "Queen Gabrielle, let me get this straight. The only reason as to why you want to bring all the tribes together is so it'll stop the fighting amongst themselves?"

Gabrielle sighed. "No that's not the only reason why. I-"

She was cut off by that council member. "Surely Queen Gabrielle, you don't want us all to come together just so we can have more wilder parties then the ones we have?" Everybody in the council laughed except for one. "Or perhaps the Queen rather-"

Now that annoying council member was stopped by a raised hand. The person whom silenced the council member, looked to her. "You better hold you tongue. I will not take that sort of centaur crap in my council. You will give Queen Gabrielle a chance."

The council member nodded her head. "I apologize Masika." She then looked to Gabrielle. "Queen Gabrielle, I apologize to you as well."

The Queen nodded her head a little, but her eyes still stayed narrow. She then stood up from her seat, pushing her chair back. She grasped the chair and rammed the chair into the table, a boom was heard in the hut. Her hands still tightly grasped the chair. Everybody's eyes were on her and serious now. "Thank you." She took a deep breath. "Now that you've all, with the exception of Masika." She nodded to the head council

member, Masika nodded back. Gabrielle then looked back to everybody. "Have had their laugh, lets try to be serious." Releasing the chair she straightened up.

She began to pace back and forth in front of the council. The regent pushed her seat back to be able to see Gabrielle. The Queen stopped and looked to them. "I want the nations together not only to stop this quarreling but to establish the nation again." She took a deep breath. Walking back to the table. "We all know the Amazon's pride, the bickering between the tribes will only get worse. Maybe even start battles up."

"That's crazed."

Gabrielle looked to the person whom spoke in the council. "Is it really? You can't tell me if I stand here and insult you. That you wont stand up and challenge me. Am I wrong?"

All the council members shook their heads.

The small warrior smiled sarcastically. "No I'm not." She put her hands on the table and leaned forward. "So that's my point. One tribe insults another, they'll stand up to the other. Eventually it'll get out of hand. I promise you it will happen if nothing is done about it." She brought her hands off the table and began to pace again. Everybody watched her. Gabrielle stopped and looked to them again. "Once our Nations are together, we can establish the final Nation to survive through time. Otherwise I have a feeling the Amazons will die out."

"The Amazons won't die out."

"Yes they will, not over night or tomorrow or the next day. But in time they will. It's already begun. Look at what Pompey did to us."

"But we defeated him."

Gabrielle nodded. "We did. But will we defeat the next warlord that comes along? Win the next war that comes? We don't know and eventually our luck will run out. Look at what's happened to the once great nation. It was a whole, now it's separated into what? Ten tribes now?" She looked to Ephiny in answer. Ephiny nodded back. Gabrielle looked up to the council. "Ten tribes are left including us. That's nothing compared to what it was. Look at the facts, they're right there." She took steps back to the table, she looked to each and every member. "We will not survive the test of time if we do not do something about. We will not exist if we are not together."

Masika's head was bobbing up and down. She looked up from the table to Gabrielle. "I agree with you Queen Gabrielle. I'm the oldest here in the tribe. I've watched some of the nations fall apart and die out. When I first became an Amazon there were I believe fourteen nations." Masika looked to the other council members. "It will only take a good puff of wind to blow each nation down like a piece of straw. If we are all together, then we will survive better."

Gabrielle nodded at that in agreement, Masika looked back to her. The Amazon Queen looked to all the members again. "We do we have to lose?"

All the members began to nod in agreement. Masika though kept looking at the Queen. "There is just one problem Queen Gabrielle." Masika then brought her right

hand up to the table after speaking.

"That is?"

Masika took a deep breath. "How are we going to do it?"

Another council member now spoke up. "That is true my Queen. We all agree, but there is the problem of how to go about it. We can not ask the tribes to come together. There is no way all the Queens will want to give up their castes. Besides that, there'd be the problem of a single Queen. Who'd it be?"

The Amazon Queen nodded her head. She shifted away from the table, she began to pace again. She then grinned to herself and looked to the council. "A fight."

"Excuse me, Queen Gabrielle." Masika sighed and went on. "But we can not spill our own sisters blood for this."

Gabrielle nodded with a smile, she crossed her arms. "I don't mean necessarily a fight. A challenge." She then walked up to the table again. Her back straight as she kept her arms crossed.

"A challenge my Queen?"

The small warrior nodded. She looked to the entire council. "It would be perfect. We send out a challenge to every tribe. All the Queens come with however many Amazons they want. All the Queens will have a fight... challenge to each other. Sort of like a contest that we can hold here. Since we're the tribe that's in the center. We make a few exceptions to the rules. Whichever Queen comes out victorious then is the head Queen. And none of the Nations will be able to refuse the challenges because of tradition." A pause. "Not to mention pride."

All of the head council members looked to each other. Talking lowly to each other.

Masika listened to them talk. She then looked up to Gabrielle with a smile. Gabrielle smiled back and the Amazon looked back to the council.

One of the council members looked away from the group to Gabrielle. "Queen Gabrielle, what would be the exceptions to the rules?" All the members now looked to the Queen.

Gabrielle uncrossed her arms, her hands going to her hips. "The exceptions... the exceptions to the traditional challenge. I think the biggest one we need to have is nobody is allowed to kill. Then I think a second one would be that each Queen could choose her own weapon."

All the council members nodded and began to talk again. Then they started to quiet down and looked to Masika.

"Is it agreed upon?" All the members nodded their heads to Masika. The head council member smiled and looked up to Gabrielle. "Then it's agreed between this council. That Queen Gabrielle and this Nation will issue out challenges to all of the other nations. The challenges in turn will be held here in our tribe."

The Queen of the Amazons smiled. "Great."

All the members nodded and smiled to Gabrielle. They all said goodbye and left, except Masika.

The head council member stood and looked to Gabrielle. "That's quite a dream Gabrielle."

Gabrielle shrugged her shoulders and smiled a little. "We need to make it reality Masika."

Masika nodded her head. "I agree. I do believe it will happen. And hopefully you will become the head Queen." A pause. "I will say off the record from what I know of the other Queens. They're not to brilliant and couldn't match up to you."

The Queen sadly smiled. "Thank you Masika."

The older Amazon shrugged her shoulder. "Nothing to thank, I just hand you the truth. Now then you'll have to excuse me. Busy day."

Gabrielle nodded her head. "Have a good one Masika."

Masika nodded as she made her way to the door, she looked back to Gabrielle. "You to Gabrielle. Good job today." She then left.

The small woman took a deep breath and looked to Ephiny.

The regent stared up to Gabrielle with a huge grin. "That was something else Gabrielle. Where did you come up with all of that?"

Gabrielle chuckled, she ran her hand through her short hair. "I don't know Eph. Right there while I was pacing."

The Amazon chuckled and stood up. "Well that was incredible."

The Queen smiled. "Thanks."

Ephiny then took a step forward and hugged her friend. The regent then released her. "Well I need to get going. How about after lunch we work up on challenge letters?"

Gabrielle nodded. "That sounds good."

The Amazon smiled. "Great, catch you then Gabrielle."

"Bye Eph." She watched till her Amazon friend was gone, she then looked to Xena.

The warrior smiled and shifted off the wall. "Wasn't to bad."

The younger woman chuckled. "Uh huh."

Xena walked up to her partner. "I have to agree with Masika though."

Gabrielle raised an eyebrow at the warrior. "Oh yeah, what was that?"

"You'd be the best Queen."

The small woman sighed. "I don't know Xena. I don't think I could beat them all."

"We'll find out huh?"

"Yup."

"You up for some sparring? I could use some."

Gabrielle nodded then smiled some. "Yeah, I could go for that."

"Your shoulder can handle it?"

Gabrielle nodded. "Yeah, come on."

The two friends left the hut and went to the sparring field. There they practiced. Xena now studied Gabrielle's movement to try and figure out if there was anything physically wrong with her. She did notice that her left arm had a slower reaction time due to the healing wound. The warrior in turn was slower about attacking her friend's left side. Overall though, she could not find anything odd.

About half way through their sparring, a group of Amazons started watching. None of them knew whom to glue their eyes too. They all found both Xena and the Queen quite extraordinary to watch.

"Xena?"

The warrior parried Gabrielle's sai thrust. "Yeah?"

The small warrior spun to put her back to Xena. She lowered her sais to stop a sword blow. She whirled back around to face Xena again. One sai went up to stop Xena's sword coming down. The other sai jabbed forward for the taller woman's stomach. She missed since Xena jumped back. "Is there anyway I can get my enemies sword out their hands with sais?"

Xena jumped as the Queen came at her feet. "Maybe."

Gabrielle rose back up from trying to get at Xena's lower portion. She then leaned to her left as the sword swept past her. "You think we can find one?"

The warrior took a step back and lowered her sword. "Sure."

Gabrielle smiled and dropped her arms, her sais flickered and went under her wrists. There was a ting as the butt end of the sais hit her bracelets.

Xena tossed her sword up in the air a little and caught it by the blade. She held the handle out to Gabrielle. "Switch."

The Amazon Queen nodded her head. She placed her right sai into her left hand and handed them to Xena. She then took Xena's sword.

The warrior held the warm sais for a second and studied them. She looked up and studied her own sword in Gabrielle's hand. She looked back to the sais and their design. Looking back up she smiled. "Okay, I have an idea. I want you to bring the sword down on me with both hands, tight hold too."

Gabrielle nodded her head. She took a step back and Xena brought the sais up, the tips out. The warrior nodded and the sword came down with quick speed and force. The

warrior brought both sais up at the same time and stopped the sword in between the grooves. Xena then split the sais, one going right and the other left with a hard jerk and force.

The sword flew out of Gabrielle's hand and went twisting up into the air. The warrior put the right sai into her left hand and held out her right hand. The sword came down handle first and Xena caught it. She smiled and looked to Gabrielle.

The small warrior's hands went to her hips. "Show that to me again, but slow."

The Warrior Princess nodded her head. She tossed the sword to Gabrielle and she caught it. Gabrielle slowly brought the sword down on Xena.

The warrior put the sais up again. Once the swords met the sais she looked to Gabrielle. "First get the sword between the forks of the sais okay?"

Gabrielle nodded. "I got that."

Xena nodded. "Okay, next have one sais go left then the other right. Make sure it's fast and hard. Don't give your enemy a chance to pull their sword out." Her blue eyes shifted back to the sais. She jerked the sais each way and the sword went sailing again. She caught it as it came down. "And there you go. Wanna try it?"

The Amazon Queen nodded her head. "I better."

Xena grinned and handed back the sais as she took her sword back. "Remember hard jerk left and right. Won't work otherwise."

Gabrielle nodded. "Go ahead."

The warrior nodded and brought her sword down quick at Gabrielle. The Queen brought her sais up and stopped the sword. She then rapidly pulled her one hand left the other right. The sword slipped from Xena's hand and went flying up again. Gabrielle tossed her right sai into her left hand and caught the sword. She twisted the sword in hand and brought it to Xena's throat.

The warrior grinned. "Perfect. One thing."

"Yeah?"

"I wouldn't use the sword."

Gabrielle chuckled. "Right." A pause. "But my enemy wouldn't know that." She dropped the sword and handed it back to Xena. "Okay I think I'm done." Her hands went down with the sais, they went back into the catches on her boots.

The older woman sheathed her sword and looked to Gabrielle. "Good job. You have the hang of those sais."

Gabrielle nodded. "Thanks, they work well."

Xena grinned. "They only work well if the owner knows how to use them."

The small warrior grinned. "Right."

That's when the pair began to walk, they headed towards where the crowd of Amazons

are, only ten Amazons or so. Most of them began to leave, only three stayed behind. Gabrielle recognized one as Aster.

"That was really good Gabrielle."

The Queen looked to Aster. "Thanks, had lots of practice."

"I'm sure with those abilities."

Beside the Queen stood Xena. The warrior had narrowed her eyes a little to the Amazon.

Gabrielle took a deep breath and smiled. "Thanks again."

Aster then reached forward with her left hand. Her warm hand grasping Gabrielle's right shoulder. "Hey if you ever have time. I'd love to spar with you."

The small warrior nodded a little. "Maybe we can."

The Amazon smiled. "Great, I'd love it." She squeezed Gabrielle's shoulder then removed her hand. She began to head off. "By Queen Gabrielle."

"Bye Aster."

Gabrielle then began to look up to Xena. The warrior saw this and calmed down, her eyes not being narrow anymore.

"She seems nice huh?"

The Warrior Princess started to walk. "Yup."

Gabrielle walked along with her. "You don't like her huh?"

Xena shrugged her shoulders. "Don't know enough of her to say."

Silence materialize between the partners.

They though went their separate ways once they got into the village again. Gabrielle went to find Ephiny. Xena though, she went some where. Gabrielle had no idea where.

~\*~\*~\*~

Night had soon came along with it so was dinner. Gabrielle had sat at the table with her closes friends. Xena though, she had no idea where she was. She'd spotted her earlier in the food hut. She just figured the warrior sat some where else for dinner. It bothered Gabrielle, it really did. But then again, she had no right to complain. Xena could do whatever she wanted. Wasn't her place anymore to say.

The small warrior had eaten already and ridded herself of her plates. Now she sat down with a mug of wine. Normally she'd never drink wine, but she was definitely in the mood for it now. She then stood up. "I think I'm going to go find Amarice. I'll stop back later."

Everybody nodded to Gabrielle. She then left the table with her mug. She looked around in the hut for a red head. Oh that didn't take long. She made a beeline across

the hut to Amarice, she sat down beside the Amazon.

Amarice looked to the Queen with a smile. "Hey."

Gabrielle smiled. "How are you Amarice? Haven't seen much of you."

The Amazon nodded her head. "Sorry, been busy catch up with my sister."

The Queen nodded. "That's what I figured. How's that going?"

Amarice went to respond.

Xena looked away from her best friend and Amarice and looked back to her mug of ale. She sighed, she didn't feel like much for drinking. She stood up and left the bench, making her way to the dish table and she dropped her mug off.

Teresa then came up beside her. "Hi."

Xena looked to the Amazon. "Hey Teresa."

The Amazon took a deep breath and looked up to her. "Xena, look I'm sorry about the other day. I know I didn't say hi or anything. I'm real sorry about that."

The warrior nodded a little. "Its okay. I'm use to that sort of thing." She smiled some.

Teresa though didn't take it as a joke. "No I'm really sorry Xena. It's just... well there's been a lot of talk about things."

The warrior crossed her arms against her chest. "About what?"

The Amazon took a deep breath. "About you and Gabrielle."

Xena's head bobbed up and down a few times. "What about us?"

"Just stuff Xena. There's just a lot of rumors flying and things."

"I figured that considering pretty much all of the Nation is ignoring me."

"Yeah I know. I was listening to those rumors. That's why I acted like I did early. But I just knew better, that's why I had to apologize."

Xena smiled faintly. "Thanks Teresa."

Teresa smiled back. "Hey yeah, the least I could do. But I need to go."

The Warrior Princess nodded. "Okay. I'll talk to you later."

"Bye Xena."

"Teresa?"

The Amazon looked back to Xena. "Yeah?"

"Are the rumors mainly focused around me?"

Teresa's eyes dropped to the ground. She looked back up. "Yeah, they're just not good."

The warrior nodded her head. "Okay. Thanks again. Bye."

"Goodnight Xena." Teresa then left the hut.

The warrior looked through the food hut, she spotted Gabrielle. She was still talking to Amarice. Xena sighed and left the hut, she headed to her own. That's when she crawled in bed after ridding herself of the armor.

Sleep though didn't take her right away. She'd heard Gabrielle come in about a candlemark later. She just lay there pretending to sleep. Xena didn't sleep till quite later on in the night. Her thoughts were flying through her head to fast to let her sleep. But once she did, she knew she wasn't going to sleep pleasantly.

~\*Part 6\*~

"Xena why'd you leave me in the temple?" Gabrielle looked up with red eyes.

The warrior took a step back. Now she was in Dahak's temple again. Hope's body wasn't there this time. It was just her, Gabrielle, and the pit.

"I didn't want to Gabrielle, I swear."

"Right Xena, you just wanted to kill Caesar over protecting me."

"It wasn't like that Gabrielle."

"Then how was it Xena?" Gabrielle took steps closer to Xena. "Gods, please tell me the truth then Xena? I sure as Hades don't seem to know huh?"

"Gabrielle-"

"No Xena! You left me here to be raped. You choose the greater good over me. No no I have that wrong." Gabrielle stared at the floor then looked back up to Xena. "You choose your hatred over me. Gods Xena I can't believe that! You bitch!"

Xena's body began to shake, she took steps back, Gabrielle came at her. "Gods no Gabrielle. I never meant for all of that to happen."

"Do you think I believe that Xena? You probably planned it that way."

"You know that's not true Gabrielle!"

Gabrielle took more steps, she pressed her body against Xena's. "Do I really Xena?" She took a deep breath. "I don't trust you, I don't respect you, and you know what else? I don't love you." She repeated it in a whisper. "I don't love you." She took a step back. "I'd rather die then look at you." Her eyes then burned. "I hate you Xena! I hate you!" Her voice now erupted to fill Xena's world. "I hate you! I don't love you!"

"I hate you!"

"I don't love you!"

"I hate you!"

"I don't love you!"

"I hate you!"

"I don't love you!"

Xena shot up in the bed. Her body was shaking all over. She felt beads of sweat go down her body. She looked to her left at Gabrielle. The small woman slept soundlessly. She hadn't heard Xena move. The warrior leaned forward, her hands cupping her face. The warrior took a deep breath.

Her legs swung from the bed, her feet going to the wood floor. Xena got up and began to put her armor on. She had to leave, she needed too.

*"I hate you!"*

*"I don't love you!"*

Xena shut her eyes for a moment. She shifted the gauntlet on her arm, her eyes opening again. The warrior went to the foot of the bed and put her boots on. Looking up, she stared at her... friend sleeping. Tears rolled down the warrior's face. She looked away and finished tying her boots. Now she was dressed with her weapons, not sure where to go.

The warrior took a deep breath and quietly went to the door, leaving. It was still night out. She figured it would be dawn in a little more than a candlemark. Her legs carried her to the stables.

Her body the entire time was ridged, her face emotionless. Ephiny had quickly found this out when the warrior brushed by her. Xena had said nothing to the regent, acted as if she wasn't even there. But Ephiny, she'd caught that deep darkness in her friend's eyes. She didn't like it. In turn that made her ease her way to Gabrielle's hut.

Xena though, kept walking to the stables. Torqueo greeted her, Xena smiled sadly and went to Argo's stall. Once she had her mare saddled, she was gone.

~\*~\*~\*~

Over a half of a candlemark left before the dawn's light comes over the small Amazon village, it was a nasty night. The gray dark clouds had swept in to mask the night sky. Something in the very pit of Gabrielle's stomach told her something wasn't right. Not that she has had that feeling before, yet now it has grown an increasing amount.

She sat on the end of the bed, her boots up on the bed, legs crossed. Her sais had been removed and placed beside herself on the bed. Gabrielle has her elbows propped up on her knees, her hands up cupping her chin. Emerald eyes unfocused and fixed on the wooden floor of the hut.

Xena had left earlier. Gabrielle was not sure of where or exactly when the warrior got up. She just knew the warrior had left for some reason. The Amazon Queen though definitely had her guess as to why. As soon as Gabrielle woke up from her nightmares she changed into her leathers.

But her mind is racing over the past few days. We can only guess as to what exactly it is about. However I can assure you that it all consists of her, Xena and their declining relationship. Something so dark and strong was inside of Gabrielle it threaten to kill her everything. She knew how to destroy it yet she didn't know if she could actually

do it. The small warrior understood all of this enigma inside of herself but not even the understanding seem to help her less fear it. Instead as the days passed she grew more and more scared, believing she would never be able to stop this darkness.

A knock at the door was heard and Gabrielle lifted her head. "Come in." A curly-haired Amazon walked in with a strong gate. Gabrielle smiled to her friend. "Hey Eph, how are you?"

The regent smiled a little to her friend. "Pretty good you?"

The small warrior dropped her hands to her lap and shrugged. "Surviving I suppose." Ephiny nodded her head and the Queen went on. "Surprised you're here this early. So formal visit or what?"

The regent grinned some. "Just came to check up on you. See how you're doing way early this morning."

The small warrior nodded her head with a small smile. Ephiny had her eyes locked with the other woman on the bed. She could see the deep sadness hidden within. It clenched even at Ephiny's heart. She wished she could set things straight for her friend, but knew it was up to Gabrielle to settle things.

"Thanks." A pause. "You seen Xena by any chance?"

The Amazon's eyes dropped to the ground for a brief moment, then she looked back up. "Yeah I did."

"What is it Ephiny?"

The regent took a deep breath. "Gabrielle, when I saw her, I said hi to her and she didn't respond. Her eyes were really cold, never seen her like that before."

The warrior leaped off the bed and spun the sais for a moment then inserted them in the catch on the sides of her boots. "Where was she going Ephiny?"

"I believe to take Argo for a run." The bard began to move to the door. "Wait Gabrielle?" The Amazon Queen stopped short of the door and turned to face the regent. Ephiny took a deep breath and continued with a serious voice. "Let a couple of Amazons go with you."

Gabrielle sighed and moved closer to her friend, one hand going to the Amazon's shoulder. "Look Ephiny, I need to go after her alone."

"Gabrielle."

"No Ephiny, she doesn't need a bunch of Amazons hanging around. Okay?"

The regent nodded her head. "Be careful Gabrielle, that weather there is looking real bad."

Gabrielle nodded her head with a small smile, she headed out the door in a rush. With a fluent motion the small warrior made her way to the stables where her horse awaited for her. It was dark out from the clouds hiding the full moon, so torches around the village lit the way.

The Queen entered the stable, going to the stall where her horse was nickering. "Hey boy, I need your help to find Xena."

Torqueo threw his head back and snorted. The small warrior smiled and stepped into the stall. In no time at all, the horse was saddle up and Gabrielle walked him out of the stable. She hopped up into the saddle and grabbed the reins, her boots going into the stirrups. Gabrielle looked up to the dark sky for a moment. It was a sticky air, the kind that comes when a storm is about to hit its brewing beginning now. Gabrielle squeezed the stallion on the sides and that went at a trot out of the village.

Once they hit the woods, Gabrielle sent Torqueo into a gallop. They gallop aimlessly, Gabrielle had no idea where. She began to cry, feeling hopeless. She had no way of finding Xena, or so she thought. That's when it came to Gabrielle. *Our connection! Gods please let it still be there.*

So she stopped her stallion. Her red eyes closed and she took deep breaths. She focused on that darkness in her that is growing more and more each day. It sarcastically laughed at her. Gabrielle's lip twitched and she listened and studied the darkness. Oh that is her connection with Xena now, darkness. What Gabrielle is feeling so is Xena. And the small warrior knew this.

Her eyes flew open. She sent Torqueo into another gallop, she followed the darkness. It grew stronger, she is getting closer to Xena. She scanned around the woods. It was still dark from the storm clouds, yet it still had not rained. The weather seemed to wait for something.

Looking back ahead Gabrielle spotted a dark huddled form on the ground. The darkness inside engulfed her and she knew it was Xena. Stopping Torqueo, Gabrielle almost fell off the horse. Her feet made contact with the ground and Gabrielle went off sprinting to Xena.

The warrior looked up and saw her partner coming. Oh gods how she knew Gabrielle was looking for her. She knew when Gabrielle first got up by the shot of pain she got. She knew when Gabrielle came looking for her because of the desperate hope that filled her.

The small warrior came straight to Xena. She came down on her knees and looked to Xena. The warrior had her head lowered, her hands in front of herself, a dagger in her right hand. The tip of the dagger pressed into Xena's left wrist.

Gabrielle grabbed at Xena's left hand and saw the blood seeping out. She grabbed the dagger from Xena's hand. "Gods no Xena!" She threw the dagger behind herself. She turned back to Xena. "Xena gods."

The warrior looked up to Gabrielle. "Gabrielle, I can't-" She was cut off.

Thunder had erupted in this realm. The sky opened then, rain came hammering down. It swallowed the pair up whole so to speak. It was dark as Indian ink now. They only saw each other through flashes of lightening.

"Xena you can't what?"

The warrior shook her head. "I can't keep going Gabrielle, not like this."

Gabrielle opened her mouth to reply. But she didn't because thunder stopped her. Lightening then flashed. Gabrielle caught sight of the blood flowing off Xena's hand from the rain. The pure rain cleaning the deep cut. Xena felt the sting of her wound.

"Xena, I can't either gods believe me." She took a deep breath. Lightening flashed as she spoke. "Xena, I am hating myself a little more each day. I can not ever forgive myself for what I did to you."

The warrior looked up, her bangs slicked in front of her face. "I've forgiven you for it all Gabrielle."

Thunder rolled. The world lit up then went dark again.

"I know Xena. I've forgiven you too. But we can't seem to forgive ourselves. I know I can't forgive myself. Maybe..." Thunder. "Maybe the answer is to help each other forgive ourselves."

Lightening then thunder. Lightening flashed a few times then stopped. The rain still hammered down on them.

Xena closed her eyes then opened again. "Gabrielle, I'm too scared to be together with you. Gods I don't want to hurt you anymore. I can't do that to you." Tears began to slip.

Gabrielle's eyes stung as the tears rolled down her cheek mixing with the rain. "I know Xena. I feel the same with you. But Xena-" Thunder sounded, Gabrielle ignored it and went on. "Xena you can't tell me you feel like you're slowly dying inside. I know for me as each day fades away so does part of me. I don't know who I am anymore. I just know that the biggest part of me is you." Thunder then lightening. "If I don't have you, then I can't be myself." The ultimate truth finally escaped Gabrielle's lips in a low whisper.

"I can't survive Xena."

The two women locked eyes. Xena was breathing heavy, she could hear Gabrielle as well breathing hard. She heard the pounding of rain. The thunder crackled as the lightening streaked through the sky.

"Gabrielle." Thunder erupted. "Gabrielle, I know I will die without you. Gods, I need you now more than ever." Lightening crackled.

"Xena." Gabrielle smiled sadly. She whispered Xena's name again. "Xena, I'm right here. I've been waiting for you. I can't move without you."

Xena smiled. She brought her right hand up to Gabrielle's cheek. She then leaned in as Gabrielle closed her eyes.

The Soulmates' lips met.

Lightening flashed repeatedly, it never stopped. Once the Soulmates pulled back from their kiss, did the lightening stopped. Thunder soundly loudly in this world. It was echoed through and through.

"I love you Gabrielle."

"I'm beyond in-love with you Xena."

The warrior smiled. "I know, there're are no words to tell how much I love you Gabrielle."

The Soulmates started to cry. They kissed again. The thunder erupted. The lightening flashed over and over as they kissed. The rain softened on their bodies. To the Soulmates it felt utterly good the cool rain, replenishing. The water sliding down their backs, legs, hair, between their faces and interlocked lips.

The long kiss itself was filled with love and forgiveness, each Soulmate trying to hand their soul over to the other. To show complete devotion to the other. They made it a need to please the other. They had to believe again.

The Soulmates pulled away from the kiss, both crying. Xena pulled Gabrielle into her lap. Gabrielle wrapped her legs around the Xena's waist, her small arms around Xena's back. Xena's own arms around Gabrielle's waist. Gabrielle dug her head into her Soulmate's right shoulder, Xena's head going into Gabrielle's hair.

The rain still fell on the Soulmates. The lightening stopped with its thunder. The gray clouds beginning to break up, the light rain continued to fall on the Soulmates of this time. As the clouds dispersed did the dawning begin, the morning sunlight came cutting through the darkness. The warm light of the eastern sun fell on the Soulmates and warmed them to their core.

The Soulmates felt an infinite weight disappear from them. From inside of their souls the weight left, in their hearts, and minds. Gods how that made them cry in each other's arms. They hug so tightly worried that they may separate again.

Their need for each other had grown an unmeasurable extent. To such an extent that no mere language can capture the need, the want, and desire. The indescribably is the soul touching entities. And this pair of Soulmates felt this need, so much that they must cry.

They cry from the need, from the separation, from the happiness. And as we all know, from the pain. The pain that turned into darkness. That darkness that had almost swallowed them both whole. They could have lost each other forever. That was another thing to cry about, they could have lost the other for eternity. They hadn't and felt that burning risk inside now. Beyond glad it didn't happen.

Gabrielle lifted her head from Xena's shoulder. Xena in turn lifting her head. Gabrielle reached down to Xena's left hand, she careful brought the wounded hand to her lips. She placed a warm kiss over the cut.

Xena smiled and leaned in, placing a kiss to Gabrielle's forehead.

The small warrior then placed her head under Xena's chin, she started to cry all over again.

The warrior tightly wrapped her arms around her partner again. "Sshhh, we're okay Gabrielle." Xena rocked both their bodies now.

Gabrielle shivered in the older woman's arms. "Gods, Xena I thought I'd lost you

forever."

"No, never Gabrielle." She then looked down to Gabrielle. "I'm not going to leave you."

The Amazon Queen looked up to the warrior. "I couldn't leave you Xena." Her eyes burned her throat hurt. Her body only shook again out of past fear.

Xena held tight as a small smile broke out across her lips. "I know." Lowering her head to Gabrielle's neck, she felt tears stream down.

Gabrielle brought up her right hand behind her Soulmate's head. "We are going to be okay Xena."

They stayed like that for awhile, no time is needed to be told how long. It just was. They had to feel the other all over again.

Xena though lifted her head again. She then removed her right hand from her Soulmate's back. Reaching down to her waist. Gabrielle shifted back in her lap some. Xena then reach into her small hidden pouch in her leathers, she slowly lifted up two rings and necklace in the palm of her hand.

Gabrielle brought up her right hand to her mouth as her eyes widen. "Oh gods Xena." She dropped her hand to grasp the warrior's waist.

Xena smiled. She didn't say anything, didn't need to. She carefully grasped Gabrielle's left hand, bring it up. First she slipped on the thin wedding ring then the engagement ring.

Gabrielle smiled so sadly as she turned her hand a little. The rings greeted her with sparkles and twinkles. She'd missed that weight on her left ring finger so much. Looking back up from them, she saw Xena bringing up the necklace. She dropped her head.

The warrior reached behind Gabrielle and hooked the necklace. It fell to her chest, it was warm. Xena brought her hands to Gabrielle's chest, straightening the charm out.

Gabrielle reached for the charm, she lifted it so slowly. The deep sapphire twinkled up to her. The rain fell into the gem then rushed off, slipping down Gabrielle's hand. Her emerald eyes lifted up to Xena. That's when she shifted her right leg. Leaning forward some the small woman reached to her right boot. She reached into a small hidden pouched on the side of her boot. She lifted out a ring and similar necklace.

Xena had certainly caught this. She felt Gabrielle slip the thick silver and gold wedding band onto her left ring finger. Then the necklace, oh how it felt good to have those weights back on her. She herself lifted the necklace up. The emerald though sparkled to her. Telling her how much it missed being at home around her neck. The warrior smiled down at it. She looked back to Gabrielle.

They both leaned in and captured each other's lips.

### **Part 3**

### Section 3

~\*Part 7\*~

Gabrielle grasped at the door to the hut, she quickly swung it open. It was still raining out and she wanted to get the mud off her body. Torqueo and Argo had been settled up into their stalls again. Grateful for the dryness of the stable.

The small warrior now stepped into the hut, Xena came in behind her and closed the door. As soon as the Amazon Queen heard the door shut, she turned around. Gabrielle quickly wrapped her arms around Xena.

The warrior was stunned for a moment. She then tightly enveloped Gabrielle and dropped her head onto Gabrielle's.

They stood like that for a time. Taking in each other, taking in the feelings and emotions they hadn't had for two years. They were the feelings and emotions they would die for.

"Gabrielle?"

"Yeah?"

"We should get a bath before you get a cold in these wet leathers."

Gabrielle grinned to herself. She then lifted her head, she patted her Soulmate's stomach a little. "Can't let you get a cold either. You hate them so much."

The warrior shook her head a little. "Damn things are annoying, you have to admit."

The smaller woman chuckled. "Yup." Releasing Xena, Gabrielle made her way into the wash room.

There inside was a huge tub off to the left. They'd just have to fill it. So they did in no time at all. Afterwards, they began to peel off their boots, armor, and leathers.

After getting everything off, the small warrior climbed into the steaming tub. Her body flinched a little to the warm water, she then settled into it comfortable. Lifting her eyes to Xena, she watched the nude warrior place their leathers up to dry.

She hung them in the sun light from the eastern sun. Xena looked out the window from which the sun came streaming in from. She found it odd, rather odd. The sun shined brightly yet it still rained. Not a hard rain but a very soft, gentle, and quiet rain. Either way though, it didn't matter to Xena. She went to the tub and climbed in beside Gabrielle.

The small warrior had watched her the whole time. She'd watched the warrior's muscles shifted from all the movements. She'd missed watching Xena.

"Hey come here."

Gabrielle smiled and moved in the water to lean against Xena. The warrior leaning against the side of the tub. Xena encircled her partner with her arms.

"Xena?"

"Mmm?"

"We are going to take things slow?"

The older woman smiled to herself at that. She brought up her right hand from under the water. Xena began to let her hands run through Gabrielle's wet short hair. "Yeah, be careful this time."

Gabrielle nodded her head with a smile. She dropped her head back against the warrior's chest. "Gods, it feels good to finally be home again."

"Yeah." Xena leaned her head in some to place a warm kiss to Gabrielle's neck. She then brought her head back up again. Her right hand went back down under the water to snake around Gabrielle's waist.

"I feel like I've lost all this weight off my shoulders Xena."

"I know, I feel really..."

"Tired?"

"Yeah, that was a hard war."

The Amazon Queen chuckled. "Warriors, I swear."

"Don't like them?"

Gabrielle grinned devilishly. She turned around in Xena's arms. "Oh no. Not my warrior." She then leaned in to kiss Xena. And they kept kissing.

The warrior liked being claimed by Gabrielle again, she'd missed that. Xena finally stopped the kissing with a grin. "We better take this bath before the water cools off."

The small warrior nodded with a grin. "I wouldn't be to sure of that."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, with your warm body."

"And like yours isn't?"

"I didn't say that Xena."

The warrior chuckled, she leaned in to kiss Gabrielle on the forehead. The pair then began their bath. Xena then quickly found out just how much entertainment she could get out of Gabrielle's short hair. Especially when Gabrielle went to dry her hair with the towel. The small warrior's hair a complete mess.

"Where's the brush?"

The warrior grinned. "In the saddlebags."

"Good." Gabrielle quickly made her way to the saddlebags with her towel wrapped around her body. She pulled it out and brushed back her hair and behind her ears. That's when Xena came up to her and began to brush Gabrielle's hair this way or that

way with her long fingers.

"Thanks."

Xena grinned. "No problem."

Gabrielle sighed then. "Fascination with my hair now?"

The warrior nodded her head. "Considering I haven't been able to run my fingers through it since you got it short, yes."

The younger woman smirked. "Good reason."

The warrior chuckled. "I thought so too." Xena then brushed a little of the bangs forward to fall onto Gabrielle's forehead. "There." She then left Gabrielle's side, she went to the saddlebags with the brush.

The Amazon Queen watched her. Xena dropped the brush in and milled around in the saddlebags. She pulled out two shifts and came back to Gabrielle.

"I haven't worn one of your shifts in forever."

"I know." Xena then handed the white shift to Gabrielle. She herself took off her towel and began to slip into her other shift, the smaller woman doing the same. The warrior then looked to Gabrielle. "That looks better on you." Her eyes widen a little. "Not that the leathers don't look good on you, its just..." Xena stopped herself.

Gabrielle came up against her, her small hands going to the warrior's waist. "I know what you meant." A pause. "More relaxing."

Xena sighed. "Right." She took a deep breath. "Thanks."

The small warrior smiled. "It's okay Xena."

The Warrior Princess nodded her head, she then brought her head down to Gabrielle's. She lightly kissed Gabrielle. "Let's do some relaxing huh?"

"Oh I was planning on it."

Xena chuckled. "Good."

The smaller woman grinned. "Feel like tea?"

"Wouldn't have it any other way."

"Great."

They released each other. The warrior went to the fireplace, she packed it with wood. Gabrielle went to the saddlebags, she pulled out a small pot, went into the washroom and filled it. Xena lit the fire as Gabrielle came out of the washroom with the pot. Gabrielle handed to her Soulmate the pot of water, Xena hung it over the growing fire. Xena went to sit down on the floor, her back going against the foot of the bed, she propped her legs up.

The small warrior though went to the saddlebags again, she removed two mugs, flavored tea, and honey. She made her way back to the fireplace, settling the items

there. Turning back around she locked eyes with Xena. She slowly walked over to Xena. Bending down to one knee between the warrior's leg, she brought one hand up to the warrior's left cheek. Leaning in, she captured Xena's lips.

The warrior moaned and brought up her right hand behind Gabrielle's head. The kiss deepening now. As soon as the kiss ended, another started.

Gabrielle broke the kiss and smiled to her Soulmate. "I've missed you Xena."

Xena smiled back up to her. "I've missed you too."

They leaned into each other and started kissing again. Then somebody at the door knocked.

Gabrielle groaned, she talked between the kisses. "You've got to be kidding me."

The older woman chuckled but kept kissing, replying in between. "We should answer it."

"No." The small woman's lips went down to Xena's neck. The warrior sucked in a deep breath. "They'll leave."

"Gabrielle." The small warrior's name coming out deep from Xena's throat. "It's probably Ephiny." Another knock at the door.

"I don't care." Gabrielle then brought her lips back up to kiss Xena more. "She'll leave." A third knock.

"I... I don't think so."

That's definitely when the door to the hut swung open. The regent certainly stepped in, closing the door behind. Ephiny pushed her wet hood of her cloak off from her head. Her hands went to her hips as she stared down at her Queen kissing her Consort. "So I see you two are unquestionably together again."

Gabrielle dropped her head against Xena's chest, she began to blush deeply.

The warrior grinned, and kissed her Soulmate on top of her head. She looked up to the regent. "We are."

The Amazon nodded her head with a warm smile. She stepped closer to the pair. Dropping her hands from her hips she replied. "I could kind of tell."

The Queen now looked up to the regent. Her face was still a deep red. "You just had to come in Eph."

The regent chuckled and crossed her arms against her chest. "Well, you both disappeared before the sun even rose up. I was kind of worried."

Gabrielle looked to Xena with an arched eyebrow. The warrior looking to Gabrielle with a raised eyebrow as well. They seemed to have read each other's mind, both saying it aloud. "Mother hen."

The Amazon Queen broke out laughing, her body falling into Xena's. The warrior wrapping her arms around Gabrielle as she laughed.

The warrior grinned and looked back up to Ephiny. "Well we found each other out there Eph."

The regent smiled warmly. "I'm really glad. I was worried about you two."

Gabrielle had stopped laughing, she then stood up from Xena and looked to the regent. "Thanks Eph."

The Amazon looked to Gabrielle. "Anytime my Queen." She then shifted to Gabrielle. She pulled in the smaller woman for a tight hug. Once they pulled back, Ephiny placed a light kiss to Gabrielle's forehead. The regent then turned to the warrior. She leaned down and hugged Xena, then also placed a light kiss to her forehead as well. Straightening back up, the Amazon looked to the both of them. "You both better not do this again."

Gabrielle chuckled. "We aren't planning on it Eph."

The regent nodded seriously. "Good." She then sighed. "But you'll both will have to convince the village."

The Queen looked down to Xena, the warrior looked up. Something passed between the two women.

Gabrielle looked back to Ephiny. "We can handle that."

Ephiny chuckled. "I have no doubts Gabrielle."

The Queen grinned. "Neither do I." She then looked down to her Soulmate, smiling. Xena smiled back.

"I think I'm going to head out. I can't believe the rain too."

The small warrior looked to Ephiny. "I know, it's sort of weird. Its sunny but it's raining."

The regent shrugged her shoulders. "I agree, I don't mind it."

Xena then cut in. "I actually really like it."

Gabrielle looked down to her with a smile. "I was going to say the something."

Ephiny laughed a little. "That doesn't surprise me." The regent then looked to Gabrielle. "Why don't the both of you take the morning off."

The Queen grinned a little. "I have my regent's approval?"

The Amazon grinned. "Yes of course." Gabrielle chuckled but Ephiny went serious. "Just come by my hut this afternoon sometime. We'll finish up the scroll for the challenge letters."

Gabrielle nodded her head. "That sounds good. We'll get them out tomorrow?"

Ephiny shook her head. "Probably tonight would be better. We need to get this stuff done and fast. We can't have this going while winter sets in."

"Gods I almost forgot." Gabrielle then ran her hand through her partially wet hair. "Okay, I'll come by early this afternoon."

The regent nodded her head. "Good. I'll catch you both later."

Both Soulmates smiled and replied simultaneously. "Bye Ephiny."

The Amazon smiled to them and opened the door. She stepped through after putting her hood back over her head. "Bye." She closed the door behind.

Gabrielle then looked to the fireplace, the water was definitely boiling. "Hades." She rushed over to the fireplace, going down on her knees. The pot was taken from over the fire and settled to the ground. Gabrielle then placed the tea into the mug and then lifted the pot again, pouring the hot water in. Then the mugs were stirred till the tea mixed perfectly with the hot water.

When that was done with, she walked to Xena. The warrior took her mug and Gabrielle settled down onto the floor, snuggling into her Soulmate.

The warrior wrapped one arm around her partner. Her right hand lifted the mug, she took a small sip, knowing it was still hot. That's when the flavor shot through her mouth and settled there while the warm tea flowed down into her stomach to warm her. "Cinnamon?"

Gabrielle grinned as she took a sip of hers. "You like it?"

Xena chuckled. "How couldn't I?" The warrior still had her legs propped up from earlier.

"Glad you like it."

The warrior smiled, her head bending forward as she placed a few light kisses to Gabrielle's neck. After bringing her head up, she felt her partner shiver in her arms.

"Gods how do you do that to me?"

The older woman smiled. "The same way you do it to me."

Gabrielle smiled, she pressed her back more into Xena. She lifted her mug again and drank from it. Once the mug was settled back onto the floor, she brought her hands to rest on the warrior's hand on her own stomach. "Xena?"

"Mmm?"

"Is..." She sighed and took a deep breath. "Is it okay... if we talk about things?"

"Yeah." The warrior released her mug, her right arm circling Gabrielle again in comfort. "Where you want to start?"

"I don't know." She took a deep breath. "From the beginning maybe." She then lowered her head. "If I could figure out when it was."

The warrior felt a lump enter her throat. Oh gods how she hated talking about these things. But she'd do it for Gabrielle, knowing it would help her heal. Knowing also it would help herself heal. She took a deep breath then responded. "I think the beginning

was in Britannia."

The small warrior nodded her head. She reached for her mug, drinking from it. Once it was back on the floor, she leaned back into Xena. She felt protected. "Yeah but that's never bothered me as much."

Xena had been drinking her tea, she'd almost choked on it. She swallowed down the flavored tea then replied back. "Gabrielle... how... how can you say that? After what you went through with Dahak." Her mug went back to the floor

Gabrielle sighed. "I know how that sounded. Xena anymore I don't care what happens to me. I care about what happens to you."

The warrior tightened her arms more around Gabrielle. "I know." She'd quietly whispered that.

"Xena, what really bugs me. Is I feel like I've wasted these past two years."

Xena nodded her head, she chewed on that idea. As she thought she took a sip of the cinnamon tea, Gabrielle doing the same. As the mug came back down on the floor, she responded. "I don't think so Gabrielle."

The younger woman just froze in her position for a moment. She then began to breathe again. Gabrielle turned around in Xena's arm. Her knees on the floor. "You don't think so?"

Xena shook her head. "No." She paused then explained. "I've learned a lot Gabrielle. About you, myself, and us. I've seen so many changes for good or worse. It's also made me even love you more deeply then before. I knew I had a need for you before but now... I can't quite explain it."

Gabrielle nodded her head. "Its just not a need or desire anymore. Its more like a way... a way of life." Her eyes were locked to Xena's. Her words coming from some where deep in herself. "A way to live and survive time and the world."

Xena nodded her head. "Exactly."

The small warrior smiled. "I'm still not describing it right totally. And I'm the one who was a bard."

The larger warrior chuckled. "Nobody could Gabrielle because its deals with the soul."

"And you can't describe anything that deals with the soul."

The older woman nodded in agreement. Silence then began to invade. Xena kept her eyes locked with Gabrielle's. She noticed deep in her Soulmate's eyes they still contained sorrow. Xena didn't understand why either. That's when she knew not everything was okay. She was missing a small yet important piece of the puzzle. In time though, she knew she'd find out. For now though, she'd have to do some digging.

"Xena?"

"Mmm?"

"What... what would you have done if I did end up drinking the water from Mnemosyne?" Gabrielle had been looking away, she looked up to Xena now. "If I had destroyed my memory?"

The warrior closed her eyes for a moment. "I was willing to take that risk." She opened her eyes again. "Either way Gabrielle, you would have come out of it healed. If you had drunk the water then you'd finally be rid of me. If you hadn't and came out, you'd lost most of the pain." She dropped her eyes as she finished in a low whispered. "You'd been saved either way."

Gabrielle searched Xena's face and eyes. "Like I said to you before Xena. I couldn't have done it. I would have lost all my good memories as well. Forget my family, my childhood. The first time we ever kissed, were together, and married. I just... just couldn't have thrown those things away like they were nothing. I've done that one to many times."

The warrior smiled, she brought up her right hand to run it through Gabrielle's hair, then her hand came down to cup the other woman's cheek. "I know, that's why I took the risk."

A few tears escaped down Gabrielle's cheek. "I never thanked you for that Xena. That... that journey did help me heal."

"I'm just glad it had." Xena then reached for her Soulmate, she pulled her in.

Gabrielle leaned into Xena's body on her left side. Her left arm wrapping behind the warrior's back while her right hand went the other way so she hug Xena. The older woman wrapped her arms around Gabrielle waist. Their legs were stretched out and tangled together.

The Warrior Princess lowered her head some and kissed her partner on the top of her head. "Go to sleep huh?"

Gabrielle nodded her head. She shifted her arms around Xena so that they tightened. The warrior smiled and placed her head down gently on top of Gabrielle's. Soon the pair both fell asleep.

Gabrielle looked around, she was hovering up in clouds. She did a hundred-sixty-degree turn where she stood. Once she stopped turning, did she feel a weight in her right hand. She looked down to see a new sword in her hand. Then she felt weight on her body, she had on armor and wings. That's when she knew she was back in Heaven.

Once she looked up she saw Xena materialize in front of her. Xena stared at her for a second, then she leaned forward as she formed into a demon angel. Gabrielle's emerald eyes widen.

The demon angel looked back up to Gabrielle with burning red eyes. "Looks like I'm finally in Heaven. How nice."

"What's going on Xena?"

The demon angel smiled evilly and took a step closer to Gabrielle. "You tell me. I'm not suppose to be in Heaven."

"What?" Gabrielle shook her head. "I don't understand."

"What's there to understand Gabrielle? I'm suppose to be in Hell while you live it up in Heaven as an archangel. Its that simple."

Gabrielle shook her head again. "No... no... this isn't right."

"The Hell it isn't Gabrielle!" The demon angel came closer to Gabrielle.

Xena narrowed her eyes, she quickly realized she is floating in clouds. She looked up and down, left and right trying to figure things out.

"Xena, it wasn't like that. I swear!"

Xena quickly turned around at hearing her name and Gabrielle's voice. As soon as she did, she spotted herself already standing in front of Gabrielle, but as one of the demon angel.

"Then enlighten me Gabrielle! I seem to have gotten everything screw up then. I must be wrong huh?"

"No, Xena you weren't wrong. I... I don't know what happened."

The demon angel came right up to Gabrielle. "Oh I do know what happened Gabrielle."

Xena narrowed her eyes, her anger was taking control. She broke out running towards the demon angel, ready to take it out. Once she came near, something out of no where hit her and knocked her to the ground. Xena got back up, her eyes wide with amazement.

"Gods no Xena!" Gabrielle started to cry. "I didn't mean for any of it to happen."

Xena growled. "No!" She came at the pair again, but something invisible stopped her. She hit it again. Xena noticed Gabrielle nor the demon angel heard her. Xena began to hit the invisible wall. "Gabrielle I'm right here, don't listen to that demon!"

The demon angel nodded a few times. She then began to circle around Gabrielle. "Then what did you intend to do? You tried to fight me Gabrielle! Stop me from taking over Heaven."

Gabrielle looked up. "Xena you knew I would have tried to stop you."

Xena's eyes were wide in horror. She tried again to beat through the invisible wall. "Gabrielle! Don't you hear me? I'm right here!" Xena growled and punched at the invisible wall, she was getting no where. "Gods no! Come on!"

The demon angel stopped circling Gabrielle and came to face her. "Why Gabrielle? Why did you try to stop me? I ask you this in your defense."

Gabrielle dropped her head as she shook it. She could hardly reply. "I don't know Xena. I just couldn't let you."

The demon angel laughed evilly. She began to circle Gabrielle again. "Maybe because you're a heartless bitch Gabrielle. Maybe because you're the most selfish bitch there

ever was or is! I can't believe I loved you. I must have been hit over the head one to many times."

Xena kept pushing against the invisible wall. "No! That's not true Gabrielle! Don't listen to her!"

The demon angel stopped walking right behind Gabrielle. "You know what Gabrielle? You were never my soulmate! How could somebody like you ever be my soulmate? I'd rather be dead before being your soulmate."

Gabrielle closed her eyes. She dropped the sword from her hand, it fell through the sky, down and down and down. Next Gabrielle fell down to the invisible ground, she pulled her legs up and hugged herself.

Xena was shaking her head as she stood there shocked. "No.... no. Gabrielle! Gods, please hear me Gabrielle! Gabrielle... Gabrielle..." Tears began to fill Xena's eyes. She took a deep breath. "There's gotta be another way." Xena then looked to her Soulmate. She reached forward to the invisible wall, her hands pressing against it. Her sapphire eyes closed and she began to talk to Gabrielle through her mind.

The demon angel walked around to the front of Gabrielle. She looked down at Gabrielle. "Do you know how much I hate you for killing my own son Gabrielle."

Gabrielle didn't respond she kept her head tucked down in between her legs, she cried as her heart raced.

The demon angel smiled at the lack of response. "Well let me tell you then."

Xena took a deep breath and quietly whispered to herself. "Come on Gabrielle, let me in." *Gabrielle, listen to me. Don't believe that demon angel, that's not me. I am your Soulmate, please believe me Gabrielle. I wanted you to fight against me when I was a demon angel. That wasn't even truly me.*

Gabrielle lifted her head. "Xena?" She'd quietly whispered the name.

Xena opened her eyes again and looked to her Soulmate. "You can hear my thoughts." She smiled to herself.

The demon angel looked down to Gabrielle. "You want something?"

Gabrielle looked up to the demon angel. "You're not Xena."

The demon angel narrowed her eyes to Gabrielle. "I am Xena, the one you've betrayed three times now!"

Xena closed her eyes and concentrated again. *Gabrielle don't believe her. You've never betrayed me. You've never left me then you've never betrayed me. Believe me Gabrielle. I love you!*

Gabrielle narrowed her eyes to the demon angel. "You're not Xena. She wouldn't say those things."

The demon angel grinned as she kneeled down in front of Gabrielle. "If I'm not Xena, then who am I?"

"You're my guilty conscious, not Xena."

Xena opened her eyes again and smiled at her Soulmate's words. "That's it Gabrielle."

The demon angel laughed. "What difference would it make anyway Gabrielle? Either way, you're haunted."

"The difference is, I can destroy you."

The demon angel's eyes widen. "No... no you can't."

Xena grinned at the switch of power she saw. "Perfect."

Gabrielle grinned. "Oh I can, I control you. I'm already doing it. Besides that, I know the truth. You don't."

The demon angel rose up. She took steps back away from Gabrielle. "No... no... no" The demon angel then faded away, its last word still, "No."

Gabrielle sighed in relief she still hugged herself. "Oh gods that was horrible."

Xena then felt the invisible wall disappeared, she rushed over to Gabrielle. She came down on her knees. Gabrielle had definitely taken notice to her. They both pulled each other in for a hug.

"Xena?"

They pulled back and Gabrielle's wings and armor disappear. She now wore her normal leather attire.

Xena smiled and brushed back Gabrielle's hair. "It's real me."

"But... but how? I thought I was dreaming."

"You are, we both are."

Gabrielle's eyes widen. "Then I really did hear you in my head. Gods I thought..."

Xena shook her head. "It wasn't your imagination."

Gabrielle smiled. Then she started to cry a little.

Xena pulled her in to hold her. "I'm here Gabrielle."

Gabrielle hugged Xena tightly. She released and looked back to her Soulmate. "When you say you're not leaving me, you really mean it."

Xena chuckled. "Not even in your dreams."

Gabrielle smiled. She leaned up a little and captured Xena's lips. They both closed their eyes in the deep kiss.

They broke away from the kiss, Gabrielle first to open her eyes. She looked around and quickly noticed she was back in the hut. She looked up to Xena. The warrior was looking around with her eyes wide. She looked back down to Gabrielle.

The younger woman shook her head. "Xena... are our dreams reality or is our reality dreams?"

The warrior shook her head. "I don't know anymore Gabrielle."

Gabrielle huffed and looked down at their bodies. They were still in the same position as when they first fell asleep. She looked back up to Xena with a smile. "I'm not going to complain though."

The warrior grinned. "No?"

The Amazon Queen shook her head. "No, considering the fact I only get more time with you."

Xena laughed a little. "I have to agree love." She suddenly went serious. She'd just called Gabrielle by a name she hadn't done in ages. Gabrielle had her eyes locked with Xena's. And Xena didn't know what reaction to expect from Gabrielle.

Gabrielle smiled. "I've missed that."

The warrior sighed, she lowered her head closer to her partner's. "I've missed saying it."

The smaller warrior brought up her head to close in the distance, she whispered back. "I love you Xena." She finished the distance and kissed Xena. They both were quite involved and didn't hear the knock at the door. As they kept kissing a harder knock came, Xena heard it.

"Somebody is at the door."

The small warrior groan, she stopped kissing her Soulmate. Gabrielle then moved her head away from Xena's. She repositioned herself to sit back on the warrior's lap, her back into Xena's body. Looking up to the door Gabrielle sighed. "Come in!"

Slowly the door creaked open, a curly red-head Amazon poked her head in. "Um hi." Amarice then stepped in and took notice to things. "I just came by for... for a visit. Am I... interrupting something?"

The warrior grinned while the Queen just chuckled. She stopped and replied back. "No it's okay Amarice. Come in."

The Amazon nodded and closed the door behind herself. Amarice then shifted more into the hut.

"You can sit down Amarice."

Amarice looked to Xena with a confused look, then she nodded her understanding. "Right." Turning around, she found a wood chair and moved it to sit down in. She looked back to the Soulmates. "So I take it I'm missing something huh?"

Gabrielle nodded her head as she felt Xena tighten her arms around her waist. "Yeah just a little of it Amarice."

The Amazon chuckled. "Well I sort of... got that impression while I was travelling

with you both."

The Amazon Queen nodded her head. "Sorry Amarice. Xena and I... we weren't doing to well to talk about anything then."

"But you both are okay now... right?"

"Right."

Amarice nodded her head at Xena's answer. "So... so what happened?"

Gabrielle sighed. She looked to the floor then up to the Amazon again. "Xena and I were together over two years ago. Then..." She looked sidelong to Xena.

Xena looked to her partner then to Amarice. "We separate because of somethings that happened. When we met you Amarice, Gabrielle and I were just getting through the rough part of it."

Amarice nodded her head. She gazed at the Soulmates, she could see them glowing, could feel a certain intensity coming from them. How she'd never felt something like that, something that powerful. Then she noticed the necklaces and the rings on their hands. "You both got married." It was a statement.

The Amazon Queen nodded her head. "We did through Amphipolis and the Amazons."

The Amazon smiled warmly. "I didn't hear anything about that. I mean..." She sighed. "Well you see, my sister was telling me these rumors that have been going on. But I didn't hear anything about... well about how you both came together."

"It figures." That had come from Gabrielle, in a low menacing voice. Amarice hadn't heard it, but Xena certainly had. It had actually struck a small cord of fear in the warrior. "Amarice?" The Amazon looked to Gabrielle, she continued on. "I'm asking you not to tell anybody in the village. Please. Xena and I need to work things out still."

The Amazon smiled. "I understand, don't worry. Good to see you both together. Gods, I mean I didn't know before I met you both. But I could tell neither of you were... well happy. Heart wrenching I guess."

Gabrielle's head bobbed up and down a few times. "Thanks Amarice."

"No problem." She then smiled again.

Xena then took this moment to lighten things up. "How's your sister?"

"She's good." Amarice looked to the warrior. "It's been awhile since I've seen her."

"You never told us you had a sister Amarice."

The Amazon grinned at Gabrielle's words. She relaxed back more into the chair. "We used to not get along. Competitive."

Xena chuckled and shook her head. "That's not surprising."

Amarice grinned. "Hey, somebody has to do it. I always made the excuse its our red

hair."

Gabrielle started to laugh. She took a deep breath and replied. "Amarice, I don't think that's it."

The Amazon chuckled. "What you don't like my hair? I think it says I'm dangerous."

Both the Soulmates started to laugh. The small warrior was the first to settle down, then Xena did.

Gabrielle looked to her partner. "You agree?"

The warrior grinned. "Definitely."

"Me too."

They both then looked back to Amarice.

The Amazon smiled. "Thanks." She reached up and brushed her hair back some. "Always like my hair red."

The Queen shook her head. "So when did your sister get here?"

"Um... Rodhiya said she got here about ten days ago."

Gabrielle nodded her head. "She came from the same southern village as you?"

Amarice nodded. "Yeah, that's one of the reasons I left. We couldn't get along."

"Distance makes the heart grow fonder."

The Amazon looked to Xena. "Its true. No offense or anything. But when I was traveling with you both I started to really miss her."

Gabrielle was silent. Xena picked up on this. *Oh gods, not over what I said? Hades.* Xena tightened her arms more around her Soulmate's stomach to comfort her. She then looked up to Amarice again. "She knew you came to this village?"

"Yeah, I told her before I left. But she didn't know I left with you guys till she got here."

"Amarice?" The Amazon looked down to Gabrielle. "Are you both planning to stay here?"

Amarice nodded her head. "I think so. She likes it here."

Gabrielle smiled. "That's good to hear."

The Amazon chuckled. "Besides, how could I leave you both?"

The Queen grinned. "I'd hope not."

A shake of the head. "Nope." Amarice took a deep breath. "I think I'm going to go. I'm on patrol duty soon." She sighed and rolled her eyes.

"Who's shift are you on?"

Amarice grinned. "Solari's."

Xena chuckled. "Good luck."

"Thanks." Amarice stood up. "I'll talk to you both later." She went to the door opening it.

"Bye Amarice." Gabrielle then smiled.

"See you Amarice."

Amarice looked back and smiled as well. "Bye." She stepped through the door, closed it behind and went off.

Gabrielle sighed. "I better go catch up with Eph."

The warrior nodded. "Want me to come?"

Thinking for a moment, Gabrielle then responded. "Can you?"

Xena smiled. "Love to."

The smaller woman smiled. "I think we'll need your help with these challenges."

"I know."

Gabrielle nodded and she began to stand, the warrior releasing her. Xena then got up. The pair then began to change quickly into their normal attire. The smaller warrior once changed looked to Xena with a raised eyebrow as she stood in front of the door.

Xena looked up to her after tying her last boot on. She walked over to Gabrielle.

Once she came near, the small warrior grasped the warrior's large left hand, she turned the palm up. There she spotted the cut. "How's it feel?"

The older woman sighed. "Its fine. It'll heal over fast."

"Let me-"

"Gabrielle." Xena took a deep breath. "It'll be fine."

The Queen looked up to Xena with a serious face. "Humor me?"

The warrior sighed. "You win."

Gabrielle grinned. "Thank you." She walked over to the saddlebags, she retrieved out of the medical kit some balm. She came back over, took Xena's hand again and began to rub the balm in. As soon as she was done, the small container of balm was back in its home. Gabrielle came up to Xena's side near the door.

"Thanks."

Gabrielle nodded with a smile. "Anytime."

Silence and no movement.

"Gabrielle?"

"Yeah?"

The older woman took a deep breath. She tried to figure out the best way to phrase it, then just went with her instincts. "Sorry about that earlier."

The smaller woman furrowed her brows. "About what Xena?"

"For what I said to Amarice about distance making the heart grow fonder."

Gabrielle looked to the floor for a moment, then back up to Xena. "No it's okay. It just... it had me thinking. It's a true statement."

Xena smiled a little. "Yeah."

The smaller warrior mirrored that smile. "Come on." She turned to the door.

"Mmm, one second." Xena then went to the table where their cloaks were. She grabbed them and threw Gabrielle's to her. They both put them on. The warrior then walked back to Gabrielle. "And this to."

Xena grinned and leaned down. She captured her partner's lips in a loving kiss. Gabrielle's lips formed into a smile as she kissed. Once she pulled back, Gabrielle's hands went to press against Xena's leather clad stomach. She leaned into Xena as the warrior leaned back down. They kissed yet again.

Once they broke it the older woman chuckled. "We better go."

Gabrielle nodded. "Right." She moved her hands off her Soulmate's stomach and opened the door. The pair left and went into the brisk outdoors. The rain had stopped, the sunshine brightly in the cloudless brilliant blue sky.

~\*Part 8\*~

Gabrielle and her Soulmate came into Ephiny's hut after being allowed in. The regent sat at her desk as the pair came in. The Queen walked in first, Xena right behind.

Gabrielle came up to the Amazon. "Hey Eph."

The regent looked up with a smile. "Glad you made it."

The Queen chuckled. "Thought it might be a good idea."

Ephiny nodded with a smile. "Definitely." She went serious. "Here's the rough copy for the challenge letters." She pointed to the scroll on her desk. "You both should read it."

Xena shifted from behind Gabrielle to be to her right side. Ephiny was on the left sitting. Both Soulmates looked down to the scroll and began to read.

*Queen Name and Nation Name*

*This letter is being sent to your Nation as well as all of the other Amazon Nations. Queen Gabrielle and her Nation have decided to make an official challenge to your*

*Nation as well as all of the others.*

Gabrielle stopped reading for a moment. She moved closer to Xena, wrapping her right arm around the warrior's waist. Xena in turn had stopped reading and brought her left arm to come around her small Soulmate's back. They then both went back to reading the scroll.

*The challenge is expected to take place as soon as all the Nations arrive in Queen Gabrielle's Nation. We will be hosting the challenges for however long they will take.*

*The challenges themselves will be between each Nation's Queen. The challenges can also be considered a contest. There will be a few rules destroyed or added as necessary to the normal traditional challenges. This will be further discussed upon your arrival at our Nation. Whomever so wins all the challenges, contest, or fights then will become the Queen of all of the Amazons.*

*This Nation because of the observance of all the Nations quarreling amongst themselves has issued these challenges. Between Queen Gabrielle and her council it has been official recognized if these begins of quarrellings among the Nations continue so will the begins of battles. These as we all know, will only further the destruction of the once great Amazon Nation. So it has been decided to put an end to all between the separation and lack of power, and quarreling by issuing these challenges. The end result will hopefully in turn bring about a new single Queen, a new single Nation, and ultimately the survival of the Amazons through time.*

*More of the future and set rules will be created through the course of time. It is assured that no creation of the New Nation has been made considering there is no single one Queen. That all will be set once the Nations go through the challenges.*

*Queen Gabrielle, her council, and her Nation would like for you to come to our lands as soon as you receive this message. We would like for Queen Name, and most of her Amazons to come to the challenge. We will provide space for the Queen and her Amazons to settle down in for the time period that you will be here in our Nation. Our Nation will provide all food and any other necessities. Be prepared to be in our Nation for an extended period of time. We do believe these challenges will take an extensive amount of time along with the creation of the New Nation.*

*Please recognize this is an Official Challenge made to Queen Name and her Nation. Recognize the fact that if the challenge is ignored that your Nation will be refusing a traditional challenge. And there for you will be disbanded as an Amazon Nation.*

*Queen Gabrielle, her council, and her Nation has high hopes in bringing all the Nations together. This is the main intent of these challenges. Please recognize that factor. This is not about fighting because of quarreling. These challenges are about bringing the Nations together and establishing a Nation to survive the test of time. Please have a safe journey to our lands. We will be preparing till your arrival.*

*Sincerely,*

*Queen, Regent, Consort, Head Council Member*

Both the Soulmates looked up from the letter.

Gabrielle looked to Ephiny. "It looks good. Reads well and truthfully."

The regent nodded her head. "I'd figured you'd want it straight forward."

The Queen nodded. "That's important."

Xena looked back to the scroll, she studied it. Then something caught her eye. She pointed down to a certain spot on the scroll. "You might want to add something here that's important."

Both Gabrielle and Ephiny looked to the spot the warrior pointed at.

"We would like for Queen Name, and most of her Amazons to come to the challenge." Xena took a deep breath. "It really should read; 'We would like for Queen Name, *her council*, and most of her Amazons to come to the challenge.' We should have the councils all here."

Gabrielle nodded her head a few times. "You're right, that's important."

The Amazon grasped her quill off her desk and reached to the scroll. "I'll add that in." She scratched the words in near the spot to insert in the final copies. "Anything else?"

"Yeah. Can I see your quill for a second Eph?"

"Sure." The regent handed her Queen the quill.

Gabrielle released Xena, stepped closer to the desk, and took the quill. She leaned forward. She drew a line from the third paragraph to above the second paragraph. "Switch these paragraphs Eph. Its better to explain the reason for the challenges first then to explain the challenges themselves."

Ephiny nodded as she received back her quill.

Gabrielle took a step back only to find Xena behind her now. The warrior smiled to herself as she dropped her hands onto Gabrielle's waist. The Amazon Queen smiled to herself.

Xena looked to the regent. "I think we should add in Solari's signature."

The regent furrowed her eyebrows together. "Why?"

Gabrielle though had caught Xena's intent by that, so she answered. "It'll look better. Show that even our second in command agrees."

Ephiny nodded. "We'll do that." She then chuckled. "You just want to add in everybody's signature?"

"Very funny Eph."

The regent grinned up to Gabrielle. "Couldn't help it."

"Uh huh." Gabrielle then looked back to the scroll. "Looks good otherwise Eph."

"Great. I'll get the finals made up. Once their done I'll let you both know so you can sign them."

The Queen nodded her head. "Then I'll take them off your hands to get them signed."

"Only if you let me get them to the messengers?"

Gabrielle looked back to Ephiny with a grin. "Alright, deal."

The Amazon smiled. "Okay, well either we'll get them out tonight or tomorrow morning."

The small warrior nodded her head. "Great." She then looked sidelong to Xena. "Xena, how long will it take Yakut to receive the message all the way in Chin?"

Xena reflected for a moment. "About three to four days ride."

"Mmm, that's a lot of time." Gabrielle looked back to the scroll. "Guess it'll have to do."

Ephiny dropped her quill and began to roll the scroll up. "I'll go get the finals made up."

Gabrielle nodded. "Thanks Eph."

"Welcome." Ephiny after rolling the scroll up looked back to the Soulmates. She'd noticed the entire time the way they stayed close to each other and touching constantly. "Mmm, I couldn't breath between you let alone get between."

Gabrielle started to laugh while the warrior grinned. The small warrior after calming replied. "Oh no Eph. No wedges this time."

The warrior grinned at that. She then bent her head down close to Gabrielle's left ear. "We should leave. Solari will be here soon to... visit Ephiny."

The regent's eyes widen at that. "Xena."

Gabrielle snickered as the Warrior Princess brought her head back up. "Was just stating the truth."

"Right Xena." Ephiny shook her head then looked back up to them. "You both move it out of here."

Gabrielle grinned. "What's the rush? Expecting somebody Eph?"

"Ha ha you two."

Xena chuckled. She squeezed Gabrielle's sides and released her. "Let's go."

The Queen nodded her head. The pair made their way to the door.

"Bye Eph. Tell Solari I said hi." Gabrielle then reached to the door's handle, opening it.

"Make sure the door doesn't hit you both in the ass on the way out!"

Both Soulmates started to laugh as they left the regent's hut. They closed the door behind, leaving a sighing Ephiny.

Once outside, Gabrielle looked up to her partner. "I think I'm going to go find some apples."

Xena grinned. "Torqueo?"

The small warrior grinned now. "Yup, after he beat your old warhorse."

The warrior sighed. "We'll see about that."

Gabrielle grinned. "I hope so." She then smiled. "Care to come with?"

Xena smiled warmly. "Definitely."

The Queen nodded with a smile. The pair then headed right for the food hut. Once inside they went into the kitchen. Gabrielle headed right to the same area as last time where she'd snagged some apples. Again she pulled out two apples. Xena then reached in and pulled out an apple. The Soulmates then mingled through the chef Amazons and went directly to the stables.

As soon as they entered Torqueo threw up his head and nickered. He took a step closer and dropped his head over the stall door.

Gabrielle came up to him and patted him on the head. She then leaned down and placed a kiss to the middle of his face.

The warrior saw this and grinned to herself. "I never thought I'd see you do that."

"Neither did I." Gabrielle then turned around to face her partner. "I can't help it though."

Xena grinned. "Trust me, I understand." She then went down another stall to Argo. The mare jumped a little in her stall in greeting. "Hey girl, its good to see you too." Reaching out she petted the mare.

Both the Soulmates then began to feed their horses. Gabrielle cutting her apples into slices, Xena's though in half. Oh how those two horses loved their owners for this.

After feeding her stallion, the small warrior rubbed behind his ears. She then reached to the bangs from his mane, straightening them out in front of his face. Torqueo snorted and Gabrielle chuckled. She then felt a warm presence behind her, strong arms circling around her.

Xena leaned her head down close to Gabrielle's. "Want to go for a ride?"

"Now?"

"Why not?" She nuzzled the smaller woman's neck. "We'll both be busy soon in a few days anyway, especially you."

Gabrielle sighed, she closed her eyes and leaned back into Xena. "So you're saying we won't have much time for play huh?"

Xena chuckled, she brought her head up a little. "Exactly."

Turning around, the Queen locked eyes with the warrior. "Why not?"

The Warrior Princess grinned. "Great."

They kept their eyes locked. Gabrielle studied her Soulmate's eyes. They were so intense, so filled with love, they almost seemed perfect to her. Almost. Why was there an almost? That almost was the small wall still hidden deep in those electric sapphire eyes. That is something Gabrielle would have to figure out and then destroy that little wall. For even the little walls hide the utmost important elements to a person.

But now, she brought up her small warm hand under her warrior's chin, she leaned up. The warrior leaned down. Their lips met halfway. The kiss at first was light, then it became a little more... involved. They did though break the kiss or rather the collection of small kisses.

"Gabrielle?"

The younger woman smiled and slowly opened her eyes. The warrior grinned a little and leaned in to place a light kiss to Gabrielle's forehead. The Amazon Queen smiled and brought her right hand from under her partner's chin to go on her shoulder.

"Want to ride bare back?"

The smaller woman arched an eyebrow. "Really?"

"Really." Xena then grinned.

"I don't know Xena."

The warrior brought her head down so that her forehead leaned against Gabrielle's. "You'll be fine. I promise you'll enjoy it."

Gabrielle sighed as she reflected. She then felt a nudge at her back from a warm nose. She then chuckled. "I think Torqueo wants me to."

Xena grinned. "Smart horse."

The Queen chuckled. "So it's fun huh?" Xena nodded. Gabrielle looked down, she looked back up. "Real fun?"

The warrior kept her grin. "Oh yeah. Promise."

Gabrielle grinned. "You're on then."

"Let's go." Xena released Gabrielle and went to her stall.

Gabrielle went to Torqueo's stall, opened the door and went in. "Hey Xena?"

"Yeah?"

"Do I want his face tack?"

"No."

Gabrielle's eyes widen. "You're kidding?"

Xena started to laugh to herself. "No, I'm not kidding. Trust me."

The small warrior looked up to Torqueo. She then quietly whispered to herself and the stallion. "Oh I do." She then focused her words to the stallion. "You ready? I'm sure not."

Torqueo threw up his head and looked back to Gabrielle. He nudged at her then stared at her.

Gabrielle smiled warmly. "Don't worry I trust you too." That's when she could have sworn her stallion smiled before he turned his head back to the stall door. She blinked as her mind processed that, shaking her head, Gabrielle opened the stall door. Slowly the stallion and his master exited out of the stall and outside of the stable. Once the small warrior came out of the stables, she looked up to the sky, it was clear. The air around is crisp yet not cold or brisk. There were no clouds to be found as if there was never a storm this morning.

Xena then came out with Argo beside her. The warrior came to the other side of her mare close to Gabrielle. "Can you get up on your own?"

The small warrior looked to Xena then back to the chestnut stallion. "I think so. We'll find out." She bent her knees a little, placed her hands on the horse's front back. Leaping and swinging her right leg over, Gabrielle made it on. A smile formed on her lips as she looked down to Xena. "How was that?"

Xena grinned. "Perfect." Turning back around, the warrior faced her own horse. She followed the same steps and was up on her mare. Looking to her right at Gabrielle. "Ready?"

"There is no ready with you Xena. I thought we established that."

The warrior laughed. "We did." A smile. "Come on." Clicking with her tongue and squeezing the mare's sides, Xena had Argo moving at a walk towards the gates of the village.

Gabrielle did the same. She kept her right hand on her leg while her left was forward holding some of the mane. Looking to the warrior, she grinned. "Xena?"

The warrior looked to Gabrielle. "Mmm?"

The Queen grinned. "Can you... post up and stay up without the saddle?"

Xena grinned devilishly. Looking around, she noticed a bunch of Amazons walking past. She crossed her arms against her chest then squeezed very tightly against Argo's sides. So tight that it looked as if her legs molded with the horse's sides. She then slowly lifted her body up from the horse's back so that from her knees and up she was straight lined. Earlier there was no strain on her muscles but as she kept herself up did her muscles begin to feel the strain on them.

Gabrielle watched and shook her head with a smile. She then leaned a little to her left towards Xena. "Show off." Leaning back onto Torqueo's back, Gabrielle's smile formed more into respect.

The warrior nodded with a smile, she then slowly eased herself back onto Argo's back. Once she was sitting back down, her muscles calmed. Although she kept her arms

crossed against her chest.

"Xena?"

"Yeah?" The warrior looked to her Soulmate.

"How long have you been riding for?"

"Oh gods." Xena looked back ahead as she thought. They were almost to the gates. She looked back to her partner. "Since I was probably five. Been around them all my life."

Gabrielle nodded her head. "Figures."

The older woman grinned. She then looked back ahead.

They came to the gates and noticed an Amazon there looking up smiling. "You two headed out?"

"Yup." Xena looked down to the Amazon.

"And Ep, I've never ridden bare back."

The weapons master chuckled. "Good time to learn Gabrielle."

The Queen chuckled. "Thanks Ep."

Epinion grinned. "Quite welcome." She then smiled. "Have a good ride. By careful too, the ground is still muddy of course. Can get slippery."

Xena nodded her head. "Thanks Ep."

The Amazon nodded her head. "I'll see you both later."

"Bye Ep." Gabrielle then smiled.

Xena nodded. "Bye Ep."

The Soulmates kicked their horses again and headed out of the village. They waited till they came into the woods to change speeds.

"Start with a trot first Gabrielle."

The small warrior nodded, she took a deep breath. She squeezed Torqueo's sides again, he went into a trot. In turn she grasped mane in her right hand as well as her left.

Xena sent Argo into a trot as well. She kept close to her Soulmate and her stallion. Her gaze stayed to ahead watching their paths.

"Isn't too bad."

Xena looked to her partner. "No?"

Gabrielle shook her head. "No... well not yet." She grinned.

The warrior mirrored the grin back. "Just wait."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

The taller woman chuckled and looked back ahead. "Ready for a canter?" She then looked back to her partner.

Gabrielle arched an eyebrow in answer.

A laugh escaped Xena's lips. "Right, there's no ready. Let's try it then."

Gabrielle nodded her head. She did two clicks while squeezing the stallion's sides. He burst into a canter. Gabrielle's heartbeat seemed to also pick up into a canter. "Oh Gods!"

The warrior was cantering right beside her. "Try to relax."

The small warrior nodded her head. She took deep breaths. She leaned forward some to feel more comfortable, she gathered more mane into her hands.

"And try to stay away from the fallen trees Gabrielle."

The Amazon Queen chuckled and looked to her best friend. "Don't worry."

Xena shook her head with a smile, she looked back ahead.

They kept at that pace for awhile. Gabrielle then began to enjoy the speed, enjoy the ride. Her confidence then built, she took a deep breath along with a small little risk. She squeezed Torqueo's side again, he immediately went into a gallop. "I'm okay... I'm okay. It's just bare back, not a big deal. Gods!"

Xena chuckles to herself, Argo is also in a gallop now. She kept equal with Gabrielle. Looking to her right to her Soulmate she smiled. "You're doing good Gabrielle!"

Gabrielle looked to Xena, throwing her a look as if she were insane. She looked back ahead.

The warrior laughed to herself. "Trust me!"

The Amazon Queen looked to Xena again with a warm smile. "With my Soul." It wasn't a yell yet it wasn't quiet either.

Xena smiled back warmly. She then looked back ahead. Gabrielle herself looked back ahead. She began to feel more use to the bare back feeling. It actually was nice instead of having the hard saddle. It was more... well more natural. That is something Gabrielle had always enjoyed, nature at it's best.

The warrior looked to Gabrielle, she noticed the smile on her small Soulmate's lips. It didn't seem to leave either. That's when Xena knew Gabrielle was enjoying it, if not loving it. Xena pressed her left leg harder against the mare's side. Argo followed the signal and turn to the right some, she came closer to Torqueo.

Gabrielle looked to Xena now to find her close, rather close. She looked ahead for a second then back to the warrior with an arched eyebrow.

Xena winked and signaled Argo to get a little closer. Without forewarning, the warrior leaped off Argo's back and onto Torqueo's. She sat behind Gabrielle, her arms quickly locking around the small female's waist, her legs locking around the stallion's stomach.

"Xena?"

"Yes?" She leaned forward some.

"What... what?"

The warrior laughed. "Thought I'd come over and visit."

Gabrielle chuckled and shook her head. She looked to Argo whom had shifted away again, she still galloped. "What about Argo?" Her eyes drifted back ahead.

"She'll be fine and stay with us." She then tightened her arms a little. "This is nice."

The small warrior laughed. "A free ride? Yeah I should know."

Xena then began to caress her Soulmate's bare stomach with her thumbs. "I don't know why you didn't take advantage of this spot earlier Gabrielle."

The Amazon Queen shook her head. "Maybe because I was little naive huh?"

The warrior grinned. She brought her head more forward, her lips close to Gabrielle's left ear. "I don't believe that."

Gabrielle could feel her body go warm. She could feel herself become distracted then, she tried to stay focused on everything. "Why not?"

"Mmm." Xena brought her lips down to lightly touch Gabrielle's neck. "Because you have an imagination."

The younger woman closed her eyes then quickly remembers what she is doing. Her emerald eyes quickly opened again. She grasped the mane tightly to force herself to concentrate. "Xena?"

"Yeah?" She kept her light kisses but now added in her hands moving up and down Gabrielle's stomach to caress her. Oh and she knew exactly what this was doing to her Soulmate. It just had to make her grin, her original intent since she first got on this horse.

Gabrielle sighed, her body leaning back into Xena more. "Oh gods." Her eyes almost closed again but she stopped herself. "Hades." She forced herself to think. Thinking though, that just wasn't happening. "That's it!" Torqueo came to a quick halt by Gabrielle's demand, Argo had also stopped galloping. The small warrior then in a flash turned herself around on the horse's back to now face Xena. "You're evil."

Xena grinned. "So I've been told."

Gabrielle's eyes began to sparkle. "And I love it." She then leaned in to capture her Soulmate's lips. It was a strong, demanding kiss, Xena not really expecting it.

Xena brought up her right hand to her partner's cheek. She moaned in between the

kiss. Gabrielle's left hand came up behind the warrior's head. She deepened the kiss even further. Her right hand though went down to Xena's thigh.

Gabrielle ended the kiss then brought her lips down to Xena's neck.

"Oh gods... Gabrielle." It was a low whisper that escaped Xena's lips. Her hand had moved to the smaller woman's sides. Her eyes closed while she dropped her head back a little. "Gabrielle... this... this just isn't..."

A grin had formed on Gabrielle's lips. She stopped placing the kisses to Xena's neck she lifted her head back up to be eye level with Xena. "There's just a sentence there dying to get out."

The warrior arched an eyebrow as she took a few deep breaths. "You're gonna kill me."

The small female grinned. "You're the one to talk."

They both could feel their bodies reacting to everything. The pulses were certainly not slowing since they only lay a breath away from each other.

Gabrielle herself was also breathing heavy right with her partner. "Okay distance."

The warrior agreed to that one quickly. She hopped off Torqueo, she almost covered up the fact she'd almost fell.

The Amazon Queen got off herself, once she hit the ground she grinned to her friend. "Bit shaky there Xena."

Xena grinned to her. "Pay backs are a bitch."

Gabrielle smirked. "Don't distract me next time."

The warrior grinned, she began to move. She came to stand next to Gabrielle. "On the contrary, I'm planing to due it more often." She began to walk away to a tree.

The small female watched her go with a grin. "We're gonna kill each other." She chuckled and began to walk slowly up to Xena. She stopped walking and stood beside Xena.

They just stared at the trees around and the autumn leaves. The ground around was masked with either fallen leaves or lush green moss. It was quite gorgeous.

"This is pretty."

Xena nodded her head in agreement. "It is." She then looked to Gabrielle. "But, it doesn't compare to you."

*She just always has her way of saying things on the side, only making it better.* Gabrielle's thoughts stopped as she looked to her Soulmate. "Thanks." She smiled lovingly.

"Truth that's it." The warrior smiled back. She looked back to the scenery.

Gabrielle felt a certain special warmth fill her body, it then flowed into her heart

and soul. She reached over with her left hand and grasped her partner's hand.

The warrior grinned at her partner's physical love. How she'd missed it. She never knew what a torture was till she separated from Gabrielle.

Some would say they were in heaven when they fall in-love. For both our Soulmates it isn't heaven, it something so much more grand, more significant. So much more grand, strong and incredible that it can't not be described. Only felt, only recognized as a burning desire, only a need, and to only know one will die in every sense of the word without their other half of mind, heart, soul, and life. Die without their everything. Oh how these two Soulmates knew this, felt this, breathed this, yearn this, and thrived from this. It's rare, so rare that they'd do anything to stay together.

There was a point in time they separated. A separation, what really is a separation? Well for the Soulmates, it was torture for their soul. It was something that each day hacked away at their soul, wore them down, cut them down, and almost killed them to the bitter end. They didn't know which killed them more. The separation or all the love they held for the other and having to hold it in, bottle it up. Which do you think is worse? We can only wonder which was worse for the Soulmates.

Now though, now they were together, as one again. Not to say they never were separated by soul. They were only separated by the physical and the partial mental. For only Soulmates could ever come back together and survive time's trials. So as one again, they finally can release their love to each other. During the time it was all bottled up, it grew stronger. Now it is back out in the open, stronger, more intense, and forever connecting. From here, there can be no separation of these Soulmates.

They both knew that, felt that, and lived by that. So much so, that Xena must looked to her Soulmate and smile. Smile so warmly that it makes a sunset look like nothing. It centers right to Gabrielle's heart and warms everything that is her. Yet Gabrielle can not but help mirroring that same smile. Because she too knows what is ahead. Knows there is no ending now.

That smile sweeps through Xena's soul, so much that she lifts her interlocked hand. She then must pull her interlocked hand to her right. Gabrielle then must follow the physical command and move to stand in front of Xena. Xena then has the need to grasp her Soulmate's other hand with her free hand. Gabrielle's need takes her to lean back into her Soulmate's body as Xena brings her two interlocked hands forward. Both the Soulmate's interlace hands come to rest on Gabrielle's stomach, Xena's arms encircling Gabrielle. That's the need, to feel as one.

"Xena?"

"Mmm?" The warrior dropped her chin down onto her partner's head as she waits for Gabrielle's words.

"There's no going back." Statement, no questioning that.

Xena didn't respond, she thought. She felt that statement. She then smiled and replied. "No going back, never."

Gabrielle smiled contently, she closed her eyes. "Perfect."

"Forever." Xena then tightened her arms a little more. She then sighed happily. Her

eyes then closed.

They molded their bodies against each other again. They took in the feelings again. They let their love flow from their bodies again. They lived again.

Time passed on from this scene. The measurement of the time can not be known. For it is a specific time, so specific that its capture in time's perfection's. Time's perfection's are the unmeasured, the unforgotten, and what creates time's one rare and singular powerful love. That's why it's time's perfection.

The Soulmates then don't hear one of the horses nicker. Then another horse snorted. The horses seemed to look to each other, seeming as if they passed something between each other. The stallion nickered to the mare, he then took steps forward to come near the pair. He then nudged at his owner with a cold nose. He got no response. So he tried again then snorted at the end. Now he got a response, a chuckled from his owner.

Gabrielle opened her eyes slowly. "I think somebody wants to leave Xena."

"They'll survive."

Again the small warrior chuckled. "You never know, that pair might leave without us."

Xena grinned as she opened her eyes. "They just might."

They both heard a snort from Torqueo.

Gabrielle looked to her right at her stallion. He had his head down low with his eyes looking up sadly. "Oh gods, Xena look."

The warrior looked to the horse, she chuckled. "He's getting to you Gabrielle."

"I know, he's good to."

Torqueo lifted his head again. His green eyes sparkled to his owner. He then nudged both the Soulmates. Looking back, Torqueo nickered at Argo.

The mare lifted her head from the grass and walked up to be beside Torqueo. Argo looked to her own owner with a pout look.

"Oh gods."

Gabrielle broke out laughing at Xena's words and Argo's look. "And you talk about me Xena."

The warrior grinned. "Argo is good with her pouts."

"Now Xena, you have to be firm with your horse."

Xena chuckled. "Right." She then leaned her head forward some. "We better really go."

Gabrielle sighed. "Yeah. Fates only know what issue might be happening with the Amazons now."

"Mmm, maybe we shouldn't go. Their feathers ruffle to easy."

The Amazon Queen chuckled. "Very true."

Xena slowly released her Soulmate. The pair then turned to their horses. The warrior went to Argo's left, Gabrielle to Torqueo's left. Both Soulmates bent their knees, then leaped onto the horse's back.

The small warrior then realized how close she was to Xena, her knee almost brushing against Xena's. So she leaned to her left close to Xena, her eyes looking up to Xena. "Xena, come here."

The warrior arched an eyebrow, but she leaned to her right close to Gabrielle. "Need something?" She grinned.

"Definitely." Reaching out with her right hand, she brought her hand under her partner's chin. She pulled in Xena's lips and kissed her.

Xena grinned in the kiss. She had her eyes closed once those warm soft lips took hers. Opening her eyes some in the middle of the kiss, she spotted something. Looked in front of her, her eyes widen. "Gabrielle." The name barely came out in the middle of the kiss.

"Yeah?"

"Look."

Gabrielle stopped the kiss and followed her warrior's gaze. She groaned then.

Xena grinned and looked to her Soulmate. "We're a bad influence."

"Their horses." The small warrior looked to Xena. "That's insane."

The warrior chuckled. "Monkey see, monkey do."

Gabrielle brought up an eyebrow. "Xena that's our horses kissing up there."

Both the stallion and mare both seemed to hear that. They stopped... horse kissing and looked back at their owners. Torqueo nickered.

Gabrielle looked to him. "Your bad."

Torqueo snorted. He then brought his head back far to nudge at Gabrielle's foot.

The Amazon Queen rolled her eyes. She straightened back into her spot on her horse, Xena did the same. "Isn't Argo a little old for you Torqueo?"

"Gabrielle?"

"Mmm?" She looked to Xena.

"Argo isn't that much older, by two years or so."

Gabrielle grinned. "That's old."

A snort from Argo.

Gabrielle looked to the warhorse. "I was just kidding."

Argo nickered and threw up her head.

"Xena, this is getting really bad. I'm starting to talk to horses like their people."

The warrior grinned. "It's normal."

"Right, thanks for that."

"No problem." Xena then chuckled with a smile.

Gabrielle sighed and shook her head with a grin. She reached down to Torqueo's mane and signaled for the stallion to turn around. Argo had done the something from her master's signals. The horses then broke out into a full-fledged gallop towards the Amazon village.

## **Part 4**

### **Section 4**

~\*Part 9\*~

Ephiny opened the door to her hut, she left her hut and headed straight to Gabrielle's. She knocked on the door twice, no response. She slowly opened the door and peered in, nobody. The regent sighed and left from the hut, she went stomping through the village, she then spotted Solari near the gates.

"Solari?"

The second in command looked up to see the regent coming. "Yeah Eph?"

"Have you seen the AQ?" She came up to stand in front of Solari.

"The Amazon Queen?" Ephiny nodded her head and Solari shook hers with an answer. "Nope, haven't seen Gabrielle all day."

"Hades." The regent looked down to the ground then back up. "Well as soon as you see her, tell her to come find me."

"Sure thing Eph."

"Oh by the way, we need you to sign these challenge letters."

Solari nodded her head. "Yeah, when you need it signed?"

"As soon as Gabrielle tells you too." The regent then grinned.

"Oh, Gabrielle's in charge of the signings this time?"

Ephiny chuckled. "Yup." Looking to her right she spotted the weapons master coming their way. "Hey Ep?"

Epinion came up to them to stand next to the two Amazons. "What's up Eph?"

"Seen the AQ anytime today?"

The weapons master grinned. "Yeah, she left about... a little less than a candlemark ago. Went for a ride with Xena. Why?"

The regent brought her hands up to her hips. "Need her to take these challenge letters and get them signed."

Epinion nodded her head. "I'd think they'd be back soon."

Ephiny grinned. "I doubt it with those two." She said that knowing more information than her two Amazon friends knew about the Soulmates.

"Well they went bare back." Epinion shrugged her shoulders afterwards.

"Maybe I'll be lucky then."

As if hearing Ephiny's words, the sound of horses' hooves clapping on the ground filled the air. All three Amazons looked to the gates to see the Soulmates coming in at a walk on their horses.

Gabrielle came up along side her three Amazons and looked down with a warm smile. "Hey you guys."

Epinion and Solari smiled back up.

Ephiny though took a step closer. "Been looking for you, AQ."

Gabrielle arched an eyebrow at her regent. "AQ... What?!"

The regent began to break out laughing right along with the second in command and Epinion. Xena had stopped Argo beside Gabrielle, she just grinned. Gabrielle though shook her head.

Ephiny look up again with a grin. "Amazon Queen."

"Oh gods, don't even Eph. Don't."

The regent looked back to her two Amazon friends with a grin. Both Solari and Epinion grinned back in understanding. Ephiny looked back to the Queen. "Don't worry my Queen."

The small warrior sighed and took a deep breath. "So what's going on Eph?"

"Well, we have all nine of the challenge letters finished. We just need to get them signed and sent."

The Amazon Queen nodded her head. "Great, they're in your hut?"

"Yes, I'm headed back there. Just come by when you're done with Torqueo."

Gabrielle nodded. "Okay, I'll be there in a minute or two."

Ephiny nodded. "Great. Catch you there." The Amazon then headed off towards her hut.

Epinion watched Ephiny go for a second, she then looked up to Gabrielle. "Nice ride?"

"To say the least." The small warrior bit back her devilishly grin.

Solari had raised an eyebrow. "Must have been heck of a ride."

Gabrielle chuckled with a grin. "Quite, few words to explain."

Both Amazons looked to each other then back up to Gabrielle.

Gabrielle then smirked a little. "Well, I need to go stable up Torqueo."

The second in command nodded. "Right, and I need to do something with myself." She laughed and turned around to head off. "Bye Ep, Xena." She then turned around and walked backwards as she looked up to Gabrielle. "Bye AQ!" Solari grinned and turned back around and power walked off.

Epinion was chuckling. "I'll see you Gabrielle. Bye Xena."

The warrior looked to Epinion nodded with a smile. Epinion smiled back and headed off.

Gabrielle looked to her Soulmate. "Damn Amazons."

Xena grinned. "Hey, remember we're both Amazons."

"Gods, don't remind me." The small warrior then did a click command and Torqueo started walking, Argo walking right beside them.

Once inside of the stables, they had their horses back in the stalls and cooling down. Gabrielle first came out of Torqueo's stall then Xena out of Argo's.

The warrior walked up to her partner with a smile. "I'll come with you."

Gabrielle looked up. "You sure?"

"Yes." Xena then leaned down to place a light kiss to Gabrielle's lips.

"Mmm." The small warrior then sighed. "Xena, it was fun, it was real, it was real fun."

The older woman chuckled. "Wellll... I try." A grin fell into place.

The smaller female shook her head. "I'd say you did a majestic try."

"Good." She then leaned down once more to kiss her partner. This one was more loving.

Gabrielle only ended up wrapping her arms around Xena, pulling her in. The warrior's own arms went around the small woman's waist. After the kiss ended, the small warrior dropped the side of her head against Xena's chest.

"We should go Gabrielle."

In response the Amazon Queen tightened her arm, the warrior had to grin at that. She

didn't want to move either. So she decided to go with it for a while. Her head came down to rest on top of Gabrielle's.

"I love you Xen." Gabrielle's breath caught after saying that. She hadn't called Xena by that nickname in ages.

Xena lifted her head after hearing that, she looked down to Gabrielle.

The younger woman lifted her head as well and looked into Xena's warm eyes.

The warrior repeated Gabrielle's words in her mind. How those words tasted so sweet coming from her Soulmate's lips. They flowed so perfectly that it made Xena's eyes soften another degree while a warm smile crept up across her lips. "I love you too." She lowered her head down to let her forehead lean against her partner's forehead.

Gabrielle smiled back warmly yet it hinted sadness in her smile. Her eyes began to burn a little, then she couldn't stop it. Slowly a few tears trickled down her cheeks. She quietly whispered back to Xena. "Gods, Xena I've missed you so much."

"Hey its okay." Xena then reached up with her right hand to carefully push Gabrielle's head against her chest. "I'm not leaving you Gabrielle, never again."

The small warrior closed her eyes tighter at hearing that. Gods, it had been to long for the both of them. No, not ever again. Gabrielle lifted her head and smiled to her Soulmate. "We better go." A pause. "Thanks Xena."

The warrior smiled back down. "Hey, I'm always here for you." Leaning down, her lips placed a kiss to Gabrielle's forehead. "Come on."

They released each other and made their way out of the stables and headed straight to Ephiny's hut. Once inside, the pair walked over to Ephiny whom was at her desk again.

The regent looked up with a smile. "I know it takes awhile to stable up bare back horses."

Gabrielle chuckled. "It does, trust me."

Ephiny nodded with a grin. "I can imagine." She then looked to her desk. There on the desk was a stack of nine new scrolls. "Those are the challenge messages."

Gabrielle nodded. She reached forward to pick up one, her Soulmate stood beside her. The small warrior unrolled the scroll and began to skim down it. Xena was doing the same. The Amazon Queen kept nodding at what she skimmed through. She came to the end and looked to Ephiny. "Looks perfect." She then grinned. "Ready to sign them Eph?"

The Amazon grinned. "Do I have a choice?"

"Nope." Gabrielle then placed the open scroll down on the table.

Ephiny reached to her quill, dipped the tip into the ink well at the front edge of her desk. She then looked up to Gabrielle, holding the quill to her.

The Amazon Queen took the quill, she leaned forward and signed the first scroll as;

*Gabrielle, Queen of the Amazons.*

As she did that the regent reached to the stack of scrolls, pulled the top one off and unrolled it. Once Gabrielle was done signing the first, she placed the second down on top of the first. Gabrielle signed it. They repeated the same actions till the small warrior signed all nine.

Once the last was signed, the Amazon Queen dipped the quill tip and looked to Xena. "Next." Gabrielle stepped to the side holding out the quill.

The warrior grinned, she took a step forward, plucked the quill from her partner's fingers and leaned down to sign the top scroll. After she signed the first as; *Xena Warrior Princess, Consort to Queen Gabrielle*, the regent removed the top. Xena then signed the second that was underneath. They repeated it all over again.

Xena finished her signings then tipped the quill herself and Ephiny stood, with the unrolled scrolls in her hands. She placed them back on the desk and took the quill. Now she signed with; *Ephiny, Regent to Queen Gabrielle*. Gabrielle took the top scrolls signed by the regent and rolled them up and placed them back on the desk. By the time Ephiny was done, she had the quill placed back in its home.

"Ephiny?"

The regent looked to her Queen. "Yeah?"

Gabrielle looked from the Amazon down to the scrolls. "I'll make a speech tonight at dinner about this to the Amazons."

Ephiny smiled. "That's a good idea." Gabrielle looked up and Ephiny added more. "I'll make sure to let the chefs know it's a formal dinner."

The small warrior nodded, her expression is quite serious. "Okay, that sounds good. I'll take care of getting these signed by Masika and Solari."

"About the messengers Gabrielle." Ephiny took a deep breath. "I think it'd be a good idea to have them leave tonight."

Gabrielle's head bobbed up and down, she stared at the wood floor for a moment. She looked back up. "Good idea. These need to be out. Horse back I assume?"

"Definitely."

"Gabrielle?"

The Amazon Queen looked to her Soulmate with her questioning eyes.

"You'd be better off sending any of the Amazons here that came from another tribe as the messengers." Xena then crossed her arms against her chest.

Gabrielle reflected with that idea. She then nodded. "You're right." She sighed. "It'd look more friendly." She then grinned a little. "Besides that they'll know how to get there the fastest way."

The Warrior Princess nodded her head. "Exactly."

"Eph, who do we have from what tribes?" Gabrielle looked to her regent.

The Amazon dropped her head as she thought. "Um, Rodhiya and Amarice can take the southern tribe. Teresa is from the southwestern tribe." She kept thinking.

"What about Aster?"

Ephiny looked up. "She's from a northern Nation."

"Is there any Amazon from the Chin Amazons?"

The regent began to shake her head. "No... the Chin Amazons never come west here. We hardly have a connection with them."

Gabrielle brought up an eyebrow. "Is that going to be a problem?"

Xena then cut in. "It won't."

The Amazon Queen looked to the warrior. "I've never met Yakut."

"Don't worry, she's a good Amazon." Xena looked down for a moment then back to Gabrielle. "You might have a problem with the culture."

"What you mean Xena?"

The warrior looked away for a minute then back. "The eastern Amazons have a different way of life than the Greek Amazons. They're... they're more revolved around the spirit and almost magical powers."

Gabrielle nodded her head. "You said they have shamans right?"

"Yes, they're sort of like the Artemis' priestess. But they don't quite... believe in Artemis."

The Amazon Queen looked to her regent then back to the warrior. "Hades, that's going to be a problem. None of the other Nations will go for that."

"It won't really matter Gabrielle." The warrior took a deep breath, she explained. "Once all the Nations come together, everybody will mix, all the different cultures."

"She's right Gabrielle. Each tribe is a little different than the other."

Gabrielle looked to Ephiny. She then nodded. "They all will be. But one thing is for sure." She grinned now. "All Amazons like the trees and wear leathers with feathers." Ephiny groaned while Xena chuckled, Gabrielle kept her grin. She then looked to her regent again. "Okay, I better get moving. Get these signed."

Ephiny nodded. "After you're done, bring them back here so I can get them sent out. I'll stay here and figure out whom to send out as messengers."

The Amazon Queen nodded. "Make sure its two Amazons for each message. Except... have three go to Chin. It'll be safer."

"Right."

Gabrielle nodded then turned to the desk. She began to collect the scrolls in her arms.

Xena then came over and picked up a few. They began to stroll out of the hut. "Bye Eph and thanks."

The regent smiled. "No problem Gabrielle. Bye. See you Xena."

The warrior looked back with a small smile. "Bye Eph."

The Soulmates then were gone. Gabrielle had walked a little ways away from the hut then stopped. She carried four scrolls, Xena had five. The small warrior looked up to Xena. "Hey, I wanna talk to you... back in our hut."

Xena searched her partner's eyes for a moment. She then answered back. "Sure." Her body had tensed after hearing that.

They walked in silence back to their own hut. Gabrielle kicked open the door, went to the table and placed the scrolls down on the table.

Xena came over and did the something. The warrior then moved to sit on the foot of the bed. She looked to Gabrielle.

The small warrior was pacing back and forth in front of Xena. She stopped and looked to Xena. "Xena tonight at the dinner..." Gabrielle stopped herself. She shifted to stand in front of her Soulmate. Bending down to her knees, Gabrielle placed her hands on Xena's legs. "I want to... tell the Amazons to stop with these rumors."

Xena stared at her Soulmate. "Gabrielle... why?" It came out in a low whisper.

The small woman looked down to her own hands then back up. "I can't let them keep talking about you like that Xena. I can't."

"It doesn't matter Gabrielle."

"Xena... how... how can't it matter? Gods." The younger woman stood back up, her right hand went through her hair as she turned her back to Xena. She turned back around to face the warrior, her hand falling to her hip. "Xena... it's not right."

"Gabrielle, I don't think you can stop them."

Gabrielle's eyes closed then opened again. "I can, I will Xena." She took a step closer to her partner. "It isn't right Xena. They have no damn reason to be talking behind your back nor mine. We both know all the stuff they say is just bullshit. Pure bullshit."

"I wouldn't say that Gabrielle." It came low in anger from the warrior's lips.

"Well I would Xena." She crossed her arms against her chest. "They were not there Xena. They do not know what happened."

"They didn't have to be Gabrielle."

"Yes they did Xena. They can't talk about something they don't know." A pause. "Don't understand."

Xena looked down to the floor, she didn't know what to say.

"Xena?" The small warrior got no response. She took another step closer and went

down on one knee to be eye level with her Soulmate. "Xena?"

The warrior looked up.

Gabrielle smiled a little. "They don't know us or understand us, they have no right. Not only that, it affects you, affects me, and affects us... it can even affect my role as Queen. I will not have my Amazons talking about stuff like this. I don't care who or what it was about. This is disrespectful. The Amazons weren't created to do this sort of centaur crap."

The warrior kept her eyes locked with Gabrielle's, her mind working the reasoning out. She sighed. "Just don't be doing it for me Gabrielle."

The Amazon Queen smiled some. "I'm not, not for you or me. For us, Xena. I owe it to us after everything."

"No, you don't owe anything Gabrielle."

Gabrielle's eyes fell to the ground then she looked back up. "Xena... I have always felt like I do, thought it. I need... I need to do this to help myself heal." She paused. "I'm going to protect us Xena. This can't happen again."

Xena sadly smiled to her Soulmate. "I know Gabrielle." She leaned forward and placed a gently kiss to Gabrielle's lips. At the end of the kiss, she only pulled back a little. "I'm okay with it."

"Thank you Xena. I... I... I just can't let this go on. It's to important."

The warrior nodded her head. "I know." She took in a shaky breath. Deciding this is the best point to stop the talk, she smiled some. "You going to get those messages signed?"

The small warrior chuckled. "Yeah I better huh? Eph will be on my butt." She then grinned. "What you going to do? I don't think you wanna come."

"I'm going to work on my sword techniques. Could use some practice."

Gabrielle nodded. "Okay, sparring fields?"

"No, I'll go out into the woods. More peaceful."

"Wow, you don't want a bunch of drooling Amazons over you?" Gabrielle then began to grin devilishly. Xena arched an eyebrow. The small warrior started to chuckled. "I was kidding Xen."

The older woman smiled. "Uh huh. Maybe I'll go to the sparring fields then."

"Oh no you won't. You're mine, nobody is allowed to have you, let alone drool."

The warrior grinned. "That's what I figured."

Gabrielle nodded. She then stood up from Xena, as she shifted her left arm from her partner's leg she found a stiffness in her shoulder. "Hades."

"What's wrong?" Xena then began to stand up from the bed.

The Queen reached to her left shoulder with her right hand, she began to massage her shoulder a little.

"Here let me do that." The taller female went behind Gabrielle and brought up her hands to massage her Soulmate's shoulder. "Sore?"

Gabrielle nodded. "Yeah."

"That wound is almost gone thankfully." She stopped the massage for a moment. "Come here and sit down." Xena shifted first to the bed and sat down, her legs spread apart.

Gabrielle then moved and sat down between her partner's legs. Her back sunk into Xena's warm body. Their legs became tangled together.

The warrior reached forward with both of her hands to Gabrielle's left shoulder. She started her massage again. "How's that feel?"

"Hmmm, real good." She then dropped her head back to rest against the older woman's right shoulder. Her eyes closed. "Make sure I don't go to sleep."

Xena grinned to herself. "Uh huh."

"No really, this isn't the right time."

The warrior smiled. "Don't worry, just relax for me."

Gabrielle nodded her head. Her body did begin to relax. She felt good from this, a sigh escaped from her.

Xena smiled to herself. Her hands worked out the knots in Gabrielle's shoulder.

"Xena?"

"Mmm?"

"You know, I could just run away from here with you right about now."

A very warm smile took over the warrior's lips. "Same here."

Gabrielle also had a smile, her eyes still closed. "I just want to spend the rest of my life with you alone, nothing else."

"That would get a little boring."

The Amazon Queen began to chuckle. "I don't know Xena, everyday is an adventure."

"Really? I saw it more as, everyday with *you* is an adventure."

"Oh no. You... attract all the trouble Xena."

The warrior grinned at that. She finished the massage then wrapped her arms around Gabrielle's waist. "Think so huh? As I recall, I was always the one getting you out of messes."

"That's because I didn't know any better." The small warrior then snickered at her own

words. "Xena, you have to realize that I never ever got into any trouble when I was younger. Then I ended up traveling with you and all I got was trouble."

Xena began to chuckle. "If I remember right, you were the one telling me a while back ago how much mayhem you caused for your family. Not to mention the fact you decided to travel with me on your own free will after stalking me."

Gabrielle started to laugh. Her eyes opened now. "I didn't stalk you, I... nicely followed you."

"Uh huh, leave Poteidaia stalk me to Amphipolis into my mother's tavern. Tell you to leave then you stalk me to my brother's tomb. I fight Draco then you stalk after me in the woods in the middle of the night."

"I did not." Gabrielle grinned. "Okay okay, I'll admit I did sort of stalk after you in the woods at night. But I was cold with no food. What did you expect?"

Xena chuckled. "Oh I was waiting to see how long you'd stay out there too."

"Uh huh, see? How could it be stalking when you knew I was there?"

The warrior chuckled. "You might have a point."

"I know I do." Gabrielle then sighed. She then mumbled low under her breath. "You still bring all the trouble."

"No I don't. You do."

"You do Xena." Gabrielle then moved to now sit in Xena's lap and face her.

The warrior grinned. "Gabrielle you do."

"Xena-" She was quickly cut off as her Soulmate's lips captured hers.

The kissed ended and the warrior grinned. "We could be at this all day."

Gabrielle grinned devilishly now. "Which part, the trouble or the kissing?"

"Mmm, both." Xena then leaned back in to kiss her partner.

Gabrielle had her hands on the other woman's sides. While the warrior had one hand behind Gabrielle's head, the other on her thigh.

The small warrior was the first to pull back, her forehead leaning against the older female's. "Xena, I think I came up with a compromise."

Xena grinned. "And?"

"And well, we both draw the trouble in, together."

"Perfect compromise."

Gabrielle chuckled. "Thought so myself." She brought her lips forward to lightly kiss Xena. After pulling away, Gabrielle got up from her Soulmate's lap. She walked over to the table.

The warrior stood up and came up near her. "Mmm, you need a bag for those." Xena then went to the saddlebags, she opened up one bag and pulled out a rolled up leather satchel, bit old. She came back over and opened it.

Gabrielle lifted two scrolls at a time, she then placed them inside and then took the satchel. She brought the strap of the satchel over her right shoulder. "So I'll catch you in the woods."

Xena grinned. "Yup, I'll be there practicing."

The Amazon Queen smiled. "Okay, great. See you then." She leaned up while Xena leaned down. Their lips met halfway. The kiss only lasted a few seconds or so. They then walked over to the door, opening it and heading out.

Gabrielle went one way while the warrior went the other. Looking back with a smile, the small warrior called to Xena. "Bye Xena!"

Xena looked to her Soulmate and smiled. "Bye Gabrielle." She then looked back to the direction of the woods, making a beeline to them.

~\*~\*~\*~

Gabrielle took a deep breath. She lifted the scroll and began to read the list. She kept nodding as she read the list of Amazons going to each tribe to deliver the messages. After finishing with reading it, she looked up to Ephiny. "It looks good."

Ephiny nodded, she crossed her arms against her chest and leaned back in the chair. "Well, I pretty much matched up every Amazon with their original village as best as possible." She then looked to the satchel Gabrielle had all nine scrolls in. "So they're all signed?" The Amazon looked back up to her Queen.

"Yes they are, sign just need to be sealed and sent."

The regent smiled. "Great, I'll take care of that."

"Sending them out this afternoon?"

The Amazon looked up from the scrolls again to her friend. "Yes, Solari was just here and I told her to have all the messengers sent here to my hut. We're going to have a quick meeting about what's going on. Then I'm going to send everybody off."

The small warrior nodded. "Okay, that's great." She sighed. "I think tomorrow we should work out the plans for the challenges."

Ephiny nodded. "I agree, we should have Solari here too. We need to get organized where we're going to keep all the Amazons."

"Right. We'll do that." Gabrielle crossed her arms against her chest. "Okay, I think I'm going to go find Xena. It'll be dinner soon."

Ephiny studied her friend's eyes, she could see a bit of uneasiness in them. She reached up with her right hand to Gabrielle's arms. "Hey, don't worry about tonight. The Amazons will support you in the idea. Promise."

The Amazon Queen smiled a little. "I know, they're my Amazons."

"Exactly, nothing to worry about." The regent released Gabrielle's arm.

"Thanks Eph."

"No problem." The Amazon smiled.

Gabrielle then padded to the door. "I'll see you at dinner Eph."

"See you then AQ."

The small warrior groaned, she opened the door. "Bye AR." She stepped through the door and left.

"AR..." Ephiny stared at the floor, she then chuckled. "Amazon Regent, huh." She grinned and turned to her desk again.

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Gabrielle dropped her head forehead some as she ducked under a low tree branch. She looked to her left, that's where she knew her Soulmate went. She could feel it. Following her connection with her partner, it led her right to the warrior.

The small warrior walked a little ways as Xena came into view. The warrior practicing in an open area. Gabrielle came up to a tree, she smiled and leaned against it. She watched her Soulmate practice with her sword techniques.

Xena thrusts foreword with her sword. She then brings it back over her head, the blade pointing down behind her back. Spinning around, the warrior does a number of sword slashes and thrusts. Flipping the sword in her hand, the blade came to run the length of her arm. She then practiced her sword work with the blade under her arm.

The Warrior Princess twists her wrist to make the sword spin in a circle. She then bends down to one knee and thrusts foreword. Staying in that position, she takes a deep breath to calm her body. Slowly she rises back up and sheaths her sword. Looking to her right, she finally takes in a full view of her Soulmate. She walked over to Gabrielle.

"Hey." The small warrior then straightens up from the tree. She smiles to the warrior heading to her.

Xena came up to her partner with a smile as well. "Hey yourself."

"How was the work out?"

The warrior grinned. "A partner would have been nicer."

Gabrielle chuckled. "Sorry, your partner was off getting Amazon business done."

"You did get it done?"

The younger female nodded. "Yeah pretty much. Eph has the scrolls and she's waiting for the selected messengers to come to her hut. She's going to tell them what's going on then send them off tonight."

Xena nodded. "Good plan." A pause. "How you feeling?"

Gabrielle sighed. "Alright. I feel a little tired when I have no reason to be."

"I feel the same way, don't worry."

The small warrior chuckled. "We'll be tired together huh?"

Xena grinned. "Of course, wouldn't have it any other way."

Gabrielle smiled, she looked to her right some. There she saw the sun's rays streaming through the woods, the last rays of sun at that. "It's going to be dark soon." She sighed and brought her arms up against her chest.

"You're sure you're feeling okay Gabrielle?"

The small warrior looked back to Xena. She stared into Xena's eyes for a moment then looked down, she took a deep breath. Looking back up, she retorted back. "Just... just a bit nervous about tonight."

Xena nodded her head a few times. "You'll be fine. The Amazons will understand." She then smiled a little. "I'll be there huh?"

Gabrielle nodded with a warm smile. "Yeah, that's all I need." She then stepped forward as she uncrossed her arms. Her arms then went around Xena, the side of her face resting against the other woman's chest.

Xena tightly wrapped her arms around Gabrielle while her chin rested on top of Gabrielle's head.

Slowly the sun descended, leaving only a little bit of light. Gabrielle then quickly realized they needed to go. "Xena we better move it."

The warrior chuckled. "Right." It was fairly dark out by now. Xena released her partner.

Gabrielle turned around to face the way she had came. "Xena?"

"Yeah?"

"You wanna lead the way?"

Xena chuckled. "Yeah, come here." Reaching out she grasped Gabrielle's right hand. Xena stepped ahead and began to walk through the dark woods. Walking along in the leaf masked dark woods wasn't the simplest of things. The warrior felt herself walk over a large fallen branch. "Gabrielle watch out-" She stopped talking as she heard her partner just find that branch.

"Hades." The small warrior stumbled forward only to release her Soulmate's hand. Her small hands grasped Xena's waist. They'd both stopped walking. "This is insane. Serves me right."

The older woman grinned. "We'll take care of this little problem right now." Turning around, Xena reached to Gabrielle's waist and began to lift her up into her arms.

"Xena, I can walk you know."

"I know." She turned back around. "But you also might trip again." The warrior began to walk slowly through the woods again. She knew that she could move a lot fast through the darkness with or without Gabrielle in her arms. But for once, going slowly while having your Soulmate in your arms was much more appealing.

"Xena, the Amazons?"

"What about them?" She stepped through a mine field of rocks.

"They'll see us."

"We'll be fine." Xena then stopped in her tracks. "I know I'm going a different route."

Gabrielle looked ahead, she spotted a low light ahead. "Well we're close that's for sure."

"I know, but there's a fallen tree in front of us."

Gabrielle widen her eyes. "Really, I don't see it."

"Trust me there is. See it right there." She pointed with her right hand.

"Not at all."

"Don't look directly at the spot Gabrielle. Look out of the corner of your eyes, you'll see it then."

The small warrior turned her head to the right some, she looked from the corner. "Oh gods, that's a huge tree. We're going a totally different way."

Xena grinned. "I know, it'll be fun. Hold on." She began to sprint ahead, her arms tightening around Gabrielle.

"Xena, no no. Xena don't jump that." But she was to late. The warrior pushed off the ground and went soaring through the air. Gabrielle closed her eyes as she knew the flip part was coming. And it did, she felt herself go upside down then Xena's body tucking against hers. "I still hate heights!" Then Xena untucked, spread her legs. Gabrielle felt them land to the ground with a hard pound. The small warrior was breathing hard.

"That wasn't so bad." Xena started walking again towards the village.

"Remind me not to do it again with you."

The warrior chuckled. "Was it really that bad?"

Gabrielle grinned in the darkness. "You wouldn't believe me."

"Try me."

"Well..." The small warrior huffed. "I kind of liked it."

"That's what I figured."

The pair came to the edge of the woods. Xena carefully lowered her Soulmate to the

ground again. They then headed straight to the dinner hut.

~\*Part 10\*~

Slowly the Queen of the Amazons rose up from her seat. She stepped over the bench seat, turned to her right some, and began to walk ahead. In front of her was a small stage with nothing on it. Just to merely rise somebody above the crowd and be seen by all. Gabrielle went up onto this stage and faced her Amazon Nation with a serious expression. Her Amazons went silent at seeing her come up onto this stage.

Looking down to the table she'd just left she spotted her Soulmate, opposite of the vacated seat she was in. Next to Xena was her regent. Ephiny looked up with a smile and nodded. Gabrielle then looked to her Soulmate. Xena was already looking up, her eyes twinkled up in confidence as a warm protective smile creased her lips.

Gabrielle couldn't stop herself from smiling back. She then looked back up as her face went serious again. Her eyes scanned her Amazons to see them all waiting for what she had to say. Some knew, some didn't, some weren't sure about what she'd be talking about. Gabrielle took a deep breath, then just let it all roll from her old bard side. "I am not sure of how many of you know of this Nation issuing challenges to all the other Nations. But I can tell you it has been done."

She paused after that, all the Amazons started talking lowly to each other. Gabrielle took another deep breath. "Just yesterday," she waited for the silence from the Amazons, it came. "Ephiny, the council, and myself all had a meeting together. We've decided to issue these challenges for a couple of reasons. As most of you know some of the Amazon Nations are fighting amongst themselves. This needs to be stopped before things get worse. That is one reason. The main reason is because it is about time these Nations come back together as one."

Again she stopped, her Amazons began to talk to each other. Gabrielle let it go for a second as she took a few deep breaths. "As of right now there are nineteen Amazons that have been sent out with challenge messages." Her Amazons are silent again, listening intently. "We will be expecting a huge number of Amazons here. The challenges will go on for several days between all the Queens. Which ever Queen comes out winning overall will become the Queen of all the Amazons. The Nations then will form together as one again."

The Queen crossed her arms against her chest, her face still serious. "I'm sure many of you are wondering why the council, Ephiny, and I decided to have all the Nations join. I know for me it is a dream, I do not expect it to be each and every Amazon's dream. But let me tell you why I had this dream. It is because over a century and half-ago all the Nations were one, there were no Nations. Just a Nation. Then the Nation split into smaller Nations. As time passes on each Nation slowly disappears into the background then finally fades out. Masika herself can tell you how when she was younger there were thirteen Nations, three are gone. Now there are ten of us, that is nothing. It is only nothing because we are separated, it will be something if we join."

Gabrielle paused for effect. "Together we will live through time. The Amazons will survive as one. That is why I had my dream. I only pray it comes true and that the new Queen will be able to up hold this. Only destiny will tell us. Now I leave it to each and every one of my Amazons here to decide if this is a dream we are chasing blindly in

the dark or if we should stand together and embrace it. You decided."

The Amazon Queen stopped and let everybody converse. Her mind worked on what to say about her and Xena. She had to say this right or she'd screw everything up. Her eyes drifted down, she thought, she took a deep breath, she looked back up. "Now that I've made that speech," her Amazons went silent and listened again. "I have more of request on a... personal level from each of you." She took a deep breath. "I know what's been talked about since I've first arrived here a few days ago. I know that each of my Amazons that sit here before me tonight knows what *might* of happened between myself and Xena."

Gabrielle stopped, there was dead silence. "I myself have yet to fully understand why these things are being talked about behind my back along with Xena's. My only guess is because it's the Queen and something bad happened to her, something to talk about. But that's only a guess. I do not only know that all of my Amazons are talking about Xena and I but I know you all dislike... hate... shun Xena."

She uncrossed her arms and began to pace back and forth on the stage, she stopped and looked to her Amazons. "I quite don't understand that part either. Many of you know that rumors can be quite false and or blown out of proportion. But that's all in a general level, let me talk to you from my own personal level about these rumors." The Amazon Queen took a deep breath, she felt a bit of a lump in her throat. "For me these rumors are nothing but disrespectful and... well painful. I stand here wondering why there are rumors when none of you were there to know what really happened between Xena and I. I wonder why, I get very tensed. I see all my Amazons shun Xena, I get stressed. I don't like seeing something like that. Very few of you know Xena for who she truly is. There are five Amazons here that know Xena, they talk to her because they know her. They know that most of those rumors are false."

Gabrielle brought her right hand up to run through her hair. Her eyes started to sting. "I can tell you these rumors affect me, they affect Xena, and they affect my Nation. I came to this Nation to be at a home with people I feel like family with. I don't feel at home here now because I know my best friend and I are being talked about behind our backs. Not only does it affect Xena, this Nation, and myself but also it affects the relationship between Xena and I, it affects us."

The Queen crossed her arms against her chest, a few tears trickled down her cheeks. "I am asking all of my Amazons to stop these rumors. I am asking my Amazons to let the past be the past, it is over with. I am asking my Amazons to give Xena another chance. To let her and I be accepted here together." She stopped for a moment and brought her right hand to rest over her chest. She still cried, but she just managed to keep her voice from shaking. "For Xena is apart of who I am. If you do not accept her then you are not accepting me, your Queen. I have been the enemy these past two years, Xena hasn't. I am asking my Amazons."

The hut is dead silent.

Xena had seen her Soulmate crying. She couldn't take it any longer. She moved from her seat and in a flash was up on the stage. Everybody was still silent. Xena didn't care what these Amazons thought now. It is always going to be about her Soulmate, forever.

She came up to Gabrielle and pulled her into her arms. Gabrielle buried her head

down into Xena's chest as she wrapped her arms around the taller woman's body. Xena had her arms tight against her Soulmate's body, she placed a gentle kiss to Gabrielle's forehead.

That's when it started, a single clap, then another, a third, a fourth, yet a fifth, the entire hut filled with the Amazons clapping. All of them began to stand up from their seats.

Xena saw this and smiled to herself. "Gabrielle, look."

Slowly the small warrior lifted her head from Xena's body and looked with red eyes through the hut. She saw all of her Amazons standing and clapping with warm smiles. She then watched as Amazons began to go down on one knee and bow their heads. Soon the hut was filled with all the Amazons bowing their heads on one knee.

Gabrielle smiled and looked up to her partner. Xena looked down to the Queen with a smile as well. They both then looked back. The Soulmates had an arm wrapped around the other's waist.

The warrior looked down to Gabrielle again. "Come on."

The small warrior nodded. The pair walked down the stage and onto the hut floor again. They went back to their table as all the Amazons stood up again. Everybody carried on with their dinners for the remainder of the evening.

Gabrielle at first didn't talk much, trying to take in everything. Near the end she was laughing and smiling, she felt like more weight had left her shoulders. But as the Amazons began to leave the hut, they seemed to all take a detour to Gabrielle. All of them saying relatively the same thing but yet it held such meaning. Those words were generally; *we believe in your dream and welcome home*. Once the Amazon would say that, she would leave Gabrielle's side, walk to Xena. Grasp the warrior's closest shoulder and squeeze. The warrior would look up every time to the Amazon and smile, the Amazon would flash a warm smile back and then leave the hut. Every single last Amazon in Gabrielle's Nation did this.

By the end of this only Ephiny, Solari, Epinion, Gabrielle, and Xena are left in the hut. Their spots were cleared and they were relaxing together, telling old jokes. Everybody just finished laughing at something Solari said.

Gabrielle sighed and took a deep breath. She looked across to her Soulmate. Xena smiled to her. The small warrior then mouthed something to the warrior.

Xena nodded and winked. She looked to Ephiny. "Eph, I think Gabrielle and I are going to run."

The regent grinned and looked to the warrior. "A little late at night to do some running."

The warrior arched an eyebrow.

Ephiny chuckled. "I was kidding Xena."

Solari and Epinion both looked down to Xena. That's when they finally noticed something. Then Solari looked to Gabrielle, the weapons master doing the same thing.

They watched as Gabrielle brought up her left hand onto the table. Two small items on the small warrior's hand sparkled and twinkled up to the two Amazons.

Solari's mouth hung open. "Well I'll be centaur crap. Ha."

Everybody looked to the second in command.

The second in command grinned and looked to her Queen. "You didn't tell us." She then looked to Xena. "Nor did you."

Both the Soulmates looked to each other in question then back to Solari.

Epinion then cut in with a grin on her lips. "Nice rings Gabrielle."

The small warrior's iv y eyes widen as she just realized she had her left hand on the table. "Oh Hades." She groaned and looked to Xena. "I knew it wouldn't last long."

Xena grinned. "Considering you like to flash those rings around, it wouldn't."

Gabrielle arched an eyebrow. "Complaining?"

The warrior grinned. "Oh no, complete opposite." She then brought her right hand up to the table and reached towards Gabrielle.

The Amazon Queen smiled and reached forward. Their hands clasped halfway, they both then looked back to the three Amazons with a grin.

Solari then looked to the regent with a grin. "When do I get a ring?"

Ephiny began to blush very deeply. She coughed and looked to Solari. "Solari." It was certainly a warning.

The second in command grinned and chuckled.

The weapons master looked to the Soulmates. "When did this happen?"

Gabrielle took a deep breath. "This morning."

"Oh wow." Epinion nodded then smiled. "That's so great to see."

Both Soulmates smiled, Gabrielle though responded. "Thanks Ep." She then took a deep breath. "Really though, Xena and I are going to head out."

Ephiny looked to her Queen. "Make sure you come by my hut tomorrow." Gabrielle nodded, the regent then looked to Solari. "You too."

The second in command nodded. "Sure, what time?"

Ephiny reflected for a moment she looked to Gabrielle. "Noon?"

Gabrielle nodded her head. "Fine with me."

The regent looked to Solari. "Okay with you?"

The second in command nodded. "Yup, I don't think I have much choice otherwise."

Ephiny chuckled and looked back as the Soulmates stood up from the table after

releasing each other's hands. "Goodnight you two."

Gabrielle looked to her regent. "Night Eph. Sleep well."

"Night Eph."

The regent nodded to the warrior in response. "Goodnight Xena."

Solari and Epinion both then talked about the sametime. "Night Xena and Gabrielle."

Both Soulmates smiled, Gabrielle answered back. "Night Ep and Solari." The pair then left the hut, heading out into the cool night. They soon came to find the night sky sparkling and twinkling with bright stars, the moon still hidden below the horizon. The weather perfectly serene.

Gabrielle looked up to her partner. "Let's go for a short walk. I wanna get some air."

Xena nodded her head.

They walked through the village passing by an Amazon here or there. They headed to the opposite end where there were few huts and the sparring fields lie. Once they were a good distance from the main part of the village, Gabrielle shifted closer to Xena. She wrapped her right arm around her Soulmate.

Xena smiled and wrapped her left arm back behind Gabrielle's shoulders. "You did a good job Gabrielle."

The small warrior grinned. "I knew you'd say that and love it."

The warrior smiled. "I'm getting to readable."

Gabrielle chuckled. "Nah, only I can read you."

A chuckle from the warrior. "Right." She paused as she went serious. "Gabrielle?" They both stopped walking as they came to the sparring fields. Xena looked down to her partner. "You're not the enemy."

The smaller woman looked down to the ground then back up. "I'm not sure about that part."

"I know." Xena took a deep breath. "But I'm telling you. Remember you said we can't seem to forgive ourselves inside?" Gabrielle nodded, the warrior smiled a little. "Well then entrust in me to tell the truth to help you forgive yourself. You are not nor weren't the enemy for those two years."

Gabrielle smiled warmly while sadness was in her eyes. "Thank you Xena." That's when she realized her Soulmate might think the something about herself. "Entrust in me Xena, I'll only speak the truth to you as well. Believe in me and you'll heal yourself. You never are or were the enemy."

Xena smiled back, she bent her head down close to Gabrielle's head. "I do trust and believe with my soul. Thank you Gabrielle." She lowered her lips to brush against her Soulmate's, she then whispered. "I love you Gabrielle."

"I love you too Xen." She smiled then finished the distance kissing her partner

lovingly. But the kiss went from just loving to deep. Breath taking as some would say.

Gabrielle soon found her hands going to Xena's waist and pulled her closer. The warrior's own hands shifted to Gabrielle's back.

The small warrior pulled back first with a smile. "Come on." Gabrielle released her Soulmate and started walking towards their hut.

Xena grinned with a chuckle and walked beside her partner. She kept her arms crossed against her chest to stay in control.

Gabrielle was the first into the hut, she turned around as soon as the warrior closed the door. She pressed her body against Xena's as she went in for a strong kiss.

Xena was pressing hard against the hut door, wondering if she'd break it. As soon as the kiss was over, Gabrielle's warm lips were traveling down her neck. "Gabrielle?" She leaned her head back against the door as she closed her eyes. "Wait, Gabrielle?"

The small warrior stopped and rested her head against Xena's chest, she was breathing hard. Her hands went to her Soulmate's hips.

Xena looked down with a serious face. "Are you ready for this Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle looked up with a grin. "Xena, you know the answer to that."

The warrior chuckled. "Right, just go, I know." She then went serious again. "Are you sure about this after everything?"

Gabrielle kept her eyes locked. "Are you Xena?"

Xena smiled. "Yes."

The smaller woman smiled. "I know, so am I. I need you."

"But Gabrielle..." The warrior stopped herself, not sure what to say.

"Xena?" The warrior looked to her, Gabrielle continued. "Just stop trying to find excuses." She grinned for an instant then went stern. "Xena, I'm... I'm ready to move on. I'm sick of looking at our past... of... of letting it judge our future. I can't do that anymore Xena. I'm ready to look at my past, learn from it, turn around and walk on. But I will not do that with out you, I couldn't. Please Xena lets move on together. I don't care how dark or light I just want to be with you. Please."

The older woman smiled so warmly. "We are. I don't' want to face my future without you, otherwise it wouldn't be my future. I need you Gabrielle." Xena then leaned down to capture her Soulmate's lips. Her large hands then moved up to the small warrior's shoulders. They pulled away from the kiss, now it was Xena's lips going to Gabrielle's neck. Xena's lips slowly descended down Gabrielle's chest as her large hands slowly pushed the leather straps off Gabrielle's shoulders.

Gabrielle dropped her head back some as a moan escaped her lips. She felt her partner's warm hands slide down her muscular arms. Then Xena's warm lips came back up to claim hers in a demanding kiss.

The warrior had quickly found out that her Soulmate's body had changed some in two

years. Gabrielle's body more muscular yet was still soft, a perfect contrast the small woman's body. Gods how she'd miss the feeling of Gabrielle's body. And as she kissed Gabrielle she removed the straps. After the kiss, she slipped the top off her Soulmate's body from over her head. The maroon leather top landing to the wood table near them.

Gabrielle grinned and leaned back up to kiss Xena. Her bare chest pressed into Xena's leather clad body. She had a tight hold on the warrior's side and began to pull her Soulmate with her. They soon found themselves on the bed, Xena on top. The warrior grinned, her lips lowered down to Gabrielle's right breast.

~\*Part 11\*~

Xena looked around in the dark space of nothing, she couldn't see anything. She then slowly watched as stone walls reappeared around her. Then a stone altar in front of her, a pit behind it. Then lastly was a small blond leaning against the altar appeared, crying.

Xena's eyes widen. "Gabrielle?"

Slowly the blond turned around from the altar and looked to Xena. "Xena?"

Xena smiled sadly, she rushed over to Gabrielle's side. "Hey, yeah it's me." She bent down to one knee in front of Gabrielle. Xena noticing Gabrielle was in her old attire of green halter top, brown skirt, and red boots with her hair long

"Oh gods what happened?" Gabrielle looked up to Xena.

"I don't know Gabrielle."

Gabrielle looked around in the temple, she then looked back to Xena. "Why'd you leave me here Xena?"

"W-what?"

"Why did you leave me in Dahak's temple Xena? I can't understand, I thought you loved me."

"I do Gabrielle."

"Then why'd you leave me here?"

Gabrielle looked to her right then her left, she couldn't see anything, pitch black. She ran her hand through her short hair as she reflected. Her head quickly turned to the right as she heard a familiar voice, Xena's.

"I didn't mean to leave you here Gabrielle, I swear. Gods I-"

"No Xena! I don't want anymore excuses from you."

Gabrielle's eyes widen as she heard her own voice ring through the air. That's when it happened, she watched as a temple she knew all too well materializes before her. She spotted her Soulmate leaning down in front of herself. But it was her from two years ago, long hair and her old outfit. Gabrielle stood there stunned, she couldn't believe it.

Xena slowly up from bending down, she took a step back from Gabrielle. "I didn't

mean to leave you here Gabrielle. I swear!"

Gabrielle rose up from the stone altar. "Do you think I believe you even for a second Xena? You left me here to be raped! I've never been the same since and it's all your fault!"

Gabrielle shook her head. She quickly rushed forward to touch her Soulmate, but her hand went through Xena's body. "Gods no. Xena! Xena!?" Gabrielle quickly found out her Soulmate couldn't hear her. She looked to her younger self and narrowed her eyes. Reaching out to the other Gabrielle, her hands also went right through the fake Gabrielle.

The young Gabrielle narrowed her eyes, she took a step through the older Gabrielle as if she wasn't there. She came up to Xena and continued with her persecution. "Xena, it's your fault everything happened. It all started here!"

Xena shook her head. "No... no Gabrielle."

"Yes, and you know it Xena!"

The older Gabrielle ran her right hand through her short hair frantically as she tried to think of what to do. "There's gotta be something." She began to think of her dream with the demon angel and how Xena reached her. Gabrielle's eyes widen as a small smile crossed her lips. She closed her eyes and concentrated. She began to whisper what she was thinking. "Come on Xena, I know you can hear me. Let me in."

Xena took steps back again from the young Gabrielle. "No Gabrielle please."

"Please what Xena!? You destroyed me! You created me and now you can't handle me? Oh come on Xena, you are my creator. Embrace your creation, confront me!"

The older Gabrielle tightened her eyes more, concentrating more. "Xena, I created myself." Gabrielle's words then repeated aloud in the temple and echoed.

Both the younger Gabrielle and Xena stopped. They looked around in the temple trying to find the owner of the voice. Xena looked around, she knew it was Gabrielle's voice, she quietly whispered. "Gabrielle?"

The older Gabrielle opened her eyes and looked to her Soulmate, she smiled. "She can hear me."

The younger Gabrielle narrowed her eyes and looked to Xena. "You created me Xena. You do realize that? It is your own fault your son died."

Xena looked to the younger Gabrielle, her eyes horrid filled.

The older Gabrielle closed her eyes again, she concentrated as she whispered her words. "Xena, it was my choice to kill Hope or not. I didn't, it was my fault Solan died." Her eyes watered as her words were repeated in an echo through the temple.

The younger Gabrielle growled and took a step closer to Xena. "Don't listen to that voice Xena. Because of you I had Hope."

The older Gabrielle shook her head. "Because I didn't stay by your side Xena, I had

Hope. Because I trust Kraftstar instead of you I had Hope."

The younger Gabrielle now ignored Xena and looked around in the temple. "No! Xena destroyed me! Her son deserved to die!"

The older Gabrielle took a deep breath. "Because of Hope Solan died, because of my ignorance Solan died."

Xena looked up from the stone floor to the younger Gabrielle, her eyes narrowed. "You're not Gabrielle."

The younger Gabrielle whirled around to face Xena. "What?"

The older Gabrielle opened her eyes with a confident smile on her lips. "That's it Xena."

Xena took a step towards the younger Gabrielle. "I said you are not Gabrielle."

The younger Gabrielle laughed bitterly. "Then tell me dear Xena, who am I?"

Xena crossed her arms against her chest. "As Gabrielle once said, you are my guilty conscious."

"Either way Xena, you'll never be rid of me."

"Oh I think so. I created you, I can destroy you just as fast." Xena's eyes narrowed as she bent down close to the younger Gabrielle. "Even more so when my Soulmate is here."

The younger Gabrielle smirked. "You have no Soulmate."

The older Gabrielle grinned as she came to walk up beside the two women while talking. "Oh Xena definitely has a Soulmate." She crossed her arms against her chest.

Xena looked to her right to see Gabrielle, but with short hair with her maroon leathers.

The younger Gabrielle looked to her left to see herself but a little older. "No... no you're not here."

Gabrielle grinned as she looked to her younger mirror image. "Oh I am. Next time you decided to guilt my Soulmate, try using facts to back yourself up."

The younger Gabrielle shook her head stepping away, shaking her head. She began to dissolve. "No!" The younger Gabrielle screamed but it wasn't heard as she disappeared into nothing.

The older Gabrielle grinned and looked to her Soulmate. "Stupid guilty conscious huh?"

Xena looked from the spot where her image of her conscious had disappeared from, she looked to her Soulmate with horrid filled eyes.

Gabrielle saw that horror set in her Soulmate's deep blue eyes. She quickly moved forward to gather her Xena into her arms. "Hey I'm here Xena. It's real me."

Xena began to cry hard in Gabrielle's arms. "Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle tightened her arms more around her Soulmate. "Its me Xena."

Xena then only cried harder. The Soulmates' felt their legs weaken and they went to the ground. Gabrielle pulled her Xena into her arms even more, her head buried down into Xena's head. Xena had her arms tightly wrapped around Gabrielle, her face buried in between Gabrielle's breasts, crying.

"Its okay Xena, I'm here." Gabrielle was crying herself.

Xena looked up with red eyes. "Gods, I'm sorry Gabrielle. I did destroy you."

"No Xena, no." Gabrielle smiled sadly. "You didn't, I wouldn't be here now then if that were true." She paused. "Entrust in me Xena. I won't leave you ever again." Leaning down she placed a gentle kiss to Xena's forehead.

Xena then began to cry again, she closed her eyes and buried her face back down into her Soulmate's breasts. Gabrielle closed her eyes and lowered her head down into Xena's. She rocked both of their bodies in comfort.

The small warrior took a deep breath, her arms stayed tight around the older woman's body. She then took notice to the fact things felt different. Her body was running up and down the length of Xena's body, her legs tangled with her Soulmates. Not to mention she was nude along with Xena, bodies pressed against each other.

Slowly Gabrielle opened her eyes and noticed she was back in the hut. She looked down to find Xena's head buried under her chin. The warrior was crying slightly. The Amazon Queen lowered her head and placed a kiss to the older woman's head.

Xena lifted her head and noted to the fact she is in the hut and not Dahak's temple. She then realized the position of her body with Gabrielle's. "We didn't fall asleep like this."

The Amazon Queen nodded. "I know, I was sleeping on top of your body when we went to sleep."

The warrior furrowed her brows at that.

Gabrielle chuckled. "Just don't even ask Xen."

Xena chuckled. "I wouldn't even dare, we'll never find out." She then closed her eyes for a moment and took a deep breath, her eyes opening again. "Thank you." She looked up to Gabrielle.

The small woman smiled warmly. "Anytime." They kept their eyes locked. Gabrielle then noticed something different in the warrior's eyes. Her sapphire eyes were rich and warm, no walls. No walls. Nothing but pure trust. Gabrielle smiled with such warmth that she must lean down to kiss Xena lightly on the lips.

The warrior smiled back as Gabrielle pulled back from the kiss. She knew what her Soulmate was smiling about. The small warrior had broken her last barrier that she had standing. The last barrier to her heart. No separating these two Soulmates of time.

"We better go back to sleep Xena." She began to shift.

"No." Gabrielle stopped moving and Xena grinned a little. "This is perfect." She then tucked her head under Gabrielle's chin and closed her eyes.

The Amazon Queen smiled, she tightened her arms again and closed her own eyes. She knew Xena still wanted comfort, something she demanded very rarely openly. But Gabrielle is always more than happy to give it. She placed her chin on top of Xena's head and closed her eyes. "Xena?"

"Mmm?"

"See you in our dreams soon."

The older woman smiled and Gabrielle felt it against her skin as she mirrored that same smile. They both went to sleep and would soon meet each other there.

~\*~\*~\*~

The sunlight rose up and came beaming through the window, the light centering to the chests of the soulmates. Then ever so slowly the sunlight spread from their chests to up and down the length of their bodies, it warmed them.

Gabrielle felt warm lips touch her own, she kept her eyes closed while her body came to life. She felt those lips pull back and she opened her eyes final to look into sky electric eyes. She smiled. "Morning."

Xena grinned. "Good morning."

The Amazon Queen chuckled. "How'd you sleep?"

The warrior grinned. "Well." She then brought her hands to her Soulmate's sides. She then rolled onto her back bringing Gabrielle with her. The small warrior lay on top of Xena's body, the warrior kept her grin. "Mmm glad it's not to late in the morning."

The younger woman chuckled. "For what?" She then leaned down to kiss her partner.

One of the warrior's hands went to through Gabrielle's hair while the other was on her back. "Mmm how can I put it?"

Gabrielle chuckled in the middle of the kiss, which pretty much ended it. Her face falling into Xena's neck. "Let's not put it anyway and just-"

"Gabrielle."

The Amazon Queen started to laugh. She took a deep breath and looked up to Xena with a sparkle in her eyes. "I love you."

Xena smiled. "I love you too."

Gabrielle smiled then it formed into a grin. Her lips came down to kiss the warrior on her lower chest.

The older woman closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She felt Gabrielle's warm hands come down to her side and caress her. But the small warrior's lips came down to one of Xena's breasts.

It had been five days now that they've been in the Amazon village. How things went from one extreme to the other in a matter of five days. Funny how life works like that huh?

~\*~\*~\*~

Xena took a deep breath, Gabrielle's head rising up because of it. The smaller woman had her head resting on top of the warrior's chest. Her body at a diagonal to Xena's.

"That would be interesting."

The small warrior sighed as she responded. "I think it would be interesting."

Xena grinned. "You really like that idea huh?"

Gabrielle chuckled. "Well, if we ever have to split up a couple of days for some reason. I guess we'll find out if we'll still have dreams together."

"Mmm." Xena took another deep breath. "For once, I don't want to find out."

The small warrior smiled. "I agree, but it's still interesting."

Xena had her right hand across her own bare chest, her fingers running through Gabrielle's hair. While her left arm was snaked down Gabrielle's side, her hand locked with Gabrielle's left hand. Both their hands resting on the small female's stomach. Then the Queen had her right hand resting on Xena's stomach. The covers just stopped after Xena's breast, under Gabrielle's chin, their bodies completely under the covers.

"Xen?"

"Mmm?"

"I really don't want to move."

The warrior grinned. "I know what you mean."

Gabrielle's right hand then began to caress the older woman's stomach lightly. "Do you think we should go visit Cyrene? I know the last time she saw us was a while ago."

Xena sighed as she thought. "Yeah, you're right."

"She was really worried about us too."

The warrior nodded a little. "I know she was and I didn't know what to tell her."

"Neither did I." She squeezed her Soulmate's hand for a moment, then Gabrielle lightened her hold again.

"Gabrielle?"

"Yeah?"

"We better get moving."

"Yeah you're right." She said it, she'd thought about it, but she wasn't doing it. Neither Soulmates were moving. Gabrielle then started to laugh after a minute. "Okay, I

thought we both just agreed to get up."

"We did, not on the when part."

The younger female chuckled. "Right. This is just to comfortable."

"Mmm, perfect."

The small warrior then groaned. She released Xena and rolled to her right onto Xena's body. She buried her head into the warrior's neck. "Xena, remind me to never be the Queen of Amazons again in my next life."

Xena chuckled. "I'll try to remember. As long as you remind me not to be a warrior."

Gabrielle lifted her head with an eyebrow up as well. "Why? I like you as a warrior."

The older woman grinned. "To much physical work."

The Amazon Queen grinned. "Good for you, keep you in shape."

"Very funny Gabrielle."

"Wasn't trying to be." Gabrielle kept her grin. "I love having my warrior."

Xena chuckled. "So I'm noticing."

The small woman dropped her head back down. She took a deep breath. "You know what I just realized?"

"What's that?"

The Amazon Queen lifted her head again, crossed her arms on top of Xena's chest and rested her chin on her arms. "You can't call me your bard anymore."

"I know, been working on that."

Gabrielle arched an eyebrow. "Really? What?"

Xena bit her lower lip with a grin.

"Xena?" Warning tone.

The warrior started chuckle. "Well I was thinking along the lines of... my little warrior."

"Xena!" Gabrielle uncrossed her arms quickly and reached to her right to a pillow. She then slammed it down at the warrior's face. "That isn't funny!"

Xena was laughing through the pillow. She grabbed at it and pulled it off her face to her left side. "You don't like it?"

"No!" Gabrielle's face wrinkled up as she thought of the words again. "Oh gods, I would die."

The warrior still had her grin. "I was kidding." She then smiled.

Gabrielle sighed. "Good." She leaned down to start kissing Xena.

Xena though started to laugh in the middle of the kiss.

"Xena, don't." The small warrior backed away from the kiss with a stern expression but a small smirk was on her lips.

Xena grinned. "Don't worry, I won't." She then brought her right hand up to the back of Gabrielle's head. She brought the small woman's head down to claim her lips.

After the pair's kiss they did finally get up. They had quickly dressed and knew it would be midday soon. So once they were dressed, they made their way out of the hut and directly to Ephiny's.

~\*~\*~\*~

Epinion stopped for a moment in her path, she looked to her left at Ephiny's hut. She smiled to herself. Looking up, she took note to the fact that it is yet another clear day, no clouds. In turn it made things cold. That thought of cold made the weapons master tug her cloak closer against her body. Her eyes then drifted back to the hut, she sighed.

Then she heard somebody coming up to her right. She looked to her right to see the head Amazon Chef coming her way, she smiled. "Hey Logos."

The chef is carrying a tray of food. "How are you Epinion?"

"Not to bad. How about yourself?"

Logos smiled, she shifted the tray in her right hand. "Fine thanks. Just delivering some food to Gabrielle and the others."

Epinion chuckled. "Yeah I heard they've been in there since midday."

The chef Amazon nodded. "They have, Solari came out asking if something could be sent over to eat."

The weapons master grinned. "Well the Queen does have an appetite."

Logos chuckled. "So I've heard." She then looked away then back to the other Amazon. "Nice weather huh?"

Epinion nodded. "It is, wish it was like this all the time."

The chef nodded. "Yeah, it'll be winter soon."

"Yup, I hope we get these competitions done in time."

"I'd think they would."

The weapons master smiled. "Hopefully, find out." She paused. "I better go. I'll talk to you later Logos."

The small chef smiled. "Yeah I need to deliver this stuff. Bye Epinion."

"Bye." Epinion then started walking off.

Logos then continued on her trek to the regent's hut. She slowly opened the door to Ephiny's hut. What she found was her Queen shaking her head, sighing and sitting back in her seat with a grumble. Beside Gabrielle Logos noticed was the Warrior Princess. Across from those two are the second in command and Ephiny.

Ephiny looked up as Logos came in. "Hey Logos, thanks for bringing some stuff."

The chef smiled. "No problem. Where would you like the tray?"

The regent looked to her second in command. "Can you move the small table over here?"

Solari nodded. "Sure thing." She got up and went to the table near the head of Ephiny's bed. She lifted it and carried it to stand off to the side of the group.

Logos then carried over the tray and placed it down on the small table. She then looked at the group. "Is there anything else you four need?"

Everybody shook their head. Gabrielle then looked up with a smile. "Thanks Logos."

The chef Amazon nodded with a smile. "Welcome." She then turned to head to the door. "Bye." Everybody said goodbye and Logos went out the door, closing it quietly behind.

Xena reached up to the tray, she pulled out two red apples that were resting in a wood bowl. She handed one to Gabrielle.

The small warrior smiled to Xena in thank you, she then looked back to Ephiny seriously. "We can't do that Ephiny." She leaned forward in her seat.

The regent sighed. "Gabrielle, we can't have all these Amazons just sitting outside our doors and not invite them in."

Gabrielle began to toss the apple back and forth in her hands. She looked up from it as she kept tossing it between her hands. "Ephiny we can not put all these Amazons in this villages. Its crazy, there's no way."

The Amazon regent sighed. "Then what are we gonna do? We can't leave them outside the gates."

The Queen sighed. "We are going to have to."

Xena quickly cut in as her right hand came down to rest on her leg with the half eaten apple. "The Queens should be in the village."

Gabrielle looked to her soulmate as she looked to the apple in her left hand. "You're right." She looked to Ephiny. "We have enough huts here for nine other Amazons?"

Ephiny nodded. "Of course."

"Then we'll just have the Queens with their consorts, if they have any, in the huts. Then keep their other Amazons outside of the village. That's the best we can do Eph."

The regent nodded her head. "Okay, I can work with that."

Solari then decided to express her opinion. "We're going to need room in the woods to do that. Maybe we should cut some trees down."

The Amazon Queen nodded her head. "I agree, get some people on that Solari." She grinned. "Fire wood for the winter."

The second in command nodded. "In front of the gates?"

Gabrielle looked to Ephiny. "Gates?"

The regent nodded. She then looked to Solari. "That would be the best spot."

The small warrior sighed and rested back in her seat, she still held that apple in her right hand. She looked down to it as she spoke. "What's next on the list?" She looked back up.

Ephiny looked up as she thought. "Last thing is going over the challenges." She then looked to her Queen.

Gabrielle nodded, she reflected it. As she did, Solari got up to move to the tray and she picked up a pear, she began to munch on that. The small warrior then looked back up. "I would like to keep the two rules I expressed to the council."

"I agree." Ephiny then crossed her arms against her chest.

Solari swallowed some of her pear and then spoke. "What about the consorts and champions?"

The Amazon Queen sighed, she looked up to Xena as the red apple rolled out of her left hand into her right.

Xena looked down to her Soulmate with a serious expression. Understanding passed between them. So Gabrielle looked back to her Amazon friends. "Only Queens fight, no consorts or champions."

Neither Ephiny or Solari said anything or moved for a moment. The two Amazons could not believe their Queen's words.

Then slowly the regent nodded. "Alright." She took a deep breath.

Gabrielle straightened back up in her seat. "Once all the tribes arrive, I'll have a meeting with the Queens and their head council members. Go over everything."

"Okay, Solari and I will have to try and keep them calm. Hopefully none of the Queens will get in arguments between each other."

"Do we know which tribes are unfriendly with each other?"

The regent sighed, she then answered Gabrielle's question. "I'm not sure. I believe the three southern tribes are arguing over land. The west tribe and northwest tribe had problems with the Amazons they traded. Supposedly one Amazon went to the west tribe from the northwest and caused some problems. The west Nation then blamed it on the northwest tribe for it. Only been getting worse."

Xena had finished her apple a few back, the remains were now laying on the table to

her left near the tray. "Exactly who are the southern Queens?" The warrior then looked to Ephiny.

The regent looked to Xena. "Aureus is the Queen of the most southern tribe. The southeast is-

"Mairead?"

Ephiny nodded to Xena. "Mairead is the southeast and... Zahra is of the southwest Nation."

Gabrielle looked up from the apple in her right hand. "Who are the Queens of the west Nation and northwest Nation?"

"West is Caitriona and the northwest Nation is Queen Parvulus."

Gabrielle nodded. "Good thing to know." She looked up to Xena.

The Warrior Princess faintly nodded to Gabrielle and she looked to Ephiny. "Are any of them known for being... rough?"

Ephiny grinned. "Mairead is a tough Amazon as is Caitriona. Along as you're on their good side, they're okay with you."

Gabrielle raised an eyebrow. "And how do you get in good with them?" Xena then crossed her arms against her chest.

"You fight them and win."

The small warrior sighed at Ephiny's answer. She then mumbled under her breath. "Warrior thing."

Xena looked to her right at her Soulmate. "I heard that."

Gabrielle looked up and grinned. "I was just kidding."

"Uh huh."

The Queen went serious again as she looked back to her two Amazons. "Is that everything?"

Ephiny nodded her head. "That covers it... for the most part. I'm sure we'll run into problems later."

"Great." Gabrielle then chuckled. "Okay, well lets get this village ready. Get the sparring fields fancied up for these challenges."

Solari looked away from the pear core in her right hand to the small warrior. "Gabrielle, we might need to expand the size of the sparring fields."

"Then do that the best way you can."

The second in command nodded. "Alright."

The Queen then stood up, her right hand still held that red apple. Xena rose up from her seat as Gabrielle talked. "We'll catch up with you both later tonight."

The regent nodded while she looked up. "Sounds good. It's possible that two or three Queens might arrive tomorrow."

"Okay, let me know. We need to get these challenges done and fast before winter sets in."

"Definitely, we should have enough time Gabrielle."

The small warrior then grinned. "The Amazons might, but I don't." She chuckled a little.

Both Amazons looked to each other and arched eyebrows. Ephiny then looked back with a semi stunned expression. "Right."

Gabrielle smiled innocently and moved past the table and began to walk over to the door, Xena right behind. "See you Eph and Solari."

"Bye AQ." Both Amazons said it at the same time.

The Queen sighed and opened the door.

Xena looked back to her friends with a smile. "Bye."

"Bye Xena." Ephiny then grinned. "Stay out of trouble."

The warrior grinned. "Of course."

Solari chuckled. "Bye Xena."

"See you Solari." The Warrior Princess then stepped through the door and closed it behind. As soon as she came up to Gabrielle's side, she looked to her. "Not in the mood for an apple?"

Gabrielle lifted her right hand with the apple, she tossed it up and then caught it. "Not in the mood for eating." She looked up to her Soulmate.

"Why?"

The small warrior shrugged. "Not hungry."

Xena sighed. "Gabrielle, you haven't eaten all day."

"Yeah I know." She looked back down at the apple. "I'll get something at dinner."

Xena's eyes narrowed faintly, narrow in suspicion. She knew something was going on but wasn't sure of what just yet. But she still responded in a half worried, half frustrated tone. "Alright."

The smaller woman looked up into Xena's eyes, she saw that frustration. So she reached up with her left hand to Xena's arm. "Hey, it's nothing to worry about Xena." A pause. "I'm just not as hungry as I use to be."

The older woman nodded. "Okay but I'm still worried."

"I know." She grinned a little as she released the warrior's arm. "Thanks." She then

tossed the apple up to the warrior whom caught it.

Xena nodded. "Thanks."

"No problem." Gabrielle started walking, Xena walking beside her. "I'm ready to crawl back into bed."

The warrior grinned. "My Queen, you have yet to fulfill your duties today."

The smaller woman looked up to Xena with a half glare. "Funny." She grinned as she looked back ahead. They were headed to the gates of the village. "You know, sometimes this whole Queen thing gets to me."

The warrior nodded. "That's how I felt every once in a while with being a warlord." Xena then looked to her Soulmate. "Granted a warlord is a bad analogy."

Gabrielle chuckled. "Nah, I could see that. Being in charge of a bunch of filthy warriors. Had to be nasty job."

"You get use to the scent after awhile Gabrielle."

The small warrior looked up to partner with a raised eyebrow. "No thanks Xena. I don't know how you did it." She looked back ahead, she saw the gates of the village ahead.

"I don't know either."

Now the pair came to the gates. They walked past them and to the edge of the woods.

Gabrielle placed her hands on her hips as she looked around. "How large of a space you think?"

The warrior crossed her arms against her chest. "Well let's do some calculations. Nine Nations."

"Twelve council members per Nation. So that's... hundred eight Amazons there."

Xena nodded. "Plus how many warriors each Queen brings."

"Could be between thirty to sixty."

"So we make it fifty Amazon warriors each nation."

Gabrielle closed her eyes as she did the math. "Four hundred fifty Amazons plus the hundred eight it comes to about... five hundred fifty-eight Amazons total." She opened her eyes and looked up to Xena.

The warrior grinned. "Good math, I got the same."

The Amazon Queen turned her head left and right scanning the woods trying to imagine five hundred and fifty-eight Amazons taking the space up. "Hades Xena, that's a lot."

"It is."

"We're going to need a huge sparring field for this. The two we have now won't cut

it."

Xena nodded. "Have three or four sparring fields."

"Think so?"

The warrior nodded. "Yeah, two here then two in the village." She looked to Gabrielle.

"It'll make things go faster." Gabrielle crossed her arms against her chest. "Think we can get these trees cut down in time?"

"Yeah." A pause. "If you get enough Amazons on it."

The Amazon Queen nodded. She uncrossed her arms and pointed to her right. "Starting there to here?" She pointed far to her left."

"Mmm, add a little more to the right side. That should cover the space." Xena then uncrossed her right arm and pointed to a tree to her far right. "Start from there of one sparring field." She then brought her arm to the left some to another tree, a good distance from the first. "End sparring field there and start the camp." Moving her right hand to the far left she pointed to an olive tree. "End the camp there and start the other sparring field."

Gabrielle then pointed to a tree a good length from the olive tree to the left. "Stop the second sparring field there?"

"Exactly." Xena then reached up between her breasts to remove her breast dagger. "Let's go mark them." She then began walking to her right, the small warrior right beside her. Xena came up to the tree she'd pointed to earlier. Lifting the dagger up and cut some of the bark off the tree.

The Soulmates turned to their left and walked a ways till they came to the second tree she'd pointed to earlier. Xena cut some of the bark off there. They walked over to the third and fourth, also marking them. The warrior then slipped her dagger back.

Gabrielle crossed her arms against her chest. "Start from the middle of the camp and work out huh?"

Xena nodded. "I agree, best way to go." They both then looked back to the woods.

"Xena?"

"Mmm?" The warrior looked to her partner, but Gabrielle's didn't look to her.

"I think I don't want to be the Queen of all the Amazons." She then looked up to Xena. "I don't want leave you."

The older female completely turned to Gabrielle. "Gabrielle you wouldn't be."

Gabrielle sighed, she turned her body to face Xena as she looked up into crystal blue eyes. "Xena, we both know if I were to be Queen then I'd have to stay here. Set things up."

Xena reached forward with both her hands to the other woman's shoulders. "Listen to

me Gabrielle, I don't care how long it may take to set this Nation up. I will stay here and help you. I'm not going to go off running around Greece and leave you here, there's no way."

The Amazon Queen looked down to the ground. She then looked back up. "I know how you are about being in one area for so long."

Xena grinned. "That's only if I don't have you. As long as I have you beside me, I'll be more than happy being stuck somewhere." She then mumbled lowly. "Even if they are Amazons."

"I heard that." Gabrielle then chuckled, she felt her Soulmate pull her in. The small warrior wrapped her arms around Xena, the warrior doing the something.

The Soulmates both then pulled back in the embrace some. Xena's head leaning down, Gabrielle's coming up. They met half way for the warm kiss.

## **Part 5**

### **Section 5**

~\*Part 12\*~

The small warrior crossed her arms against her chest to keep warm. She had her cloak totally button up to keep her warm, but she felt a little cold on the inside. Gabrielle took a deep breath, she saw her breathe visible in the early morning air.

"Here."

Turning to her head to the left, Xena came up beside her with a mug of hot tea. She smiled and took the offered mug. "Thanks Xena."

The warrior smiled. "No problem." She also had her cloak on. She lifted her mug to sip from it. Gazing ahead she watched as numerous Amazons were chopping away at trees, mostly pine. The pine scent actually filled the air around them.

"It's coming along."

Xena nodded in agreement at Gabrielle's words. "It's coming. Good thing we got an early start."

The Amazon Queen nodded. "Yeah." She lifted her mug to drink from it. She kept watch of her Amazons cutting down the trees to make the camp. Once they get the area cleared, Gabrielle had plans for tents to be pitched for the arriving Amazons.

Yesterday had been relaxing for the most part. After the Soulmates had marked the trees with the dagger, they left to spar together before dinner. The rest of the evening had been a good one, to say the least. Now though, they had gotten up early to confront this cold day. Gabrielle and Ephiny had organized a large amount of Amazons to start chopping trees down for the camp and the sparring fields. Her and Xena supervising while the regent ran between the sparring fields in the village to the woods clearing. Ephiny had elected herself to make sure Solari took care of fixing up the sparring fields with a few Amazons.

Overall, things were running smoothly. Everybody would be rather tired by the afternoon but it would be worth the effort. Gabrielle and the regent both were confident that the site would be cleared of the trees by tomorrow afternoon.

The Amazon Queen took a sip of her tea, she then looked up to Xena. "I think I'm going to go find Eph."

Xena turned her attention to her partner. "I'll stay here."

Gabrielle nodded with a smile. "Thanks, be right back." She then turned around and marched off at a fast pace into the village.

The warrior turned around to watch her Soulmate leave, she smiled to herself and then turned back around to the Amazons cutting the trees. Sighing, she lifted her mug and drank from it.

~\*~\*~\*~

"Ephiny, we better have enough."

The regent sighed. "I'm pretty sure we do, I have somebody double checking on it now. But I'm sure we do Gabrielle."

The small warrior slowly released her breath. "We better have the tents Eph. We can't afford not to."

"I think we're fine Gabrielle."

Gabrielle nodded her head. "I hope you're right." She lifted her mug and drank from it. Her eyes then averted back to the sparring fields. "They look better."

The Amazon nodded. "Yeah, Solari is doing a nice job of cleaning this place up."

"Is that where she widen it?" The Queen lifted her right arm to point to the area of the right half of the two sparring fields.

"Yeah, there and over here." Ephiny pointed to the far back side of the sparring fields.

"Okay." Gabrielle nodded a few times. "Where's Solari now?"

"Solari and her group went to go get breakfast then they're headed down to the trees to help with getting them down."

The small warrior nodded. "Good." She took a long breath. "I am going to head back to the forest. You coming?"

Ephiny nodded. "Yeah I want to see how it's going."

Gabrielle smiled. "It's moving fast." The two women began to stroll through the village towards the gates. Gabrielle lifted her mug to drink from it, the tea warming her body.

"It looks like you and Xena are doing well." A statement.

"We are." The Queen smiled and glimpsed to the Amazon. "It's... well I can't really describe how wonderful it is to be with Xena again."

Ephiny nodded with a smile. "You two held out a lot longer than I thought."

Gabrielle sighed, she drank the little bit of tea she had. "I never thought we'd be together again."

The regent grinned. "I knew you two would be together again." She sighed and gazed ahead. "I can't imagine you both surviving without each other."

Gabrielle nodded. "We both were hanging in by just a thread." She paused. "I thought I was going to die after... well after Solan's death."

"Gabrielle." The regent stopped walking, so did Gabrielle. Ephiny reached up to Gabrielle's shoulder. "I thought the same thing when you came to us." She dropped her head then looked back up to her small friend. "But in the back of my mind I knew you and Xena would survive. It was just a matter of time." A pause. "Just don't let yourself or Xena be stuck in the past okay?" She then smiled.

Gabrielle smiled back. "We won't." She then pulled Ephiny in for a hug. "Thanks Eph."

The Amazon hugged back tightly then released Gabrielle. "Anytime. I'm always around if you need me Gabrielle."

The Amazon Queen nodded. "I know, that means a lot."

Ephiny kept her warm smile. "Come on." They began to trek again towards the forest, they passed the gates.

The warrior felt herself go warm and not because of her tea. She knew why, so she turned to her side and smiled to the source of her warmth.

Gabrielle smiled warmly back to her Soulmate. She kept her eyes locked with the warrior all the way down the path to Xena's side. Then coming up to the warrior's side, she hugged Xena with one arm. Once she released Xena, she stood beside her.

"How the sparring fields look?"

The small warrior looked up to Xena. "Real good." She then averted her sights back to the forest. A crash was heard as the three women watched two trees come crashing to the ground.

Xena first heard somebody walking up behind them, then Gabrielle and Ephiny turned around to spot Solari and twenty Amazons coming out of the village.

The second in command walked up to close to Ephiny but stopped and turned around to the Amazons following behind her. "Go help out the others with the trees." Some Amazons responded others nodded. Solari then turned back around and stepped up to stand beside Ephiny. She tugged her cloak closer against her body and smiled to Ephiny.

"Glad you could join us Solari."

The second in command grinned at the regent. "I thought I should."

Ephiny chuckled. "Of course."

Solari then looked down to her Queen. "Gabrielle, are we setting up any of the tents today?"

Gabrielle gazed at Ephiny first and cleared her throat suggestively. She then looked to Solari. "Depends."

The second in command arched her eyebrow. "On what?" She peered towards the regent then to Gabrielle again.

"Why don't you ask your regent?" Gabrielle then grinned.

Ephiny looked to Solari to see her arching an eyebrow. The regent sighed. "We might be short on tents."

Solari nodded a few times. "That would be a problem." She then grinned and turned her head to the small warrior. "I don't think we are though Gabrielle. At least the last time I checked."

Xena then grinned. "We're going to have too."

Gabrielle looked up to her Soulmate with furrowed brows. But the warrior was staring in a certain direction. So the small warrior gazed in that same direction, there she saw one of her Amazons on horseback riding in at a full gallop. "Not already. Hades." The Queen took a step forward turned to her left for a moment to bend down and place her mug on the ground beside Xena's. She then straightened back up and jogged towards the Amazon on horseback.

The Amazon riding came up to the Queen and pulled back on their reins and stopped. "Queen Gabrielle."

Gabrielle smiled. "How are you Leon?"

The Amazon smiled. "Quite well." She gathered the horse's reins into one hand. "Queen Caitriona is coming soon."

Gabrielle nodded. "West Nation?"

"Yes. I was sent ahead to make sure she and her Amazons are allowed into our Nation now."

"When they expecting to be here?"

Leon reflected for a moment then responded. "I'd say by this afternoon or so. They're traveling slow, most of her Amazons are on foot."

"Okay, ride back to Queen Caitriona and tell her she's definitely welcomed here. Tell her there's no rush but we are right now clearing an area in the forest for all the Queens' Amazons to stay. Okay?"

Leon nodded. "I'll deliver the message. Anything else?"

Gabrielle smiled. "No that'll cover it. Make sure you stay with them Leon till they arrive safely here."

The Amazon smiled. "Of course. Bye Gabrielle."

"Bye Leon."

The Amazon nodded then turned her horse around. She then spurred her horse into a gallop and took off the same direction she came.

Gabrielle watched the Amazon disappear, she turned around and made her way back to her friends.

"What was that about?"

The Queen shifted her attention to her regent. "Queen Cairiona is coming this afternoon."

The second in command then spoke up. "Then why was Leon riding ahead?"

"Queen Cairiona wanted to make sure it was okay to come in." Gabrielle crossed her arms against her chest. She then looked up to her regent. "Eph, we need to figure out how to split this camp up."

The regent nodded. "Yeah, we can't have the arguing Nations near each other."

Gabrielle nodded and took a few more steps and then turned around to face the woods. "Okay so it's the southern Nations... and the Northwest..."

"West Nation."

The Queen nodded at Ephiny's words. "So that's five Nations there we have to keep separated."

Xena crossed her arms against her chest. "Place the west Nation to the far right side and the northwest to the far left."

Gabrielle nodded. "That leaves us with the three southern nations."

"Well going from left to right, we could place the south Nation, the north Nation, then the southwest Nation, then the east Nation, next the southeastern Nation, the northeast, last the far east."

The Queen crossed her arms against her chest, she tried to picture Ephiny's plan. "What about Mairead and her south Nation? They're a hard bunch Eph?"

"They are." Gabrielle looked up to her partner and Xena kept her eyes on the woods as she spoke. "It should be from left to right; northwest, southwest, north, Yakut's far east, south, northeast, east, southeast and then west."

The small warrior repeated the combination in heard head again and looked to the woods where the Amazons worked. "Mairead in the middle?"

The warrior nodded. "Yes, keep her far from the other two southern tribes."

"I agree." Gabrielle stared at the slowly appearing cleared land. "You don't think Yakut will have a problem with Mairead?"

Xena shook her head then grinned. "Not Yakut, she's smart."

The Queen nodded, she then turned to Ephiny and Solari. "How's that sound to you two?"

Both Amazons looked to the Gabrielle, Solari nodded but Ephiny responded. "Sure." She grinned. "Whatever the Queen want's she gets."

The small warrior sighed and shook her head. "Right." She studied the woods and her Amazons cutting the trees down. "Now if I can just remember the order."

Xena grinned and looked to her Soulmate. "Don't worry, I remember."

"Good." Gabrielle smiled up to Xena. "I can't." She chuckled.

The warrior smiled then winked and gaze back to the forest.

~\*Part 13\*~

For the rest of the day Gabrielle and Xena watched over the clearing job of the woods while Ephiny and Solari went about finding the tents, counting then organizing them. By the afternoon the Amazons had chopped all the trees down in the area of where the camps for the Nations would be. In turn, Gabrielle had her Amazons stop chopping trees. All the Amazons then took a break.

After that break, Gabrielle's Nation went about pitching the tents through the camp area they cleared. They started on the far left side and worked to their left. They knew Caitriona would arrive soon and that meant that her Amazons would need the space on the far right. Midway through the process, Caitriona and her Amazons showed up.

Gabrielle looked after helping to pitch a tent. She'd heard the sounds of people moving through the woods. She looked to her left at her Soulmate.

Xena was looking in the direction she heard the sounds. She turned her head to Gabrielle and nodded.

The Queen shifted her sights to the Amazon that had been helping her put the tent up. "Go ahead and keep working on these." The Amazon nodded back. Gabrielle then looked to her partner again and nodded.

The two Soulmates left the camp area and walked into the woods again to see numerous Amazons coming their way. Some were on horseback some were on foot. In the front was an Amazon riding tall with her mask over her head and Gabrielle's two messengers riding beside her. That's when Solari and the regent came up to Gabrielle and Xena's side to welcome the west Nation and her Queen.

The west Nation kept coming towards Gabrielle and then stopped once the lead rider was in talking distance. The lead ride with her mask looked down to the four women on the ground. "Which of you is Queen Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle took a step forward towards the rider. "I am her."

The lead rider smiled down to Gabrielle. "I am Queen Caitriona of the West Nation. I received your challenge letter and found it quite the pressing business."

Gabrielle nodded with a smile. "It is, thank you for coming so quickly." She then glanced back to Xena, Solari and Ephiny. The three women all stepped up beside Gabrielle. "I'd like you to meet my consort Xena." Gabrielle then looked to Ephiny. "This is my regent, Ephiny and then my second in command, Solari." Gazing up to Caitriona, Gabrielle smiled. "If there are any sort of problems while you're here you can discuss that with me or either of these three."

Caitriona nodded her head. "Thank you. I have to say your messengers were great in making sure we arrived here. I thank you for that as well." Caitriona then looked behind herself and nodded to two Amazons on horseback. The two riders moved their horses forward some, one Amazon was old while the other rather young. "This is my head Council Member, Lisa." Queen Caitriona held her hand out to the older Amazon, she then shifted her out stretched arm towards the younger Amazon. "And this is my second in command, Liz." Caitriona then dropped her arm.

"Nice to meet you both."

The second in command, Liz, nodded while Lisa smiled to Gabrielle. "We've heard much about you Queen Gabrielle."

"That's what I keep hearing Lisa." Gabrielle then placed her right hand on her hip. "But while you are here in my Nation all of you will be treated as guests and nobody is allowed to call me Queen Gabrielle. Gabrielle will do fine." She took a deep breath. "Queen Caitriona, we have a hut for you to sleep in during your stay while your Amazons can stay here in these tents."

The West Nation Queen nodded her head. "That'll be great." She then looked to her second in command. "Liz, make sure everybody knows what's going on."

Liz nodded her head in response and turned in her saddle to all the Amazons. "Amazons dismount!"

All of Caitriona's Amazons dismounted, as did Caitriona herself. She then walked up to Gabrielle with her horse in tow.

Gabrielle looked to Ephiny and Solari. "Help Caitriona's Amazon get settled in." Ephiny nodded and Gabrielle averted her attention back to Caitriona, smiled. "Just follow me."

Queen Caitriona nodded and walked beside Gabrielle, Xena walked on Gabrielle's other side.

The small warrior looked to the West Queen. "You must have left early."

Caitriona nodded. "We left soon as we received your message."

"I'm glad, we don't have much time for these challenges."

Caitriona nodded in response. The three women passed through the gates, Caitriona looked to Xena. "You are the Warrior Princess?"

Xena shifted her eyes to the West Queen. "Some call me that."

Queen Caitriona nodded. "Now are you an Amazon?"

"She is." Gabrielle looked to the West Queen. "Has been for a couple of years now."

The Amazon Queen smiled. "It's about damn time too."

The warrior grinned a little. "So you're one of them who thought I should be."

"No, I knew you should be." Caitriona looked back ahead. "We're losing to many good Amazons these days."

Gabrielle let out a long sigh. "We are." She then looked to her right towards the stables. "Here are the stables." The three females made a beeline to the stables and went inside. Gabrielle walked up to her horse with a smile. "Hey there boy."

Torqueo bobbed his head up and down and nudged at Gabrielle's right hand as she petted him.

The small warrior smiled then kept moving past a few stalls then stopped at a freed one. "Here we go."

Caitriona smiled and opened the stall to place her horse inside. She then went about removing her tack.

Ephiny had told all to many times to Gabrielle how personal Amazons are about tacking and untacking their own horses. Very rarely they allowed another to do it. All Amazons cherished their horses and created strong bonds with their horses.

Gabrielle watched Caitriona for a moment, she then looked up to her Soulmate with a smile.

Xena smiled back and reached to her left towards the small warrior's closes hand. She grasped the smaller hand and squeezed for a moment, she then released Gabrielle's hand.

The small warrior smiled to the warrior then looked back to the stall to see the West Nation Queen come out of the stall with her saddlebags.

The three women in silence left the stables and Gabrielle led the way to the hut she had prepared for Caitriona. They all passed by several huts, the main guest huts in the back of the village.

Gabrielle turned her head to Caitriona on her left. "Was the ride safe?"

"Yes it was." Queen Caitriona smiled to the other Queen. "Your messengers seem to know where to go."

"They do, that's one of the things we train here."

"Really?"

Gabrielle nodded. "Yes, I have my Amazons just not focus on the physical but the mental too." She took a deep breath. "Quite important."

Caitriona grinned. "It is." She then looked ahead, she spotted a hut straight ahead.

They walked up to the hut. Gabrielle opened the door. "I hope this is qualified hut for

you."

The West Queen chuckled. "I'm sure it is." She walked in and went to the bed, dropping her saddlebag there. Then turning around to face Gabrielle and Xena.

The small warrior smiled. "We always have dinner here at sunset."

Caitriona nodded. "Wonderful." She then walked back up to Gabrielle. "Tomorrow if you'd wish I can have my Amazons help with the clearing in the woods."

The small warrior smiled. "We could use the extra help." A pause. "But your Amazons might be too tired after the trip."

"They should be fine, I'll just have them start late in the morning."

"That's great."

Queen Caitriona nodded again. "Now are you expecting any other Queens to arrive today?"

"It's possible. Maybe one more nation today."

"East Nation?"

Gabrielle crossed her arms against her chest. "I'm not sure."

Caitriona nodded. "Well they're the next closest to here." She then smiled. "Thank you for the hospitality."

"Of course." Gabrielle then uncrossed her arms. "And Xena and I are going to go check on things."

The West Queen nodded. "I'll be there in a while. Thank you again."

"Bye Queen Caitriona."

"Bye Gabrielle and Xena." She nodded her head to the warrior.

Xena smiled a little. "Goodbye Queen Caitriona."

The Soulmates then turned around and started walking back to the other end of the village again, they heard the hut's door close.

Gabrielle looked up to her partner. "What you think?"

"Controlling."

The Amazon Queen nodded. "That's what I thought of her too."

Xena then grinned. "It's a good thing to use against somebody when you're fighting them."

"I know." Gabrielle nodded with the same grin. "Just take the control from them and it'll drive them crazy."

"Exactly."

The small female chuckled. "Gods, we're bad."

"Nah, just have to know who you're fighting."

"Right." Gabrielle then sighed. "I feel like we've been here for to long but we haven't even started the challenges yet."

The warrior nodded a few times. "I know, I feel the same way."

The Queen grinned and took a step closer to Xena to bump her then she walked normally again. "So you wanna run off tonight?"

Xena chuckled. "I'm gamed."

"Hmmm." Gabrielle looked up to her partner with a devilish grin. "I wonder how Eph would handle all this on her own."

The older woman grinned. "She'd kill you for it."

"I know." The Queen groaned while dropping her head some. "Gods, I feel like leaving."

The warrior looked to her Soulmate. "We can." It was whispered and extremely truthful.

Gabrielle lifted her head up to her partner, searching her eyes. She then averted her gaze back ahead still walking. "We can't Xena."

"I know." Xena sighed. "Just an option."

The small warrior smiled. "Thanks for it."

The Warrior Princess nodded. "You always have that option." Say promise from so long ago but said and understood differently.

Gabrielle smiled to herself. "So do you Xena." She then looked up to her Soulmate. "We've gotten that far huh?"

Xena looked to Gabrielle then smiled. "We have. I've missed it."

Gabrielle nodded. "Same here." She stopped walking causing Xena to stop walking as well. The small woman took a step to Xena and hugged her tightly, not letting go.

Xena smiled and dropped her head on top of her Soulmate's head after enveloping the smaller warrior in a hug. They stayed like that for a few minutes then Xena whispered something. "Feels good to be home."

The Queen smiled warmly as she pulled back in the warrior's arms. "I know." A pause. "Come on."

They released each other and the pair continued on their walk to outside the gates. They walked to the makeshift camp for the Amazon Nations. Gabrielle's Amazons finished putting up the tents. Gabrielle then found Ephiny and Solari whom reported that Caitriona's Amazons were all settled into their tents in the far right section of the camp area.

For the rest of the day, Gabrielle's Amazons took the day off. They mingled with some of Caitriona's Amazons getting to know them. Gabrielle, Xena, Solari, and Ephiny on the other hand kept working on the preparations for the other arriving Amazons.

But by late dusk another Queen had arrive surprisingly. Queen Mairead of the Southeastern Nation. Gabrielle, Xena, Ephiny, and Solari greeted them and told Mairead's Amazons to settle in the section of the camp just left of the Caitriona's Amazons, they did. Gabrielle and Xena escorted Mairead into the village then to her own personal hut.

Gabrielle then quickly found out just how tough Mairead's leathers were. In a way Mairead seemed like Xena when she'd first met Xena. Tough, hard, cold, and powerful. The only difference mentally between Mairead and Xena is Mairead is stupid. Quite a large difference. That's when Gabrielle knew Mairead had won her right of caste as Queen by fighting and not by brains. Gabrielle and Xena both made a mental note of that, especially Gabrielle for when she would have her challenge against Mairead.

The night came and so did the huge dinner for three Nations. Gabrielle midway through dinner snuck back into the kitchen to thank her cooks for the hard work. She knew how hard such a thing could be. After the long dinner, everybody was beat. All the Nations went back to their appropriate areas and settled in for the night. Xena and Gabrielle well they were walking back to their hut together, discussing the dinner.

"It went real well."

Xena showed her agreement. "It did." She paused. "You thanked the cooks huh?"

Gabrielle grinned up to the warrior. "Yes, they did a lot."

"They did." Xena's gaze went back ahead.

"So far the Nations seem to mix well."

"They are, let's hope it stays that way."

Gabrielle sighed. "You think the south nations will have problems?" She looked up to her Soulmate.

"Maybe at first, have to talk to them."

The smaller woman grinned. "I'll let you do that."

The Warrior Princess arched an eyebrow as she looked down to her partner. "Oh?"

Gabrielle nodded. "Oh yeah, definitely. I know you'll have them shaking in their leathers and feathers. Then they wouldn't even dare to think about fighting with each other."

The warrior laughed. "Be careful with that."

"Ohh, is that a warning?" Gabrielle stepped closer to her Soulmate.

"Mmm, I might scare off the nations."

The Queen chuckled. "Sure sure." She grinned up to the taller woman. "You wish."

Xena arched an eyebrow. "Is that a challenge?"

The smaller woman still had her grin. "Yes."

The warrior grinned and peered back ahead as she saw them coming to their hut. "Good." She opened the door and went inside with her Soulmate following behind.

Once they were inside, Xena turned around to look to her partner. "I have an idea."

Gabrielle arched an eyebrow. "And it is?"

The older woman crossed her arms against her chest. "And I'll show you." She grinned. She shifted to the door again. "Come on."

The Queen grinned and shook her head, she went outside into the cool night beside Xena.

The warrior turned around to face the hut seeing how the roof slanted down some on an angle. She took steps back as she studied things. Her eyes shifted to Gabrielle. "Come here." She smiled warmly.

Gabrielle raised an eyebrow and stepped up to face her Soulmate. "This is interesting."

"You'll love it." Xena then looked away from the roof back to her partner. She then reached forward as she kneeled some. Her hands went around Gabrielle's back and under her knees as she lifted the younger woman.

"Xena?"

"Yesss?"

"What are you planning?"

"You'll see." Xena took another step back as she sensed Gabrielle's left arm wrapping back behind her neck. The warrior then ran forward and leaped. The pair went soaring through the air and flipped to land nicely on the roof. Xena then released her Soulmate.

Gabrielle arched her eyebrows at her Soulmate. "You're not?"

The warrior chuckled. "I am."

"Oh you're good Xena." The small woman grinned.

"I know." The warrior then laughed and leaped backwards to fly off the roof and land back down on the ground facing the door to the hut.

Gabrielle looked down to see the warrior go inside of the hut for a minute or two. She saw Xena come back out with a bedroll and fur, Gabrielle chuckled to herself. She then took a step back as she witnessed the Warrior Princess jumping back up onto the roof right in front of her.

Xena then went to the center of the roof and laid the bedroll down with the fur next to the bedroll and stood back up. "Figured you've missed the stars."

"I have." Gabrielle leaned down to remove her sais and placed them near the bedroll.

Xena followed her example and removed her sword and chakram, placing them beside the sais. She then lay down on her back on the bedroll.

Gabrielle grinned and then carefully lowered herself to lay on top of her Soulmate. She could then feel strong arms wrap around her stomach. Her head slowly lowered down onto Xena's chest as her eyes became fixed on the stars above.

The warrior sighed. "No clouds."

The Queen chuckled. "To say the least, it's crystal clear out tonight." She smiled because she couldn't remember the last time she'd slept under the stars in her Soulmate's arms. Then again, she couldn't recall the last time she slept on a roof. That made her start to giggle.

"What's so funny?"

The small warrior took a deep breath. "The fact we're up here sleeping on the roof."

Xena chuckled now. "Well I thought this would be the best spot. Out of view."

"True, I don't think anybody will look for us up here."

The older woman smiled. "Mmm. Good." She then began to idly run her fingertips up and down Gabrielle's bare stomach.

The smaller warrior closed her eyes at the feeling. She then brought her hands up to lace her fingers with Xena's. "When was the last time we did this?"

"Sleep on a roof? Never."

Gabrielle chuckled. "No you know what I mean."

The warrior sighed contently as she thought. "After... after the temple."

The Queen slowly opened her eyes as she remembered that night after Dahak's temple. Yeah that was the last time but it wasn't the last peaceful time. That time had been the night Gabrielle cried candlemarks on end in Xena's arms. "No... it was before then."

The other woman squeezed her hands with Gabrielle's. "Too long either way."

"It was." She sighed and stared up to the stars. She then noticed one specific set of stars. She smiled. "There's my favorite constellation."

Xena looked up to the stars and smiled as she recognized which one Gabrielle spoke of. The warrior constellation. "Never seems to leave."

"Not at all." Gabrielle picked up on all that double meaning that Xena had said. "It never will."

"It won't love."

The smaller Soulmate smiled to herself. "I know." She'd whispered it.

Xena still smiled and she slowly let her hands slip from Gabrielle's hands, to slide down the small woman's stomach to Gabrielle's lower center stomach. Her fingers then slid under Gabrielle's leather belt to touch the skin at her very lower hips.

Gabrielle closed her eyes at the feel and let a small moan escape. She then turned over and dropped her head back down under Xena's chin, her eyes still closed. Gabrielle tried to control her body's reactions.

Xena grinned at her Soulmate and slowly removed her hands from between their bodies. Now she grasped Gabrielle's sides.

The smaller woman looked down into Xena's eyes. "Dangerous."

The warrior grinned. "I know."

Gabrielle lowered her head to kiss her Soulmate deeply. First one kiss, then it was two. By the end of the second one Gabrielle pulled back.

Xena smiled and reached up with her right hand to push the younger woman's head back down on her chest. She could feel Gabrielle breathing heavy. Xena herself was breathing heavy but not quite as much as Gabrielle.

Slowly the smaller warrior opened her eyes to stare across the village in the darkness. She brought in a deep breath then slowly released it. "You think I'll be able to defeat these other Queens?"

The older woman didn't answer at first, she'd just lifted her right hand up to Gabrielle's back. Letting her finger tips glide up and down the small woman's smooth back. "Truthfully, yes."

Gabrielle sighed. "I don't feel like I could."

"You haven't even met them all yet Gabrielle."

"I know." The small woman then shifted her shoulders some and settled back down. "What about Mairead? She really seems tough."

"Like you said Gabrielle, she's stupid."

Gabrielle chuckled. "I didn't say that. I said she's got all the brawns and no brains."

The warrior grinned. "Well you were just putting it nicely. I don't."

"So I noticed." The Queen then lifted her head to gaze down into her Soulmate's eyes. "Somebody has to be blunt."

Xena chuckled. "Uh huh. And bluntly you can beat all the other Queens... if you want to."

The small warrior sighed and dropped her head back down on Xena's chest. "That's just it. I don't know if I want to."

"Why?"

Gabrielle shrugged her shoulders. "Just a lot of work Xena. We both know it."

The warrior had to agree to that one. "It would be. But you could handle it."

"I'm just worried it would take away from us Xena."

Xena sighed. She brought her right hand up to gently run through the other woman's short hair. "Gabrielle?"

The Queen raised her head and looked to Xena.

Xena smiled warmly. "We'd be doing it together." Her smile dropped as she went serious. "I'm your consort and I need to start acting like it."

"Xena-

"Gabrielle." The warrior stopped the protest. "We should be sharing the caste together and I have not done anything." A pause. "I'm sorry for that."

Gabrielle reflected about that then let a smile slip into place. "Thank you Xena." Her smile now dropped. "But I know I've never asked you for your help." She then grinned. "So will you help me?"

The warrior smiled. "Love to." She then brought Gabrielle's head down to kiss her. Once they pulled back, Xena still had her smile. "Let's get some sleep."

The smaller woman nodded in agreement. "Long day." She lowered her head back down on the other woman's chest. "Sleep well Xen."

"You to love." Xena reached to her left to the fur. She lifted it then placed the fur over her and Gabrielle's bodies. Her arms then snaked under the fur to wrap around Gabrielle tightly.

Randomly Gabrielle started to chuckle.

Xena opened her eyes some. "What?"

The Queen took a deep breath. "The roof part."

The warrior grinned. "Something different."

"To say the least." The younger woman started to chuckle again.

Xena sighed. "Goodnight Gabrielle." She closed her eyes.

"Night Xena." Gabrielle took a deep breath and let her body relax.

Sleep, well that took them from this world within minutes. The stars above and the darkness around protected them from the troubles of the world as they slept. What kept them safe beyond that were each other as they slept in each other's arms and dreams.

~\*Part 15\*~

The sun slowly began to creep up and over the horizon. It's light already filtering through the trees of this area. But this sunrise had two particular onlookers this

apparent morning. Onlookers on a rather odd spot.

Soulmates that were sitting on the roof of a hut. Xena sitting with her legs propped up. Gabrielle resting into the warrior's body between Xena's legs with the warrior's arms wrapped around her. Gabrielle had her own arms and hands resting on top of her Soulmate's.

They then knew by that beautiful sunrise that the weather would be perfect. There were clouds but only the feather kind that swept across the crystal blue sky. It made the day worth going through.

Beside them to their right rested the fur rolled up with the rolled up bedroll and their weapons. They'd woken up right when the sun peaked into this world. So the pair decided to stay on the roof of their hut to watch the sunrise. It was something rather beautiful on this brisk morning. The Soulmates could feel the heat of the sun slowly creep up their bodies as it came over the trees.

That's when they heard it, footsteps. They couldn't see whom they belonged to since the person was under the roof's hang.

Gabrielle turned her head sidelong to Xena. "Who you think it is?"

"Eph. Who else?"

The young woman grinned. "Probably right."

Somebody knocked at the door to their hut. Then the regent's voice filled the air. "Gabrielle? Xena?" Then there was a sigh and the Amazon opening the door.

Xena bent her head forward to Gabrielle's neck. "I'll take care of her." Her lips came down to place a gentle kiss to Gabrielle's neck. The warrior then stood up, releasing her Soulmate. She took her weapons hooking them to their appropriate spots. Xena then walked close to the roof's edge and bent her knees to jump and quietly land on the ground. Looking in through the open door to their hut, she saw Ephiny. She grinned. "Morning Ephiny."

The regent spun around on her heels with her hands up, she was breathing hard. "Hades, Xena. Gods I don't need a heart attack." She took a deep breath and padded out of the hut to stand in front of Xena. "Where's Gabrielle?"

"Right here Eph." Gabrielle was on the roof's edge. Her sais in her boots as she was bending down staring down at her Soulmate and regent.

The Amazon looked around. "Gabrielle?" She furrowed her brows at Xena.

Xena grinned and looked up to the roof.

Ephiny followed her gaze to see her small friend on the roof. "What it Tartarus are you doing up there?"

Gabrielle grinned. "Nothing." She then turned to her right to grab the bedroll and fur.

The warrior saw this and took a step back. She caught the flying bedroll and fur that had been tossed to her.

The regent arched an eyebrow. "You two didn't." A pause. "Did you?"

Xena grinned and sidestepped Ephiny to throw the bedroll and fur on their bed in the hut. She then closed the door and turned around to Ephiny. "We did."

The Amazon groaned. "Oh gods."

The Warrior Princess chuckled and took a few steps back to see her Soulmate up on the roof. "Ready?"

"No." Gabrielle grinned. "There's only." She jumped off the roof in the direction of Xena. "Go." Gabrielle landed neatly in the warrior's arms.

Xena grinned down at her Soulmate in her arms. "Good jump."

"I've had plenty of practice." Gabrielle grinned. "Good catch."

"I've had plenty of practice." Xena then leaned down to capture her Soulmate's lips in a gentle kiss.

The Soulmates then heard a cough from behind.

The Queen chuckled and ended the kiss, she quickly turned around to Ephiny. "What's up Eph?" She grinned.

The regent coughed again with a knowing grin. She then went serious. "Right." She paused. "Another Queen should be here relatively soon."

Gabrielle furrowed her eyebrows. "Which Queen?"

"Gloria of the East Nation."

The small woman nodded. "When is she going to be here?"

"Around half of a candlemark."

"Okay great. Have we started working on the sparring fields?"

"Yes, Solari is on it right now." Ephiny then smiled. "Caitriona and Mairead's Amazons are helping. It shouldn't take long to cut the trees down then clear the area."

Gabrielle smiled. "Perfect." She then reflected for a moment then went on. "Xena and I are going to go get something to eat. Then we'll head down to the camp."

The regent nodded. "Sounds good. I'll stay down there to keep a look out for Gloria and her Amazons."

"Great. Thanks Eph, see you down there."

The Amazon smiled and then walked off heading towards the gates of the village.

Gabrielle turned around to her Soulmate. "Hungry?"

Xena grinned. "Definitely."

The smaller woman raised an eyebrow while a grin fell into place. "Same here." She

then brought her right hand up to Xena's close arm. "Come on." She smiled.

The warrior smiled back and the pair started walking to the dining hut. Once they were there, only a few Amazons were inside eating breakfast. The Soulmates had quickly gathered their food together and sat down to eat.

Gabrielle was working on a bowl of fruit when she lifted her head to Xena. "How many Queens you think will come today."

Xena looked up. "Three... maybe four."

The small woman nodded and her gaze went back to the bowl of fruit. She still has yet to feel hungry. "The rest will probably come in tomorrow."

"Yakut my guess will be here in three days, take or give."

Gabrielle nodded. "Good, we need to get these challenges done with quickly."

"We will before winter."

The Queen raised her head again with a smile. Xena looked up and smiled back.

~\*~\*~\*~

After the Soulmates ate, they headed right to the camp. As soon as they arrived Ephiny came up to their side. Gloria and her Amazons were coming any minute. So Gabrielle and Xena greeted the Queen and her Amazons. Yet again Xena and Gabrielle escorted the Amazon Queen to her hut.

And well, Gloria they both found out to be nice, sort of the opposite of Mairead. She seemed to be a respectful Queen and person in general. Her Amazons were all close and mingled with the other Nations very slowly. Gloria herself seemed to represent her East Nation with pride and honor. Gabrielle and Xena both liked the East Nation Queen.

By early afternoon another Queen had arrived. The Northwest Nation with their Queen Parvulus. Queen Parvulus seemed rather boring to Gabrielle as well as deathly quiet. Xena though didn't like the Queen what so ever. For the Queen's hawk like eyes bothered the warrior. In a way Queen Parvulus reminded Xena of Callisto. Tall, almost white hair with small body frame and scrawny. Parvulus also had a consort whose name was Eilee and seemed rather sweet also young at that. That also bothered Xena, tensed her body up but yet the warrior remained respectful of it.

Around the time Parvulus had arrived the two new sparring fields were created. The trees gone and the ground cleared for the challenges. Gabrielle decided that all the basic challenges would take place on those sparring fields. Once the more serious challenges began they would be held inside of the village.

All day Xena and her Soulmate went about the Nations, meeting the different Nation's second in commands and head council members. Then Gabrielle had been pulled away from all the chitchat by late afternoon as yet another Queen entered in with her Amazons.

This Queen is of the North Nation, Queen Laetus. Queen Laetus seemed to be a rather happy Queen, constantly smiling and talkative. She was also very young, younger than

Gabrielle. Gabrielle figured that more than likely Queen Laetus is a new Queen to the North Nation. And Xena had asked about it.

"So did you recently take the thrown?"

Laetus turned her head to the warrior. "I did. Over a year ago, still fairly new to this Queen-ship." She smiled warmly.

Gabrielle knew how that felt. "How'd you take the caste?"

The North Nation Queen sighed. "The Queen before me passed away from a disease that had been going through the village. The huge disease actually killed a number of my Amazons but we're coming back thankfully."

"That's good to hear. We've always been lucky here with diseases here, never seem to get any." Gabrielle looked back ahead as she saw the hut she picked out for Queen Laetus to stay in.

"You're lucky. We never had one till those two years ago. Did a number unfortunately." Laetus sighed.

That conversation had been rerouted later on. While the rest of the day rolled on. Now the Nations totaled to five excluding Gabrielle's Nation. There was a massive amount of Amazons in this one small area. Dinner had been moved outside where there was more space, there certainly wasn't enough inside of the dining hut.

After dinner, the Soulmates left early. Feeling the huge need to be alone after the socializing day. There are just some points when a person can handle some many people at a time. This was certainly true for the Soulmates, they have their limits.

The warrior went into the hut first and walked over to the table, she slowly took her heavy cloak off.

Gabrielle though when she'd closed the door. She leaned against it, sighed, and closed her eyes.

Xena dropped her cloak on the chair by the table and turned around to see her partner leaning against the door to the hut. The warrior felt the same way. She gradually walked up to Gabrielle. Her large hands going inside of the other woman's cloak and to Gabrielle's sides.

"I know I like to talk." The younger woman opened her eyes. "But gods."

Xena smiled some. "I know." She then leaned in to kiss her Soulmate. After the kiss she slowly brought her left cheek to rub against Gabrielle's cheek. "But it's just us now."

The Queen smiled. "Just the way I like it." She lifted herself off the door and sensed her larger Soulmate straightening back up. Gabrielle looked up to Xena.

The older woman gazed down with a warm smile. Her eyes twinkled deeply as her they seemed to go a shade darker.

Gabrielle grinned. "Come here." Her right hand came up to the back of Xena's neck,

pulling the warrior's head down. Their lips met in a passionate kiss.

Xena slowly pulled back from the kiss. Her hands came up from Gabrielle's sides and carefully removed the leather and white wool cloak from her body. She then threw it to the chair where her own dark cloak was.

The smaller woman grinned and came back up for a deep kiss. As she did her hands came up to Xena's shoulders to work the clasps. "Great armor but..." Gabrielle chuckled in the middle of the kiss.

The warrior grinned and brought her hands up to help with the armor clasps.

Soon that armor was off and so were all their clothes. They were in the bed. But sleep was not top priority of course that only came later on.

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A loud bang was heard at the door. Gabrielle sat up in the bed quickly to hear another knock, she groaned. Looking out the window she found it to be still dark out. "You've gotta be kidding me." She rolled out of the bed. Then she began to frantically search for her clothes. Another bang at the door. "I'm coming!" A mumble under her breath. "This is ridiculous." Gabrielle found her top, put it on followed by her skirt. She raced to the door and opened it to find her regent at the door with a cloak on. "What's going on?"

Ephiny smiled guiltily. "Queen Nyx is coming."

Gabrielle narrowed her eyes. "Ephiny?" It was low.

The regent smiled. "Meet you down there Gabrielle." She quickly turned around and ran off to the camp outside the village.

The Queen quietly closed the door with a long sigh. "Great." Looking to the bed she found her Soulmate sitting up in the bed.

"There goes your good mood huh?"

Gabrielle nodded. Her tongue ran across her back molars. "Oh yeah." She shifted over to her boots and began to put them on.

Xena rolled out of the bed and found her leathers, putting them on proceeded by her armor and boots. As she put her last item on, her chakram, she turned to Gabrielle.

The small woman rose back up after tying her boots. "I'm gonna kill this Queen." In her right hand was one of her sais.

The warrior grinned and shifted to her partner. "We'll live." She moved her hand to grasp Gabrielle's right hand with the sai.

"And she won't."

The older woman chuckled. "Yes she will." Xena leaned in to kiss her smaller warrior. She then could feel Gabrielle releasing the sai and so Xena took it. After the kiss, she bent down to one knee to insert the sai back into Gabrielle's right boot.

"Xen?"

"Mmm?" Xena stood back up and smiled to her Soulmate.

"You do all the talking. I'll be too busy controlling my temper."

The Warrior Princess grinned. "I can handle that." She then smiled warmly. "Come on. Let's get this over with."

Gabrielle sighed and turned to the door, her right hand grasping the handle. She turned her head to see her partner getting their cloaks. "What time you think it is anyway?"

Xena shrugged her shoulders as she came up to the Queen's side. "Five or four candlemarks before dawn."

The younger woman groaned and opened the door, she went outside. "Why this early? That's all I wanna know." She turned around and watched Xena put her cloak on and close the door.

The warrior then held out Gabrielle's cloak and the small warrior stepped up to put the warm cloak on. The pair then walked through the sleeping village to go outside the gates to meet Queen Nyx.

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The door to the hut slammed closed. Gabrielle stalked across the room and plopped down on the end of the bed. She took a huge breath to calm her temper. "That... that..." She closed her eyes to calm down.

Xena took off her cloak and dropped it on the bed beside her Soulmate. She then shifted to stand in front of Gabrielle. "I know."

"She's on my hit list Xena." Gabrielle opened her eyes again. "Not only does she come here in the middle of the night but she was so damn snarky and rude to you." She then lifted her right hand showing her index finger close to her thumb, leaving a small space. "I was that close to reaching down to my sais." She growled and dropped her back into the bed, her hands covering her face.

"Gabrielle she was probably tired from the trip." Xena crossed her arms against her chest.

The small woman shot up from lying on the bed. "I don't care. She had no right to act like that." She stood up from the bed. "Did she see her?" Gabrielle walked near the door and whirled around. "Well this looks like an okay hut." Her voice was high pitched in a fake tone. "It's a bit small compared to the one's in my Nation. We build castle size huts with hot tubs, two rooms, and dinning room..." Her voice was filling with frustration. "... And a grand ballroom for my fifty thousands guests that come." Gabrielle groaned and rolled her eyes from her impersonation of Queen Nyx.

The warrior stood there grinning at her Soulmate, despite herself.

"Oh do you know what my favorite part was Xena?" The Queen strolled up to Xena.

Xena raised an eyebrow in question.

Gabrielle shook her head. "My favorite part was when she came up to you when she first arrive." She cleared her throat and did the high pitch voice again. "Oh dear, you're

an Amazon? I didn't know the Warrior Princess turned into an Amazon now. I would think your Queen would have appropriately dressed you in Amazon attire. You have no feathers or Amazon sword, how awful. And you're surprisingly tall and dark for an Amazon. Blah blah" Gabrielle spun around and stalked back over to the door. "I'm gonna kill her Xena." She turned around to the warrior with her dark green eyes.

Xena sighed and walked to her Soulmate with her arms still crossed. "It doesn't matter."

"I know." Gabrielle sighed. "She just... urked me. Really rubbed me the wrong way." Her shoulders dropped. "And I love you tall and dark."

The older woman grinned. "And I love you small and not busting with muscles."

The small warrior sighed and rolled her eyes. "Gods I heard that comment too."

"I thought you did." Xena took a step back. She brought her hands up to pulled her hair together and she brought her dark hair up over her head. She dropped her right hand down as her left hand held her hair up in bun on top of her head. "I've heard so much about your Queen." Xena had her voice high pitched now, something rather different to be heard. "I would have thought Queen Gabrielle would be a bit taller with all these muscles." She grasped a leather string from her skirt part of her leathers. Xena started twirling it with her right hand. "I've just heard so much about Queen Gabrielle. Heard she is suppose to be a great Queen, young, nice person, and strong." Now the warrior started to walk around in the hut, strutting all the while twirling part of her skirt and holding her hair up with her high pitched voice. "I just didn't imagine Gabrielle would be so small and not look so tough. She seems so quiet and... and well narrow minded." Xena sighed and dropped her act quickly with a grin.

Gabrielle though, she was bending forward laughing. Her arms over her stomach.

Xena started to laugh a little herself. She took in a deep breath and walked over to Gabrielle.

The Queen closed her eyes and straightened back up as she calmed down. "You win Xena, that was the best impersonation."

"A little blown out of proportion though." She grinned.

Gabrielle sighed. "Maybe... maybe not." She then smiled. "Thanks for the laugh."

"Thought you might want one." Xena then smiled warmly. "Lets get some sleep huh?"

"Yeah I've had enough fun." She walked over to the bed and lifted one leg at a time untying her boots.

Xena did the same but over to a chair untying her boots. Then next came her armor, as she was setting it down, Gabrielle came up beside her and placed her sais on the table. Now Xena only stood in her leathers and she looked to her small Soulmate.

Gabrielle glanced up and smiled, she felt tired again. She leaned against the warrior. "It's official, we get to sleep in."

Xena grinned as she brought her left arm to drape around Gabrielle's shoulders.

"Queen's orders?"

"Oh yeah." The small woman sighed.

"Come on." Xena released her partner and walked over to the bed, she climbed in.

Gabrielle sighed and came up to the foot of the bed, she crawled in and came about halfway to the middle of the bed. She stopped there and fell into the bed with a sigh.

The Warrior Princess chuckled and reached down and pulled Gabrielle up and against her body. She had her arms tightly wrapped around the small warrior.

The younger woman opened her eyes. "Thanks."

Xena grinned. "No problem. Go to sleep."

"No problem there." She closed her eyes again and let her body relax.

The warrior also closed her eyes and pair were asleep again.

~\*Part 16\*~

Well by that morning, late morning at that. The Soulmates had risen from bed and quickly found out two other Queens were coming by midday.

Queen Aureus of the South Nation and Queen Zahra of the Southwest Nation. Thankfully Gabrielle was in a good mood during their arrivals. Both Queens seemed rather nice with the same old tough as leather attitudes. Then again they are southern tribes, she knew they would be tough. None the less, that only left one other Nation to arrive, Yakut and her Amazons. And Xena mentioned that they wouldn't arrive for another day to three days.

Gabrielle had sighed at that answer and the warrior knew why. The small warrior wanted to get out of the Amazon village as much as Xena wanted to. Not because they didn't want to be there but more because they wanted to be alone together.

Unfortunately all the other eight Amazon Nations found out that it was going to take Yakut awhile to arrive and that sent all the Queens into a tizzy. In the end that led to a meeting between Gabrielle, Xena, and the eight Queens that day.

"We'll wait till Yakut arrives."

"Hades, I think we should start without her and her nation." Mairead had said that with a tough tone.

"I agree. Besides that Yakut and her Nation are hardly apart of the Amazons. Look at the Far East Nation, they're a totally different Nation compared to the rest of us. Why should we wait?" That was the Queen Nyx's opinion.

Queen Zahra brought her right hand up to the table. "Yes, there is no reason to wait. We-" She was quickly cut off.

Xena had placed her hands on the table, she'd been standing beside Gabrielle's seat. The warrior leaned forward with her eyes pinned on Queen Zahra. "We will wait." It had came out low and hard.

Gabrielle decided to say nothing. She knew this was her Soulmate's turn to force the Queens to listen. And for four years Gabrielle has learned if she can't do it then her partner can. So she let Xena take this one. Besides, this is her consort.

"And why Xena?" Queen Aureus of the South Nation's question.

"Because Queen Gabrielle says so." The Warrior Princess's eyes went to slits with her eyes cold. "And because I said so. If either eight of you Queens have a problem with it then you can take it up with me." She rose back up. "Yakut and her Nation are Amazons. We will wait for their arrival to begin the challenges. We will treat her and her Nation with the same respect as we treat all Amazons. Their Nation was created for the same reason all the other Nations were created for. Don't forget that."

Some of the Queens nodded. The three Southern Queens all seem to get a bit angry with that but didn't respond.

"Look everybody, we can wait out two days for Yakut to arrive. That'll give all of you ample time to practice for the challenges and catch up on sleep from the traveling. If I were you all I'd be grateful for that because Yakut won't have that pleasure." Gabrielle then crossed her arms against her chest.

Now all the Queens seemed to show their agreement.

The small warrior then stood up beside Xena. "Good. Now I think we all have things to attend to. This meeting is excused and another will be held when Yakut and her Nation arrives."

All the Queens stood up and left the hut.

Gabrielle slowly released her breath and then lifted her head up to Xena.

The warrior flashed her a smile.

The small Queen chuckled. "That was interesting."

Xena arched an eyebrow. "Which part?"

"The part on how you handled this." Gabrielle now smirked.

"You liked it?"

"Mmm very much Xen. Glad you're on my side." The small warrior then chuckled.

The older woman smiled. "Me too." She leaned down slowly to lightly place a kiss to her partner's soft lips. "Four candlemarks till dusk."

Gabrielle gazed up to her Soulmate thinking about that statement about time.

"Walk?" She grinned.

The Warrior Princess smiled. "I was just thinking that."

"Uh huh. Come on." Gabrielle strolled out of the hut with Xena beside her.

The pair made their way through the village rather quickly in hopes they wouldn't get caught. They came to the gates thinking they'd make it out safely.

"AQ!"

The small warrior froze where she stepped and closed her eyes. "Hades."

Xena chuckled and went serious as she saw Ephiny coming to them. "It's your regent."

"I know." Gabrielle turned to the regent. "What's up Eph?"

The regent came up to Gabrielle. "Wanted to see where you were sneaking off to in such a rush."

The Queen grinned. "Somewhere."

"Mind telling me where incase I need to find you." Ephiny then placed her hands on her hips.

"Um." Gabrielle looked up to her Soulmate. "Eph... ask Xena. She's the one who knows where." She turned her head back to the regent with a devilishly grin.

The Amazon dropped her expression and looked up to Xena.

The warrior crossed her arms against her chest and narrowed her eyes coldly to the Amazon.

"Right." Ephiny's gaze went back to her Queen. "Have a nice walk. Bye." Turned on her heals and jogged off.

The Amazon Queen laughed a few times. "Oh I've gotta do that more often."

Xena grinned. "Come on." She started to walk again.

Gabrielle nodded and walked beside her partner. They went outside of the village and detoured around the Amazon Nations camp and into the woods.

"Thanks." The small woman smiled to her warrior.

"Anytime." Xena smiled back and then gazed ahead of herself.

The young woman let out a long breath. She'd missed walking beside her Soulmate like this on the road. Well they weren't on a road headed to some random place in Greece, but this was close enough. "Xena can we do some training for these challenges?"

The older woman thought for a moment then retorted. "What sort of training?"

"I don't know, just a lot of practice. And teach me the most affective way to use my sais."

Xena nodded a few times. "I don't know sais very well Gabrielle. But I'm sure I can come up with a few surprise moves you can use." She grinned.

Gabrielle peered up to see that grin, she mirrored it herself. "Great." Her eyes went back to the trail she followed in the woods. "I need a few."

"Mmm, I wouldn't say that. You've got the hang of those sais within a few days."

The small warrior crossed her arms against her chest. "I know." A pause. "That part scares me some too."

The warrior quickly looked to her partner.

Gabrielle sadly smiled up to Xena. "Sorry. I just never imagined I'd be a warrior like this." She turned her eyes away.

"Does that bother you?"

The small woman thought about that question. Questioned herself with that question. Does it bother her? "No. It's my way Xena... to be your protector." She smiled. That is it, she is Xena's protector. Xena may say she never needs one but in one sense, even Xena does. Xena does have emotions that need protecting along with her body.

"Thank you." Xena smiled warmly to her Soulmate. "Never had one."

Gabrielle studied her Soulmate's eyes then she smiled warmly back. "Anytime." She turned her gaze away. "Everybody needs a protector."

The older woman still had her smile and she reached out with her right hand to grasp her partner's closes hand. "I'm yours."

The Queen squeezed her warrior's hand for a moment. "I know. You have been since our souls were created."

That's when that killing urge hit Xena. That urge she always has but it erupted now. That urge to become one with Gabrielle. And that urge seemed to enter into the smaller warrior, because Gabrielle stopped walking and quickly pulled her Soulmate in for a tight hug.

"Don't think about it Xena."

The warrior closed her eyes and lowered her head. She knew what her partner meant, so she tried hard to slow the urge. Xena knew Gabrielle was feeling the same urge now and it was tearing her up as well. The urge, the need, the pulling of something so grand and strong.

Gabrielle took a deep breath as she felt the need slowly lower back down inside of herself. "Wanna do that again?"

The warrior chuckled. "Is it getting that strong?" Xena lifted her head.

The small warrior also raised her head up to gaze up into the other woman's eyes. "Yes." She smiled.

"Perfect." Xena lowered her head to capture her partner's lips in a strong kiss. Then as she pulled back her eyes slowly opened again. "We better keep moving."

Gabrielle nodded quickly. "Definitely." She shifted out of her Soulmate's embrace.

The warrior grinned and began on her trek again with Gabrielle. "So you like how I handled the Queens?"

The small woman started to snicker. "Oh yeah. For now on you can run the meetings."

"Well I don't think I have them quite shaking in their leather and feathers... yet."

The Queen raised an eyebrow at the warrior. "Oh I have no doubt that you will."

Xena chuckled. "Maybe."

Gabrielle turned her eyes back to the path in the woods. She had a grin on her lips. Her grin spread across her lips more as an idea entered her mind. Her pace picked up and now Gabrielle walked in front of her Soulmate. A dying desire to tease her warrior took control of the small woman.

Xena arched an eyebrow at her friend's back. "Gabrielle?"

With no warning or anything, Gabrielle stopped fast in her tracks. She'd dug the heels of her boots deep in the ground to stable herself for when Xena rammed into her.

Xena did exactly that and peered down at Gabrielle. "Gabrielle?" It was low.

"Oh gods did you see that Xena?" The small warrior tried to keep the teasing tone out of her voice.

"No... what did I miss?"

"Nothing... I just thought I saw something." The small warrior started to walk again.

The warrior still had her eyebrow raised. Then it lowered and a very evil grin took over her lips. She watched her Soulmate keep pacing on then she bent her knees.

Gabrielle took another step then stopped, she hadn't heard Xena walking. Turning around she couldn't find Xena. "Xena?" She searched around in the space around, her arms going against her chest. Her eyes narrowed as a smirk came to her. Gabrielle slowly ambled over to the spot she last knew her Soulmate stood. She found footprints there and they stopped. Her head dropped back as she looked straight up to the trees. "Oh she's good."

The small woman then felt her body tingle. She closed her eyes and honed in on the feeling, on the direction. Gabrielle pinned pointed it and quickly dropped down to grab a sai. She bounced back up with a whirl to face the other direction. Her sai left her hand and went speeding through the air.

Xena instantly reached up to grab her Soulmate's sai that was close to embedding into the tree beside her head. She grinned down at Gabrielle. "Not bad. Little slow."

Gabrielle placed her hands on her hips and smirked. "Come down here and I'll show you slow."

The warrior crossed her arms against her chest and leaned against the trunk on the tree branch. "Come up here and show me."

The small warrior licked her lips. She'd watched Xena do this jumping and flipping stuff countless times. Why couldn't she? Hades why not try? Gabrielle took a step back then broke off running. She leapt as she neared the tree and hit one branch under Xena. She bounced off it to back flip and land on the one Xena stood on. Her balance was shaky.

The warrior quickly stepped forward and grabbed her Soulmate. "Work on the balancing part."

"Right." Gabrielle chuckled. "Sort of important huh?"

"A little." Xena held her partner by her leather belt on her maroon skirt. Without any warning she suddenly jerked Gabrielle's body against her's.

"Hi." Gabrielle sheepishly smiled.

"Hi." The warrior grinned and leaned into take her Queen's lips in a strong kiss.

The younger woman grinned as she pulled back from the kiss. She then pushed the other female back a step to be against the tree's trunk. She went in for another kiss. "This is a pleasant walk."

Xena started to laugh in the middle of the kiss. "Great walk." She moaned in the middle of the new third kiss. "Not slow."

"Good." Gabrielle ended the third kiss with a grin. "Let's see..." She took a step back then jumped up to do a back flip and landed neatly on the ground below. She'd bent down to one knee and looked up to her Soulmate.

The warrior chuckled. "Not bad. But..." Xena jumped up backwards to let her feet hit the trunk of the tree. She pushed off the tree and went soaring through the air downwards and landed beside her Soulmate standing tall.

The Queen grinned as she stood up. "Glad you made it down." She was then handed her sai back. A chuckled and the small warrior inserted her sai back in its home. "Now where were we headed?"

"Come on." The warrior grinned and continued along her trek. "So where'd you learned that?"

Gabrielle peered up to her partner. "The flip?"

"Yessss."

"You, where else?"

"But I didn't teach you."

The Queen nodded. "No, I taught myself a second ago and watched." She grinned. "For over four years I've seen you do flips. You'd think I'd know."

Xena chuckled. "There's a difference between watching and learning."

"True, I'm a quick learner."

The warrior looked to the other woman. "Don't start that."

"What? The, 'Slow learner Xena.'"

"Yes."

Gabrielle chuckled. "No, I'm the slow learner, four years." She sighed.

The warrior stepped closer to her Soulmate. "No, you just don't like heights."

"True, heights aren't as bad as they were." She then laughed. "Must be 'cause I'm short."

"Maybe that's it." Xena smiled then peered ahead to see the gates to the village. They had pretty much done a loop back around.

The Queen sighed. "AQ mode."

Xena sighed. "AC mode."

Gabrielle laughed and lightly glared up to her partner. "Amazon Consort mode? Is it that bad?"

The warrior smirked. "With your Amazons, yes."

"Oh oh, wait if I remember right you're one of my Amazons."

"True." A smile now from Xena.

The younger woman smiled back and looked forward. She sighed and felt herself go serious. "Want to turn around and start running to Amphipolis?"

"Yes."

Gabrielle chuckled. "Don't tempt me." She grinned. "I'd probably get my caste taken away then." A chuckle escaped her lips.

Xena smiled. "Come on."

The pair walked into the village. The rest of the day strolled by and a long day at that.

~\*~\*~\*~

The following two days later kept moving as well. They weren't long nor short, moderate. Most the time Xena and Gabrielle work on Gabrielle's fighting techniques for the challenges. And as the candlemarks faded by coming closer and closer to the day the challenges would begin Xena became worried. She didn't know why she was worried but she was and there is some reason. One thing she noticed was her Soulmate was slightly slow in her reaction time. Normally Gabrielle reacted in a flash but something was not quite right with Gabrielle's fighting. And she had no idea why either.

So this led her to ask now as she walked beside her partner to their hut after dinner. "Why are you fighting slow?" It was blunt and pulled out from a blind corner.

The small warrior blinked and furrowed her eyebrows as she looked up to Xena. "What you mean?"

The warrior sighed. "Gabrielle, I've noticed your reaction time isn't quite as fast as it use to be."

The Queen nodded she turned her head to their hut as she opened the door. "I don't

know." She stepped into the hut to hear Xena close the door behind. Gabrielle shifted to sit at a chair by the table. "Maybe it's because I haven't used a weapon for about a year."

Xena shook her head. "No that shouldn't affect anything." She came over to Gabrielle and bent down to one knee to be eye level with her best friend. "Is there something physically going on? I know you're not eating right either."

The small woman sighed. "I really don't know Xena. Maybe there is but I feel fine and I don't feel quite as hungry as I use to."

The warrior's eyes fell. "I'm worried." She looked back up.

"I know Xena." She smiled sadly. "I'll be fine, promise. Maybe my body is going through a short funk."

"Well this is a real bad time for your body to go through a funk."

Gabrielle chuckled. "Tell me about it." She then went serious. "I'll be fine."

The older woman slowly let out a deep breath. "I'm not just worried about that. But also about the fact if your body isn't a hundred percent then you can't protect yourself Gabrielle. Some of those Queens will try to take you out in those challenges... maybe even kill."

"Xena they-"

"Yes they would Gabrielle." Xena was now very serious. "They know your Amazons support you strongly unlike their own. And they know what position they could gain by winning these challenges. They may kill you for it, don't underestimate." A pause. "Especially Mairead out of all this is her sort of thing."

Gabrielle nodded her head. "I'll just have to be prepared."

The warrior's eyes narrow. "You won't be the only one."

"Xena wait don't even think-" Another cut off.

"Don't ask me not to Gabrielle. I will stop anybody who has any sort of intentions to kill you." She lifted her right hand to grasp her partner's closes knee. "Don't ask me to stand aside Gabrielle, please."

Gabrielle closed her eyes then opened them again. "You know what that would mean Xena? Treason to the Amazons for both of us."

"I know nor do I care."

Gabrielle smiled to her Soulmate. "Thank you."

Xena smiled back. "Anytime."

The Queen chuckled. "Really? I gotta remember that for later."

"Uh huh." The warrior stood up. "Ready to get some sleep?"

The small woman stood up. "Yeah, I'm beat after all that sparring. And tomorrow

Yakut should be here huh?"

"She should."

The Soulmates now went about changing and then made their way to bed. Curling up into each other's arms to meet the other in their dreamscape together.

~\*Part 17\*~

The sun had rose up with the Soulmates. The pair slowly ambled out of their beds and then out of their hut. The day was cold but clear which in turn led to the Soulmates putting their cloaks on to stay warm. They'd eaten in the morning followed by sparring again in the late morning. But midday that's when the final Nation arrive, the Far East Nation of Chin, Yakut.

Xena smiled and took a step forward. "It's good to see you Yakut." She hugged her Amazon friend.

The small Amazon Queen smiled as she hugged the warrior. "Never thought I'd see you again Xena." Slowly she released Xena and took a step back with the same smile.

"Glad you made it." Xena turned to her right where her partner stood. "Yakut I want you to meet my Soulmate, Gabrielle."

Yakut turned her brown eyes to Gabrielle. "It's great to finally meet the woman Xena was searching the ends of the earth for and beyond."

The small warrior sadly smiled. "I heard about that. Thank you Yakut for helping Xena."

The Amazon shook her head. "It is not me whom needs thanking, it is your partner. For if it was not her whom came to Chin our ancestors would have never been able to pass over."

Gabrielle simply nodded. "You'll have to tell me that story sometime. I never got the details." Her eyes then averted up to Xena.

The warrior grinned. "Never asked."

The small warrior huffed then responded. "Right." Gabrielle turned her attention back to Yakut. "My regent and second in command will help your Amazons settle in. And we have a hut for you."

Yakut nodded. "Thank you."

Gabrielle turned around in the middle of the woods as did the other two women. They all began to walk into the village.

"So I assume the challenges will begin tomorrow."

Gabrielle nodded at Yakut. "They will... and I believe tonight we'll have a meeting with the Queens." She peered up to her partner questionably.

Xena nodded in agreement.

"Was your trip safe?" The small warrior turned her attention to the Far East Queen.

Yakut nodded. "Yes it was and your messengers were great."

"Have things settled for you Yakut?" The warrior then turned her head to gaze at her Amazon friend.

Yakut smiled. "Things have settled since you last left. The Nation has become stronger since as well as more Amazons with us."

Gabrielle furrowed her eyebrows at the other Queen. "Now I heard your Amazons do not believe in Artemis."

"I'm afraid not Gabrielle. Ever since my Nation has come to Chin we have believed in more a spiritual existence. That is the way of Chin so it was integrated into our ancestors so long ago and ever since."

The small warrior's head bobbed up and down. "Sounds very interesting. I would love to learn of this."

Yakut smiled. "I believe that the spiritual part of my Nation is what has kept us alive and together since we first migrated to Chin. We have been quite lucky. I would be honored to show you anything of our culture."

"I would. I know most of the Greek Nations are alike but none are like the Chin Amazons."

Yakut nodded her head with a sigh. "Yes we're quite different."

Gabrielle nodded once then glanced ahead to see the hut for Yakut. She led the Amazon there and let her inside. Afterwards Xena and Gabrielle went to search out Ephiny.

~\*~\*~\*~

Xena's eyes narrowed and she walked away from the door to stand where her partner sat at the head of the long wood table. "Everybody is here."

Gabrielle nodded and then slowly stood up from her seat. Standing to her right was her regent. "Silence."

All nine of the Queens in the council room fell silent at hearing Gabrielle's hard voice. They turned their attention to Gabrielle.

Gabrielle smiled. "Now then, as we all know, we are here for the same reasons. Tomorrow will begin the challenges between the ten Amazon Nation Queens. We are not sure how long this will take exactly but between a time span of three to six days. Hopefully we can get this done and quickly as we know winter will set in soon." She paused for a moment noticing she still held everybody's attention. "After the challenges and we find out whom will be the Queen of all the Amazons then the Nations are expected to stay. After these challenges the Queen will need to figure out how to rule this new Nation but that is later on." The small warrior leaned forward with her hands on the table. "We all know the normal rules for a challenge, they've been changed for this time."

Now there was a commotion of murmurs and whispers.

Gabrielle let it go on for a few seconds then she spoke loudly. "Are there any problems with this?"

All the Queens looked to Gabrielle but it was Queen Mairead that had something to say. "What sort of changes?"

The small warrior grinned and responded. "A few. One, consorts and champions may no be allowed to fight in the challenges. I believe that to be quite unfair. Second rule is the Queens are to personally choose their own weapon. Then the third final rule is nobody may kill their opponent in these challenges. Is that agreed upon by all?"

Most of the Queens nodded at that but not all.

Parvulus spoke up. "Why not at least consorts? They are considered our other halves." Now there was a din of agreement in the room. It would be Parvulus to ask since she had a consort.

Gabrielle grinned evilly. "Consorts huh?" She stood up from leaning forward on the table. "Well that'll be fine with me. Would you all like to meet my consort?" The small warrior turned her attention to Xena. "Xena the Warrior Princess."

Xena almost wanted to laugh at her Soulmate's words, Gabrielle gets her way. So the warrior went with it, crossing her arms against her chest and letting her eyes go cold.

There were a few clearing of the throats and chuckles.

Queen Parvulus of the Northwest Nation shook her head with a sheepish smile. "Maybe not consorts either."

Gabrielle grinned and turned her sights back to the Queens. "That was my figuring too." She now brought her arms against her chest. "So are the three rules agreed upon?"

All the Queens of the nine Nations nodded their heads.

Yakut though decided to cut in. "What about the weapons? Is there a limit on how many?"

Gabrielle nodded. "True. I believe one major weapon of choice would be fine and a dagger, something small."

Again the Queens nodded their heads.

The small warrior turned her head to her regent. "Your turn."

Ephiny grinned and looked to all the Queens. "I will be the person in charge of the challenges. I will be keeping track of who has won, lost, and who fights whom at what points. Tomorrow all of us are expected to come to the two sparring fields at the camp by early morning. Then I will set each of you up with your challenger and the challenges will go on till the afternoon. Is there a problem with this?"

Everybody shook their heads.

Gabrielle's regent smiled. "Great."

The small warrior though gave her attention to Xena. "Anything you'd like to say?"

The warrior grinned and glanced back to the nine Queens with a serious face. "Keep in mind all of you the purpose behind these challenges. This is not for revenge or past arguments and if you think it is then get it out of your head right now. I know I am not here to screw around with something petty as that. These challenges are serious and so is the dream of bringing the Nations together. Remember what is at risk here." She turned her head to Gabrielle and nodded lightly.

Gabrielle looked to the Queens. "That is all we have to say. If anybody else as anything to speak about then so do it now." She paused waiting for any voices to arise but none came. "Great, this meeting is over. Everybody get plenty to eat and rest for tomorrow's challenges. Good luck." She smiled.

The Queens of the different Nations slowly shuffled out of the hut into the late afternoon. Each going about to do varies things.

After the last Queen left Gabrielle sighed. "Here we go."

The regent turned to her friend. "You're doing well Gabrielle."

"Thanks Eph. Just hope this works out as planned."

"It will." Ephiny smiled. "You'll see." A sigh. "I have to run. I'll catch up with you both later." The regent looked up to Xena and smiled.

The warrior nodded. "See you Eph."

The Amazon shifted to the door. "Bye Xena and Gabrielle."

Gabrielle smiled to her friend. "Bye Eph and thanks."

Ephiny smiled then went out the door quickly.

"You sure you don't want the consorts fighting?"

The small woman chuckled at her Soulmate. "Yeah, they seemed to like that huh?" Gabrielle peered up to her best friend.

Xena grinned. "They liked it up till they found whom your consort is."

"Yeah I know, I don't understand that one Xena." The Queen started to chuckle.

The warrior still had her grin. "Uh huh."

The young woman sighed again and shifted from standing behind the table to the other side of her partner. "So what's our plan now?"

Xena shrugged her shoulders. "What you feel like doing? We should do some more sparring."

"Oh gods, you gotta be kidding me Xena." Gabrielle now fell into the taller woman's side. "I've been sparrized."

The warrior grinned. "Sorry." She grasped her friend's sides and pulled her into her arms. "But you do need to prepare."

The Amazon Queen let out her breath slowly. "I know." She leaned more into Xena and closed her eyes.

The older woman lowered her head to let her cheek nuzzle against Gabrielle's. "How about a compromise?"

"What's that?"

"We'll do a little sparring for a candlemark or less then we'll get an early dinner."

Gabrielle grinned. "What about the evening?"

"We'll have some... time together in our hut... alone."

The small woman chuckled in her Soulmate's arms. "I like the compromise."

"I figured you would." Xena lightly let her lips brush against her partner's neck.

The small warrior shivered in reaction. "Xen?"

"Mmm?"

"I love you."

The warrior grinned and lifted her head, she carefully turned her Soulmate around. "I love Gabrielle." She slowly ducked down to kiss Gabrielle lovingly.

They slowly pulled back as if in a dream. The Soulmates then left the hut to go to the sparring fields to practice yet again. The evening came and the Soulmate went. Went to their hut to be together before things became chaotic for the next few days. The days of the challenges that would shape the new Amazon Nation.

## **Part 6**

### **Section 6**

~\*Part 18\*~

Quickly she ducked as a sword breezed by her head. She then jumped back and spun her sais in her hands and a grin crossed her lips. Next to follow were a number of rapid attacks with the butt end of her sais striking her opponent on the sides and arms. Then she pulled back with her same grin and she saw the affect she had on her opponent. Her opponent was scared and only circled her not attacking.

Yes this was just perfect for this small woman. This challenge she was winning it and it would only build her confidence for later challenges. That is something one of the onlookers off to the side of the challenge thought and knew from experience. That onlooker had to grin herself and cross her arms against her chest and continue to observe the fight going on.

Gabrielle flipped her right sai out to let her opponent's sword get caught up in the forks of her sai. Then with her left sai the small woman attacked her opponent in the

stomach with three good blows. The opponent stepped back coughing. Gabrielle grinned and quickly ran towards her opponent and stopped once close enough to do a fast round house kick at her opponent. Her opponent went flying hard onto their back with a large groan, their sword rolled out of their hand into the dust of the sparring field. Gabrielle's opponent? Queen Parvulus. Queen Parvulus of the Northwest Nation defeated by Queen Gabrielle of the Central Nation.

Slowly Queen Parvulus stood up and gazed at Gabrielle. "Nice fight."

Gabrielle smiled. "Thanks, you did well." She then bent down to sheath her sais on the sides of her boots. Then reaching forward she collected the Northwest Queen's sword and stood up. Neatly she handed the sword back to the Queen.

Parvulus took her sword back and easily sheathed it. "Well I'd say I'd done better if I'd won." She grinned.

The small warrior chuckled. "It happens." She then reach forward, holding her right hand out.

Queen Parvulus took the offered hand and shook then bowed her head.

They released each other's hands and walked off the sparring field. Parvulus went one way while Gabrielle went another way.

"Good job."

Gabrielle smiled as she lifted her head up to her Soulmate. "Thanks." She then sighed. "One down eight to go."

The warrior grinned. "Don't worry."

Ephiny then came ambling up beside the pair in the middle of the small crowd of Amazons. "Gabrielle?"

The Queen turned her head to her regent. "Yeah?"

"You have about... a candlemark till your next challenge." The regent then gazed up from the scroll she was holding. She then smiled. "Good job against Parvulus."

Gabrielle smiled. "Thanks." She then sighed. "They're doing lunch right now right?"

The regent nodded. "Yeah, go get something to eat. But eat lightly for your next challenge."

The small warrior grinned. "Yes mom."

"Now don't start that AQ." Ephiny then rolled her scroll up and held it in her right hand with her quill. She shook it at Gabrielle. "Don't be late and your challenge is on this sparring field again."

Gabrielle chuckled. "Yes Ma'am."

The regent sighed and stomped off.

The Queen chuckled and glanced back up to Xena. "You hungry?"

Xena shrugged her shoulders. "I could go for something." She smiled. "Come on."

The Soulmates trekked out of the Amazon Camp and went into the village. They entered into the dinning hut and collected some food to sit down at a table together and alone.

Gabrielle lifted her eyes from her food to Xena. "You think I'm still reacting slow?"

The warrior sighed as she considered the question and her partner's fighting earlier. "Yes."

The Queen nodded sadly and stared down at her bowl of fruit. "Am I faster or slower than last time?"

"About the same."

The small woman sighed. "What you think it is?"

Xena looked up from her plate of food. "You're not eating properly."

Gabrielle arched an eyebrow. "Xena, I'm eating a bowl of fruit. How could it be that?"

"You maybe eating health but doesn't mean you're eating properly." The warrior studied the fruit. "You get your vitamins and acids from the fruit." She then gazed up to Gabrielle. "But you need protein and fiber... minerals... anything to give you energy."

The Queen knitted her eyebrows together. "But I eat all the fruits, vegetables, meats, and other stuff."

"Gabrielle it isn't a question of what right now. It's a question of how much." The warrior locked eyes with her best friend knowing she'd caught Gabrielle on that one.

The young woman looked up to lock eyes and felt wrong so her eyes lowered. "I don't know what it is."

Xena still studied her partner as she thought. "Nothing emotional?"

Quickly the small warrior lifted her head back up. "No, it's... it's not like I'm sitting here thinking that I need to lose weight or anything." She sighed.

"Physical?"

Gabrielle shook her head. "I don't feel odd." She paused. "And I don't even feel like I'm slow when I fight."

The warrior nodded. "And you never feel hungry do you?"

The Amazon Queen shook her head. "Not like I use to since... well since we've came here." She gazed down at the fruit then back up to the warrior. "Not stress either."

"Mmm, it's something physical then." Xena started to eat again. "If it is physical it'll make itself apparent soon."

Gabrielle huffed. "Great."

Xena's left hand quickly came up to the table and reached across to Gabrielle's left hand that was grasping her bowl. She locked eyes with Gabrielle again. "You'll be fine okay?" The young woman nodded and Xena smiled. "It's nothing too big I think." She squeezed her Soulmate's hand. Slowly she pulled her hand away but let her finger tips turn Gabrielle's engagement and wedding ring then her hand came back to her own side.

Gabrielle chuckled in reaction and gazed down at the rings for a moment. Both rings sparkled and twinkled up to her with happiness. A warm smile creased the woman's lips as she lifted her head back to Xena. "Sorry... I know I was a little snippy there."

The older woman nodded. "Same here. I'm just worried about this."

"I know." The small warrior smiled. "Thanks for looking after me."

Xena smiled warmly. "Always." She then went serious. "Speaking of which, lets go to the hut real fast."

Gabrielle nodded and stood up simultaneously with Xena. The pair rid themselves of their plates and food then trekked to the hut together. Once inside the warrior went milling through the saddlebags and found what she was looking for. Gabrielle stood off to the side watching in wonderment.

Xena stood up and walked over to Gabrielle. She held out her hands to her Soulmate. "Extra protection, can't forget."

The younger woman glanced down into the other woman's hands to see her silver dagger with the interrogate ivy design in its sheath. Gabrielle looked back up. "Xena.... I don't... none of the Queens will try to kill me."

The warrior's left hand came up to grasp her partner's closest shoulder tightly. Her cobalt eyes were serious. "Gabrielle I'm not taking risks." She paused as she collected her thoughts. "Listen, I don't give a damn about anybody here as much as I do for you. When it comes right down to it, it is only you that matters. It is only us that matters. I am asking you not to take the risk of letting those Queens possibly hurt you badly let alone kill you. Don't ask me to let you take that risk." She sadly smiled. "You're the one thing I will keep to myself. Please don't endanger your life so that I maybe left alone."

Gabrielle studied her Soulmate's brilliant blue eyes. She considered Xena's words which seem to warm her being. Then a sad smile crossed her lips as a few tears streaked down her cheeks. "Don't you ever endanger your life so that you maybe killed and leave me behind. I want to spend as many seconds as I can with you in this life Xena. You are mine and I am not about to let anything or anybody take you."

Xena sadly smiled as well, she ducked down to place a gentle loving kiss to Gabrielle's lips. In the middle of the kiss Gabrielle started to cry. Xena pulled away and placed a kiss to her Soulmate's cheek then pulled her into her arms. The Soulmates held each other tightly and let a few tears trail down their cheeks.

Another step taken together in their journey.

Gabrielle placed a gentle kiss on the left side of her Soulmate's chest then lifted her

head. "We need to get down to the sparring fields."

The warrior nodded and carefully released her partner. As she brought her arms back to her side she lifted her right hand with the dagger.

The smaller woman nodded and lifted her left arm.

Xena placed the dagger and sheath at Gabrielle's upper left arm so that her black arm-bracelet was at the middle of the dagger. Xena then tied it in place with the strings attached to the sheath. "Thank you."

The small warrior turned her head away from the dagger on her arm to her partner. "I'll do anything for you Xena. Just ask." She smiled warmly.

Xena smiled back. "Thank you. Ask anything of me and it's yours." She leaned down to place a kiss to her partner's forehead then straightened back up.

Gabrielle turned to the door. "Does that include massages?" She grasped the door handle as she felt a grin take her lips.

The warrior chuckled. "Oh definitely."

"Good." The Queen opened the door and stepped out. "I'll take you up on that one later."

Xena close the door behind and lowered her head close to Gabrielle's before moving. "Do that." She rose up again and started walking.

Gabrielle grinned to herself and jogged up to her partner's side then ambled along beside Xena.

~\*~\*~\*~

Late afternoon came for the Central Amazon Nation and also came the end of the challenges for the day. Ephiny smiled to herself as she studied down at her scroll with the list of challenges, who won, and who lost.

Aureus South Nation ~ Won against *Zahra*/Lost to *Mairead*

Wins: One Losses: One

Mairead Southeast Nation ~ Won against *Aureus*/ Won against *Zahra*

Wins: Two Losses: None

Zahra Southwest Nation ~ Lost to *Aureus*/ Lost to *Mairead*

Wins: None Losses: Two

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Laetus North Nation ~ Lost to *Nyx*/ Lost to *Parvulus*

Wins: None Losses: Two

Parvulus Northwest Nation ~ Won against *Laetus*/Lost against *Gabrielle*

Wins: One Losses: One

Nyx Northeast Tribe Nation ~ Won against *Laetus*/Won against *Gloria*

Wins: Two Losses: None

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Caitriona West Tribe Nation ~ Won against *Gloria*/Won against *Yakut*

Wins: Two Losses: None

Gloria East Tribe Nation ~ Lost against *Caitriona*/Lost to *Nyx*

Wins: None Losses Two

Yakut Far East Nation ~ Lost to *Caitriona*/Lost to *Gabrielle*

Wins: None Losses: Two

Gabrielle Central Nation ~ Won against *Parvulus*/Won against *Yakut*

Wins: Two Losses: None

The regent lifted her head from the scroll after running down the results then saw her Queen coming towards her.

Gabrielle smiled and came up to her friend's side. "How things looking?"

"Pretty good." Ephiny handed over the scroll.

The Amazon Queen studied the results with her head bobbing up and down in agreement. She then raised her head to Ephiny. "Looks like Mairead is going to do well."

The regent nodded. "Afraid so. So is Caitriona and Nyx."

Gabrielle sighed at hearing the name Nyx. "Will I fight either three of them tomorrow?"

Ephiny nodded. "Yeah probably Nyx."

The small warrior then grinned. "I can't wait."

The Amazon arched an eyebrow. "And why?"

"Because Queen Nyx pushed one of Gabrielle's buttons."

Both Ephiny and Gabrielle turned their heads to the left to see Xena standing there with a grin.

The regent chuckled and gazed back to her Queen. "I forgot about that. Still upset?"

The Queen gave a fake angry smile. "Oh yeah."

Xena chuckled and shifted by her Soulmate's side. "Yakut commented to me you're a

honorable fighter."

Gabrielle gazed up to her partner. "Really?"

The warrior nodded with a respectful smile. "Yup." Xena then gazed down at the scroll in Gabrielle's hands and read the results as well. As soon as she saw Mairead's wins her eyes narrowed then continued down the list.

The small warrior though gazed up to Ephiny with a grin.

The regent winked with a grin then she went serious.

Gabrielle also went serious and turned her head towards Xena. "Good results huh?"

Xena raised her head and looked to her partner. "Overall yeah."

The small woman arched an eyebrow at her Soulmate. "Overall?"

The warrior nodded.

The regent gazed up to the warrior. "One of the... results you don't like Xena?"

Xena raised an eyebrow at the Amazon.

Gabrielle grinned. "Mairead?"

"Yesss." The warrior then turned her head to her Soulmate.

Gabrielle chuckled. "I'll be able to handle her." She then rolled up the scroll as she spoke. "Don't worry, I'll wipe the sparring fields wid all of them."

Xena's raised eyebrow only went higher as she grinned. "I know."

The small warrior grinned and handed Ephiny the scroll over.

The regent took the scroll back and gazed at her friends. "I better go. I'll see you both at dinner."

Gabrielle nodded. "See you Eph."

"Bye Gabrielle." Ephiny then raised her head to Xena. "Bye Xena."

The warrior smiled. "Bye Eph."

The regent smiled back and then shuffled off to head into the village.

Gabrielle turned to her partner. "Not a bad day."

Xena nodded. "Wasn't." Her eyes then focused behind Gabrielle to lock on somebody else on the sparring field. Her eyes then narrowed at the person.

Gabrielle quickly saw this and asked in a quiet voice. "What's wrong?"

"Mairead." Her voice was quiet but light in wonderment. "She's watching us."

The small warrior grinned. "How 'bout I walk over there and tell her to draw a picture 'cause it'll last longer."

Xena grinned and glanced back down to her Soulmate. "Bad."

The younger woman chuckled. "Just trying to get your attention back to me."

"You did." Her eyes lifted back up to Mairead.

"Xena don't worry about her."

The warrior didn't respond, she locked eyes with Mairead and she let her eyes go bitter cold while narrowing. She then gave the Southeast Queen an evil smile then Xena lifted her hands to Gabrielle's sides to lower her head down to her Soulmate again. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Mairead stalk off in a huff.

Gabrielle raised an eyebrow in question.

The older woman grinned. "She's gone."

"And you called me the bad one."

The warrior chuckled. "Just protecting my other half."

Gabrielle smiled. "Thanks." She then grasped Xena's right arm. "Let's go."

Xena nodded and released her partner. "Still feel like that massage?"

Slowly the Queen took two steps then stopped to turn to her Soulmate with a grin. "If you're offering."

"Definitely." The warrior smirked back and brought her right hand up to Gabrielle's back. "Come on."

They started walking towards the gates into the village. It was late afternoon now, around a candlemark till dusk. Gabrielle overall was tired but not exceedingly. Xena though was a bit energetic having done nothing but watch her Soulmate fight in the two challenges. Right now though, they were entering into their hut.

Gabrielle went in first and stared at the bed and sighed, feeling her body drained.

The warrior closed the door and came up behind her partner. She slipped both her arms around the other female's waist and pulled her in. Xena lowered her head down close to Gabrielle's. "How you feel?"

"Tired some."

Xena nodded. "I figured." She rubbed her cheek against Gabrielle's. "Lay down and I'll take care of you." She then lifted her hands to her Soulmate's left arm to remove the dagger and sheath.

The younger woman smiled. "I love the sound of that." She felt her Soulmate release her and Gabrielle padded over to the end of the bed and lifted one boot at a time to unlace her boots. She let them fall to the ground and then she crawled into her bed.

Xena laid her sword down by her chakram and Gabrielle's dagger then turned towards Gabrielle. She chuckled and strolled over to her partner.

Gabrielle gazed up to her warrior with a smile as she lay on her back in the dead center of the bed.

The warrior smiled back and sat on the side of the bed. She lifted her hands to each of the small warrior's shoulders. For a second Xena studied her friend's left shoulder seeing the wound almost gone. All that was really left was a bit of a red spot where the raider's sword had cut through the skin.

The Queen followed her Soulmate's gaze and studied the remains of the wound as well. "Almost gone."

Xena nodded. "Thankfully it won't scar." She smiled after saying that.

Gabrielle turned her head back to Xena and smiled back. "Let me see your left hand."

At first the Warrior Princess didn't do anything in hesitation but she held her hand out to Gabrielle, palm showing.

The small woman's fingertips grazed across the healing cut in the warrior's palm. "It looks better."

Xena nodded as she stared at the cut she'd made on her hand. Her mind began to imagine if she'd cut her wrist what would have happened.

Gabrielle gazed up from her Soulmate's hand to study misty blue eyes. At that point she figured out why Xena's eyes were misty and it made Gabrielle sad. "I don't know where I'd be if you'd done that."

The warrior's eyes quickly focused on the other woman. "I'm sorry." A quiet response.

Rapidly Gabrielle laced her right hand with the warrior's left hand. "Don't be. I know... you were hurting. It's in the past." She smiled sadly.

Xena smiled sadly back. "I love you."

Gabrielle's smile went warm. "I love you too Xena."

Xena then leaned down to hug her Soulmate. Gabrielle quickly wrapped her arms around her Soulmate tightly. Gabrielle placed a gentle kiss to her Soulmate's cheek.

The warrior smiled. "Thanks."

"Anytime." Gabrielle let a smile take control as she shifted her hands to her stomach.

Xena then grinned. "Now then, how about that massage?"

The small warrior chuckled. "Oh yeah."

The older woman kept her grin and moved her hands again to her partner's shoulders. She then carefully began to massage the Queen's shoulders. "Close your eyes and relax."

The small woman did as she was told. She could feel her partner's strong hands work her muscles. It relaxed her mind and body. It wasn't necessarily the massage but the fact it was Xena's touch and that it was Xena here.

Xena kept studying her Soulmate's body as she worked her muscles. She began to notice Gabrielle's breathing becoming a little shallower by each passing second. She herself was starting to feel a little tired for no real reason. But now she shifted her hands to her partner's right arm working the muscles up and down her length. She repeated that same process on Gabrielle's left arm.

The small warrior could feel her reserves slipping she wanted to stay awake for some reason. Yet she knew Xena wanted her to sleep so she let go. Nor did she let herself think about anything.

The warrior brought her hands down to Gabrielle's sides around her waist area. She massaged the Queen's sides and under her back just a little. After that Xena came farther down to the small warrior's upper legs and thighs. She glanced back up to the small woman's face to see her expression relaxed her chest rising very gradually.

Gabrielle is asleep.

Xena smiled to herself and turned her attention back to the massaging. She came down to Gabrielle's calves and ankles. After doing that the warrior stopped and leaned down close to Gabrielle and placed a light kiss to her Soulmate's forehead.

Xena then carefully rose from the bed and went to sit in one of the seats. She leaned back into the seat with a sigh. Now an exhausted feeling took her as she relaxed in the wood chair. Closing her eyes she began to muse but the musing seemed to only make her more tired and it eventually knocked her out.

Dusk was nearing and so would dinner for them. Time then passed on for the Soulmates as they slept and their dream came together.

"I still can't believe you fell asleep."

Xena grinned. "I'm getting old."

Gabrielle chuckled as she walked along in the grassy field beside her partner. "Right" She then gazed up to her Soulmate. "That was a great massage."

Xena looked down to her Soulmate. "Good." She lifted her head again to see that the end of the grassy field came to a cliff. The cliff overlooking a sea.

Gabrielle gazed ahead at the scene. "That's beautiful."

"It is." Xena then grinned down at her partner as she kept ambling along towards the cliff's edge. "I'd just like to know whose idea it is."

"Yours." Gabrielle smirked.

"How you figure? You're the one that enjoys good scenery."

Gabrielle nodded her head. "True." She then shrugged her shoulders. "But you love the waters."

Xena smiled as she came to the cliff's edge and stopped to stare over the twinkling blue sea. "I do."

"I don't understand how you miss being on ships Xena." She shook her head. "All you

do is bob up and down in the water."

Xena chuckled. "You don't like being on water 'cause you get sick."

"Hey." Gabrielle instantly looked up to her partner. "I'm getting better with it." She grinned.

Gabrielle's Soulmate nodded and glanced down to her. "You are." Xena smiled.

Gabrielle smiled back and reached for her Soulmate's hand and their hands interlaced. They both then gazed back over the sea. Then a slight breeze picked up to brush their hair back slightly.

Xena then mumbled, "The breeze is your idea."

Gabrielle laughed. "You caught me." She squeezed her Soulmate's hand then smiled to herself.

The Soulmates continued to stare over the sea. Watching the sun's light twinkle and sparkle off as the waves gently hit the beach far below the cliff. Neither said anything, didn't need to.

Xena slowly let her breath out. "We should get up."

Gabrielle nodded as she stared out at the sea. "I like it here though."

"I know." Xena turned her head to her Soulmate. "But we need to keep entertaining the Amazons."

A chuckle. "You're right." Gabrielle turned her body to Xena. "Let's go."

Xena turned away from the scenery to face her Soulmate. She smiled and wrapped her arms around her Soulmate's body. "Nice place, we'll have to remember it." She lowered her head close to Gabrielle's.

"I second that." Gabrielle smiled.

"Good." Xena then leaned down closer. "See you there." She closed her eyes and locked lips with her Soulmate in a sound kiss.

Gabrielle was deep into the kiss then she felt her Soulmate disappear from her grasp, her arms falling back to her side. She still kept her eyes closed letting the wind blow on her for a few moments, taking it in. Listening to the sound of the beating waves, it was calming her soul.

"Gabrielle." It came out in a whisper in the wind. "Gabrielle."

The Amazon Queen felt warm lips touch hers for a moment then move back. Slowly Gabrielle opened her eyes again to find crystal blue eyes twinkling down at her. The small warrior smiled at her warrior.

Xena smiled back and brushed back some of her small warrior's short hair. Her other hand resting on the bed as she stayed bent down to one knee beside Gabrielle. "Glad you decided to wake up."

The Queen chuckled. "Sorry, it was just so peaceful."

The Warrior Princess smiled. "I know." She bent forward again to capture Gabrielle's lips. Xena lifted her head back up at the end of the kiss. "Its dark."

The small warrior nodded. "We better go huh?"

Xena nodded. "Yup." Slowly she stood up.

The Amazon Queen stood up and hopped out of the bed. She walked to the foot of the bed to put her boots on. Xena though went to the table and put her chakram in place and hook her sword on her back.

Gabrielle laced her last boot and repositioned her sais. She turned to her warrior. "You really fell asleep in the chair?"

The older woman turned around to Gabrielle. "Yeah."

The small female crossed her arms against her chest. "I wonder why?"

"You." Xena then grinned and stepped up to her partner. "You're sleepy then I am. You're hungry, I am. You're in pain, I am. You're happy, I am." Xena lowered her head down close to Gabrielle's.

Gabrielle grinned. "You are then I am too." She chuckled. "Just don't get into a bad mood Xena."

The warrior arched an eyebrow. "Me? Gabrielle who-"

"You do." The small warrior then quickly moved to the door. "You know you do Xena." She had her left hand up pointing a finger at Xena. "Admit it." The door opened and she was halfway outside into the night.

"Oh no you don't." In a flash Xena was near her partner and grabbing her by the stomach to pull back into the hut. She slammed the door shut behind with her free hand.

The Queen struggled against her Soulmate but knew she wouldn't get anywhere. "Xena... Xena."

The taller woman quickly swung Gabrielle across the room so that she landed onto the bed sitting. Xena then placed her hands roughly down onto the small woman's thighs pinning her down on the bed with Gabrielle's legs open. She grinned tigerishly. "Who has a worse temper?"

"Xena... don't-"

"Gabrielle." The warrior lifted her right knee to go between her partner's legs. "Who?"

The small warrior grinned sheepishly. "Not me."

"Mmm." Xena pressed her right knee more up against Gabrielle. "Are you sure?" She leaned in close to Gabrielle, letting her lips come close to Gabrielle's.

"Gods..." Her emerald eyes closed tightly.

Xena grinned and pressed her knee harder into her Soulmate's center and then lightly brushed her lips against Gabrielle's. "Who?" It came out in a purr.

"Sweet mother of Zeus! Alright, I have a worse temper!" The small woman then groaned.

The warrior grinned. "Thank you." She pulled her knee back then started to rise up while pulling her head away.

The Queen's eyes flew open sparkling. "Xena." It came as a growl. She quickly grasped the warrior's wrists with both hands and pulled her back down sharply. Gabrielle grinned when her Soulmate's face came closer to hers. "I don't think so." She quickly leaned in to take the warrior's lips in a rough kiss. Her hands went to her Soulmate's straps and pulled her back. They both went falling back into the bed still kissing.

Xena then started chuckling in the middle of the kiss.

It seemed to catch for Gabrielle started to laugh with her and the kiss ended.

The warrior dropped her head into her partner's shoulder with a sigh. "Later."

"Count on it." Gabrielle wrapped her arms around Xena and hugged her.

Xena really couldn't hug her back, her hands were on the bed holding herself up from falling into the Queen. So instead she placed a kiss to Gabrielle's neck then stood up. "Come on." She held her hand down to her partner.

Gabrielle took the offered hand and was hauled up to her feet. She then went to the door and opened it. Stepping out into the night she waited for Xena.

The warrior came out closing the door behind and stepped up to her Queen's side.

The small warrior smiled up to her partner and started to walk.

They headed directly to the Amazon Camp where they served the food now. It was rather cool out tonight but the Soulmates seemed to not notice for they kept each other warm by staying near.

The dinner was rather long. Everybody hustled and bustled about eating and talking and some drinking. The Soulmates met up with Amarice and her sister, all of them deciding to eat together so they could catch up. The entire time the Soulmates were chuckling and teasing each other like a pair of kids. And Amarice had an amused smile at seeing this. Rodhiya on the other hand didn't know what to make of it. Relatively near the end of dinner the regent and Solari showed up and joined in. They to watched the Soulmates teasing each other which only made them grin to each other.

"Xena I still have yet to understand why."

Amarice raised an eyebrow at Gabrielle after she'd spoken. "You mean she used the frying pan for a weapon?"

Gabrielle whipped her head to look at Amarice. "Yes." She sighed. "And you know Xena has so many moves to use on these men. Yet she had," her head turned to Xena.

"To use my frying pan."

Xena gazed down at her partner with a grin. "I told you I like to be creative."

"And I like to cook."

The warrior chuckled. "Hey I still caught us fish in the stream."

The Queen raised her eyebrow. "Yeah well it was swimming up stream all day."

Xena chuckled. "That's 'cause you wanted eel."

The small warrior shivered at just the word. "I hate eel now."

Ephiny turned her head to Solari. The second in command gazed at the regent. Ephiny winked at the other Amazon then turned her head back to the Soulmates. "So what happened that day anyway?" Ephiny crossed her arms at the table.

Gabrielle chuckled and grinned. "Howard is what happened."

"Gabrielle." Xena's voice was deep.

The Queen looked up to her partner. "Xena he was the best part."

The warrior narrowed her eyes as she grinned. "Don't even."

Rodhiya grinned at this. "What was up with this guy Howard?"

Gabrielle quickly looked at the Amazon. "Well you see he had this real bad hang up on Xena."

Everybody at the table but Xena started to chuckle. The Warrior Princess sighed.

The small warrior then smiled. "The best part was Howard would keep denying that Xena didn't love him." Gabrielle peered up at her partner. "Remember that talk we both had with him?"

"Gods how could I forget?" The warrior chuckled and shook her head. She then gazed back to the others at the table. "I couldn't get him away from me. So I..." Xena looked down to Gabrielle. "Improvised."

The Queen started to chuckle. "Don't look at me Xena. I had nothing to do with that one."

Solari grinned. "What happened?"

Xena turned her head back. "Well at the time Howard had a girlfriend named Minya. Sso I told her how to win him back."

Ephiny now grinned. "I bet this is interesting."

The warrior chuckled. "To say the least. Near the end of our day Minya came around the corner after taking my... advice. She was dressed in brown leathers and had my whip, cracking it."

"Cracking it to say the least." Gabrielle mumbled that.

All the Amazons at the table started to chuckle with grins.

The Queen grinned to everybody. "As you all can guess that was just another day in a life."

Ephiny grinned. "That was an easy day huh?"

Gabrielle sighed. "To say the least." She then looked up to her warrior with a smile.

Xena smiled down at the partner.

The Queen gave her a look and shifted her right leg to hit Xena's leg.

The warrior quickly looked back to the group of Amazons. "I think we'll retire out of here."

Ephiny smirked. "I hear you Xena. Have to get some sleep huh?"

Xena slowly turned her head towards the regent. She then grinned very devilishly. "Yesss, Gabrielle and I have to *sleep together* otherwise we won't fall asleep. You and Solari know that."

Immediately the regent started to blush and she coughed. "Yeah I know what you mean Xena. Being alone in a hut sort of... eerie."

The warrior nodded. "Right." She then stood up with Gabrielle. "Goodnight everybody."

Everybody called back to say goodnight.

Gabrielle then smiled to her Amazons. "Night. Sleep well everybody." She then gazed directly at Ephiny. "And I hope you get enough sleep." She grinned then quickly turned on her heels to walk off.

Xena chuckled and ambled off with her partner.

The warrior and smaller warrior walked to the village and directly into the hut. Gabrielle flopped down on the end of the bed and slowly took her boots off.

Xena did the same by the table and also took her weapons and armor off. She then slowly walked over to Gabrielle. "I think your Amazons believe us to be crazy."

Gabrielle chuckled. "Let them." She smiled. "I have all I need."

The warrior smiled. "Mmm I know." She then went serious. "Eph told me you'll have three maybe four challenges tomorrow."

The Queen nodded. "Yeah."

"Come here, I wanted you to do something with me."

The small woman raised an eyebrow as she stood. "What's that?"

"Something to help your back for tomorrow." Xena took a step back from the bed.

Gabrielle followed her example. "That's true, my back will probably hurt some from

all the fighting."

The warrior nodded. "That's what I figured." She lay down on the floor.

The younger woman followed her example and laid on the floor beside Xena. "What now?"

Xena turned her head to the right at her Soulmate. "Prop her feet up onto the end of the bed." She did what she told and placed her feet up.

Gabrielle did the same and quickly felt a hint of pain in her back, but the sort of pain that felt good. "Wow."

The warrior chuckled. "Feels good huh?"

"Yeah." The small woman then moved her hands to go under her head.

"Don't do that." The warrior turned her head to her Soulmate. "Put your hands under your neck but not your head."

The Queen shifted her hands farther down. "Why's that?"

"Because you want to keep all of your spine straight."

Gabrielle turned her head back to stare up at the ceiling. "Makes sense." Her eyes drifted shut.

Xena also closed her eyes and crossed her right leg over her left.

"Xen?"

"Mmm?"

"You think we can go south sometime?"

The warrior thought about that for a moment. "Where south? Egypt?"

"Yeah." Gabrielle considered. "I'd love to go there."

Xena grinned. "I think I can arrange that."

The small woman opened her eyes to turn her head to Xena. "Really?"

The older woman lifted her eyes and gazed at her partner. "Why not?" She smiled. "You'd love Egypt."

"Gods I'd die to go." The Queen smiled. "I heard it's another world and sort of mysterious."

Xena's lips now shaped into a smile. "It is. Very different culture and magical."

Gabrielle still had her smile. "Could we go down the Nile."

The warrior chuckled. "Best way to get there." She then grinned. "I'll have to talk to Cleopatra about it."

The small warrior's eyes widen. "Xena you think we could stay in her palace?"

The Warrior Princess still had her grin. "Yes, remember she invited us."

"No no, she invited you. Not me."

"Well you are me." Xena smiled. "Don't worry. She owes us a favor after last time."

"Gods I almost forgot about that time." Gabrielle chuckled. "Hades Joxer got Autolykus and I in so much trouble." She then knitted her eyebrows together. "Did I ever thank you for that one?"

Xena raised an eyebrow. "About what?"

"Getting me out of that jail cell not to mention saving our butts?"

The warrior chuckled. "Ah, wasn't your fault it didn't work." She turned her head back to stare at the ceiling. "Joxer screw it up for you."

"I keep trying to tell myself but I can never believe it."

"Gabrielle you can handle things pretty well these days from what I've seen." Xena lifted her hands off the floor to rest on her leather-clad stomach.

"Now a days yeah." The small woman sighed. "I don't know. It was after we weren't together I just seemed... seemed to not care about myself. Didn't care what happened for a time." Gabrielle turned her head towards Xena. "A lot of apathy."

The warrior gazed at her Soulmate. "Something happen for me." She let out her breath slowly. "I thank the whomever that it's over with." She smiled.

Gabrielle smiled back. "Tell me about it." She chuckled. "I think everybody here knows though Xena."

"Gabrielle I think we both know why they do too."

The small woman raised an eyebrow. "If you mean the rings. No." She grinned. "I don't like to show them, it's more like strut my stuff with them gleaming and blinding people." She started to chuckle.

Xena laughed for a moment. "Mmm you'd think people would ask."

Gabrielle grinned. "Nah, they're to scared."

"Really? Of what?" The warrior suddenly dropped her feet from the foot of the bed and rolled to her right so that she gazed down at her Soulmate. Her elbows propping her up.

"You, who else?"

Xena chuckled. "Good." She moved her left hand to her partner's stomach.

Gabrielle's eyelids slid close. "That's good too."

The tall woman grinned. "I figured." She moved her fingertips up and down her Soulmate's muscular stomach. She did that for a few minutes then let her left hand

slide down to Gabrielle's side and she shifted closer to her Queen. Xena lowered her lips to her partner's stomach and lightly placed a kiss.

"Oh gods." A low whisper and Gabrielle clenched her hands together that were still under her neck.

Xena grinned and brought her lips back down to place a few butterfly kisses to Gabrielle's stomach. She then brought her tongue into the center of her Soulmate's stomach. Without warning she felt Gabrielle's hand grasping her head pulling her up. She followed the demand and lifted her head up to her partner's.

Gabrielle quickly took Xena's lips in a powerful kiss. She then brought her feet down from the end of the bed to the floor.

The warrior kept in the deep kiss. She felt her Queen's knee press into her center hard making her moan in the middle of the kiss. Slowly Xena pulled back from the kiss and reposition her body so that she straddled her Soulmate's hips and gazed down at her.

The small woman evilly grinned up to her partner.

Xena grinned back and leaned down to claim Gabrielle's mouth. She let her hands slide up Gabrielle's stomach and to slip under the bottom of Gabrielle's maroon leather top.

~\*Part 19\*~

Aureus South Nation ~ Won against *Zahra*/Lost to *Mairead*/Won against *Laetus*/Lost to *Caitriona*

Wins: Two Losses: Two

Mairead Southeast Nation ~ Won against *Aureus*/ Won against *Zahra*/Won against *Parvulus*/Won against *Gloria*

Wins: Four Losses: None

Zahra Southwest Nation ~ Lost to *Aureus*/ Lost to *Mairead*/Won against *Nyx*/Won Against *Yakut*

Wins: Two Losses: Two

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Laetus North Nation ~ Lost to *Nyx*/ Lost to *Parvulus*/Lost to *Aureus*/Lost to *Yakut*

Wins: None Losses: Four

Parvulus Northwest Nation ~ Won against *Laetus*/Lost against *Gabrielle*/Lost to *Mairead*/Won against *Caitriona*

Wins: Two Losses: Two

Nyx Northeast Tribe Nation ~ Won against *Laetus*/Won against *Gloria*/Lost to *Zahra*/Lost to *Gabrielle*

Wins: Two Losses: Two

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Caitriona West Tribe Nation ~ Won against *Gloria*/ Won against *Yakut*/Won against *Aureus*/Lost to *Parvulus*

Wins: Three Losses: One

Gloria East Tribe Nation ~ Lost against *Caitriona*/ Lost to *Nyx*/Lost to *Gabrielle*/Lost to *Mairead*

Wins: None Losses: Four

Yakut Far East Nation ~ Lost to *Caitriona*/Lost to *Gabrielle*/Won against *Laetus*/Lost to *Zahra*

Wins: One Losses: Three

Gabrielle Central Nation ~ Won against *Parvulus*/Won against *Yakut*/Won against *Gloria* /Won against *Nyx*

Wins: Four Losses: None

Ephiny lifted her head up from her scroll and rolled it up. She walked through this sparring field to go to the other one on the opposite side of the Amazon Camp. As soon as she got there she saw Mairead take down Queen Leatus. The regent sighed and unrolled the scroll to jot the win down.

She then started scanning the crowd for her Queen and quickly found Gabrielle standing beside her Soulmate. Ephiny walked over there and came up beside her friend. "You're up next against... Queen Zahra." She lifted her head to gaze at the sparring field and saw Queen Zahra of the Southwest Nation step up into the sparring field after the finishing of the last challenge.

Gabrielle turned her head to her regent. "Here it goes."

"Gabrielle?"

The Queen looked back to the Amazon. "Yeah?"

"I've noticed Zahra likes to jump back in her attacks to look scared. She's doing it on purpose so don't strike at her that's what she wants. Let her attack you."

Gabrielle smiled to Ephiny. "Thanks Eph."

The regent smiled. "Good luck."

"Thanks." The small warrior then peered up to her Soulmate. "See you in a little bit."

Xena smiled to her partner. "Good luck love. Be careful."

The younger woman winked. "Always." She then turned to the sparring field to walk onto it to face Zahra.

"Good luck Gabrielle."

The small warrior smiled to Queen Zahra. "You too Queen Zahra. Let's play this safe."

The other Amazon Queen nodded her head. "Honorable is the only way I know." She unsheathed her sword and took a step back.

Gabrielle stepped back and lifted her hands in fighting stance. "Ready?"

Zahra nodded. "Ready."

"Go." After saying that Gabrielle began to circle the other Queen. Her hands shifted up and down in a small circle in front of her body.

Zahra kept circling as well, waiting for an attack and not getting one.

Gabrielle grinned. "Sorry but I'm trying to quit attacking."

The Southwest Queen grinned back. "Right." She then quickly attacked and brought her sword down at Gabrielle.

The small warrior brought her right hand up to stop the sword with her bracelet.

Zahra still had her grin. "That's why you have those bracelets huh?" Without warning she brought her sword to swipe at Gabrielle's left side.

But the Central Nation Queen stopped the sword with her left arm bracelet and smirked to the Queen. "Not just for fashion."

Queen Zahra laughed and lunged forward with her sword.

Gabrielle though jumped back with a grin.

The other Queen then rapidly tried to chop off Gabrielle's head.

The small warrior responded by ducking and rolling on the ground to her right. She stayed bent to her knees and unsheathed her sais and bounced up to her feet and rapidly attack Zahra.

The challenge went from there. It was a well equal fight except Gabrielle was smarter and faster as well as agile. And within a quarter of a candlemark she defeated Queen Zahra of the Southwest Nation.

That was Gabrielle's last challenge for the day. Everybody else finished up their fights as well. The remaining candlemarks of the day were down time for all the Queens. The dinner was fairly good and all the Amazons ate rather fast. The Soulmates though found themselves in bed early, Gabrielle rather tired.

Gabrielle closed her eyes as she felt her partner's arms slip around her stomach. "Gods that was a long day."

"You did well."

The small warrior smiled. "Thanks." She lifted her head a little then settled her head back down on the pillow. "Tomorrow Eph said we're only doing two challenges."

Xena smiled. "Good." She leaned in a little placing a kiss to her partner's right shoulder. "Go to sleep huh?"

Gabrielle stiffened a yawn at that moment. "Good idea." She chuckled and lifted her hands to rest over her Soulmate's hands. "Xena?"

"Mmm?"

"I love you."

The warrior smiled again. "I love you too."

The small female smiled herself and turned in Xena's arms. She placed her left arm over the warrior's stomach.

Xena chuckled and lifted her right hand to press her partner's head under her chin. "Go to sleep."

Gabrielle nodded. "Night Xena."

"Goodnight love."

~\*Part 20\*~

The next day wasn't quick nor fast either. Gabrielle had her challenges against Queen Leatus and Queen Aureus. She won both. So far she'd won all her challenges and loosing none. She felt pretty happy about that not to mention proud. She'd also heard Mairead hadn't lost any yet. And tomorrow Gabrielle would have her first challenge against Mairead then against Queen Caitriona. She was pretty nervous about both.

Right now it was late afternoon and the Soulmates decided to take their horses for a run. Torqueo and Argo had been to cooped up in their stalls.

Gradually Gabrielle turned her head to her Soulmate. "It's nice out."

"It is." The warrior glanced over to her friend. "Glad we decided to go." A warm smile creased her lips.

The Queen nodded and turned her head back ahead.

They were walking their horses through the Amazon Forest just finishing a portion of galloping. They let Argo and the stallion take a break at a walk. Both the horses seem to be full of energy after being in the stable just a little to long.

Gabrielle let her left hand release the rein and grasp the saddle horn. She felt herself rhythmically sway back and forth in the saddle with the Torqueo's walk. A large amount of air filled her lungs then escaped at a slow pace.

Xena studied her partner for a moment then turned her head away. "I'm not sure if you'll beat her."

The Amazon Queen peered over to her Soulmate. Gabrielle studied her warrior and let that statement roll in her mind. She dropped her head and turned to lift her eyes to the trail ahead. "I can't help but wonder."

The warrior nodded. "I know." She paused then continued with, "You just need to relax tomorrow with the challenge."

Gabrielle's head bobbed up and down. "I hope I can."

The older woman reposition herself in the saddle. "Have confidence Gabrielle. You've beaten all the other Queens so far, don't let Mairead stop you." Xena let those same words take her, let them create a certain emotion. The emotion of anger.

The Amazon Queen glanced over at Xena. "I can't let myself get to angry with it Xena."

The warrior nodded and looked to her partner. "I know I've said anger clouds the mind, prevents focus. But I can also add that if you can control your anger then you can also focus it towards Mairead in the challenge. It might just protect you." Her jaw clamped down thinking about if Mairead beat Gabrielle how much anger would fill her. It was already filling Xena. The warrior let the anger fill her, she needed it. Gabrielle needed it.

The younger woman turned her attention away and considered her warrior's words. She knew Xena was right about one thing when it comes to anger. Anger protects one. And yes, Gabrielle has won all her challenges thus far. How could she let one beef head Amazon stop her now? She couldn't let Mairead take her chance away to become Queen of all the Amazons. No, she'd work to hard to create this dream for the Amazons. Gabrielle wasn't going to have her dream distorted with the Queen of all Amazons being a no brainier Amazon. Gabrielle felt as if she earned the position as Amazon Queen of all Nations.

These sort of thoughts quickly fumed in Gabrielle's head. They swirled in her mind and constructed an anger for Mairead. It was such a powerful anger that Gabrielle shut her eyes. She needed to take control of it so that it wouldn't take control of her. That was the key with anger. Control anger, don't let anger control.

Slowly the Queen's eyes drifted open, they sparkled a second then went normal again.

Xena had felt that same anger in herself. For her cobalt eyes twinkled deeply then shifted normal again as well. "Be careful."

Gabrielle shifted her eyes to Xena. "I will." She smiled warmly. She'd known what the warrior meant by that. Be careful, yes be careful with your anger. For Gabrielle not only had her anger but Xena's anger all inside of herself.

The tall woman nodded and gazed onward. "So Amphipolis after here or Egypt?"

Gabrielle grinned. "Decisions, decisions."

Xena quietly laughed and had a smile on her lips. "Hard huh?" She let her breath out slowly. "We'll probably have to go to Amphipolis first. I'd like to catch up with Mother before we disappear to Egypt."

The smaller warrior nodded. "Yeah I agree. Besides won't it take awhile to get a message down and back from Egypt?"

"Yes. I'd say it would take fourteen days at least."

"You think we'd be best off having somebody from Amphipolis deliver the message Xena?"

Xena considered the question. "Yeah I think so."

Gabrielle let a grin sweep across her lips. "So how long are we going to stay in Egypt?"

"However long you'd like." The warrior grinned back to her partner then gazed ahead.

The Queen quietly laughed. "Well not too long. If we do I'm sure something would happen that we'd have to fix."

The older woman shook her head with her grin. "Probably right." She pulled back on her reins to stop Argo.

Gabrielle did the same with Torqueo. "Gallop back?"

Xena nodded as she turned her warhorse around to face towards the Amazon village again. "All the way back."

The small warrior lifted an eyebrow at her partner. "Really?"

The warrior coolly turned her head to her Soulmate then slowly an evil grin controlled the warrior's lips. "If you can handle it?"

Gabrielle regarded the other woman and let a calm smile take over. "I know I can. The big question, is can you Xena?"

Xena arched an eyebrow at the Queen.

The younger woman chuckled. "See you in the village Xena." She kicked Torqueo in the sides. "Ya!"

Torqueo's response was a lightening bolt gallop.

Argo had been sent into a gallop as well directly behind Gabrielle and her stallion. Yet another race has begun. They were a fair distance from the Amazon village.

Gabrielle was in the lead for the most part. But then Xena started to catch up, she came right along side of Torqueo and Gabrielle. The warrior glance over to her partner with a knowing grin. Gabrielle had sighed at this and looked ahead again. She tried to get Torqueo to pick up speed but wasn't really able to.

"Gabrielle is Torqueo getting a little slow?"

The Amazon Queen narrowed her eyes over at Xena. She then shook her head and turned her head forward. "Pick it up Torqueo. Don't let her talk about you like that."

The chestnut stallion tried to pick up his pace but only by a little. He'd been to coop up in that stall without moving it was weighing on him now.

Argo on the other hand was starting to pass by Torqueo. She was breathing heavy but

she wasn't going to let that stop her. Soon she was ahead of the stallion and still picking up some speed.

Ahead Xena caught sight of the stream they'd crossed earlier at a walk. She lifted herself in the saddle doing a standing post. And as Argo came to the stream's edge she leaped over the stream. The warrior then gazed back to her Soulmate and her eyes widen in surprise as she watched.

Torqueo came to the stream's edge and suddenly lurched to a surprising stop. Gabrielle went lashing forward with the sudden stop, her face in the stallion's mane. Slowly she lifted her head with her teeth clenched to see Xena and Argo speeding ahead.

Xena turned her head back from the scene of her partner. She quietly laughed to herself and kept going at a gallop.

Gabrielle brought her right hand on the saddle and drummed her fingers, her tongue touching her back molars. "Okay! Care to explain to me Torqueo why you stopped?"

The horse turned his head back to glance at his owner. His head bobbed up and down then he huffed turning his head forward. Slowly the stallion practically tiptoed through the stream's water to the other side.

The Amazon Queen groaned. "This is good." She sighed. "Well Xena and Argo definitely won." With a shake of her head, Gabrielle patted her horse on the side of the neck. "Come on boy." She kicked him into a trot. She knew she'd lose against Xena. So why rush it? Just enjoy the ride now.

~\*~\*~\*~

Xena ambled out of the cook's hut after grabbing an apples. She'd just finished stabling Argo from the ride. Gabrielle hadn't returned yet. So Xena decided to go meet her partner at the gates. She strolled down to the gates while she ate the apple. The warrior came to the wood gates. She walked over to one side and leaned against it and continued to munch on her apple.

Within a few seconds Gabrielle appeared out of the forest coming at the village on Torqueo. The horse was moving at a walk.

Xena smiled to see her Soulmate coming. She finished eating the apple and threw it to the ground out of the way. Lifting her arms she crossed them over her chest. She kept her eyes pinned on Gabrielle mounted high on the stallion.

Gabrielle's image riding on Torqueo was rather beautiful. The Queen kept her back straight, her hands resting on her thighs with the reins. Her hair slightly brushing back from the light breeze. Her ankles were down on a perfect angle. Torqueo, himself, was gorgeous with is chestnut coat flashing from the sun's light.

Gabrielle came up to the warrior's side pulling her stallion to a stop. "Hi."

The warrior grinned as she gazed up to her Soulmate. "Glad you made it."

"Thanks." The small warrior then sighed. She carefully dismounted beside Xena and started strolling into the village towards the stables.

Xena walked beside her partner. "So you had a good look of Torqueo's mane?"

The smaller woman groaned. "Gods, that was horrible."

Torqueo heard it for he nudged against his owner's back.

"Oh don't nudge me Torqueo." Gabrielle looked sidelong to her stallion. "You owe me for that."

The horse whined and walked a little fast so that he could rest his head on his owner's shoulder.

The Warrior Princess watched the scene and grinned inwardly.

Gabrielle sighed and smiled to herself. She patted her stallion's face. "Alright alright, you're forgiven."

It seemed as if a smile took Torqueo's mouth. For he nickered and lifted his head and sped up to walk along side his owner with a sort of happiness in his stride.

The small warrior chuckled and turned her head to Xena. "I'm beat now."

"More then one way." The warrior's voice had came out low.

"What?" Gabrielle narrowed her eyes up to her Soulmate.

Xena laughed and smiled. "Nothing." She wrapped an arm around Gabrielle's waist.

"Uh huh." Gabrielle kept her pace of walk up as she held her horse's reins in her left hand. "I assume that Argo is stabled."

"She has been for awhile."

The smaller woman narrowed her eyes up at the warrior. "Don't even Xena." She grinned. "I know you're going to rub it in."

Xena grinned. "Never."

"Right." Gabrielle chuckled to herself. Then without warning she stopped and turned to Xena.

The warrior raised an eyebrow at her partner, wondering why they'd stopped.

Gabrielle quickly wrapped an arm around Xena's body as she leaned into the warrior. Her right hand though stayed by her side holding Torqueo's reins.

Xena smiled and enveloped the smaller woman. She lowered her lips close to Gabrielle's ear. "Your Amazons are going to wonder."

"Mmm, let them." The Queen nuzzled her face against her warrior's neck then lifted her head. She released Xena and stepped back.

The warrior's lips shaped into a warm smile she then nodded. Once again she started walking beside Gabrielle towards the stables.

That was late afternoon. Dusk came to the day and so did a huge dinner then later an

early sleep. Gabrielle though didn't fall asleep right away, she was too nervous about tomorrow.

~\*Part 21\*~

Gabrielle stared at the dagger in its sheath on her left arm. She sighed and felt her Soulmate's hand move away from her arm after tying it on. Slowly her eyes lifted up to Xena.

The warrior's mouth shaped into a sad smile of sorts.

The Amazon Queen mirrored the smile then sighed. Her eyes shut, she tried to calm herself. She could feel her nervousness sweep through her body. She'd be fighting Mairead first and later Caitriona, the most challenging fights yet.

Xena leaned forward to place a gentle kiss to her partner's forehead.

The smaller woman opened her eyes again and smiled to the warrior.

"Ready?"

Gabrielle nodded.

The warrior's body tensed then. Gabrielle hadn't made the usual joke about being ready and just going. She lifted both her hands to her Soulmate's shoulders. "Gabrielle you'll do fine okay?"

"Yeah." The Queen nodded her head.

"Remember that you're first before this Nation Gabrielle." Xena then smiled. "Hey, I'll be there."

A very elegant smile took the small warrior's mouth. "I know." She took a deep breath. "Okay, we better go."

Xena nodded. She straightened up and so did her partner. The Soulmates left the hut in full gear. The day was cold and brisk making them grab their cloaks before leaving and wearing them. They ambled down to the sparring fields outside of the village and met up with Ephiny.

Mairead had been waiting on the sparring field already, warming up.

Gabrielle nodded at something her regent said. She turned her head to her left at Mairead in the distance warming up. Ephiny said a few other things but she never really heard what.

The regent said something else in question.

The Queen nodded without knowing what she'd answered to. "Yeah." Her head turned back away from the scene of Mairead to the regent.

Ephiny smiled. "Good luck Gabrielle."

"Thanks." The small warrior smiled.

The regent nodded and strolled off.

Gabrielle turned her head back in Mairead's direction. But she only got to studied for so long for Xena stepped in her view. She lifted her eyes up to Xena. "Thanks." It was sincere, she really hadn't want to see Mairead.

The warrior smiled. "Sure." She then crossed her arms against her chest. "Do you know what Ephiny said?"

The younger woman shook her head guiltily. Her voice came out in a peep saying, "No."

Xena nodded. "I figured." She lifted her hand to her Soulmate's shoulder. "She told you to watch out for Mairead's high attacks. She likes to go at people's heads."

"Okay." There was such a lack of emotions in Gabrielle's voice.

The warrior squeezed her Soulmate's shoulders. "You don't have to do this if you don't want to Gabrielle. Just tell me." Xena's voice was deep and strong.

The Queen locked eyes with her consort. She debated her answer. No, she couldn't let Mairead win this one. Or if Mairead won Gabrielle would go down fighting. Her eyes then narrowed with a hard answer of, "No. I'll be okay."

The warrior smiled. "Be careful."

"I will. Thank you Xena."

The older woman nodded and released her partner's shoulders. She watched her Soulmate walk past her into the sparring field to meet up with Mairead.

Mairead smirked. "Nice that we finally have our challenge."

Gabrielle nodded. "Better late than never huh?" She bent down to pull her sais out of her boots and she stepped back. Her cloak was slightly open from the cold breeze in the air. Gabrielle flipped her sais so that the blades were under her wrists. "Ready?"

The Southeast Queen grinned. "I have been." She reached behind to unsheathe her sword with a scrape.

The Central Queen grinned. "Then lets go." Gabrielle instantly attacked after saying that. Her effort was fruitless for her attacks were stopped by Mairead's good defense.

After Gabrielle's attacks came Mairead's strong attacks. They were quick and hard ones. But Gabrielle was able to stop them all. The small warrior stopped Mairead's sword as it came to her side. She fired back by thrusting her other sai at Mairead. But the other Queen jumped back which slipped her sword out of Gabrielle's sai. The Southeast Queen's next move was something rather sudden. She'd pulled back her left fist and went to punch Gabrielle in her face and succeeded in doing so.

Gabrielle had stumbled back shaking her head trying to let her vision become stable again. But her body prickled at her right side and she placed her sai there to stop a sword. Her vision came back to normal and she quickly gave Mairead a taste of a punch. The small warrior's left hand connected with Mairead's face with the sai's butt

end.

It didn't quite bother the Southeast Queen as much. She easily shook it off and went on attack against Gabrielle. That punch in the face from earlier only seemed to enflame Gabrielle's anger. Right after Mairead's attack, Gabrielle went full force on her offensive side. She gave attack after attack against Mairead. But the Amazon was able to stop all the attacks. She was a bit taken aback by all these attacks but she let it go. For she knew Gabrielle would run out of energy and she could use that.

And she had. Gabrielle quickly wore herself out and Mairead took this advantage. She did a number of thrust and attacks on Gabrielle and a few lunges. The Southeast Queen saw her opponent just barley making the parries and stops. Mairead then gave a hard swipe at Gabrielle's right side. As soon as Gabrielle stopped the blow Mairead gave a kick with her right foot and hit Gabrielle in the lower abdomen.

The Central Queen went stepping back coughing as she bent forward. Gabrielle wouldn't leave it at that for she raised back up and came at Mairead with her eyes flashing. It was a purely stupid move because Gabrielle only found herself hit in the stomach again and flying through the air onto her back. She closed her eyes as her vision swam. Her sais rolled out of her hands and she opened her eyes at hearing boot steps come up near her.

Mairead smirked down at the other Queen. "Nice try. Next time don't be so stupid with your anger." She shook her head the strolled off the sparring field.

Gabrielle coughed, carefully rolled to her right and got up on one knee. She reached for her sais putting them into her boots. Gradually she stood up and felt her stomach pitch at the movement. There was a small pain in her abdomen but she tried to ignore it.

Xena came jogging up to her partner's side. "Gabrielle?"

The Queen gazed up to her Soulmate with cold eyes. "Yeah?"

"You feel okay?" The warrior's left hand came up to the smaller woman's right arm.

"Yeah, I'm fine." Gabrielle brushed off her Soulmate and walked pass her. She was so angry at herself now that she couldn't even talk to her partner. She was too worried she'd say something stupid to Xena.

The warrior stared at her Soulmate's back and she felt an anger in herself. That's was the other way she knew Gabrielle was fuming over her loss. So she came right up behind Gabrielle and grabbed her by the right arm. "Follow me." The warrior's voice was hard and stern.

The younger woman nodded. "Okay." She sensed Xena's release of her arm. She quickly walked behind Xena following her.

The warrior went straight to and through the village to the stables. Xena stopped and turned to her partner and removed her cloak. She came up to a well near the stables, tossed Gabrielle's cloak to the ground, and let the buck go down. As it went down Xena gazed over at her partner that just stood there in anger. "What'd you do wrong?"

Gabrielle exploded. "Gods! If I hadn't been so gods be damn stupid I could beat the

damn bitch." She took a deep breath and started pacing back and forth with a stomp. "Did you hear her Xena? I gods I could just beat the living daylights out of that Amazon." Gabrielle growled. "If I hadn't let my anger get the best of me I could have beat her." She whirled around at Xena. "I'm so stupid!" As soon as she said that she found a waterfall of cold water hit her and drench her.

Xena held the bucket in her hands with a last single drop of water falling off the rim of the wood bucket to the ground. After she tossed the water at her partner, she placed the bucket on the well and stared at her Soulmate.

Gabrielle's head bobbed up and down as she touched the back of her molars with her tongue. The water still dripping down her body. She lifted her right hand up to brush back her wet hair. She was still thinking about her challenge against Mairead. "I need another one."

The warrior nodded and dropped the bucket down on the well again. It was quickly filled as Gabrielle was pacing again with anger in her stride. Xena pulled the bucket out of the well and tossed all the water onto her Soulmate as she turned around to face Xena.

The Amazon Queen let the cold water slide down her body as she shut her eyes. She took deep breaths and let her body relaxed.

Xena watched as she leaned against the well with one hand. Inside she felt her anger calm back down. She then smiled when Gabrielle opened her eyes to her again. "Feel better?"

Gabrielle nodded. "Yeah." She lifted both her hands to brush back her wet hair. "Thanks."

The older woman nodded her head. "No problem."

"Sorry about that." The small warrior sighed and stepped up to her partner still feeling the water trickle down her body. "I shouldn't have brushed you off like that."

"It's okay, I think you didn't want to say anything bad to me."

Gabrielle nodded. "I figured I would since I was so anger." She took a long breath and let it escape from her lips at a gradual pace. "Now I'm cold." A chuckle came now.

The warrior nodded and turned to her right to lean down and pick up the wool and leather cloak of Gabrielle's. Turning back around Xena put the cloak back on her Soulmate. "Better?"

The Queen nodded. "Yeah." A sigh. "I wonder if Ephiny wants me to fight Caitriona now or later?"

"Let's go find out."

So they had, the Soulmate found out from the regent that Gabrielle's challenge wasn't till the early afternoon. The rest of the morning the Queen tried to relax and ate an early lunch before her final challenge.

~\*~\*~\*~

Gabrielle smiled. "So how did you beat Mairead?"

Queen Cairiona grinned and took a step back. "I just caught her on an off day." She reached behind to draw her Amazon sword. "Prepared?"

The small warrior nodded her head while stepping back. "Anytime."

The other Queen nodded and spun her sword in her hand. She went serious as she began to make a circle.

Gabrielle did the same and had her hands in front of her body, she was waiting for Queen Cairiona to make the first move.

The West Queen swiped over Gabrielle's head. Gabrielle had bent down to one knee and unsheathed her sais. She came back up to stop a sword blow that came near her side. Cairiona then stabbed towards her opponent's chest but missed. The Central Queen had leaned to her right out of the way. She then went on attack with her sais trying to get an opening on the other Queen.

The challenge between the two Queens rushed on. Both bouncing back and forth between offense and defense. Neither seeming to find an opening in the other's defense. But then Queen Cairiona got lucky, her sword swiped at Gabrielle's left leg just cutting her upper outside thigh.

Gabrielle moved back with a growl and saw the other woman bringing her sword down at her. She flipped her sais up and stopped the blade above her head with her sais. How she wanted to do that trick Xena had taught her from a week ago. But she had no strength right now. Then it hit her like an earthquake. Gabrielle's stomach erupted into pain and she lost her strength.

Queen Cairiona slipped her sword out of Gabrielle's sais and quickly took the distraction. She gave a hard kick to Gabrielle's stomach and saw the young woman fall to her back.

The small warrior though wouldn't let this happen again. She gritted her teeth against the pain in her stomach. She rolled to her right and quickly sprung to her feet. "Cairiona, I'm not that easy."

The West Queen's eyes widen and without thinking she thrust forward with her sword.

Gabrielle let the sword's blade go past her right side and she shifted forward with her sais tips going against the other Queen's throat. She felt her body press against the other Queen's, her eyes narrowing at Cairiona.

Queen Cairiona stared into flashing green eyes. Her right arm still was straight out from her attack. She didn't want to shift for if she did she feared the sais would pierce her throat.

Gabrielle saw the fear in the other woman's amber eyes. "Yield?" A pain shot in Gabrielle's stomach but she tried to ignore it.

Cairiona nodded. "I yield to Queen Gabrielle."

The Central Queen nodded and pulled back her sais while taking a step back.

The other Queen lowered her sword and held out her hand with a smile. "Nice come back."

Gabrielle smiled. "Thanks, just barely." She took the female's hand and they shook.

Queen Cairtriona walked off the sparring fields.

The small warrior watched her disappear in the Amazons that had been watching. The pain in her stomach came back with a hard blow. Gabrielle closed her eyes and tried to will the pain to stop. A set of warm hands grasped her arms carefully.

"Gabrielle?"

"Oh gods." Gabrielle's eyes only tightened. She'd heard Xena's concern voice. Her eyes opened again. She bent down to one knee and placed her sais away. But she couldn't stand back up right away she slowly stood back up. Another shot of pain came to her stomach and that's when she knew she was going to throw up.

Gabrielle sprinted off the sparring field without a word into the nearing woods. She bent down beside a tree and let her stomach empty.

Xena sprinted after her Soulmate, she could feel her own stomach aching. But she knew it was nothing compared to what Gabrielle was feeling.

The Queen straightened back up as she sat on her knees. Her arms wrapped around her stomach. Her stomach was empty but now she tasted blood in her mouth. So she spit some of it out.

The warrior bent down to one knee beside Gabrielle. And reached over frantically with her hands to her Soulmate's face. She saw some of the blood on the sides of Gabrielle's lips.

Gabrielle had shut her eyes again against the pain in her lower abdomen. "Xena... oh gods it's so much pain." She bent forward and tried to curl up.

Ephiny broke through the sparring field into the woods, she'd seen the challenge and what happened afterwards. She ran through the woods to spot Xena and Gabrielle down on the ground.

"Okay, come here Gabrielle." Xena's eyes were wide with worry and she was breathing hard. She wasn't sure exactly what happened but had an idea. She wrapped her arms around Gabrielle and lifted her up against her chest. The warrior then stood up with her Soulmate in her arms.

"What happened?" The regent stopped as she came up to their sides.

Xena quickly looked to Ephiny. "I'm not sure. Go get Eilis and bring her to our hut."

Ephiny nodded. "Hang in there Gabrielle." She turned to the village and broke off in a sprint for the Healer's Hut.

The warrior started jogging into the village with Gabrielle tight in her arms. Xena peered down at her Soulmate. "To many hits to your stomach?"

Gabrielle had her eyes shut tightly. She nodded faintly and pressed her head into her

warrior's shoulder as the pain came ripping through again. "Oh gods." Gabrielle's words came out in a sharp pain tone. Her grip on Xena's other shoulder tightened extremely.

That only made Xena begin to run into the village. She whipped past a bunch of shocked Amazons all wondering what happened. But the warrior went to their hut and kicked the door open with anger. She shifted over to the bed and laid Gabrielle on the bed carefully. She rushed to her med. kit and pulled it out. Soon she was back at Gabrielle's side. "Okay where's the pain Gabrielle?"

The Queen still had her eyes closed and slowly opened them. "Lower abdomen." She rasped it out and sucked in a deep breath. The pain was still going on. "It feels like killer cramps."

Xena nodded and opened her medical kit. "Just take deep breaths. Still tasting blood?" She looked up to see Gabrielle nodded and the warrior lowered her head back down to the kit as she sifted through it looking for something.

That's when Eilis came rushing in with the regent behind. Eilis came up on the other side of the bed and placed her medical kit on the bed. "What's going on?"

"Gabrielle took several blows to her lower stomach." The warrior kept searching in her medical bag for something and not finding it. "Hades."

Eilis opened her medical kit and pulled out. "Xena I have the coca. You have any asafetida?"

The warrior kept searching and found a small jar of a gum-like medicine labeled asafetida. "Yeah." She pulled it out.

"Okay perfect." Eilis was pulling out a bag of white powder as she spoke. "I'll give her the coca to stop the pain and then the asafetida to stop the convulsions if need be."

Xena nodded. "I'll get the water for you." She pulled out a small cup and rushed into the wash room.

Eilis looked back to Ephiny. "Help Gabrielle."

The regent nodded, she knew what that meant. She moved up to Gabrielle's side and grabbed the Queen's hand. "Hey Gabrielle, you'll be fine."

Gabrielle nodded, her eyes still shut tight. Then a large amount of pain came and she screamed.

Xena raced out of the washroom with the cup of water. She came over to Eilis.

Eilis held out a bowl of a white powder to Xena. The warrior poured the water into the bowl. Eilis then mixed the water and coca together producing a cloudy liquid. Xena went into Eilis medical kit to pull out a sort of needle looking object. It had a sharp point and a top that could be moved up and down to suck in or extract a liquid in the middle of a glass tube. The warrior placed the sharp point into the coca mix and pulled the top up to let the center fill with the cloudy liquid.

Xena moved over to Gabrielle's right arm that Ephiny held. She peered up to

Gabrielle's face to see it in pain. She then brought the needle's point to Gabrielle's mid arm and let it pierce her Soulmate's skin and she pushed the top down to let the cloudy liquid enter into Gabrielle's system. Slowly she removed the needle's point from the skin. Xena gazed over at Eilis. "We need to put her to sleep. The pain is too much."

The healer nodded and quickly sifted through her bag to find another but yellow powder of opium poppy. She quickly placed it into the bowl and rushed into the washroom to fill it with water. She came back out while mixing the opium with the water. Eilis came up to Xena's side.

The warrior with her fingers wiped the needle and placed it into the bowl and lifts the top up to suck the yellow liquid in. She then shifted back to Gabrielle and let the needle pierce Gabrielle's skin again but more at the upper arm.

Gabrielle felt herself go shaky from the opium poppy in her body. The pain in her stomach seemed to take one last stab at her and it was a strong one. She screamed hard and clenched Ephiny's hand with force.

Xena reached across to her Soulmate's other hand holding it tight. "Relax Gabrielle. Let the opium and coca work on you."

The Queen nodded and she took a deep breath.

"That's it, relax for me Gabrielle. You'll be fine." Xena saw the beads of sweat on her partner's forehead. "Let go. The drugs will take care of the pain."

Gabrielle's body loosened up and her eyes weren't shut as tight. She took long breaths and released them slowly. She still felt the pain in her lower abdomen.

"Just hang in there Gabrielle. I'm right here, nothing is going to happen." Xena squeezed her Soulmate's hand in a second then loosened her hold. She felt Gabrielle returned the squeeze and that made her smile. "There go love. You'll be fine, just go to sleep."

The small warrior heard her partner's soothing voice and it relaxed her. Her body less focused on the pain and she felt her breathing become shallow. Gabrielle then let go and felt herself go to sleep.

Xena felt her Soulmate's grip on her hand loosen and saw Gabrielle breathing slowly. Xena released her small warrior's hand and turned to the healer. "She'll be fine."

Eilis nodded. "Is there anything you'll need Xena?"

The Warrior Princess shook her head. "No I can handle the rest. Thanks for your help Eilis." She then lifted her left hand with the needle. "Good thing you have one."

Eilis took the needle with a smile. "Hard to get but it's very helpful." Turning to her medical kit she placed the needle back inside and her powders. She closed the bag up and took it off the bed giving Xena her attention again. "Let me know how she does. I'd give her that asafetida if her stomach starts up again."

Xena nodded. "I will."

"You have any coca and opium?"

The warrior nodded. "Yes. Thank you."

Eilis smiled. "Anytime. Take care of her. I'll come by to check on her." She then ambled over to the door.

"Bye Eilis and thank you again." Xena watched Eilis leave. She then turned to Ephiny.

The regent stared down at Gabrielle. "What happened Xena?" The Amazon peered up to the taller woman.

Xena stared down at her Soulmate as she responded. "I'm not positive. But... Gabrielle knows what happened."

Ephiny turned her head to her friend now. She still held Gabrielle's hand. "Hades I'll kill Mairead if she had anything to do with it."

The warrior gazed at the regent. "Eph, it just happened. Nothing can be done about it now."

The regent nodded. "You're right." She sighed and released her friend's hand. "Tell me when she's up Xena." She then grinned. "Or she feels like seeing me."

Xena grinned. "I will. Thank you Ephiny."

The Amazon nodded and walked out of the hut and glanced sidelong to Xena. "See you Xena." She walked out of the door and closed it behind with a sigh. Ephiny then headed towards the Amazon Camp.

The warrior looked away from the door to her Soulmate. She leaned down and placed a gentle kiss to Gabrielle's lips then rose back up. Walking to the opposite side, she took her medical kit and lifted it to place on the opposite side of the bed. Xena then padded into the washroom and soon came back out with a wet cloth.

The wet cloth was carefully placed on the small nick wound on Gabrielle's right thigh. It was pressed hard for a minute then Xena began to carefully wipe the wound clean. After that she pulled out some balm to neatly rub it into the wound to keep it clean. Lifting the cloth, she took it back to the washroom and came to the bed again. The warrior took the medical kit and put it away. Xena shifted over to the table and picked up a chair and moved it next to the bed. She sat down in the seat and sat back in it and thought about what could have happened to her partner.

~\*~\*~\*~

She took a long breath and let it fill her lungs fully then she released it slowly. Turning her head to her right, she opened her sea green eyes. And what she found was her smiling Soulmate sitting in a chair.

"How you feel?"

Gabrielle did a mental check of her body then answered. "Better."

Xena stood up from her chair and moved to sit on the bed gently beside her Soulmate. "Sleep alright?"

"Yeah." The small warrior then knitted her eyebrows together. "How long did I sleep

for?"

The warrior shrugged her shoulders. "Two candlemarks."

"And you were sitting there the entire time?"

Xena grinned. "Why wouldn't I be?" She placed her right over top of her partner's right hand. "I was too worried."

The Queen frowned. "Sorry for the scare."

"Not your fault." For emphasis, Xena squeezed her Soulmate's hand.

"I know." Gabrielle's eyes drifted away but came back to Xena. "I should have known this was coming."

"It happens Gabrielle. I'm just glad you're okay." The warrior released her partner's hand and stood up. "Speaking of which I need to do something."

The small warrior gazed up to her warrior. "What do you need to do?"

Xena faced the small woman's stomach and brought her hands to rest lightly on Gabrielle's stomach. "I'm going to test your stomach area. Tell me if anything hurts okay?"

The younger woman nodded. "Okay."

The Warrior Princess turned her attention back to her friend's stomach. She shifted her hands to Gabrielle's upper stomach, right under her ribs. Xena pressed her hands down and pushed against her Soulmate's stomach.

"Nothing."

The warrior nodded and moved her hands down to Gabrielle's mid stomach. She did the same thing and pressed while pushing some. "Now?"

"Hurts a little."

Again a nod and Xena brought her hands to the other woman's lower abdomen. Her hands pressed down while pushing back and forth. She quickly heard a hiss of pain from Gabrielle.

The Queen gritted her teeth. "Right there." Her eyes shut. "Oh gods."

Xena had lifted her hands from her partner's stomach. She gazed down at Gabrielle to see her still fighting the pain. So the warrior brought her right hand up to hold Gabrielle's. "Take deep breaths Gabrielle. Relax and you'll be fine."

Gabrielle held tight to her Soulmate's hand. Her eyes were still closed tightly and she took deep breaths while relaxing her body. Slowly the pain faded away till there was a hidden lurking pain. Her eyes opened once more. "Well... what's that mean?"

The warrior was serious. "You're bleeding internally."

The smaller woman went stiff in the bed and felt fear wash over her. "Xena."

Xena squeezed her Soulmate's hand tightly and smiled in comfort. "It's not bad I don't think. Are you still tasting blood?"

"Just a hint."

Xena nodded. "You'll be fine. Your organs are have been bruised mainly and slightly bleeding from all those blows." She took a deep breath herself. "You just need to rest."

Gabrielle closed her eyes then opened them again. "How long?"

"Until your stomach doesn't hurt."

"How long Xena?"

The warrior looked away with a sigh. She glanced back to Gabrielle. "A week minimum."

"Xena, I can't."

"You will." Xena's voice came out stern with no questioning her words. "I'm not going to let you get hurt more."

"I know." The Queen closed her eyes. "Hades."

The warrior placed her left hand on her partner's cheek. Gabrielle had opened her eyes and Xena smiled warmly. "You first before this Nation."

"Thank you." Gabrielle smiled sadly. "I just..."

"Wanted to win these challenges. I know Gabrielle. Maybe you'll be able to do them later." Xena then moved her fingertips to glide over the smooth lips then go under her friend's chin. "We need to figure out how this happened."

"It's all from the kicks I got to my stomach."

"How many?"

The small woman's eyes unfocused as she tried to remember. "I think it was... three or four." Her eyes focused on Xena again. "It couldn't have taken only four Xena."

The warrior nodded. "No." She lifted her head to stare at the headboard of the bed. Now her eyes went unfocused. "When did you first stop feeling hungry?"

"Um... before we got here. Right after we saved that village."

Xena didn't respond instead she thought about those five days of traveling. She tried to remember what happened during that fight they had against the raiders. Then the memory hit her out of a blind spot.

*Xena's sword sliced through the raider's chest. She watched him fall to the dirt ground then for some reason she felt the need to turn around. As she did she spun her sword in her hand. Once she turned around her eyes widen at the scene behind her. She'd just seen Gabrielle fly through the air and slam into a horseback man. Them both tumbling to the ground and the raider punching Gabrielle unconscious. That's*

*when the warrior broke out into a sprint after the raider that stood over her best friend. As she ran towards the raider she saw him kick Gabrielle hard in the lower abdomen. Gabrielle's unconscious body coming up off the ground for a moment from the blow then falling back down in a limp load.*

"Xena?"

The warrior shook her head of her memory and gazed back down to Gabrielle. The scene flashed to her again. *As she ran towards the raider she saw him kick Gabrielle hard in the lower abdomen. Gabrielle's unconscious body coming up off the ground for a moment from the blow then falling back down in a limp load.* "The raider."

Gabrielle furrowed her eyebrows. "What raider?"

Xena's eyes narrowed. "Remember the raider on horseback in that village that you stop?"

"Oh couldn't I?" The Queen grinned but she saw Xena still serious so she went serious again. "What about him Xena?"

"After he punched you unconscious he kicked you in the stomach hard."

The small woman shut her eyes. "Hades, I should have known." Her eyes drifted open again. "My stomach was killing me when I first woke up in that healer's hut."

"Why didn't you tell me Gabrielle?"

"Because I wasn't worried about it at the time." Gabrielle shook her head. "Didn't matter."

"But the fight did? Gabrielle you should have told me."

Gabrielle whispered, "I'm sorry."

Xena sighed. "No, it's over with." She smiled. "I just really worry about you."

The younger woman let a smile take shape. "I know. I'll be more careful." She squeezed her Soulmate's hand.

"Thank you." Xena leaned down and placed a warm kiss to her partner's lips. She raised back up with a gentle smile. "I need you to take something for me. Think you can handle it?"

Gabrielle nodded. "I'll try."

"Good." Xena released her small warrior's hands and stood up from the bed. She walked over to their saddlebags where she'd placed the med. kit back. Xena pulled out a spoon and a small jar of a yellow syrupy liquid. Shifting back to the bed, she gazed down at her partner. "Can you sit up?"

The Queen tried and slowly lifted herself but felt a shot of pain. She shut her eyes in response.

The Warrior Princess dropped the spoon and jar to the bed and reached down with both hands to Gabrielle's upper sides. She easily supported the smaller female.

"Breathe."

Gabrielle took a deep breath and nodded.

Xena carefully pushed her Soulmate back against the headboard. "Okay relax now."

Slowly the younger woman did and she opened her eyes again. "Not so bad now."

The older woman smiled. "Good." She reached down to the jar and spoon again. She took the jar's top off and lifted the spoon. Slowly the yellow liquid was pour into the spoon till it was filled. Xena then gazed back to her partner with a grin. "This will taste good."

Gabrielle raised an eyebrow. "Gods."

"Ready?"

"No, just go."

The warrior just quietly laughed and brought the spoon full of syrupy medicine to Gabrielle's lips.

The Queen took the stuff in as she smelled it as well. The taste exploded in her mouth and she almost wanted to spit it back out. But she forced it down into her system with a big swallow. She closed her eyes and shook her head. "That is foul Xena."

Xena lifted the spoon away. "I know, sorry. It'll help though."

"What was it?" The small warrior raised her head back up as her eyes opened once again.

"Arnica, it'll help with the internal bruising and bleeding." Now the jar's top was on again and Xena was putting the medicine and spoon away. "You should try to go back to sleep. Best thing right now."

"What you going to do?"

"Go see Ephiny and Eilis for a few minutes." Xena walked back over to the bed.

Gabrielle sighed with a nod. "Alright." She gazed up to her partner. "This was bad timing."

"It was." A sad smile took Xena's lips. "Just be glad it wasn't worse huh?"

"Yeah." Gabrielle's eyes fell to her lap then came back up to Xena. "Xen?"

"Yeah love?"

"Don't take long okay?" The Queen crossed her arms in her lap lightly. "I'm scared of this." She'd ushered that.

Xena bent down to one knee to be eye level. "You'll be fine, I promise okay?"

Gabrielle nodded. "I do."

The warrior smiled warmly and got one back. She then leaned forward to hug

Gabrielle lightly. And as they hugged Xena carefully lowered her Soulmate onto the bed again. Gradually the warrior pulled back but placed a kiss to Gabrielle's forehead and stood up. "Go back to sleep huh?"

"I will."

"Good." Xena shifted down to the foot of the bed. She reached forward and untied Gabrielle's boots and placed them on the floor while placing the sais on the table. Coming back over to the bed, she helped slip the covers over her friend's body. "I'll come back soon as I can."

"Thanks Xena." The young woman's lips shaped into a loving smile.

Xena reflected the smile back. "No problem love." She lowered her lips down to claims Gabrielle's. She sensed her Soulmate's small hand on her cheek. A very fine tint of blood was in the kiss, which made Xena's stomach turn in worryment. Pulling back she still had that smile. "Sleep well."

"Oh yeah." Gabrielle chuckled as she watched her Soulmate amble over to the door.

The warrior opened the door a peered back. "Bye."

"See you Xena."

Xena lowered her head and walked through the doorway going into the cloudy day. She closed the door quietly behind and headed directly down to the sparring fields to find Ephiny.

## **Part 7**

### **Section 7**

~\*Part 22\*~

The warrior lifted her arms to cross them over her chest. She nodded. "She's asleep now." Slowly Xena leaned back against the hut's wall.

"Good. But that internal bleeding shouldn't be bad." Eilis then smiled as she sat at her desk with a few scrolls surrounding her.

"It shouldn't as long as she rests."

Eilis chuckled. "Very true." A seriousness took over and she locked eyes with the warrior. "I couldn't help but noticed what you said to Gabrielle."

Xena raised an eyebrow. "Which part was that?"

"The part where you called her 'love.' Are you both together again?" Eilis moved her arms off the table to sit back in her wood chair.

"We are."

The healer smiled warmly. "That's wonderful." Her arms went against her chest. "When did this happen if I may ask?"

The warrior let a smile take her lips. "Eleven days ago."

"Ah, that makes sense then."

Once again Xena raised an eyebrow in question.

The healer quietly laughed. "I noticed a change in the relationship between you and Gabrielle." A nod. "I'm glad to hear it."

The Warrior Princess stood up from the wall and uncrossed her arms. "It was to long."

Eilis nodded. "Might have been longer. Things seem pretty perfect now except..."

"Speaking of which." The warrior moved to the door. "I need to go check on the Queen."

A small chuckle came from Eilis. "Quite." She went stern. "I'll come by tomorrow morning to check on her."

Xena nodded. "Great. Thanks again Eilis."

"Quite welcome Xena. Take care."

The warrior opened the door still gazing over at the healer. "We both will." She smiled. "Take care yourself. Bye." With that said she stepped out the door and closed it behind. Slowly Xena's boot stamped down the steps of the healer's hut to meet the ground. She went at a slow walk heading to her hut, her mind filled with thoughts.

Then it suddenly hit her causing her to stop dead in her tracks. Xena brought her arms over her stomach and shut her eyes as a bad pain came like a cramp. Her eyes flew open. "Hades." She broke out running to the hut with full intent to burst through the door, which she did. As soon as Xena came in she saw Gabrielle sitting up arms around her stomach head bent forward crying in pain. The door was closed and Xena raced to her saddlebags for the medical kit. "Hang in there Gabrielle." She frantically milled through her medicines.

"Xena... I don't need medicines." Slowly the young woman opened her eyes to gaze at her friend. "Just you... please." All her words came out in a rasp of pain.

Xena stopped for a moment. Her mind raced to consider that a smart idea or not. But her soul only knew one answer. Her soul had the greater strength and it led her to stand up and quickly move to the bed, forgetting about the medicine. The warrior got onto the bed behind Gabrielle and wrapped her arms around her Soulmate and pressed her body against her small back.

The Queen took a long breath and she reached to her partner's large hands. Her eyes were still shut against the pain but she took Xena's hands. Gabrielle then brought her Soulmate's hands to her lower stomach to rest there. She continued to take deep breaths to relax her body.

Xena let her fingertips slid under the younger woman's leather belt right to where she knew the pain to be.

Gabrielle took one last deep breath and felt the pain disappear. "Oh gods." She sighed

in relief and let her body relax back into Xena.

The warrior nuzzled her partner's neck. "Better?"

The small warrior nodded. "A lot."

"What happened?"

Gabrielle closed her eyes. "I woke up with the pain." Her eyes slowly opened.

The warrior lifted her hands slowly from under the leather belt, she wrapped her left arm around her partner's lower stomach. With her right hand she reached behind to unhook her sheath and sword. They fell the ground and soon the chakram did as well. "Think you can move back?"

The Queen nodded. "Yeah."

Xena wrapped both her arms around Gabrielle's stomach again. Slowly and carefully she pushed back till her back was against the headboard.

The younger woman shut her eyes as the pain started to come fizzing up again. "Xena."

"I got you." Xena quickly moved her hands down to where the pain was in Gabrielle. "Relax."

The pain slowly dissipated to nothingness and the small warrior dropped her head back against her Soulmate's right shoulder. "Thank you Xena."

"Sorry I wasn't here."

Gabrielle shook her head. "You couldn't have known." She lifted her hands from her thighs and brought them up to lace through her Soulmate's fingers.

Now both Soulmate's hands stay resting on Gabrielle's internally damaged abdomen.

The young woman then knitted her eyebrows. "How'd you know I was in pain anyway? You came bursting into the door like you knew."

The older woman grinned. "Let's say I felt the effects."

Gabrielle chuckled. "Oh I see. You got caught with some bad cramps huh?"

"Pretty much." Xena brought her lips down to place a gentle kiss to her partner's neck. "I guess we'll be staying like this for awhile."

The smaller woman quietly chuckled. "And you don't mind?"

"Oh no." Xena rubbed her thumb over Gabrielle's for a second.

"Did you find Eph?"

The warrior nodded. "I did."

"What'd she say?"

"She's worried about you. But right now you have three by's before technically having

a challenge."

"And what did you say Xena?"

Xena sighed. "Basically you'd be there if you can be."

Gabrielle nodded. "Maybe I'll be lucky."

The warrior let her breath out slowly. "Let's take it a day at a time." She paused. "By the way, Eilis is happy about us."

The young woman looked sidelong at Xena. "Eilis? Us? Hold on what you mean?"

Xena let a chuckle escape. "She knows we're together."

"How?"

"Because I called you love earlier."

Gabrielle groaned. "And you talk about me flashing rings. You just right out say it."

"Remember I'm the blunt one."

The Queen snickered. "Right." She let a smirk take her lips. "That's why you had to kiss me in a dreamscape thingy instead of just telling me you're in-love with me."

A laugh came from Xena. "Well I didn't want to... overwhelm you."

Gabrielle started to laugh a little. "Overwhelm me Hades. Overwhelm yourself you mean."

Xena grinned and brought her lips close to her partner's ear. "Overwhelm us maybe."

"Mmm, sounds right." The Queen turned her head sidelong so that she could place a kiss to her Soulmate's left cheek and then nuzzle the warrior's neck. She let the side of her face stay resting against Xena's neck. "So what did Eilis have to say?"

"That she was really glad." The warrior closed her eyes as she let her head rest against Gabrielle's. "She'll be here tomorrow morning to check on you."

"She's not going to do that stomach pushing like you did... right?"

The warrior chuckled. "You're the Queen."

"Hades that doesn't mean a darn thing when it comes to a healer."

Xena grinned. "True." She then smiled as her voice came out in defense. "I'll take care of her."

"Good." Gabrielle's eyes drifted shut. "You tell Eph to come by?"

"Nah, I just assumed she would."

Gabrielle grinned. "Ephiny, oh yeah she will. That mother hen." A knock at the door came. So she grinned and spoke more louder. "I'll bet my life on it that's her."

"But I already own that."

The Queen grinned. "Definitely." She then sighed as another knock came and she still talked in a loud voice. "Think we should answer?"

"Yesss." Xena opened her eyes and gazed across to the door. "Come in." Her voice was louder.

The door opened and Ephiny came stomping in. Outside the setting sun's rays filter through into the hut till the door was closed behind.

Gabrielle grinned devilishly at her regent. "Nice to see you here."

"I heard what you two said earlier." Ephiny placed her hands on her hips with a glare.

The warrior grinned at the Amazon. "And?"

"And I'm not a mother hen." The regent looked directly at Gabrielle and cleared her throat.

Gabrielle chuckled. "Denial Eph."

The regent sighed and shook her head she ambled over to the table and picked up a chair. She swung it around to face the Soulmates. Ephiny sat down in it with a flop. "So how are you feeling?" She was gazing at Gabrielle.

The small warrior nodded. "A lot better." She felt a tint of oddness for sitting like this in her partner's arms in front of her friend. But Hades if she was going to move out of her Soulmate's arms.

"Good. That was pretty scary." The regent relaxed back in the chair and crossed her right leg over her left.

The Queen grinned. "Trust me I know." Her expression went serious. "What's going on with the challenges?"

Ephiny reached down to her left side to untied a scroll and she handed up to Gabrielle. "We still need to do some primary challenges before we can do the final one's."

Gabrielle nodded as she unrolled the scroll and peered down at it.

### ***Finals***

#### **Mairead Southeast**

Wins: Aureus - Zahra - Parvulus - Gloria - Leatus - Yakut - Nyx - Gabrielle TOTAL:  
8

Losses: Caitriona TOTAL: 1

#### **Gabrielle Central**

Wins: Parvulus - Yakut - Gloria - Nyx - Zahra - Leatus - Aureus - Caitriona TOTAL:  
8

Losses: Mairead TOTAL: 1

### **Caitriona West**

Wins: Gloria - Yakut - Aureus - Nyx - Leatus - Zahra - Mairead TOTAL: 7

Losses: Parvulus - Gabrielle TOTAL: 2

#### *Primary*

##### *Aureus South*

Wins: Zahra - Laetus - Yakut - Gloria - Nyx TOTAL: 4

Losses: Mairead - Caitriona - Gabrielle - Parvulus TOTAL: 4

##### *Zahra Southwest*

Wins: Nyx - Yakut - Leatus - Gloria TOTAL: 4

Losses: Aureus - Mairead - Gabrielle - Parvulus - Caitriona TOTAL: 5

##### *Nyx Northeast*

Wins: Laetus - Gloria - Yukut - Parvulus TOTAL: 4

Losses: Zahra - Gabrielle - Caitriona - Mairead - Aureus TOTAL: 5

Gabrielle gazed up to her partner. "Nyx?"

The warrior still stared down at the scroll. "Yeah probably."

The small warrior rolled the scroll up and handed it to Ephiny. "So there's going to be challenges between Nyx, Zahra, and Aureus?"

The regent had taken the scroll and was tying it onto her side again. "Yes." She lifted her head to the Soulmate's again. "Whichever Queen comes out winning will be in the finals as well."

"Sso that's going to be in the course of two days?"

Ephiny nodded at Gabrielle's question then responded. "Yes then we'll all take a day off before the finals." She then sighed. "Gabrielle I'll try to have you last as possible but if you can't fight you'll have to forfeit. It's Amazon tradition."

The Queen closed her eyes and turned her head away. "Alright." She gave her attention to Ephiny again. "Whatever happens, happens I guess."

"There's nothing you can do Eph?"

The Amazon averted her eyes to Xena. "No Xena, it can't be changed." Her head lowered and she sighed while raising her head. "I tried to think of something but I can't come up with anything. Your only chance is to heal in three days."

Gabrielle laughed low and sarcastically. "Fat chance."

Xena though felt an idea take her but she didn't voice it. This wasn't the time so she gazed to the regent again. "Do the Queens know?"

The regent shook her head. "I won't say anything till I'm sure Gabrielle can't fight."

The Queen turned her head back and forth. "They'll know. Mairead and Caitriona will know what's happened." She sighed.

Ephiny released her breath slow. "Just worry about what's going on with your body Gabrielle. That's most important then these challenges." She smiled. "You're more important."

The small warrior sadly smiled. "Thanks."

"Anytime." The regent then stood. "I need to head down to dinner."

Gabrielle let a warmer smile take shape. "Thanks for coming by."

"No problem. Get plenty of rest."

"Plan to."

The regent then glanced over at the warrior. "You'll be down at dinner?"

Xena nodded. "For a second or two to grab some food."

Ephiny grinned. "I could have somebody bring some up for you both..."

A grin creased the Queen's lips. "Really?"

The Amazon chuckled. "Definitely my Queen. I'll have it sent." She ambled over to the door. "Bye."

"Bye Eph." Gabrielle watched her friend leave. "So Xena what's this idea of yours?"

The warrior knitted her eyebrows. "How did..."

The younger woman grinned. "I just know you Xena. You changed the subject quickly so I knew you had something in mind."

"You're good."

"I know." Gabrielle let her hands lace with Xena's again. "So?"

Xena smiled. "Well it's going to have to deal with a lot of together time."

A small laugh came from the Queen. "I'm liking this plan already."

The warrior though went stoic as she decided to explain her idea or rather hopes. "I have a feeling if we're... well together then you'll heal faster."

Gabrielle didn't respond right away, she considered the idea. "You mean close together?" She paused. "Hold on... so you're saying if... if we're close then I'll be able to heal faster because we're Soulmates?"

The warrior didn't say anything instantly as she reflected on it. "Yes, I have a funny

feeling it might work."

The Queen let her breath out slowly and relaxed into her partner's arms. "Good plan."

Xena quietly laughed. "Shouldn't be... too stressful."

~\*~\*~\*~

"Room services." The Amazon grinned as she closed the door behind with her free hand while her other hand held a tray of food. "Or rather hut services I should say."

Gabrielle groaned at her friend. "Thanks Amarice."

The warrior slowly ambled out of the wash room. "What took you Amarice?"

Amarice coolly turned her head towards the Warrior Princess. "Deal Xena."

Xena quietly laughed and finally let an appreciative smile take form. "Thanks Amarice."

"No problem." The Amazon flashed a smile then strolled over to the table placing the tray of food there. Turning to Gabrielle she frowned. "I heard what happened. Letting to many of those dumb Queens get you."

The small warrior sighed as she sat on the bed. "I'm afraid they're the smarter ones Amarice. They broke my defenses and good."

The Amazon crossed her arms over her chest. "I still say they're stupid to mess with you from what I've seen."

"Thanks." Gabrielle shook her head. "But maybe I'll be up and about soon." She let her hands shift in her lap and her shoulders shifting some against the headboard of the bed.

Xena moved to sit down on the foot of the bed gazing over at Amarice with Gabrielle in the corner of her eye.

Amarice knitted her eyebrows. "So exactly what's... the injury? I mean you look fine."

"My lower organs are internally bruised."

The Amazon flinched for a moment. "How long will that take to heal?"

That's when the warrior cut in. "Maybe a week Amarice."

"Oh gods." Amarice turned her head to Xena. "The longest?"

Xena turned her head to Gabrielle. "Two and half weeks." She averted her eyes back to Amarice.

"Then that means you can't fight... right?" The Amazon questioned the Queen with a worried tone.

"Yes Amarice." The small warrior added her arms going against her chest. "Nothing can be done really."

Amarice huffed. "Well centaur shit if I am gonna be an Amazon if somebody like

Mairead becomes the head Queen. I am not going to be apart of that."

Gabrielle's eyes quickly harden. "Amarice you will give Mairead a chance if she does become the Queen."

The Amazon raised an eyebrow. "I'm sorry Gabrielle but I am not even going to give her the time of day." Amarice quickly noticed her Queen's eyes narrowing so Amarice explained herself. "Gabrielle I'm not the only one that feels like that. All your Amazons won't have anything to do with this new Nation if Mairead is the head Queen. Nobody wants to be reigned under her control. Mairead can only think about fighting, wars, and battles. We all want you for the head Queen."

The small warrior sighed and dropped her gaze. "It's probably not going to happen now Amarice." She glanced back up. "So start liking the idea that Mairead will be Queen. She might just be."

Amarice sighed and rolled her eyes while dropping her arms. "She's going to have a really small Nation then. That piece of a centaur-"

"Amarice." The Queen's voice had came out in low warning.

The Amazon sheepishly smiled. "Sorry... well I'll just hope that Caitriona becomes Queen."

"Thank you Amarice."

Amarice let herself quietly laugh. "Sure. I still say you belong as Queen."

Gabrielle raised an eyebrow. "Well maybe if I can't fight in the challenges then I'll try to challenge the head Queen later on."

The Amazon's face brightened. "You have to Gabrielle if Mairead becomes Queen. You can't let her be the head Queen, she'll destroy the Amazons."

The small warrior sighed. "We'll see." She paused. "Thanks for bringing the food."

Amarice smiled. "Anytime. Ah I better go so you two can eat." She walked over to the door and gazed back at the Soulmates on the bed. "I got you something light Gabrielle." Her eyes then drifted to Xena. "And Eph said you don't eat any sort of red meat."

The warrior grinned. "Trying to quit."

The Amazon chuckled. "No cow huh?"

Xena lifted her arms to cross over her chest. "No, cow butt doesn't interest me."

"But chicken butt does?" Amarice then started to laugh.

"Bye Amarice." Gabrielle had a smug look on her face after she said that to her Amazon.

Amarice stopped and went serious. "I can take a hint. See if I visit you two ever again."

"You will Amarice." The warrior shot a smirk to the Amazon.

The Amazon huffed and opened the door. "Maybe. Well enjoy the food. Bye."

"Bye Amarice and thank you."

Xena smiled and also spoke up. "Thanks Amarice. Be good too."

Amarice rolled her eyes. "Right. Bye." She then left closing the door quietly behind.

Gabrielle sighed after she heard the door shut. She gazed over at Xena. "She's a mess."

The warrior grinned. "Tell me about it." She stood up from the bed and padded over to the bed to the tray. "Let's see what we got here." Xena studied the food deciding what would best settle with Gabrielle's stomach. "Think you can handle some soup?"

"What kind?"

"It's just chicken. Shouldn't be too hard to digest." Xena glanced sidelong at her Soulmate.

Gabrielle nodded. "Yeah sure. What else is there?"

"A little white rice too. Let's start with the soup." The warrior turned around with the bowl of soup and a spoon. She took two steps over to the bed and handed it carefully to Gabrielle.

The Queen took the bowl and smelled the aroma of the soup invade her senses. She actually felt herself go hungry. "Thanks."

Xena nodded and turned back to the tray and lifted a plate with grilled chicken with an olive sauce and broccoli with corn. She picked up a knife and fork then sat on the side of the bed to face her partner. "How is that?"

Gabrielle gazed up and let a grin take her lips. "Bland but it's settling."

"Good." The warrior settled the plate into her lap and began to eat the food on her plate.

"So think I can have some milk later with all of this?" The small woman was grinning as she glanced over at her Soulmate.

The older woman slowly raised her hand at Gabrielle. "If you want to throw it up later sure."

The small warrior chuckled. "Welllll maybe after I get better."

"Good idea." Xena grinned and went back to eating her food.

The pair ate in relative silence as they always did. It was one of the few times they stayed silent but they always enjoyed the silence. It was almost like a tradition to be silent at their dinners.

After they ate Gabrielle peered over at her warrior whom was by the fire stocking it.

"Think I can try getting out of bed?"

Xena just lit the fire and turned to her Soulmate. "Yeah." She moved across the floor to her partner's side.

Gabrielle waited for her Soulmate not wanting to stand till she was by her side. Slowly the young woman swung her bare feet out of the bed to the wood floor. She stood up at a slow rate beside her partner. But she was shaky and so she grasped her warrior's closest shoulder.

"Take your time." Xena held her Queen. "You have no energy since you pretty much emptied your stomach today."

The young woman nodded. "I'd say so." She took a deep breath. "Okay, I think I'll be alright." Slowly she released Xena and began to walk around.

Xena watched her and saw how her Soulmate moved slowly. This was a bit unnerving for Xena. But she could only let time heal Gabrielle.

The small warrior then walked into the washroom deciding she really wanted to clean up.

The warrior though went to the saddlebags and pulled out one of her shifts. "Feel like getting out of your leathers."

"Yeah." Gabrielle had called back from the washroom.

Xena rose up and tossed the shift to the bed and turned towards the washroom's entrance. She saw her Soulmate come out slowly with her eyes closed tight.

Gabrielle leaned against the doorway and wrapped her arms over her stomach. She sucked in a deep breath.

The Warrior Princess's eyes widen and she took two large steps to be near Gabrielle. Her large hands came down to the younger woman's lower abdomen. "It's okay, I got you."

The Amazon Queen nodded and leaned into Xena instead of the doorway. Her arms wrapped around the warrior while she let her face sink into Xena's shoulder.

Xena held her Soulmate around the stomach area feeling Gabrielle's breathing slow down. "Is it leaving?"

The small warrior took a long breath and raised her head. "Yeah thanks."

The older woman smiled. "Anytime." She then took a step off to the side to stand beside her friend. Xena's right arm snaked around Gabrielle's back. "Come on."

Gabrielle nodded and moved through the hut gradually. Xena helped her to sit at the foot of the bed next to the night shift.

Xena then smiled after releasing the other woman. "Let's get you out of your leathers."

Gabrielle nodded. "Right simple enough." She began to take her top off.

"Let me do it. You relax."

"Xena, don't be an Ephiny."

The warrior's lips formed into a grin. "No, I'm just being your Soulmate."

Gabrielle let a warm smile crease her lips. "Thank you."

Xena nodded. "I love you." She reached forward to carefully pull Gabrielle's leather top off. She then reached to her right picking up the shift and slipping it over Gabrielle.

The young woman shrugged it over her body letting it stay just over her hips since she still had yet to take her skirt off.

The warrior grasped her Soulmate's leather belt attached to the skirt and she carefully pulled them off. She didn't want to be fast or hard about it since the leather belt would brush past Gabrielle's lower stomach. After taking them off she placed the skirt by the leather top.

Slowly the Amazon Queen stood up and let her partner's shift slid over her body. It felt good to have on something loose. Gabrielle padded over to a window closes to her. She stared outside into the darkness and let her eyes drift up to the star lit sky.

After placing her Soulmate's leathers away, Xena turned towards Gabrielle's back. Xena quietly made her way over to Gabrielle. She wrapped her arms around the Queen's stomach and gazed out of the window as well.

"I hope my stomach will heal over soon."

Xena was silent for a moment. She wished she could just correct the problem with a wave of her hand. But she couldn't. But maybe, just maybe she could will it to happen. "Give yourself time."

Gabrielle sighed. "That's about all I can do huh?"

Carefully the warrior moved her hands to her partner's sides. She forced Gabrielle to turn around and face her.

Gabrielle stared deep up into her Soulmate's eyes and she saw a certain promise in them.

And Xena soon spoke that promise. "Do you want your stomach to heal in three days Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle nodded. "Yes."

Xena's lips shaped in a very warm and trusting smile. "Then we will have it heal in three days." Carefully Xena leaned down to capture her Soulmate's lips in a love filled intense kiss.

~\*Part 23\*~

The three days rolled in and rolled away. The days for the Amazons were nothing but fighting and deciding on the fourth Queen to be in the finals. The end result of these

last challenges was Nyx who defeated the other two Queens. But the third day was a day of rest for all the Amazons, especially the Queens.

For the Soulmates these three days were nothing but rest and relaxation. They spent time together in the hut hardly doing anything but resting in each other's arms. Gabrielle had begun her healing process and fast at that. By the third day's morning only her lower abdomen hurt faintly. So that had led them to finally leave the hut in the late morning going for a walk together through the woods.

The Queen smiled while walking down the trail. "Gods, it's so nice to finally be out of that hut."

The warrior chuckled and gazed over at her Soulmate. "Was it all that bad?"

"No." Gabrielle grinned up to her partner. "Two days with you alone? I'd do it again in a heartbeat." She then gazed ahead. "It's just nice to stretch my legs though."

Xena nodded. "Felt a little cramp in that small hut."

The Queen quietly laughed. "Well maybe you did since you're tall."

"Ohhh?" The older woman arched an eyebrow down at her smaller warrior.

Gabrielle nodded. "Yeah, you know." She stepped closer to Xena to bump against her.

Xena chuckled and wrapped an arm around behind her Soulmate's shoulders pulling her in close. She took a deep breath and gazed ahead thoughtfully. "Your body might be able to handle fighting tomorrow."

"You really think so?" Gabrielle peered up to Xena with a hopeful look.

"Maybe." Xena sighed. "We should talk to Ephiny and see how she's going to work these finals." She looked down at Gabrielle. "If she's doing a fight a day we should have Mairead, Caitriona, and Nyx fight tomorrow."

"So then that would leave me another day to recover huh?"

Xena nodded. "Exactly." She was gazing down at Gabrielle with serious eyes. "I don't want you fighting when you haven't had a chance to practice first."

The Queen nodded in agreement. "You're right. I wouldn't stand a chance then after three and half days of laying around."

The warrior looked up as she kept walking. "My thoughts exactly." She sighed unhappily then. "We better head back."

The smaller woman smirked. "You don't sound to happy about that."

Xena turned her head to Gabrielle. "Oh no."

Gabrielle chuckled and stopped walking. "Yeah I agree, this is dragging out huh?"

The older woman had stopped walking in the forest. She shrugged her shoulders. "Maybe."

The Queen raised an eyebrow. "You know it is."

Xena flashed a knowing grin.

Gabrielle chuckled and her lips shaped into a warm smile. She took a step closer to Xena and wrapped her arms around her Soulmate.

Xena enveloped her arms around Gabrielle holding her tight. Her head lowered down to rest against Gabrielle's while her eyes closed.

"Thanks Xena for your help." The small warrior rested her head against her Soulmate's chest as she held her partner.

The warrior kissed the top of Gabrielle's head and dropped her head back down. "You know I would."

"Yeah I know. It's just... sometimes it hits me hard just how lucky I am to have you."

Xena smiled. "The feeling is mutual."

Gabrielle laughed lightly. "Good." She lifted her head knowing Xena would lower hers.

Their lips had met and created a strong kiss that lasted for a time. After they broke the kiss and released each other they started walking back to the Amazon village to find Ephiny.

~\*~\*~\*~

Ephiny sat down in her chair by her desk and soon as she did a knock was heard. She sighed and gazed over to the door. "Come in!"

The door opened and the pair of Soulmates came in with warm smiles.

The regent smiled back. "So you both are up and about huh?"

Gabrielle grinned and padded across the hut to sit down. She heard Xena shut the door and move to sit down in a chair next to Gabrielle. "Yeah, Xena and I just got back from a stroll in the woods."

"Really?" The Amazon turned her head to Xena. "I didn't think warriors took *strolls* but I guess I'm wrong."

The Warrior Princess raised an eyebrow at the regent. She then was serious. "I didn't think regents fell in-love with their second in commands but guess I'm wrong."

Ephiny chuckled and crossed her arms over her chest. "That's just a myth."

Xena grinned devilishly. "Just a myth huh? I've seen different."

The Amazon opened her mouth to say something but was cut off as Gabrielle coughed to get her attention. Ephiny closed her mouth and turned her attention to her Queen. "Yes my Queen?"

Gabrielle snickered. "That's better." Now she went serious. "What's going on with the finals?"

The regent sighed. "Well as you know it's Nyx, Mairead, Caitriona, and you in the finals. So far I'm planning to have one final a day. I figured it would be a good idea, give you an extra day to rest."

The Amazon Queen smiled. "Perfect. That's mainly why Xena and I came by."

The regent nodded. "Well right now the plan is for Mairead to fight Caitriona tomorrow. The following day is suppose to be you and Nyx." She let her breath out slowly. "You think you can fight by then or not?"

The small warrior turned her gaze from Ephiny to her Soulmate in question.

Xena looked at her partner then to Ephiny. "We think so Eph. Gabrielle's stomach is almost healed."

The regent's eyes widen. "Gods really?" She gazed over to Gabrielle for conformation.

The Queen nodded her head in agreement. "Almost."

The Amazon smiled. "That's great. Gods... it's amazing." She chuckled. "How'd you manage that?"

Gabrielle grinned. "It's called a lot of TLC."

The regent let a grin take her lips as well. "Oh... I see now."

The smaller warrior groaned and peered up to Xena.

The warrior grinned. "Your regent."

Gabrielle sighed and glanced back to Ephiny. "Anyway." She grinned. "What happens the third day of the finals?"

"Whoever wins the two challenges the other two days will then fight. And whichever Queen wins will be the head Queen of the Nations."

The small warrior furrowed her eyebrows. "A live or die situation you're using huh?"

Ephiny nodded. "Yeah I figured it would be the best way. I pretty much matched up each opponent that is evenly matched."

Gabrielle nodded. "Good idea, we don't have much more time."

The regent nodded her head. "No not much. I give it another week or two before winter hits."

The Amazon Queen groaned and leaned back in her seat. "That's not good."

"Don't worry Gabrielle, we have plenty of fire wood for the winter."

Gabrielle chuckled but only for a moment. "That's not my concern. I'm worried if the Queens will have enough time to get back to their Nations." She then let her next words come out in a whisper. "Especially Yakut."

Ephiny shook her head. "I think we'll be fine."

Xena nodded and gazed over at Gabrielle. "We'll be fine Gabrielle. We'll just make it by the skin of our teeth."

The small warrior nodded. "I hope the weather holds out till then." She then sighed after gazing down at the floor. "How are all the Amazons dealing with each other?" Her eyes lifted up to Ephiny.

Ephiny smiled. "Things are fine. No fights or bickering. Everybody is pretty involved with the challenges."

Gabrielle nodded. "Good." She then gazed over at Xena. "I think we'll go." Her eyes averted back to Ephiny. "This is your day to catch your breath."

The regent nodded. "Yeah, been a busy week."

The Queen nodded. "Tell me about it." She stood up slowly with her Soulmate. "Get Solari to give you some TLC today Eph."

Ephiny laughed and stood up from her chair. "I don't know what you're talking about my Queen."

"Right AR."

The Amazon's lips took on a grin. She stepped forward and hugged Gabrielle. "Glad you're doing better. I've been worried."

A smile came from Gabrielle. "Thanks Eph. And thanks for sending Amarice practically every candlemark with food."

Ephiny snickered. "I thought you would like that."

"Oh she's great entertainment. She keeps me posted on the gossip."

The regent nodded. "Oh yeah, Amarice is part of the G force in this Nation. She knows all the gossip."

"So I've notice." Gabrielle sighed. "Okay, I'll see you later. Have a good day Eph."

"You too Gabrielle." Ephiny then smiled to Xena. "Xena, I'm surprised you haven't caused any mayhem in the village yet."

The warrior grinned. "I don't know what you're talking about Ephiny."

The regent laughed. "Right. Bye Xena."

Xena smiled. "See you Eph." She ambled over to the door and opened it.

Gabrielle followed behind. "See you Eph."

"Bye you two." Ephiny watched the door to her hut close and she sighed.

~\*~\*~\*~

The afternoon of that day had quickly come and the Soulmates for a candlemark before dusk did some light sparring. They'd left the village to go to a clearing in the Amazon Forest to practice.

"I want you to take this slow okay?"

Gabrielle nodded at her Soulmate as she stood up with her sais.

Xena smiled. "Good." She took a step back and unsheathed her sword. "And if your stomach starts hurting at all then tell me."

The Queen nodded only again. "I think you'll know if it is bothering me." She grinned as she flipped her sais placing the blades under her wrists.

The warrior arched an eyebrow. "Sometimes you're good about hiding it."

Gabrielle smirked. "Well monkey see monkey do."

Xena gave her partner a semi-drop dead look for that comment. "Funny Gabrielle." A small grin now.

The smaller warrior chuckled then let her grin go a little devilish. "So you going to fight or give me looks all day?"

The Warrior Princess twisted her wrist to flip her sword and now her own grin swept across her lips. And that certain twinkle came to her crystal blue eyes.

Gabrielle took a deep breath. "Oh boy." As soon as she said that Xena's sword came at her and Gabrielle just parried it. Afterwards Gabrielle jumped back. "Not bad Xena. But you seem still a little off."

Xena laughed. "You're full of all sorts of jokes today Gabrielle."

"Oh yeah." Gabrielle quickly lunged forward with her sais to get at Xena's stomach. "Just trying to keep you distracted."

The warrior grinned after stopping the sais. "You're going to need a lot of jokes then love."

The Queen pulled back to come at Xena's feet. "Oh I don't need jokes to distract you."

Xena had done a back flip to get away from the sais coming at her feet. She landed and flipped her sword while speaking. "Don't I know."

The Soulmate's sparring practice went on for that planned candlemark. Gabrielle was slower than normal and a bit weak but she wasn't stupid about her fighting. Xena figured that by tomorrow she would be fine and ready for the fight against Nyx.

"No you shouldn't have any problems." The warrior then sat down on the log after speaking. She reached behind with her sword sheathing it.

Gabrielle walked over to the log and propped one boot up at a time sheathing her sais. Then she sat down with a flop beside Xena on the log. "You think so huh?"

Xena nodded. "Yeah. Just get plenty of sleep tonight and tomorrow night."

"And plenty of food." Gabrielle chuckled after her own words.

"And plenty of food will help Gabrielle." The warrior gazed over at her partner with

seriousness.

The Queen nodded. "I know." She took in a long breath. "I'm actually hungry now."

The older woman smiled. "It's good to hear that again." She reached over with her left arm and wrapped it behind Gabrielle's shoulders. She pulled her smaller Soulmate against her.

Gabrielle smiled as she dropped her head against Xena's shoulder. "So we're going to practice tomorrow too?"

Xena nodded. "Yeah. All day sound good?"

"Let me think." Gabrielle grinned. "I guess so." A light laugh escaped her lips.

The warrior smiled to herself. "Good."

Gabrielle sighed contently. She felt the cool afternoon's air begin to take her. She then knew her body was cooling down from the sparring. "You know it'll be nice to see Cyrene."

Xena stared off into the dusk woods. "It will. If I know Mother, she's worried about us."

"Gods, you realize Xena we're going to have a time explaining everything to her?"

The warrior chuckled. "Oh yes." She sighed with a grin. "As soon as we come into Amphipolis I can promise you Mother will come out and grab me by my ear. Drag me into the tavern and yell at me for separating with you."

The Queen lifted her head off Xena's shoulder. "You really think so?"

"Yesss." Xena gazed over at her partner.

"She didn't the other two times."

Xena shrugged her shoulders. "Because she knew I wouldn't talk about it then."

Gabrielle grinned and dropped her head back down on the warrior's shoulder. "Well, she'll just have to yell at me too."

The warrior didn't say anything. Instead she kiss the top of Gabrielle's head then rest her own against Gabrielle's head. After that she felt her small partner wrap an arm around her mid back. They both closed their eyes and let their bodies become lost in their soul.

"Xena?"

"Mmm?"

"We better go before it gets dark. I don't feel like getting lost in the woods like last time."

Xena chuckled and opened her eyes. "Don't feel like doing a flip with me?"

Gabrielle slowly opened her emerald eyes. "No, just don't feel like tripping to fall on

my face."

The warrior's lips took the shape of a grin. "Don't feel like having me catch you again?"

"Welll." The small warrior chuckled. "There are exceptions." She raised her head off Xena's shoulder once the warrior lifted her head.

The older woman chuckled and slowly stood up. "That's what I figured." She watched to see Gabrielle stand and that made her smile warmly. Carefully Xena pressed her warm hands against Gabrielle's stomach. "How's it feel?"

Gabrielle smiled back and let her hands come up to rest on Xena's over her own stomach. "So much better."

Xena let her hands then glide across her partner's stomach to her sides. "Good. That was a good scare."

The small warrior nodded. "It was." Her hands now shifted to rest on her tall Soulmate's hips. "I'm just glad you've been here to take care of me."

The warrior's smile went deep into warmth. "Always." She leaned down to kiss her Soulmate soundly.

Once they pulled back from the kiss they found it to almost be dark.

Gabrielle groaned. "Oh great."

Xena grinned and reached down to grasp her partner's hand. "Come on. We've made it through the darkness before."

The Queen nodded with a smile. "To say the least."

The warrior started walking through the darkening woods with Gabrielle right beside her. This time though, the pair made it directly through the darkness without any problem. They hit nothing, didn't fall because of anything, and didn't lose each other.

~\*Part 24\*~

The following day brought about a lot of work and sparring for Gabrielle. She and Xena had risen late morning and made their way to eat a huge breakfast. After that, well they left the village taking a long walk into the woods to find a clearing far away from the village. And there they practice till late morning.

Gabrielle's fighting in the morning was a little lethargic but quickly picked up as she went along and when she was fully awake. By that early afternoon before the Soulmates broke for lunch she was going all out. Gabrielle's moves had sped back up to lightening quick reflexes. Her blows held their normal strength and Gabrielle's focus was perfectly there. The only small thing that lack was her endurance and tone.

"I guess three plus days of doing nothing finally caught up with me."

Xena flashed a grin then went stoic. "It did some." She took a deep breath. "But you'll be more than prepared by tomorrow."

Gabrielle nodded. Her fork came down to pierce a few cut carrots. "Thank the gods for that." She then grinned.

The warrior arched an eyebrow in question. "What's the grin about?"

The Queen shook her head. "I think I should be saying thank Xena for that."

Xena chuckled as she watched an Amazon pass by their table in the food hut. "We both healed your stomach."

Gabrielle nodded. "I know. I'm just glad it worked." She sighed. "I still can't believe it did."

The Warrior Princess grinned evilly. "Neither can I nor will the rest of the Amazons."

The smaller warrior snickered. "I can't wait to see everybody's looks tomorrow when I walk onto the sparring field to fight Nyx."

Xena let a laugh leave her lips. "Neither can I." She ate the last bit of her lunch and gazed at Gabrielle. "Ready to go back out?"

Gabrielle nodded and stood up with her plate. "Just go."

The older woman chuckled and stood up with her own plate. The Soulmates rid of their dishes and started walking to the trail to leave the village again. As they ambled down the trail in the woods an idea seem to take Gabrielle.

Gabrielle then gazed up to her partner after stopping to walk. "So I'm lacking tone right?"

Xena stopped walking and nodded. "Yes."

The Queen nodded and grinned. "How about a little toning exercise Xena?"

The warrior placed her hands on her hips. "What you have in mind?"

"A run to the clearing? How's that sound?"

"Think you can handle it?" Xena hadn't asked in a teasing tone but in concern.

Gabrielle nodded. "I think so."

The tall woman nodded and smiled. "Let's try it out."

Gabrielle smiled back and turned towards the trail again and first started out jogging. She couldn't remember the last time she'd done any running. She knew this would help out a lot, it always seemed to.

Xena jogged right along beside her Soulmate. First it started out as a jog for them then it sped up. Gabrielle controlled the speed they went at considering she was the one injured not to long ago. When they were rather close to the clearing they'd been at early Gabrielle was at a sprint. She felt good, it was a bit tiring when it shouldn't have been but it didn't leave her dying for air.

Once they made it to the clearing Xena made her Soulmate stretch her muscles to

make sure she wouldn't pull them or have them stiff. Afterwards came the sparring for three candelmarks or so. And the entire time Gabrielle never felt such a determination to get back into shape. To prepare herself to fight.

Xena had saw this and it made her smile. The warrior herself became quite involved with the sparring trying to tone her body back up. She hadn't slashed with a sword in to long nor done a back flip. Now became the best time to practice her fighting skills with her partner. By the end of the sparring in the late afternoon both Soulmates were tired from the none stop sparring.

Gabrielle took a deep breath as she brought her right arm over her head and pulled on it with her left hand. She felt the muscles in her left arm begin to stretch out.

Xena had just finished stretching her body and slowly came up behind Gabrielle. She watched her Soulmate switch arms over her head and Xena came directly up behind Gabrielle. Slowly Xena snaked her arms around the Queen's stomach and lowered her lips to the small warrior's neck.

Gabrielle moaned and dropped her arms and leaned her head back into Xena. "You're starting something."

"Mmm I know." Xena let her hands come up to slide across Gabrielle's ribs and directly under her leather top.

The small warrior turned around and quickly captured the other woman's lips in a strong kiss.

Xena grinned in the middle of the kiss. Her hands came gliding down and she let her finger tips go in between Gabrielle's belt and skin while her thumbs rubbed against the soft muscular stomach.

Gabrielle's hands came up to press against Xena's stomach as she kissed her warrior strongly. Then she ended the kiss to only let her lips graze across the warrior's neck and down to her chest.

"Gabrielle."

The small warrior chuckled and placed one last light kiss and rested her head against Xena's chest. "And I thought you wanted to start something."

The warrior grinned. "I do but for later."

The Queen's lips released a small laugh. "It's a date then."

Xena laughed. "Good. I'll see you in the hut after dinner for the... date."

Gabrielle started to laugh as she relaxed against her Soulmate's body. "Oh count on it."

"Mmm, lets head back to the hut and get our cloaks. I don't want your muscles to get sore or stiff."

The Queen sighed and lifted her head. "Or you for that matter." Another soft kiss was placed on Xena's chest then Gabrielle stepped back feeling Xena remove her hands.

The pair started trekking back to the Amazon Village in the late afternoon. They made it to their hut right around dusk. Inside they grabbed their cloaks for the cold night to come. They'd quickly left the hut and went down to the Amazon Camp for dinner.

Gabrielle enjoyed being back out with her Amazons and talking away with them. The entire time Xena stood aside and watched with a smile. Every now and again she would cut in to tease her small Soulmate which she would receive a glare with grin. And by that night they were falling into each other's love to bring on a long and deep sleep.

~\*Part 25\*~

The sun had crept into the Soulmate's hut easily awaking them. They'd both slid out of bed and put their clothes on. Gabrielle for her part felt invigorated to have her final against Nyx and she knew she was going to beat the Queen. She felt it deep down inside of herself.

Xena smiled down to her Soulmate as she stood in the mass crowd of Amazons. "Be careful Gabrielle."

The Queen nodded. "Promise."

The warrior nodded back and placed her right hand on Gabrielle's left arm. "If anything, protect your stomach. If you get another good two blows there it'll be worse than before. You won't be able to move for at least a month."

Gabrielle sighed and stared at the ground, slowly she lifted her head up. "That's the reality of it huh?"

Xena let her breath slowly. "Yes it is." Now her voice came out so serious. "We both know you can take out Nyx, but don't do it under a high cost." She paused. "For me?" She squeezed Gabrielle's arm for a moment then released.

Gabrielle smiled lovingly and placed her right hand up against the left side of Xena's chest. "For you? Always love." She then winked at Xena as she dropped her hand and turned to slowly walk onto the sparring field.

Xena watched her go with a small smile to her lips.

Gabrielle stepped into the center of the sparring field as Nyx turned to her. "Ready Queen Nyx?"

Nyx was laughing as she turned around but suddenly her expression dropped. "How'd you...? When'd you...? You're..."

The small warrior grinned. "Healed... I know. Let's just say I have many skills."

Nyx raised an eyebrow as she reached behind to unsheathe her sword. "Well then, I must say I might have been wrong about earlier."

"Oh? And what was that about?" Gabrielle placed her hands on her hips.

"Maybe you do have a lot of muscles then."

The Central Queen laughed. "You have no idea." She took a step back and lifted her

hands in front of her body.

Nyx shook her head and shifted her body into fighting stance. "I still believe you need to dress your consort better Queen Gabrielle."

Suddenly Gabrielle lunged forward with a kick to Nyx's chest. Nyx went stumbling back with a shocked expression.

Gabrielle smirked. "Have any other comments about my consort and me you'd like to express?"

Nyx narrowed her eyes. "Well I can see you're still narrow minded." She came at Gabrielle with a swipe of her sword.

The small warrior jumped out of the way of the blade. "Takes one to know one Queen Nyx."

The Northeast Queen growled and brought her sword down over Gabrielle.

Gabrielle simply crossed her wrists at her bracelets and lifted her arms up. She watched as Nyx's blade stopped right between Gabrielle's bracelets. "Well Queen Nyx, I'm glad you don't have anymore opinions."

Nyx laugh lowly. "Oh I have loads of them about you and your consort." She stepped back with her sword twirling it.

Gabrielle smiled sarcastically. "Oh please share Queen Nyx." She lowered her hands after uncrossing her wrists. "I'd *love* to hear."

The Northeast Queen grinned and quickly tried to do a quick kick at Gabrielle.

Instead of receiving the blow, Gabrielle literally caught Nyx's foot by the boot. "Queen Nyx, weren't you taught how to kick right?" Gabrielle then abruptly let a cat grin take her lips.

Queen Nyx's expression in reaction went into fear as she saw Queen Gabrielle start to twist her leg fast. Her body was then tossed to the ground in a heap because of Gabrielle's quick move.

The Northeast Queen growled as she wiped away the dirt from her face. Her hand went back down to the ground to lift up a hand full of dirt. She quickly looked up. "My last comment about you and your consort." Her next words came out in a sneer. "You're both are pathetic for Soulmates." Without warning Queen Nyx threw the dust up at Gabrielle.

The small warrior was completely caught off guard by this and the dust blurred her vision. She frantically worked to get the dust from her eyes.

Xena from the sidelines saw this. Her eyes widen as she watched her Soulmate rubbing at her eyes in the middle of the small dust cloud. Then she saw Queen Nyx instantly jump to her feet and kick Gabrielle hard in the chest. The warrior's right hand slipped down to her chakram. Oh she was ready to hurl her chakram at the Northeast Queen in a heartbeat.

Gabrielle had went reeling backwards onto her back on the ground. Fortunately

though her vision was pretty much back. She knew Nyx would bring her sword at her if she didn't move. So she propped her feet up and unsheathed her sais and flipped up to her feet with her sais up. "Now that wasn't nice Queen Nyx."

Nyx grinned and started to circle with Gabrielle doing the same. "I don't play nice when it comes to the role of Queen."

The Central Queen shook her head. "Then you're not worthy enough to be the Queen of all the Amazons."

Queen Nyx laughed and started on attack at Gabrielle. She did a number of thrusts and swipes not making any headway in Gabrielle's defense. After her try Queen Nyx jumped back trying to catch her breath. "You actually have a decent defense."

The small warrior laughed with sparkling eyes. "I know." She smirked. Gods, how Gabrielle had picked up so many things from Xena. "By the way Queen Nyx, your defense from my last experience... well lets say it was good as centaur shit." Now Gabrielle saw Queen Nyx's brown eyes flash with anger.

Immediately the Northeast Queen came at Gabrielle. She did nothing but rapid thrusts, punches, and kicks but she couldn't break through Gabrielle's defense. By the end of her attacks Queen Nyx lost much energy and had to back off.

Gabrielle on the other hand had just a knowingly smiled at this. She flipped her sais out blades forward. "Let's see if your defense is still good as centaur shit." The small warrior attacked Queen Nyx not breaking through the other Queen's defense. But she kept moving, kept chipping away. Then she saw her opening at Nyx's right shoulder and struck there. Gabrielle pierced the other woman's shoulder, leaving a bleeding wound.

Queen Nyx stepped back to gaze at her right shoulder seeing the blood trickle down her arm. She tossed her sword to her left hand knowing now she couldn't win. She was dominant with her right hand when it came to her sword. So when she lifted her brown eyes to Gabrielle they held a fear.

Gabrielle smirked at the other Queen. She then lunged forward to go after Queen Nyx to finish the challenge. Gabrielle did just this. Near the end she'd swiped the Northeast Queen's feet out from under her. After Nyx crashed to the ground Gabrielle bent down to one knee and pressed her left sai against the Amazon's throat. "Don't breathe my name or my consort's again."

Nyx blinked with no other response.

The small warrior lowered her head down closer to Nyx's, she let her eyes flash. "And next time you label somebody narrow minded make sure you know the definition first." Gabrielle briskly removed her sai from the Queen's throat and stood up and strolled off the sparring field.

Xena had released her chakram when she saw her partner winning the challenge. Now she had her arms crossed against her chest. Off to her right she saw the regent wedging through the Amazons to come up to her side.

"What in Hades was that all about Xena?" Ephiny looked to her right to see Gabrielle

coming towards them.

The warrior shrugged her shoulders. "They just had some words."

The regent huffed. "To say the least." Now Gabrielle came up to her and Xena. "Gabrielle what was that about?"

Gabrielle placed her left sai into her right hand with her other one. "What you mean Eph?"

Ephiny crossed her arms against her chest. "You and Nyx were talking none stop out there."

The Queen grinned. "Yes well... we just had some words."

The regent gazed up to Xena, who was staring at Gabrielle. She then looked back to Gabrielle, whom was staring at Xena. She shook her head. "Right. Let me know if you ever care to share someday." She grinned. "I'll see you both later."

Gabrielle turned her head to see Ephiny walking off. "Bye Eph."

"Uh huh. Bye Gabrielle." Ephiny was ambling away and had waved then kept going.

Xena let a smile sweep across her lips. "You are getting cocky out there Gabrielle."

Gabrielle slowly lifted her head up towards Xena with a cool look. "I know." She grinned with confidence.

The warrior chuckled. "I like it."

The smaller warrior still had her grin. "Same here. I think I picked it up from somebody I know."

The Warrior Princess laughed. "I wonder who."

"Mmm, you have one guest and the first doesn't count." Gabrielle chuckled and bent down to one knee to sheath her sais on the sides of her boots. Slowly she rose back up. She was about to say something but was cut off as she heard her name.

"Gabrielle."

The Queen looked over at her second in command and weapons master. "Hey Solari and Ep."

Solari smiled. "That was impressive there against Queen Nyx."

Epinion narrowed her eyes. "She isn't too honorable either."

Solari sighed and gazed at the weapons master. "Understatement."

Gabrielle shrugged her shoulders. "Ah, she paid for it."

The second in command chuckled. "So we saw." She then smiled warmly. "Good job Gabrielle."

"Thank you."

"So you're fighting Mairead tomorrow then huh?" The weapons master then crossed her arms against her chest after her words.

The Queen nodded. "Afraid so."

Solari placed her hands on her hips. "We heard what Caitriona and Mairead did to your stomach."

The small warrior shook her head. "Well it wasn't just them." She sighed. "Before Xena and I got here we'd saved a village from some raiders. One of them had knocked me unconscious then kicked me rather hard in my lower abdomen."

Xena took a step closer to her partner, placing a hand on her right shoulder. "Oh don't forget the small detail Gabrielle of the fact you'd jumped off a barn. Then took the raider off his horse before he could attack me from behind."

Solari quietly laughed while Epinion just grinned.

Gabrielle huffed. "You had to."

The warrior grinned. "Yup."

Solari smiled. "Well I think your Amazons know how amazing you are Queen Gabrielle." A grin took her lips now. "You have nothing to prove."

Gabrielle sighed and glanced up to her partner. "See what you did?"

Xena smirked. "Me? You did." She then bent her head down close to Gabrielle's and whispered to her. "Maybe they'll start calling you the Warrior Queen."

That's when Gabrielle bursted out laughing.

Solari and Epinion looked to each other in question and shrugged their shoulders.

Solari leaned towards Epinion. "It's one of those jokes we'll never know."

The weapons master nodded. "I know." She then gazed back to the Soulmates to see Gabrielle settled down. "I think Solari and I need to head out."

Gabrielle nodded and took a deep breath. "Have to find somebody Epinion?" She arched an eyebrow in suspicions.

Epinion's face took on a tint of red. "No."

The Queen grinned. "Tell Teresa I said, 'hi.'"

The weapons master nodded. "Um... right." She gazed at the second in command with a look.

Solari snickered. "See you Gabrielle." She looked up to Xena. "Bye Xena."

The warrior smiled. "Bye Solari." Her eyes averted to Epinion. "Bye Ep."

"Bye Xena." Epinion then nodded at Solari to go.

Solari started walking with Epinion. The two Amazons mingled through the slowly

dispersing crowd of Amazons.

Gabrielle sighed and lifted her attention to Xena. "Warrior Queen? Where'd you come up with that?"

Xena grinned. "Warrior Princess."

The Queen shook her head. "No no, there's a difference between you and I with fighting."

The older woman cross her arms over her chest. "Is there really?"

Gabrielle stared up Xena for a moment. "Really? I don't know."

Xena smiled and placed her left hand down to Gabrielle's back. "Come on."

~\*~\*~\*~

The challenge between Queen Nyx and Queen Gabrielle had been during the early afternoon. It had ended by the late afternoon to leave the Amazons with time to relax. Tomorrow would be the day of the final challenge. It would be a challenge between Gabrielle and Mairead to see which one would become Queen of all the Amazons and Nations.

By the time this sunk into Gabrielle's mind, she was a nervous ball. But she was able to fool everybody making them think she wasn't nervous what so ever. Well, not quite everybody. For her Soulmate certainly knew by just gazing into her eyes not to mention Xena was a nervous wreck herself. And she knew this was because Gabrielle was very nervous.

All day the Soulmates mingled with all the Amazons. Gabrielle really hadn't been with them since her injury and she didn't want to seem like she was hiding. So Xena and Gabrielle were not alone till after a late dinner when they'd made it back to their hut.

Xena stood by the table and was removing her sword and chakram as she heard Gabrielle close the door. They'd walked back to the hut in silence. The warrior turned to her Soulmate and walked over to her.

Gabrielle lifted her head up to Xena with a look of nervousness. Her walls had fell.

The warrior's lips took on a loving smile. She lifted her left hand to Gabrielle's right cheek. Leaning down she carefully kissed Gabrielle. After doing so, Xena brought her hands down to grasp Gabrielle's hands. She didn't say anything and started to walk backwards the bed.

Gabrielle followed Xena's lead and saw Xena sit down on the foot of the bed.

Xena still had her loving smile and she pulled Gabrielle onto the bed and into her lap. She released her partner's hands and wrapped her arms around the smaller woman while pushing Gabrielle's head under hers.

The Queen sighed in relief as she wrapped her legs around her Soulmate's waist. Her arms wrapped around the older woman and she closed her eyes. She felt the perfect safety from Xena.

The warrior kissed her friend's forehead then lowered her head back down on Gabrielle's. She kept a hold of her smaller warrior till she felt safe from world around.

A half of a candlemark passed by and that's when Gabrielle opened her eyes and nuzzled her warrior's neck. "Thanks Xena."

A warm smile broke across Xena's lips. "Anytime." She brought her right hand down to lift Gabrielle's head. "Don't let yourself get so nervous."

The young woman sighed. "I know. It's just... you know it's a big thing."

"I know it is." Xena brought her hand up to run through Gabrielle's short hair. "But you'll be perfect."

Gabrielle smiled sadly and her eyes seem to go unfocus. "I'm just worried she'll tear me up like last time." She shook her head while her eyes focused back on Xena. "I don't want to do that again."

Xena's expression became very serious at that point as she locked eyes with her Soulmate. "Listen to me okay?" Gabrielle nodded and Xena continued on. "I will be there with you. All you have to do is release me inside of you. Alright?" A smile broke across Xena's lips now.

"Yeah." Gabrielle reflected the smile back. "Been slowly doing it these past years."

"Let it all come out tomorrow." Xena leaned in to take her Soulmate's lips. "I'm always there to protect you."

Gabrielle's smiled in the middle of the kiss and she began to push Xena back. They two Soulmates went falling back into the bed with laughs.

Xena stopped laughing as she felt her partner's legs twine with hers. "Mmm, I need to distract you from thinking about the challenge tomorrow." She brought her lips to Gabrielle's neck while her hands came up to the leather straps of Gabrielle's top.

The younger woman grinned. "You're doing a good job of it."

"Good." Xena's voice was deep now as she slipped the leather straps down Gabrielle's arms.

Gabrielle though dropped her head down while closing her eyes. Her body's reactions began to wash over her soul.

~\*Part 26\*~

Gabrielle lifted her left arm with the ivy-designed dagger. It twinkled up to her in protection. She smiled slightly at it then her attention went back to tying her boots. After she tied them she placed her sais into her boots and turned around.

Xena was leaning against the door holding Gabrielle's cloak in her arms. "How you feel?"

The small warrior nodded and took a deep breath. "I'm handling this." She grinned up to her partner.

The warrior lifted herself off the door and strolled over to her Soulmate. She walked behind Gabrielle and started to put the cloak on her as she spoke. "Think you can eat?"

The Queen nodded. "Oh yeah, I need to feed this thing." Gabrielle placed her hands over her stomach to refer to the "thing." She felt the cloak on with Xena's arms coming around her waist to rest her hands over Gabrielle's hands.

"That hungry huh?"

Gabrielle's lips took on a grin. "After last night? Yes."

Xena laughed and pulled her friend more against her body. "Was a... wild night huh?"

The small warrior started to laugh hard while closing her eyes. "That's one... interesting way to put it."

The older woman grinned as well and nuzzled her partner's neck. "I thought so too."

"Mmm." Gabrielle turned around in her Soulmate's arms. She placed her right hand behind Xena's head and brought the warrior's lips down to hers.

The kiss lasted for numerous seconds on end. After it broke, the pair left their hut and went for breakfast. The breakfast was long and the Soulmates sat alone in the corner of the food hut. Gabrielle and Xena both wanted to be left alone together. Just being near Xena alone caused the Queen to be calm and stoic and that was something she needed right now.

By the time they finished breakfast it was late morning. They had a slow walk down to the sparring fields within the village. Once they got there, the area was packed with Amazons. Everybody knew this was the final challenge to find out the Queen of all Amazons. And the weather above seem to know as well for it was a crystal clear day with the sky a perfect blue.

Right now, Gabrielle tore her eyes from the blue sky to take a deep breath and focus on what was at hand. She stood in the middle of the sparring field. In front of her was Mairead. Xena stood to her right and Ephiny stood to her left.

Ephiny smiled to her Queen and Queen Mairead. Then she went stern as she spoke to the two Queens. "As you both know, this is the last challenge. Whomever comes out of this as the winner is the Queen of all the Amazons and Nations." The regent paused. "If there are any suspicions of dishonor by either of you then the challenge will be thrown out. The Queen who was dishonorable will be banded and another challenge will take place between the honorable Queen and Queen Caitriona." Again Ephiny paused and studied the two Queens. In the background she could hear all the Amazons of the different nations talking. "Is this understood by you both?"

Gabrielle nodded to Ephiny.

The regent looked to Mairead who also nodded in response.

Ephiny turned her attention to both Queens again. "Okay if there is nothing else. Good luck to you both and do not forget the rules." She smiled to Gabrielle then to Mairead.

Gabrielle turned her to Xena. "Xena?"

The warrior nodded and started walking a little ways away from Mairead and Ephiny.

Gabrielle came up to her side and took a deep breath. "Well here it goes." She began to take her cloak off and once it was removed she handed it to Xena.

The warrior took it, her eyes lifted back up to Gabrielle. She brought both her hands to her Soulmate's shoulders. "I want you to be careful Gabrielle. I can guarantee you Mairead will try to kill you. Don't risk your life." She squeezed her partner's shoulders. "Have I made myself clear?"

Gabrielle grinned. "Uhh no. You're a little fuzzy around the edges, so you keep trying, you'll get there."

Xena closed her eyes, bit her lower lip, and let a grin take her lips. She tried so hard not to laugh but she couldn't help but let a small chuckle. Slowly her eyes opened again. She was glad Gabrielle was a little more relax since she was throwing jokes around.

The Queen loss her grin. "Seriously, I will Xena." Her eyes looked away then came back to Xena. "Just watch over me."

Xena's face lit with a loving smile. "You know I will. I promise you, you'll be walking off that sparring field and into my arms. Alright?"

Gabrielle nodded. "I know." She mirrored her own warm smile.

The warrior squeezed her Soulmate's shoulders then dropped her hands. "Good luck." She paused for an instant. "I love you Gabrielle."

"I love you too Xena." Gabrielle kept her smile then turned towards where Mairead and Ephiny stood. She walked over to them.

Xena watched her go. Slowly the warrior straightened her back out with protective eyes. She stood there waiting on the sparring field.

Ephiny looked to Mairead. "Are you ready Queen Mairead?"

Mairead grinned. "Yes."

The regent turned to Gabrielle. "My Queen?"

Gabrielle nodded. "Definitely." She let a smile control her lips. Inside she felt that nervous come but she quickly grabbed it and choked it. For it was not the emotion she wanted right now. Instead she pulled out her cockiness from yesterday, a portion that is of Xena.

Ephiny nodded. "Again, good luck and fight honorable for the fate of the Amazons." Ephiny then walked off towards Xena.

Xena and Ephiny walked to the edge of the sparring fields. Xena crossed her arms over her chest with Gabrielle's cloak in her arms. Ephiny stood to Xena's right and watched the beginnings of the final challenge.

Gabrielle lifted her hands in fighting stance.

Mairead lifted her hands in fighting stance.

The two Queens began to circle each other. Their eyes were locked.

Mairead's lips broke out into a cat grin. "Remember what I did to you last time Queen Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle smiled sarcastically. "How can I forget? Every time I puked I thought of you."

Mairead narrowed her eyes briefly then laughed deeply. "Well as they say, history repeats itself."

"Maybe so, but history is fickle."

Suddenly Mairead lunge forward with her hands.

Gabrielle jumped out of the way and felt the other female breeze past her.

Mairead whirled around with her same grin. She was a big built Amazon with a lot of muscles. "So do you really believe that you should be Queen of all the Amazons?"

The small warrior grinned intensely. "Well I know for certain you don't belong as the Queen."

The Southeast Queen bounded forward again to grab Gabrielle's wrists. She squeezed Gabrielle's wrists tightly right below her bracelets. "Caught in a small pickle Queen Gabrielle?"

The Central Queen closed her eyes against the pain. Quickly her mind worked on how to get out of this but she wasn't quick enough.

Mairead had sharply brought her right knee up to hit Gabrielle's stomach.

Gabrielle fell to the ground and started coughing. Thankfully she tasted no blood in her mouth. Slowly she lifted her head to see Mairead smirking down at her.

Mairead reached behind to unsheathe her sword. "Gods don't tell me it will be this easy."

The small warrior saw the sword coming at her and she rolled away as it landed in the dust. She bounced to her feet. "No it won't be." She did a quick round house kick and sent Mairead stumbling back.

The Amazon shook her head and readjusted her grip on her sword. In front of her she saw Gabrielle standing with a smirk and her hands on her hips. "Don't get so cocky Queen Gabrielle."

"Why shouldn't I be Mairead? I just know you are a hulking Amazon with no brains." To add to her statement Gabrielle smirked knowing she was right.

Mairead's eyes narrowed and she swiped at Gabrielle with her sword and clearly missing her. Mairead then tried to stab at Gabrielle's stomach but the other Queen had

jumped back. She then tried to come at Gabrielle's left side.

The Central Queen however dropped to her feet and rolled away. She was on one knee and she unsheathed her sais and bounced to her feet. Now Gabrielle went on attack against Mairead trying to break her defense.

Then at one point Mairead caught Gabrielle's sais in her sword's blade and locked them. The Southeast Queen grinned evilly at Gabrielle. Her fist pulled back and came forward to connect with Gabrielle's face.

The small warrior's head snapped with the blow. Then she felt her feet taken out from under her and she crashed hard onto her back.

Mairead took a step back and then kicked Gabrielle hard in the sides of her left ribs. After doing that Mairead turned around then whirled around to gaze down and see Gabrielle curling up in pain. "Come on Queen Gabrielle, is that all you really have?"

Xena dropped her Soulmate's cloak to the ground and began to take a step onto the sparring field. But a hand shot out and grabbed her by the wrist.

"Xena don't."

The warrior gazed back at the regent. "Ephiny don't you-"

"Xena, she can handle it." Ephiny paused for a moment. "Go to her in another way."

Xena stared at her Amazon friend then turned her head back to her Soulmate laying in the dust of the sparring field. Oh gods how she just wanted to rush out there and take her into her arms. But yet she knew Ephiny had a point. So she took a deep breath and relaxed back after Ephiny released her. Xena closed her eyes and tried to focus on her Soulmate.

Gabrielle saw Mairead walking towards her again. She tightened her arms over her body more in protection as her eyes shut. *All you have to do is release me inside of you. I'm always there to protect you.* Xena's voice filled her head.

Mairead shook her head and bent down to one knee near Gabrielle. "You don't belong as the Amazon Queen, you're too weak." She stood back up and kicked Gabrielle again in the ribs hard.

The small warrior's body shot full of pain from the blow. "Oh gods." Her body curled more up.

The other Queen bent down again. "Come on Gabrielle. You can stop this, all you have to do is yield to me."

Gabrielle shut her eyes tightly. "I won't Mairead."

Mairead's eyes flashed after hearing that. She then reached to her boot to unsheathe a dagger and placed it against Gabrielle's throat. "Then I'll help you Queen Gabrielle. Do you really want to leave this world over something like this?"

Gabrielle blocked out Mairead's voice. She felt a darkness enter inside of her, it was a darkness she knew. It was Xena's darkness. Gabrielle then carefully let herself slip into that darkness and soon as she did she felt safe and protected. Just as she did those

minutes Xena's soul took control of her body so many years ago.

"Queen Gabrielle, if you don't yield soon you'll never have the chance to breath again."

Slowly Gabrielle's eyes opened again. "Mairead, my answer stays the same. I won't yield." In a flash Gabrielle's hands wrapped around Mairead's wrists. She began to push the other Queen's hand back, which held the dagger.

The Southeast Queen's eyes widen in surprise and she tried to push back. "How in Hades?"

The Central Queen felt a great burst of strength and used it to push Mairead's hand back and punch Mairead with her own hand.

Mairead fell back on her butt and dropped her dagger.

Gabrielle grabbed her sais out of the dust of the sparring field and flipped up to her feet. She watched to see Mairead stand up with her sword.

"Queen Gabrielle, you keep surprising me."

The small warrior smirked. "I have many skills."

Mairead narrowed her eyes and locked hers with Gabrielle's. That's when she noticed something different in the other Queen's eyes. Gabrielle's eyes were no longer just green. They were still emerald yet as Gabrielle shifted her body her eyes would flash a sky blue. All the while her eyes sparkled and twinkled at Mairead with power and anger. The air around Gabrielle was no longer light, it was more a combination of dark and light. It actually sent a chill down Mairead's back.

Xena slowly opened her eyes as a feral grin took over her lips. Her eyes flashed an emerald shade with her sky blue with her certain deep twinkle and now a sparkle was in her eyes.

The Central Queen flipped her sais out. "I know people like to stare at me Mairead but you take the cake."

The Amazon shook her head and came at Gabrielle.

The small warrior laughed evilly and once she saw Mairead close enough she did a back flip over Mairead's head. Once she landed she kicked behind to send the other large Amazon flying. Gabrielle spun around while flipping the blades of her sais out.

Queen Mairead jumped to her feet and twisted her sword in her right hand. "Come on!"

"If you insist Mairead." Gabrielle then came at the Amazon. She tried a number of attacks but only got parried every time.

The Southeast Queen then brought her free hand forward to grab the smaller Queen by the throat and began to slowly choke her.

Gabrielle closed her eyes as her air started to leave her body. She sense her body being lifted off the ground as she started to gasp.

Xena's eyes narrowed. Her right hand slipped down to her chakram.

Ephiny heard a small ching and she looked to her left to see Xena's chakram out of its clip and in Xena's hand. Her eyes lifted to Xena to see how much protection and love were in them. The regent's eyes gazed back out to the scene of her Queen being choked by another Queen. Her eyes narrowed now. This is her Queen, this is her closest friend, this is the chosen of Artemis. Ephiny's right hand came up to her sword's hilt and she slowly pulled it out of its sheath and brought it forward. Her body quickly went into fighting stance and her senses came to life.

Solari looked across the sparring field to see her regent with her sword out and Xena with her chakram out. She locked eyes with Ephiny and saw why Ephiny unsheathed her sword. So now Solari reached behind her back to unsheathe her sword.

Epinion stood beside the second in command and gazed at Solari then to Ephiny and the Warrior Princess. She understood and unsheathed her sword.

Amarice and Rodhiya saw what happened. Knew who was out there in the sparring field. Their swords became unsheathed. After theirs sword came unsheathed so did Teresa's, Logos's, Masika's, Leon's, Aster's, and Eilis's swords all unsheathed with a scrape. The next thing to happen can only be described as the sparring field filling with a din of swords being unsheathed.

Gabrielle's lips took on a grin. "Hear that Mairead?" She gradually opened her eyes to whisper her words out. "Those are *my* Amazons." She then narrowed her eyes and growled. Quickly Gabrielle brought her feet up to kick the other female in the face and pushed herself off Mairead to fly through the air and land on the ground. Gabrielle stayed down on one knee as she glared up to the other Queen while taking deep breaths.

Mairead reached up with her left hand to her jaw. She grasped her jaw tightly and jerked it to the left, a snap was heard. Her jaw went back into its socket. "Not bad Queen Gabrielle."

The small warrior rose up with her sais and smirk. "Sorry, I was a little rusty there. I promise I'll make up for it."

"Oh goody." Mairead came at Gabrielle with her sword. She began to do numerous attacks. But she got no where, for Gabrielle's defenses seem to be better then before. So the Southeast Queen put her strength all into her last attack. She rapidly brought her sword down over Gabrielle.

The small warrior was so prepared for this, she was hoping for it. She lifted her sais up and saw the blade go between her sais' forks. She jerked one sai to the right and the other to the left.

Queen Mairead lost her grip on her sword and watched as it went sky high. Then it landed off to the right on the sparring field. She then stepped away from Gabrielle and came up with an idea to even the score. Reaching to her sides she removed two daggers and threw them at the other Queen.

Gabrielle's eyes widen and she dropped her sais. She lifted both her hands and caught the two daggers coming at her by the blades. But before she could rid them the

Amazon had came at her and did a high kick. Gabrielle dropped the two daggers while her head snapped back from the blow. She quickly recovered and stepped back with her hands up.

Mairead had her own hands up and in her right hand was another dagger.

The small warrior grinned. "You have quite a dagger supply Queen Mairead."

"One can never have enough."

Gabrielle's eyes dropped down to her sais on the ground then back up to the other woman. "Yes well I'd say that's a little against the rules huh?"

Mairead had saw the other Queen's eye movement. "I don't think anybody else will notice." She saw Gabrielle move down to grab her sais. But Mairead stopped her by swiping at her with her dagger.

The small warrior jumped back and saw Mairead take a few steps closer to put the sais behind her body now. She then smirked and abruptly kicked at Mairead's hand that held the dagger. The dagger went flying. "Lost your dagger Mairead?" After speaking that Gabrielle did a roundhouse kick and sent the other Queen rolling on the ground to the right. The Central Queen then raced to her sais and lifted them up and whirled around to Mairead's direction.

The Southeast Queen was already on her feet though and kicked Gabrielle in the chest as she rose up. She watched Gabrielle fall on her back with the sais skidding across the sparring fields.

The small warrior gazed up and quickly realized she'd kicked Mairead in the direction of her sword.

Mairead sighed with a grin. "This has been fun but really..." She brought down her sword at Gabrielle.

Gabrielle's eyes narrowed in anger. She raised her hands and caught the blade of the sword between her hands. Her hands wrapped around the blade after she stopped it and she jerked the sword out of Mairead's hands.

The sword landed far away and Mairead was staring off in surprise.

Gabrielle growled and leaped to her feet. She pulled back her right hand and punched Mairead in the face. Then she did a hard kick to the other Queen's stomach. The small warrior stopped and took a step back, her breath was heavy.

Mairead was dazed and stared at Gabrielle. She quietly whispered, "You don't belong as Queen." What happened next Mairead was never sure of.

Gabrielle had almost seem to disappear in a blur of motion. Her right hand came up to unsheathe her dagger and she kicked Mairead's feet from under her. Her right hand came down with the dagger to press hard against Mairead's throat.

Mairead opened her eyes and stared up into dark flashing emerald-sapphire eyes.

Gabrielle's lips took on a cat grin. "Mairead, I am the Queen of the Amazons."

The Southeast Queen closed her eyes again and then opened as her vision finally unblurred. "You are the chosen." Mairead's eyes seem to fill with a respect and sort of fear for challenging Artemis's chosen.

Gabrielle narrowed her eyes. "Don't ever forget that either." Slowly Gabrielle rose back up to sheath her dagger. Her eyes were down, pinned on the other Queen.

Mairead though coughed and got up to one knee and bowed her head down to Gabrielle with her hands on one knee.

Gabrielle raised her head to the massive crowd of Amazons.

A cheer broke out through the Amazon Village that probably could be heard for leagues around.

Queen Gabrielle of the Central Nation let a smile sweep across her lips. Her eyes then seem to warm and become just a shade of sparkling emerald. She watched as her Amazons cheered and threw their hands up with the swords. The other Amazons of the other Nations were cheering right along.

For once Queen Gabrielle couldn't hear her own breathing after a fight because of the loud din of cheering. And ever so slowly the Queen's eyes searched through the crowds of Amazons for one person.

Gabrielle's eyes fell on her Soulmate and her smile went from warm to loving.

Xena stood there with that same smile and her arms crossed against her chest. Her head was bobbing up and down slightly.

Gabrielle then suddenly broke out running towards Xena.

Xena laughed and uncrossed her arms.

Gabrielle came near Xena and jumped to wrap her legs and arms around her Soulmate.

Xena automatically wrapped her arms around her Soulmate to support her.

Gabrielle moved her right hand up behind her Soulmate's head and captured her Soulmate's lips in a powerful kiss.

The cheering of Amazons only became louder at seeing this display.

## **Part 8**

### **Section 8**

~\*Part 27\*~

Gabrielle walked into the hut and flopped down on the foot of the bed. She lifted her head up to watch her older Soulmate close the door behind.

Xena smiled at her Soulmate and strolled across the hut's floor to bend down in front of Gabrielle. Her large hands came up to rest on the smaller warrior's lap. "I'm proud

of you."

The Queen smiled. "Thanks." She sighed and then lost her smile. "Thanks for helping me Xena."

The warrior's eyes dropped but came back up. "It was all you."

"We both know it wasn't."

Xena shrugged her shoulders and her face lit up with a smile again. "Either way Gabrielle, we both know we are each other. Ssso..."

Xena's smile went to Gabrielle's lips. "So I, as in you and I, defeated Mairead." She grinned. "Perfect." She leaned forward to capture Xena's lips.

The older woman lifted her right hand to her partner's cheek, which then snaked back behind Gabrielle's head. But Xena didn't leave it at one kiss, another came just as quickly as the first. Yet a knock came at the door and the warrior groaned. She pulled away but still had her hand behind Gabrielle's head. "Who is it?"

Gabrielle chuckled at her Soulmate.

Xena glanced up to her partner, flashing a smile, then back sidelong to the door.

"It's the AR." A pause but the regent's voice now came out in a teasing tone. "Is it safe to come in?"

The warrior sighed and turned her attention back to her friend. "I might end up killing your regent."

The Queen quietly laughed and bent down to place a kiss to Xena's forehead. "You're not the only one."

Xena shook her head as she huffed. Walking over to the door she opened it to let Ephiny in.

The Amazons came in with a huge smile and gazed over at her Queen. "Well that was something else my Queen." She heard the door slam faintly behind and saw out the corner of her eye Xena sitting down with a stoic expression.

Gabrielle placed her hands on the edge of the bed. "It was. I didn't think I'd beat Mairead." She stretched her legs out in front with her arms pushing against the bed. "But..." Her eyes lifted up to Ephiny as she relaxed again. "Couldn't let her be the head Queen."

The regent smirked. "So I noticed."

The Queen crossed her arms. "So are we having a big celebration tonight?"

Ephiny placed her hands on her hips. "If the Queen wishes it, yes."

"Let me think about it Eph."

The Amazon raised an eyebrow. "My Queen, I have to intervene and advise that if you don't, it would be the first horrific act the new Queen does."

Gabrielle laughed. "Mmm, then you're saying it's not really my choice."

"Pretty much." Ephiny then smiled after her grin. "When would you like to start it?"

"How about we make the dinner formal Eph? I want to do a speech tonight. Then after that the celebration can start."

A low mumble then was made. "There goes a quiet evening."

Gabrielle gazed over at her Soulmate who had said that. She grinned to Xena. "Don't worry. I've got us covered." For emphasis she winked to Xena.

The warrior grinned at her partner then went stoic again.

The smaller warrior looked up to Ephiny. "Do we have enough... supplies for such a large... celebration tonight?"

The Amazon chuckled. "Of course, I prepared us for this."

Gabrielle let out a groan. "Why doesn't that surprise me Eph?"

"I don't know." Ephiny then took a deep breath. "But I need to go." She took a few steps closer to Gabrielle. "I just came by to congratulate you my Queen."

"Thank you Ephiny." Gabrielle then stood up from the bed.

The Amazon pulled her friend in for a huge hug. "I knew you'd do it." She pulled back but still held her friend.

The small warrior sighed. "I had to wonder though."

"You may have but nobody else did Gabrielle. You'll be the perfect Queen for the Nations and Amazons." Ephiny smiled then released her friend. She walked over to the door opening it a crack. Her eyes lowered to Xena in the chair. "I never thanked you for not slaughtering Mairead out there."

Xena chuckled. "She should be thanking me." Her eyes flashed for a second then went normal.

"I know." Ephiny grinned. "See you Xena."

"Bye Eph."

The regent looked over to Gabrielle. "Bye Gabrielle."

"Bye Eph."

The Amazon smiled then began to leave but stopped halfway out the door. "By the way, a... few Amazons might stop by my Queen." After saying that Ephiny quickly closed the door behind.

"A few Amazons?" Gabrielle's face dropped and she glanced over at Xena.

The warrior sighed and drummed her fingers on her chair's arm. "I won't say anything."

Gabrielle let a small smile take her lips. She walked over to her partner and placed her right hand under Xena's chin. Gradually she lifted the warrior's head. Her small smile now went more loving as her emerald eyes began to sparkle deeply. "I love you Xena."

Xena's sky whisked eyes went very warm and began to twinkle. Her lips then mirrored Gabrielle's same loving smile. "I love you Gabrielle."

Gabrielle now leaned down to seal her lips with Xena's lips. The kiss was long and held their soul in it. And once they pulled back yet another knock came.

The Queen lowered her hand from Xena's chin and walked over to the door. She grasped the handle and glimpsed back at Xena. "Ready for this?"

Xena grinned devilishly. "No, just go."

Gabrielle chuckled and was about to open the door as another knock came.

"Gabrielle?"

The small warrior stopped herself from opening the door and turned her head back to her warrior.

"Let me know if you'd like me to help them out the door."

Gabrielle grinned. "Don't worry I will." She turned back to the door and opened it.

Numerous Amazons then came flooding into the hut, one by one. There was Solari, Epinion, Amarice, Teresa, and Masika.

The Queen sighed with a smile. "What brings you five?"

Solari smiled back. "Thought we'd come by to congratulate the new Queen."

The small warrior smiled to her Amazons. "Thank you." She then went serious. "And thank you everybody for being ready to protect me out there."

Epinion cut in quickly. "Gabrielle, I do believe you don't have to thank us." She paused. "All of your Amazons were about to commit treason for you. We all know you are the rightful Queen."

Gabrielle nodded. "I'm not sure... where my Amazons see this but I trust it."

Amarice added on to that. "Do that." She grinned. "I'm just glad we didn't get stuck under Mairead's reign."

The Queen smirked back. "So I've heard Amarice."

Amarice chuckled.

"What we doing about the new Nation Gabrielle?"

The Queen gazed over at Teresa to answer her. "I'm not sure yet." She then nodded to herself. "But there're going to be changes."

After Gabrielle's words the Amazons and the Queen talked for a few minutes or so.

They all chuckled about different parts of the challenge. Some tried to urge Gabrielle to tell them what she'd said to Mairead out on the sparring field. But the Queen refused to divulge and said it didn't matter.

Then within five minutes Gabrielle stopped the conversation to gaze over at Solari. "Solari, can I talk to you for a second outside?"

The second in command nodded.

Gabrielle turned her head to Xena and mouthed to her, 'get rid of them.' She saw Xena faintly nod in answer and the small warrior glanced over at her other Amazons. "Keep Xena busy for me."

All the Amazons chuckled.

Xena who had been silent just grinned.

Solari and Gabrielle on the other hand walked out of the hut closing the door behind quietly.

"What's up?"

The Queen smiled and answered. "I need you to do me a favor."

"Sure anything." Solari smiled and crossed her arms over her chest.

"I need you to get some food and bedrolls with blankets together in two sets of saddlebags."

"For how many days?"

Gabrielle smiled. "Just for a day."

"Okay, then what?"

The Queen grinned and crossed her arms now. "Tonight about a candlemark after the party starts can you have Argo and Torqueo saddled up and waiting?"

Solari's lips shaped into a grin as she started liking this. "Oh sure. Want them in the stables?"

"No no." Gabrielle shook her head and her eyes dropped to the ground. "Have them tied to a tree outside in the Amazon woods."

The second in command chuckled. "No problem. Where in the woods?"

"Leave them at the south side of the village. Okay?"

"No problem. Anything else?"

"Actually yes." Gabrielle's eyes lifted back up. "I also need you to go find Mairead and ask her if it's possible for Xena and I to renew our vows."

The Amazon began to smile very warmly. "You both are going to renew your vows? That's great."

Gabrielle chuckled. "I'm not sure yet Solari. I haven't asked Xena. So..."

Solari shook her head. "Xena will agree."

The Queen nodded. "I know." She then sighed. "Make sure you let Eph know to about it. But tell her not to get her feathers to ruffle about it. It's just an idea being tossed around right now."

Solari nodded her head. "No problem. Is that it?"

Gabrielle nodded. "That's it. Think you can do it all?"

"Definitely." Solari then went serious. "So, saddle up Argo and Torqueo and leave them in the south woods. Then talk to Maired about renewing vows and mention it to Eph. Got it."

"Great. Thanks Solari."

"Anytime." The Amazon then stepped forward to give her Queen a hug. "Congratulations."

"Thank you Solari."

Solari nodded with a smile. "I better go and you better save Xena from your other Amazons."

Gabrielle grinned. "I better. I'll see you later."

"See you Gabrielle." Solari then turned around and started heading off.

The small warrior turned to the door and opened it coming back in. When she came in she watched Xena cross her right leg over her left and gaze up at the four remaining Amazons with a huge grin. Gabrielle looked over at her Amazons, they were all silent and Amarice was bug-eyed. She quickly shifted her attention to Xena with an arched eyebrow in question.

Xena glanced up to her best friend. "Hi."

Gabrielle crossed her arms over her chest. "So what was the topic of conversation while I was gone?"

The warrior's eyes went to the Amazons in question.

Amarice turned her head to Gabrielle and peeped out, "Nothing." She blinked.

The Queen nodded and touched her back molars with her tongue. She tried so hard to bite back that huge grin.

Epinion turned her head to Teresa. "I think we better leave."

Teresa nodded and looked to the weapons master and mumbled out, "Good idea."

The two Amazons including Amarice shifted to the door as Gabrielle shifted out of the way.

"Bye Gabrielle and Xena."

The two warriors looked to the leaving Amazons and responded, "Bye." After they left, there was one remaining Amazon.

Gabrielle looked to Masika.

The Council Member smiled to her Queen. "I have to say I was a bit worried that your dream might have not come true." She let out a sigh. "But I'm glad I was proven wrong."

The small warrior smiled. "Thanks Masika."

The Amazon nodded. "No thanks, it was the truth." She looked down to the floor as she walked over to Gabrielle. Lifting her head, her expression was serious. "I know that the Nations and Amazons are safe in your hands as Queen." She paused to let a smile take her lips. "I wish you had been my daughter."

A warm smile came from Gabrielle. "It's never to late to start."

Masika quietly laughed. "Very true." She took a step forward and hugged the Queen.

Gabrielle hugged the older Amazon tightly back.

Pulling back, Masika still had her smile. "Glorious job my Queen. And I need to go."

The Queen nodded. "I'll talk to you soon Masika."

"Of course." Masika turned her head to Xena. "And you before I go."

The warrior looked up with hard eyes, a certain protection in them.

Masika crossed her arms over her chest. "We both started with a dislike to each other. And I apologize because I know I brought it on." She took a deep breath. "I'd like to try again."

Xena nodded and let her eyes warm slightly. "Thank you."

The Council Member nodded back. "And thank you." She looked back to Gabrielle. "Bye." She glanced over at Xena. "To the both of you." Going over to the door, Masika made her exit.

Gabrielle let the door closed and waited for a moment. Her eyes then drifted over to Xena. "I need to write that down Xena."

The warrior laughed then smiled to her partner. "Even I do."

The smaller woman grinned and padded over to her Soulmate. "Oh no, I will. I was the bard, remember?"

Xena reached up to Gabrielle's hips and pulled her down into her lap. "Speaking of which. When are you going to get back into bard mode?"

The Queen sighed and dropped her eye contact. "I don't know if I will." Her eyes came up again. "Xena I'm a warrior now."

"Yes, but you are also a Queen, a best friend, Amazon, Soulmate... Would you like me to keep going?"

Gabrielle shook her head. "No." Her hands lifted up from her lap to go to the necklace around Xena's neck. She started to adjust it to perfectly fit against her partner's neck as she spoke. "I don't know if I want to do it again." She carefully released the charm in the center of the warrior's chest. Her eyes came back up to Xena. "Seems like an old side of myself."

Xena nodded. "I can understand that." She paused figuring her words right. "But do you still yearn to write?"

The younger woman's hands move to grasp the other female's sides. "Yes."

"Do you still have a passion?"

Gabrielle nodded. "Always have."

The warrior smiled. "Well it's up to you." She shrugged her shoulders. "Just was hoping you'd retain that part of yourself. I always loved it."

Gabrielle smiled and slightly laughed as her eyes fell.

Xena raised her right hand to bring it under her Soulmate's chin. She gazed into Gabrielle's deep sparkling green eyes. "Love anything about you."

That's when Gabrielle leaned into take her Soulmate's lips in a deep kiss. And after the kiss she leaned into Xena to hug her.

The warrior wrapped her arms tightly around her partner.

"Maybe I'll try again."

Xena smiled. "Good. I know you've missed it."

Now the smaller woman smiled. "I have." A silence for a moment. "You're good."

The warrior chuckled. "I know." She slowly let her breath out. "But... my Queen I think it's about time to go see your Nation."

Gabrielle groaned. "This job is already starting to get to me."

Xena laughed. "It'll only be for four or so candlemarks."

"Xena."

The older woman chuckled and leaned back some to kiss Gabrielle's head. "Let me know if you want to leave."

"Oh count on it." Gabrielle's lips took on a devilish grin that Xena never saw. She quickly wiped it away and sat up. "But yeah, we better go."

Xena nodded and leaned up to place a gentle kiss on her partner's lips. "Come on."

The Queen sighed and stood up from her Soulmate's lap. The pair then ambled over to

the door and left quickly.

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Gabrielle slowly raised her head up to stare at all the Amazons before her. They all were standing below the podium gathered around to hear their Queen's words. She could easily pick out the Queens in the mass of Amazons. Off to her right she spotted Ephiny and Xena standing together and watching over Gabrielle.

The Queen of the Amazons took a deep breath and smiled to her Amazons. There were too many of them to count.

All the Amazons now went silent as seeing their Queen wait for them. A low usher was made and then it became dead silent. Over six hundred Amazons went silent for their new Queen.

Now Gabrielle felt a small breeze pick up as it brushed her hair. She took a deep breath and began her speech. "Today, this is not an everyday. At least not for the Amazons and their Nations. All of us have watched these numerous challenges take place between the Queens and it slowly broke down to two Queens. I have been the one to come out as the winner. But I can tell you I am not the winner. These challenges were not a contest which almost seem to be that way. This is matter of the Amazon Destiny."

Now Gabrielle paused to lift her arms and cross them over her chest. "There was fighting between our Nations. And my first act as the new Queen I will tell you deals with this. I will not take any sort of fighting or bickering in my Nation. Because we should not be fighting between ourselves. Each Amazon Nation was created for the same reason. I do not care whether my Amazon knows the ways of fishing, knows trade, or how to fight. I do not care if my Amazon comes from the north, south, west, east, or Chin. I do not care if my Amazon is a priestess or a shamanness. I do not care because that is not what makes an Amazon. What makes an Amazon is trueness of heart, of love for another, and selflessness. We are no longer broken fragments of what was, we are so much more. We are not just tribes of women, warriors, fighters, farmers, traders, priestesses, Queens, archers, and fishermen. We are a family. We are a family of sisters, mothers, and daughters. And there is no other such Nation in this world like ours. That is the difference of our Nation. That is what makes this Nation so special."

The Queen took a long breath and lowered her head then raised it back up with a conviction in her eyes. "I am the Queen and I am your chosen. I will tell you the destiny of the Amazons. Tell you the Amazon Destiny. I promise to this new Nation, to the old Nations, the first Nation, our ancestors, and to Artemis that I will not let this new Nation rest asunder. We will not rest asunder. This new Nation all of us will establish. This new Nation will last for all time."

Yet another pause as the Queen put her thoughts together. "This is a new age for the Amazons. The sun set on the Amazons so long ago. We have survived the night and waited for the light. The dawning of a new era has shined over the Amazons. And the night may fall upon the Amazons someday when I am gone. But I will come back to bring my Amazons out of the night and into the rising sun's light. Time will never bring about the death of the Amazon."

Gabrielle stopped as she gazed over her Amazons. "Amazons. Women. Nation."

Warriors. Family. These are the things we are. And something trivial as time will never destroy us as it tried for so long. The only thing that now remains is for all of us to become as one. To forget about what Nation we came from, for it does not matter here. Now we must stand together and embrace the Amazon Destiny!"

The dusk air only filled with an ear shattering cheer after the Queen of the Amazons spoke.

Gabrielle smiled to her Amazons and nodded while still standing on the podium before her Nation. Then off to her right she saw Ephiny starting to move. The regent held a mask in her hands and Gabrielle never caught it earlier.

Ephiny slowly made her way up onto the podium with this mask. The setting sun's light gleamed off the mask for the mask was coat with gold and in the center of the forehead of the mask was a gleaming diamond cut emerald.

The Queen dropped her arms and turned towards Ephiny. She felt herself actually shake after seeing this mask. Never had she'd seen a gold mask nor heard of it.

The regent came up to Gabrielle and soon as she did the cheering died out. "Queen Gabrielle of the Central Nation. Your right of caste as Queen of the Central Nation has been removed. Now you are given the special caste as Queen of all the Amazons and Nations. And you are given the caste as the Chosen. Represent us well, as we know you will."

Gabrielle smiled and nodded.

Ephiny raised the mask high in the air.

Every last Amazon cheered in authorization to place it on their new Queen.

Ephiny smiled as she saw Gabrielle lower her head.

Gabrielle felt the mask carefully slip over her head and fit with perfection. She gradually raised her head with the mask reflecting the sun.

The Amazons broke out cheering yet again.

The regent smiled at her Queen and then gazed down to where Xena stood and she saw Solari right behind her. Her eyes locked with Solari and nodded to her.

Solari nodded back. She came to stand next to Xena. "Xena follow me."

The warrior looked down at the second in command with a confused look. But she followed Solari up to the podium and walked on. Xena then caught in the Amazon's hands a mask of gold as well.

Solari escort Xena to stand beside her Soulmate. Then she shifted to stand beside Ephiny and handed the regent the golden mask.

Ephiny carefully took it and gazed up to Xena. "Xena, former Consort to Queen Gabrielle. The Amazons have recognized you as part of this Nation again as an Amazon. You have the heart of an Amazon. We do not only recognize you as an Amazon once more but as Queen Gabrielle's consort. Do you wish to take this

position as consort again?"

Xena smiled warmly. "Yes, forever."

Ephiny smiled. "Then the caste is given to you with open arms from the Amazons. Remember the duties that come with being the Queen's consort. But realize as well, as Queen Gabrielle does, you are not only receiving caste as Amazon and Consort but also as the Chosen. Represents us well, as we know you will."

Xena nodded and lowered her head.

Ephiny raised the golden mask to receive a cheer of authorization to place it upon Xena's head. It was done, the regent carefully placed the golden mask with the diamond cut sapphire over Xena's head.

The warrior gradually lifted her head to Ephiny.

The regent smiled warmly as she gazed at her two friends, she then faintly nodded towards the crowd to them.

The Queen of the Amazons walked over to the edge of the podium and crossed her arms against her chest.

The Consort of the Queen shift to stand directly behind the Queen. She lifted her hands to grasp the Queen's sides in ownership.

Nothing but shouts and cheers of approval and happiness filled the air for a minute. Ephiny then walked to one side of the Soulmates and Solari the other side. Ephiny bent down to one knee with her head bowed, Solari did next. Then the Soulmates watched each Amazon slowly bend down to one knee with lowered heads.

The only Amazons not kneeling were the former Queens. And each Queen came forward to the podium and lined up. Queen Nyx at the far right drew her sword and held it up towards the Soulmates then twisted it to embed in the ground and she kneeled with a bowed head. Queen Mairead stood next to Nyx and followed her example. Then Queen Caitriona then the next Queen till it came to Yakut at the end.

Gabrielle felt a certain special power fill her, it charged her. And she knew her Soulmate felt it because it flowed through their soul. They held the Amazon Destiny in their hands together.

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Xena carefully grasped the gold mask over her head and pulled it off hearing the feathers ruffle from the movement. She turned the mask so she could look at the front. It was made of gold and the design of Greek immortality was carved into the gold face. In the forehead Xena saw the sapphire twinkle up to her. She smiled and gazed over at her Soulmate.

Gabrielle lifted her eyes from her own mask. "Something else huh?"

The warrior nodded. "I was surprised."

The younger woman chuckled. "The both of us." She ambled over to the bed to gingerly place the gold mask down on the bed.

Xena came up and did the same placing it right next to Gabrielle's.

"Mmm, we better head back down there for the celebration huh?"

The warrior nodded. "Yup."

Gabrielle chuckled and turned to her partner. "It won't be that bad."

Xena raised an eyebrow.

The smaller female grinned. "Trust me huh? I promise. You'll like the... celebration."

That warm smile took Xena's lips. "I do." She lowered her head. "Trust you with everything of me." She claimed Gabrielle's lips.

When they pulled back Gabrielle grinned up to her best friend. "The feeling is mutual."

Xena quietly laughed. "Good."

The Queen reached and grasped her Soulmate's hand and intertwined their fingers. "Let's go."

The warrior nodded as she started moving to the door with her Soulmate.

They left the hut and walked down to the celebration hand in hand. The celebration was nothing but loud, wild, and filled with wine and food. It was a celebration bash.

Gabrielle and Xena never seem to budge from each other's sides. Now they sat on the ground with numerous Amazons all talking. The Soulmates had just finished their dinners and decided to relax with their friends. It was dark now in the world around. But the Amazon Village was lit by a number of fires located here and there. Music was filling the air with the laughter of a mass of Amazons.

Gabrielle just started laughing over a small joke from Teresa. She then calmed down as she sat cross-legged on the ground. Her eyes lifted up and she saw Solari across the area looking directly at her.

Solari grinned and faintly nodded to her left.

The small warrior faintly nodded back and watched Solari disappear off in that direction. Gabrielle then decided she wanted to get a drink. She then turned her head to Xena and placed her hand on the warrior's closest leg. Gabrielle squeezed her Soulmate's knee then stood up. "Be right back." She said it to everybody but Xena.

Ephiny furrowed her eyebrows and looked to Xena. "Where's she going?"

Xena grinned. "To get something to drink."

The regent's expression dropped. "How'd you know... I don't wanna know actually."

The warrior chuckled, as did the other Amazons in the group.

Gabrielle came up to the drink table.

Solari came up to her side.

"What's up Solari?"

The second in command grinned as she gazed at her friend. "Everything is ready. I just placed Argo and Torqueo at the southern section of the forest. Just follow the south trail and you won't miss them."

The Queen lifted a mug of wine that was only half filled. "Perfect. How far of a walk?"

"Only about five minutes down the trail."

"Great. Thanks Solari."

Solari nodded. "Oh, I talked to Mairead."

"What did she say?"

"She said there is no problem and would do it whenever you'd like to start the ceremony. And she wanted to know why you didn't ask sooner."

Gabrielle laughed as she pulled the mug away from her lips. "Mairead." She shook her head with a smile. "Did you mention to Eph about it?"

"Not yet... I'll tell her tomorrow."

The small warrior nodded. "Great. Okay I think I'm going to go get my warrior."

Solari grinned. "Well I don't have to tell you to have a goodnight."

"Thanks Solari." The Queen sighed. "I know yours will be good too."

The Amazon devilishly grinned now. "Of course. Speaking of which I think I'll find my regent."

Gabrielle chuckled. "Let's go."

Solari laughed and they both started walking back to the group of Amazons.

Xena lifted her head up as she saw Solari and her partner reappear into the group. She smiled up to her Soulmate.

Gabrielle smiled back and sat down beside her.

Solari walked across to sit down beside Ephiny. "Hi."

The regent flashed her second in command a warm smile. "Missed you."

Solari smiled warmly now. "I know the feeling."

Ephiny chuckled and gazed back around at the Amazons.

Now the conversation started back up between the large group of Amazons. In the group were Amarice and her sister, Yakut, Ephiny, Solari, Epinion, Teresa, Aster, Leon, Caitriona, Gloria, Laetus, surprisingly Mairead, and a few other Amazons.

Once Gabrielle finished her mug of wine she placed it to the ground. She glanced at Xena to see her listening to the others. She smiled to herself then gazed back to the group of friends. The conversation just ended and she decided this was the right time. "I think Xena and I are going to leave you all."

All the Amazons turned their attention to Gabrielle.

"Have plans my Queen?"

The small warrior glared at her regent for a second then answered. "Yes." She stood up and waited for Xena to stand before speaking. "Make sure this celebration goes on all night Eph."

The regent laughed. "No problem there."

Gabrielle crossed her arms. "But makes sure we have a little wine left over."

Solari piped in. "Can't guarantee that."

The Queen rolled her eyes. "Doesn't surprise me." She then smiled. "Make sure everybody has a good time." Her eyes then mainly focused on her regent. "Xena and I will be up and about here by late morning or so."

Ephiny arched an eyebrow in question.

Gabrielle chuckled. "Goodnight everybody."

Xena smiled to the Amazons. "Goodnight."

All the Amazons called back with, "Goodnight."

The Soulmates then left the celebration area and once they did Gabrielle stopped walking and turned to her partner.

The warrior stopped as well. "What's up with us leaving early?"

Gabrielle shrugged. "I could get a headache anytime."

Xena shook her head with a laugh. "True."

"Mmm I know." She then reached forward to take Xena's hands. "Come on, follow me."

A raised eyebrow from Xena. "What you up to?"

"Well if you come with me, you'll find out."

Xena laughed with a smile. "How couldn't I?"

"Then come on." Gabrielle started to walk with Xena right behind her and her hands behind her back holding Xena's hands. She led them out of the village into the woods. Then searching around she found the trail that led the south section of the woods. She released Xena's hands and grinned up to her. "Just follow me." She winked and broke off running.

Xena watched her Soulmate go for a second then she grinned. She sprinted after her

partner and came to run beside Gabrielle.

Gabrielle followed the trail and was thankful for the full moon tonight. Then she rounded a bend and directly ahead she spotted Torqueo and Argo standing together in the moon's light in a small clearing. She stopped running.

Xena stopped as well and stared at the horses. "Gabrielle?"

The Queen grinned. "Thought we... would have our own sort of celebration." She smiled up to her Soulmate.

The warrior smiled as she glanced down to her best friend. "You're good."

"I know." The small warrior ambled over to the horses with Xena. "I know this perfect spot we can go to as well."

Xena smiled. "Of course." She came up to Argo's reins and untied them. She easily mounted the warhorse. Turning her head to the right she saw her Soulmate on Torqueo. "So where to?"

Gabrielle turned her horse to the right. "This way." She led them into the woods. "Here we go." She kicked Torqueo into a gallop.

The warrior sent her mare into a gallop as well right beside Torqueo.

Gabrielle gazed over at her partner. "Gods this is great!" She then laughed out of excitement.

Xena laughed in happiness and turned her head in the darkness to Gabrielle. "Perfect."

The smaller warrior smiled and turned her head forward to watch where she went. She felt so alive right now. The pair rode ahead and within a quarter of a candlemark they came to a stream with a sparkling green grass clearing. It hadn't been clutter with the falling leaves.

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Gabrielle sighed as she lay on her back staring up at the stars. "Not a bad day."

Xena quietly laughed. "Not at all."

"Busy I have to say."

"Very true." Xena brought her hands under her head as she studied the stars. They were lying on the ground beside the stream. They hadn't star gazed in nature like this for to long.

The Queen sighed again contently. She suddenly rolled to her right to place her upper body on top of Xena's. Her arms crossed over the warrior's chest and she rested her chin on her hands.

Xena smiled and brought her hands from under her head to rest on Gabrielle. "So tell me how you put all of this together."

Gabrielle chuckled. "I have my ways."

"Uh huh." The warrior's right hand came up to run through Gabrielle's short hair. "Mind sharing?"

The small warrior grinned. "Not at all. I asked Solari to saddle up Argo and Torqueo and pack the saddles with food for a day. Then I told her to leave them on the south side of the forest."

"Ah, so that's what the 'drink' was about huh?"

"You caught me." The small woman then chuckled. She lowered her head down on her hands.

"Thanks for doing this Gabrielle." Xena paused. "I wasn't to excited about a night of talking to the Amazons."

Gabrielle laughed. "I agree. I didn't want to either. That's the one requirement we both failed."

Xena now started to laugh. "With flying colors."

"Mmm." Gabrielle lifted her head up again. "I also asked Solari to talk to Maired about something."

The warrior's right hand came down to rest on her Soulmate's hands. "What was that about?"

"Well she asked Maired if it was possible for you and I to renew our vows. And well... I didn't say we would and that I had to ask you first."

Xena responded and smiled. "We should have done it sooner."

Gabrielle started to laugh at those ironic words. "Oh gods, Maired said the same thing."

"Mmm, smart priestess."

The Queen shook her head with a smile. "So you want to do it?"

Xena nodded. "Love to." Her thumb rubbed against Gabrielle's knuckles. "Ritual?"

Gabrielle sighed. "Yup, another one."

The older woman grinned. "I'm getting use to it."

"Yeah." The small woman shook her head. "We're being ritualized."

Xena wrinkled her nose for a second. "We are."

Gabrielle leaned closer to her Soulmate. "Normal not our style."

"No. So why we doing it?"

"I don't know." Gabrielle chuckled a little. "But I really don't care."

"Mmm neither do I for once."

The Queen smirked. "I'll write that down too."

"Funny Gabrielle." Xena then gave a smug look.

"Wasn't trying to be." Gabrielle then finished the distance and took her Soulmate's lips in a strong kiss.

The warrior's hands moved down to grasp her friend's sides. She lifted Gabrielle onto her body as the kiss kept going. And the kiss soon developed into more that night.

~\*Part 28\*~

Xena reached up with her right hand to pull the fur more over her Soulmate's body that lay on hers. She then felt a smile spread across her Soulmate's lips that pressed into her neck. "Morning."

Gabrielle quietly mumbled out a, "Morning." But she didn't open her eyes.

The warrior tightened her arms more around her friend as their bare bodies kept each other warm under the furs. Her head turned to the eastern world and she saw the sun had just peaked over the horizon.

"Dawn?"

Xena turned her head back to close her eyes. "Yeah."

"Let's go back to sleep."

The taller woman lifted her head slightly place a kiss on Gabrielle's head. "Tired huh?"

Gabrielle chuckled. "Yeah." She contently released her next breath. "Yesterday wore me out."

"Mmm, which part about yesterday?"

The small warrior snickered now. "Well it wasn't the fighting part."

"Ooh, I see now."

The Queen's lips shaped into a grin. "You agree?"

Xena's lips took on a grin as well. "Definitely." She then took a deep breath. "Go back to sleep huh?"

Gabrielle tightened her arms around her Soulmate. "See you there."

Xena smiled to herself and then let her body slip into a sound sleep with her partner.

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Gabrielle slowly felt herself come out of her dream with Xena. But she knew her Soulmate was still faintly sleeping. So she kept her eyes shut but carefully moved her right hand between her body and Xena's as she lay on the warrior. Her hand snaked down Xena's soft stomach to her lower abdomen.

"Gabrielle."

The younger woman grinned and stopped her movement since she felt her partner's breathing pick up. "Hi." Her eyes then gradually opened and she lifted her head up to gazed down at Xena.

The warrior's dark eyes opened up and locked with her friend's. "Starting something."

The Queen shrugged her shoulders. "No, just helping you to wake up."

"Uh huh." Xena released Gabrielle's side and brought her hand behind her partner's head to bring her in for a strong kiss.

Once it ended Gabrielle pushed herself up more and lowered her head back down to kiss her Soulmate. She felt her body press hard against Xena's body as they kissed.

"Gabrielle." The warrior tried to talk in the middle of the long kiss. "It's late morning."

The small warrior pulled back from the kiss. "I'm the Queen, they can deal." Slowly her right hand came up her Soulmate's soft stomach to her sides near her breast.

Xena shut her eyes in reaction. "Won't argue."

Gabrielle grinned. "Good." She leaned down close to Xena and let her lips brush against her warrior's. "My Soulmate comes before anything else."

Xena's right hand came behind Gabrielle's head again to finish the distance and begin a passionate kiss. And yet again the Soulmates fell into their touch and soul's love.

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Gabrielle packed the last fur and closed up the saddlebag on Torqueo's rump. She held her hands on the saddlebag and at a random moment a random memory filtered back to her.

Xena closed up her saddlebag and turned her head to the right to see her best friend frozen where she stood in action. She knew Gabrielle was thinking about something and it wasn't a pleasant thing by the look on her small warrior's face.

The warrior patted Argo's side and quietly came up behind her Soulmate. Very carefully Xena's arms circled around Gabrielle in protection from her memory. Xena carefully whispered her Soulmate's name. "Gabrielle?"

The Queen shook her head and dropped her hands from the saddlebag. "Sorry."

"What was the memory?"

The small warrior's eyes still had a bit of confusion in them as she gazed up at Xena. "I just started remembering Illusia." She shook her head. "Gods, I'm sorry. I shouldn't...." Her eyes shut.

Xena sighed a little unhappily. "We still both haven't gotten over it."

Gabrielle lifted her eyes back up to Xena. "No." Her right hand came up to run through her short hair then fall down to Xena's hands that held her. "I can't. I just... I just can't forget what I did to you. Gods." Her teeth clenched while she turned her

head a way. "And I can never understand why." She shook her head and looked up to her warrior again. "I can't figure out why I did it all. Why it happened."

"Gabrielle it just happened the way it did." Xena took a long breath. "I let myself fall back into my hatred for Caesar in Britannia and that led you need to trust somebody else. Khrafstar planned it that way Gabrielle and he played his pawns perfectly. It has nothing to do with what you do wrong or not."

"Wait." Gabrielle locked eyes directly with her partner. "You're making it sound like it was your fault and Hades if I'm going to let you think it was Xena. You're right Khrafstar did set it all up, everything. He played off of us both. He played off your hatred and he played off my blind trust." She sighed. "He just happened to be there in the right place at the right time to catch us both off guard." Her words then came out in a growl. "The bastard."

"There is real no fault Gabrielle." Xena saw her Soulmate raise her head to her again. "We both learned lessons from it all."

Gabrielle laughed unhappily. "To many at once." Her next words came out of thought. "Ever day I thank Solan for Illusia and every day I apologize to him for Hope."

"You hold Hope's actions as your responsibility when it wasn't Gabrielle."

Gabrielle's eyes began to burn faintly. "Xena how can you say that? I brought her into this world Xena."

"Dahak created her Gabrielle. The only thing she had of you was her body, nothing else."

The small warrior nodded. "That was it." She shook her head. "I still remember before we went into Dahak's temple and she came to me in the woods. She asked me to be her mother again." A sigh. "A part of me was so close to saying yes. I felt like I still owed her something but then when she touched my cheek this anger erupted in me. I never hated somebody so much other then her."

"I know." Xena's eyes unfocused for a moment while she spoke. "I remember how hollow your eyes were when you came back. I couldn't help but wonder why and I figured it out quickly." Now an old dream came back to Xena with a sickening smack.

*Gabrielle's eyes narrowed. "I could have said the something about you! I could be sitting here telling you, you were a vessel for Evil. By the gods Xena you were a warlord and killed thousands of people. Hope hardly did that. People showed you a second chance. But you couldn't even give her one to start with."*

*"No Gabrielle."*

*"Yes Xena, and you know it! You killed my daughter! And admit it, you loved it? You enjoyed it?"*

*"No Gabrielle I didn't." Xena stood up and took a step back. Gabrielle stood up now, she stepped over Hope. "Yes you did Xena. Admit it!" She pointed a finger at Xena, her eyes narrowing. "I saw that look of utter satisfaction when Hope and her son lay died in that barn. I bet that was the happiest moment in your life!"*

Xena shut her eyes tightly against her memory of the dream.

Gabrielle reached up with her right hand to carefully caress her partner's right cheek. "What memory?"

The warrior opened her eyes that were filled with horror. "Old memory of a dream." She shook her head to let herself go stoic. "Gabrielle, I did enjoy killing Hope."

The small warrior nodded as she let a sad smile control her lips. "I did too." Her eyes dropped. "As bad as that sounds for both of us." Emerald eyes lifted back up. "She almost destroyed us Xena. I couldn't let that go. I couldn't let her get away with killing Solon, destroying my dream of a child, threatening Cyrene, hurting you, and ruin my relationship with you. Never. I wanted her to know how it felt to have her dreams shattered and a loved one killed." She paused as her eyes went a little hard. "Xena, nobody hurts you and if they do they better run from me."

"I know." Xena pulled her Soulmate in closer. "I was angry at Hope for the same things and wanted her to pay." She paused. "But what made me the angriest was how she destroyed your dreams of a daughter. I saw that look of love when she was first born and I knew she'd only damn you. I never got so angry before."

Gabrielle nodded and she rested her head against her friend's chest. "She really was my hope."

The warrior held her Soulmate tightly. "Would you ever want to have a child again?" Xena gazed down at Gabrielle.

The younger woman looked up to Xena. "Really, I don't know." She shook her head for a moment. "I'd be so scared the child would be like Hope. As if Dahak still infects me."

"He doesn't Gabrielle. That I know."

Gabrielle smiled to Xena then lost her smile after a moment. "I wouldn't mind knowing I can have a normal child." She sadly smiled. "Motherhood." She chuckled. "That would be something else between us."

Xena grinned a little herself. "Oh it would be."

The Queen laughed and quickly glanced up to Xena. "Why we even talking about this?" She shook her head. "We can't anyway."

The warrior shrugged her shoulders. "Crazier things have happened to us."

The smaller woman rolled her eyes and shifted out of Xena's arms. "True." She lifted her shoulders up as she walked to Torqueo to grab his reins. "You know only bacchae, dryads, you swimming to the underworld..."

Xena grinned as she crossed her arms over her chest and stared at her partner's back.

Gabrielle rapidly turned around to face her friend with the reins in her hands. "Me being a bacchae, giants, my ugly grandson and look alike daughter, Velasca was an experience along with Callisto, Angels, huge flying birds, Hercules, Prometheus..."

The warrior glanced over at her horse and raised her hand up as a grin took her lips over her Soulmate's raving.

Argo looked at her owner and then walked over to her.

Xena reached up and took the reins. "Don't forget the Titans."

"Oh gods yes! The Titans, I think that was my favorite." Gabrielle chuckled. "Oh Cecrops, Troy!" Gabrielle threw her arms up. "Am I missing anything?"

"The horde."

"Oh how could I forget that? Then there was always India with all of that hocus-pocus. Karma, time traveling, and Alti." Gabrielle started walking with Torqueo to her left and Xena to her right and Argo to Xena's right. They all began their trek back to the Amazon village. "We can't omit Ares's little schemes to get you back."

The Warrior Princess laughed. "Definitely not." She glanced over at her smaller warrior. "The body switching with Callisto."

Gabrielle quickly looked over to Xena. "Gods I hated that." She then laughed. "Hey nothing is impossible with us huh?" She then snickered. "Think we can switch bodies someday?"

Xena started to laugh. "Gabrielle be careful with what you just said."

The Queen laughed herself. "Oh come on it would be a fun experience to wake up in your body tomorrow. See what it's like up there."

The warrior rolled her eyes. "Funny. And I'd see what it's like from down there."

Gabrielle snickered. "It's great from view from down here." She walked closer to Xena and bumped her. "So crazy things have happened to us." She shrugged her shoulders. "Maybe I will be mysteriously pregnant tomorrow." A laugh quickly followed Gabrielle's words.

Xena joined her in the laugh as they kept walking back to the village. The warrior then evil grinned after she calmed down from laughing. "The jinn."

Gabrielle laughed. "I don't know what issues Najara had for hearing voices in her head."

Xena snickered. "She had quite a few if she's hearing voices."

"So we noticed." The small warrior then closed her eyes as she walked. "Oh yeah I hear jinn too." Her eyes opened again.

The older woman quickly grabbed Gabrielle's right arm. "What they say?"

"Uhh they say... I love Xena." The Queen grinned over at her Soulmate. "Gee, it doesn't take jinn to tell me that."

The taller woman shook her head. "Gods, we're bad."

Gabrielle chuckled happily. "But it feels good to laugh at it all."

Xena nodded at that. "It does." She grinned over to her friend as she ambled through the woods. "Anything else you'd like to share about our adventures."

"Yes." Gabrielle turned her head to Xena again. "This is just between you and I." Her face was very serious.

The warrior raised an eyebrow in question.

"Khrafstar ... he was so ugly! He made centaur shit look good."

Xena broke out laughing. "I think he looked better than the Destroyer."

Gabrielle's nose wrinkled up. "That is a mug only a mother could love."

The two Soulmates kept at it for the rest of the walk to the village. Their laughter could be heard all the way to the village that early afternoon.

"Oh I got it Xena, it's bound to happen. We'll be frozen in ice tombs for twenty-five years..."

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Gabrielle dropped the quill and leaned back in her chair. "The spring, it's the best time."

Ephiny nodded her head in agreement. "I agree."

The small warrior looked to Xena.

The warrior nodded. "Agreed."

The Queen glanced over to Masika. "You Masika?"

The Council Member also nodded. "Definitely the spring."

Gabrielle smiled. "Great, it's the spring then that all the Nations come here." She relaxed in the chair as she stared at the scroll on Ephiny's desk. It was early evening and Gabrielle decided to call a quiet meeting between herself, Ephiny, Xena, and Masika. They were all inside of Ephiny's hut having just finished a dinner together and now working on the future plans for the Nation.

Masika cross her legs. "What's next on the list?"

The Queen thought for a moment. "Roles, we need to figure out ranks and roles."

Ephiny grinned. "Obviously you're Queen."

Gabrielle slowly averted her eyes to her regent. "Naturally." She grinned but went serious quickly. Reaching up she took the scroll off the table with the quill. She placed it in her lap, she wrote down Queen then her own name. "Okay next in rank I want consort." She looked up to her friends. "Agreed?"

Both Masika and Ephiny nodded rather fast.

Gabrielle grinned inwardly then lifted her eyes to her Soulmate. "Xena?"

Xena looked at her partner, her eyes shifted away, and back to Gabrielle.

"I'll take that as a yes." The Queen wrote down next consort and Xena's name. She sighed. "Next will be regent."

Ephiny quickly cut in. "Definitely."

The small warrior quietly laughed as she went about writing next rank of regent. "Next would be second in command."

"Wait Gabrielle."

The Queen lifted her eyes to Ephiny in question.

"What about an Amazon Princess?"

Gabrielle sighed and sat back in her seat. "Doesn't the Amazon Princess have to be my sister or daughter?"

Ephiny shook her head. "Not necessarily. Perfect example was you and Melosa."

The Queen nodded her head a few times. "I'm not sure. What if... just... hypothetical. I choose an Amazon Princess now and then later I have a daughter and I want to make her the Amazon Princess?"

Masika quickly answered. "You could do two of things Gabrielle. Either you could take the caste away from the Amazon Princess at the time and give it to your daughter. Or you could wait until you retire as Queen and give your daughter the caste."

Gabrielle nodded and considered the routes. "Hold on. If I handed my daughter my caste would that make her Queen or Princess?" She gazed at Masika.

"Both Gabrielle." Ephiny explained herself when her Queen turned her head to her. "If the Princess at the time is younger then your daughter then your daughter would be Queen. But if the Princess is older then your daughter, she'll be Queen. Then there's always the details of a regent."

The small warrior nodded. "I think I got it."

The regent nodded. "I can dig up the scrolls on it for you."

"Yes, actually this coming winter I wouldn't mind taking the Amazon scrolls to read."

Masika's eyes widen. "Gabrielle, that's a lot of scrolls."

The Queen chuckled. "Then I'll know Amazon well."

The older Amazon grinned and nodded. "As the Queen wishes."

Gabrielle smiled then rested in her seat again. "But there is still the question on an Amazon Princess."

"Amarice."

The Queen turned her head to her Soulmate. "Amarice?"

Xena nodded. "She would be perfect for Amazon Princess." She turned her attention to Gabrielle.

The small warrior lifted the quill as the feather tip brushed across her lips. "That's an interesting idea." She nodded a few times.

Ephiny crossed her arms against her chest. "I don't think she's a little... inexperienced for the role Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle grinned to the regent. "Did you think I was?"

The regent shut her eyes with a grin. "Caught me." Her eyes opened again.

"The question isn't about inexperience here. It's a question of whether Amarice has the heart for the role."

The Amazon Queen nodded at Masika's words. "It is." She then smiled. "And she does definitely since she's traveled with Xena and I."

Ephiny quietly laughed. "I knew it was a good idea sending her off with you two."

Xena glimpsed over to the regent. "I never thanked you for that Eph." She grinned.

The regent chuckled. "Well I knew you'd whip her into shape Xena."

Gabrielle snickered to herself but stopped and went stern. "Okay, so Amarice for Amazon Princess yes?"

"Well what do you think Gabrielle?"

The Queen responded to Ephiny. "Definitely yes, she'd be good once she understands her duties."

The regent nodded. "I agree."

Masika smiled. "Same here."

"Xena?" The small warrior peered up to her partner.

The warrior nodded. "Of course."

Gabrielle quickly jot down Amazon Princess and Amarice beside it. "Okay second in command next."

"Gabrielle, we need to consider the Queens before we get any lower on the pole."

The Queen nodded at her Soulmate's words. "You're right. They wouldn't be happy to become low ranking Amazons from Queens." She sat back in the chair, dropping the quill on the scroll, and laced her hands to let them rest on the scrolls. "Any suggestions?"

Ephiny spoke out of thought. "Could make them commanders."

Gabrielle nodded as she stared at the scroll and the list of rank she'd created so far and she'd like to create.

"No." Xena shook her head and lifted her head up. "That's to many commanders and to much power for certain ones."

"Then what's your suggestion Xena?" The Queen looked up to Xena in question.

"Lieutenants." Xena's head bobbed up and down. "Technically in armies a lieutenant is one rank below a commander."

"Nine lieutenants." Gabrielle took a deep breath. "How Amazons are there grand total Ephiny?"

"Well... there're around six hundred... maybe six hundred fifty here now. Plus the Amazons remaining at the Amazon Nations. Probably somewhere around nine hundred Gabrielle."

The Queen nodded. "Perfect nine lieutenants and nine hundred Amazons. I like that." She gazed up to her best friend. "Lieutenants are lower rank than commanders?"

Xena nodded. "Yes."

The Queen smiled. "Perfect. Before I put that down, I would like to keep Solari as my second in command. She does a great job of it. Everybody agree?" Everybody nodded and Gabrielle smiled. "Great." She jotted down Solari's name with second in command. "I also wouldn't mind a third in command and I was thinking about Teresa for the role."

Ephiny nodded her head. "I agree with that. She'd make a good commander."

"That's what I thought." Gabrielle took a deep breath. "She's quiet but that's okay. She knows how to get along with people really well and knows her stuff. And Teresa is well respected among my Amazons."

Xena's lips creased into a smile. "She would be a perfect third in command."

Gabrielle glanced at Masika. "Masika?"

The Head Council Member smiled. "Agreed."

The Queen smiled and began to write down Teresa's name with third in command and also wrote down the Queens' names with lieutenant. As she did this she spoke aloud. "Let's just go over other roles." She finished writing and leaned forward with the quill to tip it with ink from the ink well. "The head council member..." She smiled and glanced over at Masika. "Will not change."

Masika lowered her head for a quick second then raised it again. "Thank you."

Gabrielle nodded. "Any disagreements?"

"Nope." Ephiny shook her head. "Masika is the best."

"Not at all." Xena crossed her legs at the ankles as she watched her Soulmate write down Masika's role.

"Side note for you three on the council." Gabrielle raised her head. "I would like to take the head council members from each nation and place them in the new council."

I'd hate to bump off the other council members but... they're just minor. I think it'll be the best to have the head council member from each different nation when the new government is established this coming spring."

Everybody nodded their heads in agreement.

Gabrielle sighed. "Okay... just a few more." She quietly laughed and then went on.

The four women all stayed inside of the hut discussing a few more roles and terms for another candlemark. Then near the end of it all Gabrielle was rolling up her scroll.

Ephiny took a long breath. "Anything else Gabrielle?"

The Queen shook her head as she placed the quill back on Ephiny's desk. "I don't think so." She leaned back in her chair. "I'll talk to Teresa, Epinion, Amarice, whoever else about their roles. Technically right now all these roles are unofficial till this spring. Once we set the government up and everything is settle we'll go through the normal rituals to make everything official." Gabrielle tapped one end of the scroll against her leg. "And tomorrow I'll speak to the other Queens and tell them basically what's going on."

Masika nodded. "Great. Nothing else?"

Gabrielle shook her head. "Not that I can think of now. Thank you for coming by Masika."

The elder Amazon smiled. "Quite welcome but I must head to bed." She stood up and stretched her legs. "Have a good evening everybody."

"Goodnight Masika." The small warrior watched Masika head to the door.

"Night Masika." Ephiny smiled to the other Amazon.

"Goodnight Masika." The warrior nodded to the head council member.

"Bye." Masika then left closing the door quietly behind.

Gabrielle turned her head away from the door to Ephiny. "Did Solari talk to you?"

The regent crossed her arms over her chest. "About renewing your vows?" She smiled. "Yes."

The Queen smiled. "When can we do it?"

"As soon as you would like."

Gabrielle looked up to her Soulmate.

Xena lowered her eyes to Gabrielle and studied her partner's eyes for a second then glanced to Ephiny. "Tomorrow morning."

Ephiny furrowed her eyebrows. "How do you two..." She stopped herself and shook her head.

Gabrielle was staring at Ephiny with a grin. She reached over with her left hand and patted her friend's knee. "Don't ask Eph because we can't even explain it to

ourselves."

The Amazon sighed. "I won't." But now she smiled. "Tomorrow morning sounds perfect. I'll talk to Maird about it and get it setup. Late morning?"

The warrior nodded. "That's perfect." She paused. "Gabrielle and I won't be helped with getting... dressed?" She heard a snicker from her smaller Soulmate.

Ephiny sighed. "No, don't worry."

Gabrielle suddenly stood. "Great, thanks Eph."

"Somebody is a little tired of being here." The regent smirked up to her Queen.

Xena now stood. "She isn't the only one." Her hands came forward to grasp her Soulmate's sides.

The regent shook her head. "Goodnight you two."

Gabrielle chuckled. "Sleep well Eph."

"You too." Ephiny stood up and smiled.

"Goodnight Ephiny." Xena smiled and released her partner's sides.

"See you tomorrow Xena."

The warrior grinned. "Count on it."

Gabrielle ambled over to the door with Xena right behind. They went out the door and heard their Amazon friend say, "Bye." But they kept walking once they closed the door.

The Warrior Princess reached to Gabrielle's right hand and laced their hands together. "Tired?"

The smaller woman nodded. "That wore me out. Thanks for putting up with it."

Xena nodded. "No problem, just hard seats is my only complaint."

"No doubt." Gabrielle stiffened a yawn. "I think you and I should have leather seats."

The warrior laughed with a smile. "Right."

The Queen shrugged her shoulders. "One can dream."

Xena pulled her Soulmate closer to her body as they neared their hut. "Speaking of which."

Gabrielle nodded. "Let's do some dreaming together."

But before they even slipped into their dreamscape together they relaxed. Relaxed in a hot bath for a half of a candelmark. The Soulmates went directly to bed afterwards that night. Tomorrow would be another busy day for them.

~\*Part 29\*~

Xena rolled out of bed first then Gabrielle did. The small warrior gathered up her clothes and strolled into the washroom.

The warrior however went to a chair and picked up her leathers and slipped into them. As soon as she did a knock was at the door. The older woman shifted to the door and opened it. She stood in the opening of the door to peer outside. "Morning Maired."

The priestess gazed up at the Warrior Princess with a warm smile. "I stopped by because of the vows being renewed."

Xena nodded. "Ephiny talked to you?"

"Yes she did. She said you and Gabrielle would like to do them this morning."

"If we can Maired."

Maired smiled. "Of course you can. The arrangements have been made." Her smile fell and she went serious. "The ritual will be held in Artemis's temple and you may only have three witnesses. The process will take around a candlemark and half."

The warrior nodded and retorted. "When would you like us over there?"

"As soon as possible Xena."

"Okay great. I'll let Gabrielle know and we'll be over there soon."

The priestess nodded. "Wonderful, I'll see you both then."

"Thank you Maired. Goodbye."

"Bye Xena." Maired strolled off with her robe slightly flowing in the air behind her.

The warrior quietly closed the door and as soon as she did Gabrielle came out of the washroom. Xena gazed over at her with a smile.

"Three witnesses Xena?"

"Yes." The warrior padded over to the table and lifted her brass armor to put on.

The Queen adjusted the leather strap on her right shoulder having just put it on after her skirt. Gabrielle then grabbed her boots and began to put them on. "Who do you think we should have? Ephiny?"

Xena hooked the brass armor over her left shoulder. "Yes." She hooked her right armor strap. "Maybe Amarice."

Gabrielle nodded and lifted her right boot to tie. "Solari or Epinion?" She sighed. "That's a toss up."

The warrior finished strapping her armor on and began to put her boots on. "Maybe Solari."

The smaller woman nodded. "But we've known Epinion longer."

Xena sighed as she tied her last boot. "It is a toss up." Her foot came down to the ground after being on the chair. "Maybe the thing to do is not have anybody." She

reached to her sword with her fingers wrapping around the sheath but hesitated to lift the sword.

"Maybe you're right." Gabrielle's right foot connected with the wood floor. She turned to her Soulmate having not heard a response. She saw her partner stuck in action about taking her sword so she came up behind Xena. Gabrielle's left hand came forward to rest on Xena's right hand on the sword. "You don't want to take it?" She gazed up to her friend.

Xena nodded. "It's not right." Her eyes fell on Gabrielle. "When we were married I should have never had my weapons." She shook her head and released the sword and instead she took Gabrielle's hand.

The small warrior nodded. "You're right." She unwillingly released her Soulmate's hand. She leaned down and grasped the hilts of her sais. Raising back up, Gabrielle twirled them then slammed the tips into the table holding them for a moment. She let go of the handles and watched the sais fall on top of Xena's sword and chakram with a cling. "Love is a weapon." Her left hand came over to take her Soulmate's hand again.

Xena stared at the weapons for a moment with narrow eyes. But her eyes warmed as they averted to Gabrielle. "Let's go."

Gabrielle smiled with a nod.

The Soulmates first went to eat rather quickly in the food hut, then found themselves in Artemis's temple with Maired.

The priestess raised her head once she heard the doors to her temple close. "Welcome my Queen and Consort."

Gabrielle smiled to her priestess. "Good morning Maired."

Maired bowed her head slightly as she watched the Soulmates walk through the temple to meet her on a stone alter. She brought her head up. "Please come here and we'll begin."

The Soulmates smiled and still held their hands and came onto the stone alter with Maired standing in front of them.

The Amazon sighed unhappily. "I am afraid I will have to ask you both to release hands and hold your hands behind her backs for a moment. Also please face each other."

The Soulmates did as they were told. They faced each other and released hands. Gabrielle's hands went behind her back and Xena followed her example.

"No witness I presume?"

The Queen shook her head. "None. This is something that never needs witnesses."

The priestess smiled warmly. "The first Queen and Consort to realize this." She turned around to a small stand that held cold embers. Behind the stand was a huge gold laced statue of Artemis looking over the temple. The priestess pulled out a small pouch from her robe and sprinkled some mysterious powered over the embers and a fire

came to life. The fire's light spread up and down the gold statue of Artemis almost bringing her to life. The pouch went back into its home as Maired turned around to the Soulmates.

Xena stared directly into her Soulmate's eyes.

Gabrielle stared directly into her Soulmate's eyes.

The priestess smiled. "Now we begin." She took a deep breath. "Queen and Consort, Consort and Queen. They are seen as one, complete. These two go through trials and tribulations through their days together. And one of those many trials or tribulations may tear them apart to only make them Queen and Consort again. But yet the Queen and Consort heal themselves then each other. Once the two candles' flames are relit then their melting wax mix together. And in this the Queen and Consort become one again." Maired now raised both her hands and glanced first to her Queen.

Gabrielle seemed to understand and she raised her left hand and carefully rested her palm in Maired's right hand.

The priestess turned her head to Xena and nodded to her.

Xena lifted up her right hand to rest in Maired's other hand.

Maired smiled and closed her eyes as her next words seem to flow from her lips in a dream. "Lao Ma, Ming T'ien, Caesar, Khrafstar, Dahak, Hope, Solan, and Illusia. These are the people. Jealousy, betrayal, distrust, hatred, rage, pain, forgiveness, and then finally love. These are the emotions. The strength of Soulmates and the spiritual love. This is what was learned." The priestess opened her eyes slowly and gazed at the Soulmates to see both of their cheeks streaked with tears but they were smiling. "Your soul and love were never separated from each other as were your emotions, bodies, thoughts, and dreams were."

The priestess stopped and took a deep breath. "This is not a ritual for renewing vows between Queen and Consort. For renewing vows is something so much smaller than what the purpose of this ritual is. This is Artemis's ritual of the binding of Soulmates."

Maired closed her eyes once more. "Artemis, these are your Chosen, this is the Queen and Consort, this is Gabrielle and Xena, and these are the Soulmates of time. Their love is immeasurable for all. And now has come the time where they ask to be seen as one before you. Grant them their deepest desires."

The priestess kept her eyes tightly closed and she moved her hands together with the Soulmates' hands still in her palms.

The Soulmates eyes have been locked since the beginning. The Soulmates now felt their fingertips touch and an energy seem to burst in their fingertips then flow through their bodies.

Maired opened her eyes again but now they were crystal white. "As the Chosen of me your lives are protected. As the Soulmates of time you have the strongest love ever known. As the Soulmates with the strongest love you can grant your deepest desires at will together. And now your desire is to become Queen and Consort of mine. I recognize my Queen and Consort as one again and forever. And in that this is the binding of the Soulmates of time for eternity." She shut her eyes slowly as her

following words were light in air. "Always remember two things Soulmates. Remember your soul you share knows of no time. And remember what you desire together will be yours, never forget this Soulmates." Mairead opened her eyes again to the Soulmates, they were normal now.

That energy burst inside of the Soulmates now quickly shot to their hearts in collection then disappeared.

The priestess smiled. "Now comes the last part. This is the part that begins the binding." She moved the Soulmates' hands together and nodded to them both.

Xena took her Soulmate's hand.

Gabrielle took her Soulmate's hand.

Maired kept her warm smile and continued on. "Never break your hands. Never move your lips to each other. Never break eye contact. You both will remain in this temple for a candlemark. You may sit and you may find an alternate route to a form of talking. But remember your hands do not break apart, no sound or movement passes your lips, and your eye contact does not break." She lowered her hands from the Soulmates' hands. "In that candlemark go through the days together. The day you met, the day you married, the day you almost lost each other, the day death almost tore you apart, the day forgiveness hit you, the day hatred raked at your soul, the day the light came, and so on. I will return in a candlemark Soulmates." Now she walked to her right past the Soulmates. Slowly Mairead walked down the center of the temple and went out the large wood doors. She closed the doors behind quietly.

Gabrielle smiled lovingly to her partner.

The warrior smiled back to her smaller warrior.

The Queen sighed. *Great, we can't talk. How we going to get around this?* She felt her partner squeeze her hand and she came out of her thoughts.

Xena grinned a little knowing her friend had been thinking. She pulled her hand that was locked with Gabrielle's down then back up.

Gabrielle nodded her head knowing what Xena meant by that.

Together they easily sat down together on the cool stone altar. Then without even asking each other they took laced their other hands together.

The small warrior wanted to chuckle at their situation but held back. They'd been in worse problems before and they couldn't get around this one. Wait, this isn't even a problem. For Gabrielle it was not being able to talk to her best friend. She sighed a little again. *Okay we can talk from our lips. Mairead said there was another route.*

Xena saw her Soulmate thinking deeply about the communication or lack there of. But she only began to think of what to do herself. *Alternate route to a form of talking? I hate riddles.* She kept thinking and went to what Mairead said earlier and it quickly came to her. *What you desire together will be yours. That's the answer.* Xena took a deep breath and began to let a certain desire fill her.

Gabrielle knew her warrior had an idea, she just had to figure it out herself. *What else*

*did Maird say that has Xena thinking? There's got to be something. Stupid riddles. Oh gods! What you desire together will be yours-. Maybe just maybe... I desire to speak to Xena mentally, that's it. A sigh. Xena I wish you could hear me, please do.*

*Gabrielle, you ask and you shall receive.* The warrior grinned to her partner.

Gabrielle's eyes widen. *-Xena?*

*The one and only.* The warrior smirked at Gabrielle but squeezed Gabrielle's hands.

*I can't believe this, you're in my head.*

*Hey! Who says you're not in my head?*

Gabrielle grinned to her partner then smiled warmly. *In each other's heads?*

*Exactly.* Xena smiled to Gabrielle. *Well you'll have to make sure you write this down too huh?*

*Gods, yes. This is insane Xena.*

*You're complaining Gabrielle?*

The small warrior grinned. *Oh no. It's just... well.*

*Different and not quite normal?*

*Exactly.*

Xena smiled now. *Well we are not the normal pair of girlfriends.*

Gabrielle bit her lower lip to keep from laughing. *Xena, don't make me laugh, gods.*

*Don't worry, we both were about to break the ritual.* Xena released her lower lip after she felt the urge to laugh leave her.

*Okay, I can work with this Xena.*

The older woman grinned. *Same here.*

*So Maird said we should talk about our days together. Gee where should we start?*

*The beginning always works.*

Gabrielle shook her head a little with a small grin. *Good idea.* She took a deep breath. *The grove, you still remember that day?*

*Yes of course.* Xena smiled to her partner. *My life has changed since then.* Now a grin took her lips. *I can still see you in the grove and back talking Draco's men.*

The Queen started to grin. *Yes, the naive little me.*

*Gabrielle.*

*Oh come on Xena. We both know I was naïve. I was till... gods two and half years later.*

*It was not two and half years Gabrielle.*

The small warrior raised an eyebrow. *Then when?*

*Right after my death Gabrielle and you became Queen. I felt it in you.*

Gabrielle sighed. *I see it as after we got through all the turmoil of Dahak and Hope. After Illusia.*

The taller woman furrowed her eyebrows together. *You can't think that Gabrielle.*

*Xena you have to admit all the things I did with Hope and Ming T'ien were immature.*

*No, it was out of jealousy.*

The small warrior shook her head. *Either way it was immature and naïve of me.*

The warrior's hands tighten more around Gabrielle's hands. *Listen, you were jealous over something you had complete right to be jealous. If I had been you I'd done the something Gabrielle.* She sighed. *I was never angry at you for what you did. I was happier then anything, alright?* A smile took Xena's lips

The Queen smiled faintly. *I was just never happy over what I did.*

*I know but you were not naïve or immature over that even more so since I say so.*  
Now the older woman's smile shaped into a grin.

The small warrior grinned back. *Especially when you don't think so. A bit of a sigh. Remember the first time we kissed?*

Xena raised an eyebrow. *Which time? When I was in my body or in the dreamscape thing?*

Gabrielle shook her head faintly. *The dreamscape of course.*

*Oh yes, I definitely remember. It was so romantic.*

*Xena!* The Queen held back a laugh. *So we both were a little...*

*Shy would be the word.*

Gabrielle nodded to her Soulmate. *Shy and then some maybe.*

*So why didn't you ask me sooner about why I kissed you in that dreamscape Gabrielle?*

The small warrior's eyes widen. *You're kidding me right Xena?*

*Nnno.*

The younger woman grinned. *Okay I'm sure I would just asked you after you came back to life why you kissed me. I'd be looked at like I had four heads. I can see it now. 'Xena why'd you kiss me?' Then I get this look like I was crazy and you'd answer with something like. 'Gabrielle I have no idea what you're talking about. Have you been eating drugged nutbread?'*

The warrior smirked. *I guess I am a little different compared to then huh?*

Gabrielle arched an eyebrow.

The Soulmates continued on talking together through a rather... different means. This went on for over a quarter of candlemark. They talked about everything in their lives together. Going over the bad things and the good things together. Flipping through their feelings from so long ago and now today together. And by the last few minutes of the time in the temple they were discussing recent things.

*I was having the worst nightmares.* Gabrielle shook her head. *They can tell you a lot.*

Xena nodded. *I know. I could tell you were having nightmares.*

*I wasn't the only one.* For emphasis the Queen raised an eyebrow at her partner.

The warrior grinned. *Yes, I was having my own... lovely dreams.*

Gabrielle grinned for a moment then went serious. *Xena what if this happens again? It took us... a year and half to get over everything.*

Xena's head bobbed up and down. *But it was worth that wait. Gabrielle either way we have to wait out the darkness, whether it's together or separate. Either way when the light comes I'll be there beside you.*

At first the Queen didn't respond. *Xena?*

*Yeah?*

*It's not going to happen between us again.* Gabrielle's eyes had so much promise in them. *I won't let it nor will you, I can feel that.* A loving smile swept across her lips. *Can't you feel it Xena? She squeezed Xena's hands tightly. We're Soulmates with the strongest force in our control. That's the key Xena. We're not on the paths of warriors or the way of the warrior.*

A smile took Xena's lips as she finished the declaration. *We're on the way of Soulmates.*

*Exactly.*

Xena nodded with her warm smile. *And in us both realizing that we can do as we will.*

*We can finally forgive ourselves because it would be forgiving each other.*

The warrior grinned a little. *Perfect.* She began to lean towards Gabrielle.

Gabrielle met her halfway.

The Soulmates' lips sealed together in something so indescribable. And as they kissed that burst of energy came back to life and rushed through their bodies and passed through their locks lips and mixed together in both their bodies. Then they slowly pulled back from each other with warm eyes.

"Well it looks like your candlemark went well."

The Soulmates grinned to each other after hearing the priestess voice.

Maired walked up to the altar and but did not climb the few stairs onto the altar. She gazed directly at the Soulmates. "Stand up but keep your hands together."

The Soulmates nodded and carefully stood up but still gazed at each other. If they were suppose to break eye contact it wasn't going to happen.

"Now then, the ritual is over. Your half soul has finally been binded together for a time without time." She then smile to the Soulmates. "And do not forget Artemis's words." Maired turned towards the temple doors and walked through the temple to the doors. She opened them and called back. "And you may speak aloud again." She grinned to herself and opened the door, exited, and closed the doors behind.

Gabrielle smiled to her warrior. "Well, that went well."

Xena smiled right back. "Definitely." She leaned towards her partner and placed a gentle kiss to her forehead. "We better go."

The Queen sighed. "Yeah, have things to do."

Both the Soulmates turned their heads towards the golden statue of Artemis that stood tall. The fire altar stand still burned with the wild yellow and orange flames.

Xena turned her head back to her Soulmate. "Let's go."

Gabrielle gazed back to Xena and nodded.

They released one hand but kept their other locked hands together. Slowly they walked off the altar and once they did the flame that had been burning yellow and orange sparked into a deep red shade.

The pair heard the snap of the fire and gazed back.

Gabrielle furrowed her eyebrows as she stared at the red flame. "Why red?"

Xena studied the red flame and then slowly smiled. "Red... love." She turned her head to Gabrielle.

The small warrior smiled and turned her attention to Xena. "Makes perfect sense." She grinned and started walking again with Xena.

They opened up the doors of the temple as the light of the sun came shining down on them. Walking out, the doors were quietly closed behind.

The red flame only glowed stronger.

Xena and Gabrielle kept walking deciding to head to their hut first to pick up their cloaks.

"Something is different Xena."

The warrior smiled as she squeezed Gabrielle's hand then loosened her hold. "I know."

Gabrielle glanced up to her partner. "I'm glad we did that. I feel like..."

Xena chuckled. "Don't try to describe it. You'll never be able too."

The Queen quietly laughed. "True." She smiled up to her best friend. "I love you Xena."

"I love you Gabrielle." Xena stopped and turned to her partner.

The small warrior smiled and placed her free hand on Xena's hip.

Xena smiled back and brought her free hand behind Gabrielle's head. She lowered her head and claimed Gabrielle's lips.

The Soulmates stood in the middle of the Amazon Village kissing. They received all sorts of grins from the passing Amazons. Especially one Amazon.

Ephiny started walking towards the pair.

Xena pulled back from the kiss and leaned her forehead against Gabrielle's. "Your regent is coming right up behind you."

Gabrielle rolled her eyes. "Don't stop kissing me because of that."

The warrior grinned. "Wasn't planning to." She leaned in to gentle kiss Gabrielle then a second gentle kiss. The third kiss Xena made passionate and long.

The regent came up near the pair. She crossed her arms against her chest knowing they were kissing to annoy her. So she coughed with a grin and spoke loudly. "Don't let me interrupt anything... Soulmates."

Gabrielle started to laugh in this kiss that she lost count of.

Xena grinned and leaned her head against Gabrielle's again. "I think Maired has been talking."

"Really." The Queen kissed Xena lightly then turned to Ephiny but she leaned against her warrior. "What's up Eph?"

"Nothing much." The Amazon was still grinning. "No witnesses huh?"

"Nope." The small warrior crossed her arms over her chest. "Didn't need any."

Ephiny nodded. "No you didn't." She furrowed her eyebrows. "Hold on a moment." She took five steps back and studied the Soulmates. "Oh I know it was bad before but now it's worse."

Both Soulmates raised an eyebrow in question.

The regent laughed and walked up to them again. "You both were glowing before but now your more like a glow of a wild fire."

Gabrielle grinned. "I'll take that as a good thing."

Ephiny smiled. "It is. Solar and I have discussed that before."

The Queen quickly looked up to Xena.

Xena gazed down at her partner.

They both said it at the same time. "Solar?"

The Amazon's face dropped right then. "Oh no."

Gabrielle stood up from leaning against Xena and crossed her arms against her chest. "Solar... as in Solari?"

Ephiny shook her head. "No... no no." She started to turn a deep red.

The Queen laughed a little and looked up to Xena. "Solari is never gonna live this down."

The warrior grinned evilly. "Oh no."

Ephiny groaned. "Oh gods she's gonna kill me." Her right hand came up to run through her hair.

Gabrielle off to her right saw her second in command then. "There she is now." She looked straight at Solari and yelled over to her. "Hey Solar!"

The second in command stopped dead in her tracks and her eyes narrowed. She jogged over to the small group and looked directly at the regent. "Ephiny, why did they just call me Solar?"

The regent lifted her head up. "Slip of the lips." She smiled sheepishly.

Solari sighed for a few seconds.

Gabrielle grinned and nudged Xena.

The warrior nodded.

The pair quickly shuffled off with a few chuckles.

Ephiny grinned. "I'll make it up to you Solari."

The second in command raised an eyebrow and crossed her arms against her chest. "You know they'll never let that go?" She grinned. "You definitely owe me." She walked off. "I'll see you tonight Eph."

The regent grinned a little. "Count on it."

After that, the Soulmates went to their hut. Gathered up their cloaks and went for some lunch. That afternoon though lead to a meeting between the Queen of the Amazons, her Consort, and the former Queens.

## **Part 9**

### **Section 9**

~\*Part 30\*~

"Once all the Nations return this coming spring we'll begin to establish the new

Nation."

All the former Queens nodded at the head Queen. But it was Caitriona that spoke up. "What will become of us, the Queens?"

Gabrielle sighed. "I am not totally sure yet but I have plans."

There was now a low murmur between all the former Queens. Nyx looked to Gabrielle whom sat at the head of the table. "What will happen to my sister? She's the princess. Does her caste just get taken away like it was nothing?"

The Queen opened her mouth but was cut off.

Another former Queen piped in. "Yes? What will happen to our Princesses or our healers?" It was Mairead.

"What about our councils?!"

All the former Queens quickly stood up from their seats around the table. All looking to each other and Gabrielle. All of them yelling and demanding what will happen to whomever. "What about my priestess?" "My second in command?" "Consorts?" "My Nation's traditions?" "Your Nation's traditions? What about my Nation's traditions?" All the former Queens went on with their bickering and demands.

Gabrielle closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Her eyes opened again and she had her head hung low and glanced over to Xena.

The warrior sat beside her and gazed over to her. She turned her head to the Amazons and her eyes went hard. She quickly stood up with her wood chair's legs scraping across the wood floor. "Silence!" Xena crossed her arms over her chest.

All the former Queens went dead silent and turned their attention to the deep-angered voice they heard.

Xena's eyes narrowed as her voice came out in a growl. "Now sit down." She uncrossed her arms and placed her hands on the table. She leaned forward slightly to keep the Amazons' attention. "Those are not your Nations any longer." A pause as she saw all the former Queens drop their eyes. "And don't think for a minute Queen Gabrielle has not considered all the things you ask." Xena removed her hands from the table and straightened up to stand tall. "It is not the main concern who has what rank in the new Nation. The concern right now is making it through this coming winter. Is that understood by all?" Her hands went to her hips and she saw all the Amazons nod in understanding. "Good." She carefully pulled her chair forward and sat again.

Gabrielle lifted her chin from her hands that she had laced. She dropped her elbows from her chair's arms and placed her hands in her laps. Her tone however was more soothing. "I understand everybody's concern about their roles." She took a deep breath. "But as Xena said I am more worried about this winter than anything for my Amazons. And right now I am asking all of you to return to my tribes to look after my Amazons. Is that something each of you can handle for me? If not I will be happy to send somebody else to do it in your place."

Every Amazon quickly nodded in positive answer.

The small warrior nodded with a smile. "Good." She then lost her smile. "This winter..." Gabrielle held her left hand over at Xena. "My Consort and myself will be going over the scrolls of the first Nation." She lowered her hand to the chair's arm. "Not only that but I will be figuring out the ranks in my Nation. Figuring the ranks, the rituals, and Amazon laws for the coming Nation." She paused. "But they will not be set in stone until all the Nations have come." Another smile took her lips. "And this is because I would like for each of you to gather up Amazon law, Amazon ritual, Amazon tradition, Amazon history of your Nation, and a list of everybody in your Nation. Is that clear to each of you?"

The former Queens nodded yet Yakut cut in. "And why is this?"

The Amazon Queen smiled. "I'm glad you asked Yakut." She stood up from her chair and held the other Amazons' attention with ease. "I want to know every Nations nook and cranny so that when my new Nation comes together we all feel at home. So that we all feel apart of each other and accept each other. Each Nation holds special elements to them and I do not want to let that go to waste." Gabrielle paused and now she did as Xena did and placed her hands on the table to lean forward. "And yes I still understand your concerns over the roles and ranks in the coming Nation." Her eyes narrowed faintly out of anger. "But what I do not understand is why you have these concerns. Point blank, these concerns piss me off." She stood up from leaning against the table. "It should not matter who gets what rank in this Nation." She crossed her arms over her chest. "I would be more honored to be just an Amazon then the Queen." She smiled warmly. "And do any of you know why?"

All the Queens shook their heads.

"Because the Amazons would not be without them." Gabrielle grinned. "It could be just all of my officers and myself without the Amazons. There wouldn't be enough of us to sail a ship let alone create a Nation." Now her grin shifted to a smile again. "That's why I honor my Amazons more then my officers. Because they make the Nation, the officers don't make the Nation. They just help protect the Nation." She lost her smile quickly. "And each of you better damn well understand that or you will not be apart of my Nation. I will not have any form of corruption in my Nation. So get any sort of staffs out of your asses and realize you're just as equal to the next Amazon. Is that clear as well?"

All the Queens nodded again and now they held a respect to Gabrielle in their eyes.

Gabrielle smiled. "Wonderful." She took a deep breath. "If there are not any questions then you all may leave. And don't forget your duties this winter. I want all of my Amazons gone by tomorrow and preparing to move here on my orders this coming spring. This meeting is over." Gabrielle saw them leaving but spoke up. "Aureus?"

The southern Amazon turned around and glanced over to her Queen. "Yes Queen Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle smiled. "I need to ask you something."

Aureus nodded with a small smile and came up to Xena and Gabrielle. "Yes my Queen?"

"Aureus, what you think of the idea of Amarice becoming an Amazon Princess?"

Gabrielle knew Aureus was the former Queen of the south tribe from which Amarice came from.

Aureus's head bobbed up and down. "She'd be good." Her eyes lifted from the floor. "She's a good... person."

Gabrielle's facial expression didn't shift but inside she was filled with wonderment. *A good person?* She sighed faintly and responded. "Great. Just wanted to get your opinion since she was of your tribe."

The south Amazon nodded. "That's what I figured." She smiled warmly. "But I need to go and get the Amazons from the south tribe together."

The small warrior nodded. "Thanks Aureus."

"Anytime." Aureus turned around and headed out of the hut.

All the former Queens headed directly to the Amazons in the Amazon Camp outside of the village. The former Queens had their duties to full fill and planned on doing it quickly and efficiently.

But this left the Amazon Queen in the meeting room with her Soulmate. Gabrielle turned to her best friend. "Well that was fun." She sighed and dropped her arms. "I hate being a hard ass at times."

Xena grinned up to her partner. "I don't know. I think you like it."

The small warrior raised an eyebrow. "How can you be sure?"

"Cause I am you."

Gabrielle grinned and shifted to sit in Xena's lap. "You're good."

"I know." Xena took Gabrielle's lips carefully with her own. Once she pulled back her right hand fell on her Soulmate's thigh. "What's the plan now my Queen?"

The small woman quietly laughed. "You can call me your Soulmate."

The warrior grinned. "My Soulmate."

Gabrielle grinned back and placed her hands on Xena's upper arms. She went stern. "I thought I'd talk to Teresa and Amarice about their roles. I figured you'd rather do something else huh?"

"Nope." Xena smiled. "Rather be with you." She lifted her right hand to brush back some of Gabrielle's short hair. "So we can go talk to Amarice and Teresa."

"Xena..."

The older woman furrowed her eyebrows. "Don't need me to come?"

Gabrielle shook her head. "No it's not that. I think I need to talk to Amarice alone." She sighed. "I just have a feeling something isn't right."

Xena nodded. "Because Aureus said she's a good *person*."

"Yeah, that just bothers me she said that."

The warrior leaned forward and placed a gentle kiss to her partner's forehead.  
"Worried I might intimidate her my Queen?"

The small warrior quietly laughed. "Amarice yes." She then smiled. "How about you talk to Teresa?"

Xena nodded her head. "After that we'll meet up for dinner?"

The Queen grinned and hopped off Xena's lap. "Sounds like a plan Xen."

The older woman stood up with a smile. "Great." She leaned down to capture her Soulmate's lips again. Slowly she rose up again and still had her warm smile. "Let's go."

The younger female nodded, buttoned up her cloak, and moved to the door. The pair left the hut and went their separate ways to find the two Amazons.

~\*~\*~\*~

Gabrielle walked a ways down the trail and gazed around up into the trees. She knew her Amazons were on patrol and Amarice happened to be on patrol duty.

Suddenly those three patrol Amazons dropped from the trees directly in front of Gabrielle.

The Queen smiled. "Was wondering when you three would show."

The three Amazons all chuckled and reached up to push their masks back. There was Amarice, Aster, and Leon as patrol.

Aster smiled warmly. "We figured if we didn't we'd be in deep centaur crap with the Queen."

The small warrior grinned a little. "Definitely." Now she went serious. "If you and Leon don't mind I would like to steal Amarice for a little while."

Aster gazed over to Leon.

Leon shrugged her shoulders and turned her attention to the Queen. "No problem."

Aster turned her head back to Gabrielle. "Just don't keep her to long." A small grin.

Gabrielle smiled. "I won't." She averted her eyes to rest on Amarice. "Come with me."

Amarice nodded, she quickly noticed how serious Gabrielle was. She knew her friend was in Queen mode and there wasn't room for jokes. So she walked up to Gabrielle in silence.

The small warrior gazed back to her two Amazons. "Thanks Aster and Leon."

"No problem Gabrielle." After her words Aster disappeared into the trees.

Leon looked to Amarice. "Good luck." She now disappeared.

Amarice rolled her eyes then gave her attention to Gabrielle again. "What's up?"

Gabrielle was serious again. "Let's take a walk." She started moving along through the woods with Amarice right beside her. "How've you been Amarice?"

The Amazons lifted her head and smiled to her friend. "Not to bad. Yourself?"

"Good." Gabrielle flashed a smile. "I just got done a meeting with the former Queens."

"Oh yeah?" Amarice grinned. "How'd that go? I bet it was something else."

The Queen laughed quietly. "It was." She sighed. "After it was over I had a small talk with Aureus." Now her hands went behind her back.

Amarice quickly lifted her head to Gabrielle. "About... about what?"

Gabrielle noticed her Amazon's quick interest and reaction. "I asked her if she thought the idea of making you the Amazon Princess was a good one. Whether you would be a good princess or not."

The Amazon's eyes widen and she stopped walking. "Gabrielle, I don't think... well I am not the right person for the job."

Gabrielle nodded a few times. She'd stopped walking too and was still holding her hands behind her back. "Why Amarice?" A knowing smile began to shape on Gabrielle's lips. "Aureus said you were a good... person."

Amarice shook her head. She turned away and walked over to a near tree and turned to face Gabrielle again. "I just wouldn't Gabrielle. Somebody like... Teresa would be better."

The Queen nodded and dropped her hands from behind her back. "The first time I met you I would have never guess you'd turn down something like this." Gabrielle crossed her arms over her chest. "And I believe you owe me an explanation as to why you won't take the caste Amarice. You're turning down a huge honor."

Amarice's right hand came up through her hair and she sighed. "I just can't Gabrielle. It's... it's complicated."

The small warrior sighed and uncrossed her arms. She came up to her Amazon and placed her right hand on Amarice's shoulder. "Amarice. I am asking you as a friend not as your Queen." Her eyes went warm with a smile.

Amarice looked away as her eyes burdened and she found a lump in her throat. "I'm not an Amazon Gabrielle." She turned her head back to her Queen. "I never was."

Gabrielle nodded. "What about your sister, Rodhiya?"

The Amazon nodded. "She's an Amazon."

"How'd this happen?"

Amarice took a deep breath and told her story. "You see, Rodhiya is older then me about... a year and half. When Mom had her she had Rodhiya given an Amazon caste

right away." She sighed. "But then Mom died in labor with me. Rodhiya and I were both raised by some friends of Mom's in the tribe. Everybody in the Nation though didn't realize I never received a caste to be an Amazon. Yet I was raised and train as one but I don't have the caste."

The small warrior furrowed her eyebrows. "And why didn't you ever speak to somebody about getting one?"

"Gabrielle, we both know the tone of the southern tribes. They're rough and tough, you can't show weakness. I would have been the laughing stock of the Nation if I said anything. Besides I didn't want to dishonor Rodhiya either." She shook her head. "I just kept hoping nobody would find out about it." A sighed escaped her lips. "I guess Aureus knew."

Gabrielle nodded and squeezed her friend's shoulder then dropped her hand. "Well can I tell you something Amarice?"

The Amazon nodded with no other indication.

"It's all in perspective Amarice. I am very proud of you for sticking it out and not leaving the Amazons just because you don't have a caste. You see there's a difference Amarice. You may not have a caste to say you're an Amazon but you are the purest form of an Amazon." She smiled warmly to her Amazon. "And right now I need you for my Amazon Princess."

Amarice smile sadly. "But I'm not an Amazon."

"In my book you are Amarice, in the Queen's book you are an Amazon. You may not have a scroll with an Amazon caste. But you have the caste inside of yourself." The Queen paused. "When you're the Amazon Princess you'll have the Amazon caste."

The Amazon's smile loss the sadness and went warm. "So would I be able to order Solari around?"

Gabrielle grinned. "Yes."

"Ephiny?"

The small warrior chuckled. "Afraid not."

"Mmm, I'm not sure then." Amarice though went serious. "Princess?"

Gabrielle nodded. "Yes." She waited.

The Amazon took a deep breath and smiled. "I'd love to be your Amazon Princess."

The Queen smiled lovingly. "Thank you." She pulled her friend in for a tight hug.

Amarice returned the force of the hug. After they pulled back Amarice had a smug look. "Do I get to order Xena around?"

Gabrielle released Amarice and narrowed her eyes. "No."

The Amazon laughed. "I guess only you get to huh?"

The Queen said nothing but a huge evil grin streaked across her lips and a sparkle

took her eyes.

"Well that look is enough of an answer." Amarice grinned.

Gabrielle quickly went stoic. "Get back to your patrol Amazon."

Amarice chuckled. "Yes my Queen."

The small warrior smiled. "Thanks Amarice. Catch you later."

"Bye Gabrielle and thank you." She leaped to disappear into the trees.

Gabrielle watched her go for a moment. She sighed with a small smile. "She is a mess." Now she started her trek back to the village in hot pursuit for her Soulmate.

~\*~\*~\*~

Abruptly a huge smile took Teresa's lips. She jumped forward and gave the taller woman a hug. "I can't believe it."

Xena laughed and hugged the Amazon right back. She was taken aback by this hug. "I'm just the messenger Teresa."

The Amazon pulled back with a smile. "Yes but you're still Gabrielle's other half." She shook her head still trying to believe it. "Thank you Xena."

The warrior smiled as she cross her arms over her chest. "Thank Gabrielle." She took a deep breath. "Gabrielle, Ephiny, Masika, and I all decided you as the third in command."

Teresa's right hand went through her hair. "Gods. I can't believe it."

Xena grinned. "Start believing it." Her eyes then lifted from the Amazon to see her Soulmate coming. "Mmm, looks like you'll be able to hear it from the Queen herself."

Teresa followed Xena's gaze to see Gabrielle coming. The Amazon didn't wait and broke off jogging to her Queen and enveloped the Queen in a huge hug.

Gabrielle laughed as she hugged her Amazon back. "I guess you found out huh?"

The Amazon flashed a smile as she released her Queen. "Yes, thank you."

The small warrior shrugged her shoulders. "You earned it Teresa." She started walking towards her Soulmate with Teresa beside her. Gabrielle smiled up to her partner. "Hi."

The Warrior Princess smiled right back. "Hi yourself." She was about to say something else but she heard a yell.

"Gabrielle?"

The small warrior sighed and gazed over to her right to see her regent coming. "Hey Eph."

Ephiny came up to the group. "Been trying to find you."

"You found me Eph."

The regent huffed but went serious. "How'd the meeting go with the Queens?"

Gabrielle smiled. "Xena and I got them under control."

Ephiny raised an eyebrow and glance up to the warrior. She saw Xena grinning so she averted her attention back to Gabrielle. "That must have been interesting."

"Gabrielle?"

The Queen looked beyond her regent to see Solari and Epinion coming, Solari had called her name.

"Hey Solar. What's up?"

The second in command came up with Epinion still at her side. "The other tribes are getting ready to leave tomorrow. I wanted to double check and make sure these were your orders."

Gabrielle's head bobbed up and down. "They are. They should all be out of here by tomorrow." She wanted to add more but had stopped anyway. "Hades I wish I had Amarice here."

Epinion grinned. "I believe that's Reese coming now." The weapons master nodded behind Gabrielle.

The Queen glanced back to see Amarice coming towards them. "Great." She turned her head back to her weapons master. "Reese?"

Epinion grinned. "Short for Amarice."

The small warrior sighed. "Nobody seems to like just their regular names."

Amarice came up to the large group. "What about regular names?"

Solari gazed over to Amarice. "We're discussing your nickname."

Amarice chuckled. "Oh you mean Reese?" She gazed at her Queen. "Rodhiya has called me that since we were kids."

Gabrielle grinned. "Good to know." Her grin disappeared. "Okay since we're all here. I want to make some things known with all of you."

Amarice shifted to stand by side Xena so that she could gaze at her Queen like the rest of the Amazon were doing.

The Queen crossed her arms over her chest. "First of off. Some of you don't know but you will now. Amarice is my Amazon Princess and Teresa is my third in command. Everybody understand?" Gabrielle's Amazons nodded and she continued on. "Second, two things about this winter. First Ephiny..." She turned her attention to her regent. "You are to train Amarice for Amazon Princess."

Ephiny grinned. "Deja-vu."

Gabrielle chuckled. "I think Amarice will be a little easier then what I was."

The regent raised an eyebrow. "I don't know about that Gabrielle."

"Hey!"

Everybody glanced over at Amarice whom had spoke up.

"I am easy to train, it's the red hair."

Everybody chuckled at Amarice.

Gabrielle shook her head with a smile and gazed over to Solari. "Solari, you are to train your third in command alright?"

The second in command grinned. "No problem." She took glimpse over at Teresa. "I hope you'll survive this third in command."

Teresa raised an eyebrow.

"I want my third in command in one piece by the end of the training Solari."

Solari quietly laughed and nodded to Gabrielle. "Yes my Queen." She turned her head to Teresa again. "TC will be fine."

Teresa groaned at the nickname. "Thanks Solar."

The second in command snickered.

Gabrielle quickly cut in before it went any farther. "Okay. Also everybody remember that Teresa and Amarice are unofficial in their roles. The other tribes will not know till this spring. So basically Amarice and Teresa are allowed to command but only here in the Central tribe. Once the Nation is established this spring then we'll make everything official. Is that clear?"

All the Amazons simply nodded.

The Queen uncrossed her arms and placed her hands on her hips. "Second thing this winter are the plans. Tomorrow afternoon Xena and I are leaving." She gazed up to her partner and winked to Xena. Gabrielle glanced back to her officers. "We are planning to go on a vacation first to Amphipolis then to Egypt if you need us. Mid-winter or so we'll return here and Xena and I will be spending the rest of the winter working on the plans for the new Nation." She took a deep breath. "So far the plans are for the former Queens to head back to their tribes and stay there this winter. When spring comes I will have all the tribes come here and we will go into heavy building and expand the village and our territory." She paused for a second. "Is there any questions?"

Ephiny quickly cut in. "Maybe you should go over the other roles for the future Nation."

Gabrielle nodded to her regent. "You're right." Her attention went back to all her Amazons. "The break down of rank and command I already created. First comes the Queen, second is Xena as Consort, third is Ephiny still as the regent." She took a deep breath. "Next is Amarice as Princess, Solari your still second in command, Teresa third in command. Then comes the Queens and this is new. I've made all the Queens

lieutenants and they are below rank of commanders." She stopped and averted her eyes directly to Epinion. "Ep you are still weapons master but also fighting master. I'm giving you the option to select any trainers to help you. That is up to you." She sighed and thought for a moment. "Last Masika is going to be the Head Council member. There still are a few other small roles but they're not quite as important right now."

The Amazons nodded but it was Teresa that jumped in. "What about Maired? Is she going to still be the Amazon Priestess?"

Gabrielle smiled. "Yes she is. We'll probably build a large temple." She shook her head. "That won't be till later." Her right hand came up to run through her short hair. "Did I forget anything?" Emerald eyes lifted to Xena and then flickered over to the regent. "Guess not." It was dusk and the Queen took notice of this. "Alright that covers everything. Thanks everybody."

After that everybody in the group decided to head down to dinner. Well the Soulmates stayed behind.

"Ephiny?"

The regent stopped in her tracks after hearing Gabrielle call her name. She glanced at Solari. "Go down there. I'll be there in a second."

The second in command nodded. "See you there." Solari turned towards the direction Amarice, Epinion, and Teresa were going and caught up with them going to dinner.

Ephiny walked over to her Queen.

Gabrielle smiled. "I need you to do me a favor while Xena and I are gone."

The regent reflected the smile back. "Sure."

"Can you put a desk into our hut?"

The Amazon nodded. "Definitely, I'll have the table removed and put a desk in with a few chairs."

"Great. Thanks Ephiny."

The regent nodded. "No problem." She turned to where the gates lay. "I'll see you both at dinner."

"Bye Eph."

"See you Eph." Xena flashed a smile.

Gabrielle watched her Amazon friend go and then turned to Xena.

Xena gazed down at her Soulmate with a warm smile. "Miss me?"

The smaller female chuckled. "Definitely."

The warrior grinned. "Thought so." But she went serious. "How'd it go with Amarice?"

"She didn't have a caste like we thought."

Xena sighed. "Would have never guessed."

Gabrielle nodded. "Neither would I." She lifted her eyes from the dirt ground. "Leaving tomorrow afternoon sound alright with you?"

The older woman grinned. "Personally I'd like to leave now. But."

The Queen sighed. "But I need to shove my lieutenants out the gates with my Amazons and wish them safe travels."

Xena laughed. "Don't sound so excited Gabrielle."

Gabrielle groaned. "I'm very excited." She grinned up to Xena. "I'll be glad to get out of here."

The warrior smiled. "I agree." She took a step closer to Gabrielle. "How you feeling?"

Gabrielle grasped Xena's hips lightly. "Ready for a break just with you."

"Good." Xena's hands moved to wrap around Gabrielle's waist. "Hopefully it'll be peaceful."

"It probably won't be with our luck."

The Warrior Princess grinned as she lowered her head. "Well either way we have Solstice to celebrate."

Gabrielle grinned up to her partner. "Just Solstice? I thought there was something else important too."

Xena brushed her lips over Gabrielle's smooth lips. "Anniversary maybe."

"Definitely." Gabrielle took her Soulmate's lips.

That night led to a huge dinner with all the Amazons of the tribes. But later in the night the Soulmates were both tired but not exceedingly tired so that left them to spend time together in a fashion.

~\*Part 31\*~

In the morning the Soulmates awoke fairly early but not at the crack of the sun's first light. They'd dressed and packed to leave later in the day. Afterwards the pair migrated down to see off the Amazons of the tribes. Gabrielle knew she'd be seeing them all soon in the spring. She had a lot of work ahead of herself.

The afternoon of the day approached and the Soulmates approached the gates of the Amazon village. And there waiting for them at the gates were Ephiny, Solari, Teresa, Amarice, and Epinion.

The Soulmates knew then there was no way they would be able to leave quietly. So they tied their horses to the gates and talked with the Amazons for a few minutes or so. For in the few minutes the Queen felt the dying urge to leave take her again. So the conversation ended and everybody said goodbye to the Queen and her Consort with

hugs.

The five Amazons stood at the gates watching the Soulmates walk down the small road through the Amazon forest with the dawning of the sun's light on them. Watching the Soulmates till they disappeared in the distance of the never-ending road.

**The End**