

~ I Cannot Be ~

by Red Hope

Disclaimer

Copyright: Yes, I do not own Xena or Gabrielle but the plot is my idea.

Violence: It's really not too bad in here.

Subtext: I really dislike this disclaimer.

Setting: Sometime in the third season roughly; it's not really defined.

Feedback: I love it because it is so rare these days. redhope@redhope.net

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Gabrielle paused in the middle of her scribing, her head bent to one side. She stretched her legs out while leaning against the log behind her but her scroll in her lap rustled in protest. Slowly her eyes drifted shut as her creative mind went back to the other day's adventure with Xena. The scene played out in her mind then stopped but still she kept her eyes closed. For some time, the bard simply listened to the rhythm of Xena's sharpening stone running down the blade, pausing, and again back down the blade.

The hypnotic sharpening soothed Gabrielle's earlier aggravation from today. Earlier today she and Xena had been in a small town to pick up supplies in their market. The warrior allowed Gabrielle to separate from her so that they could pick up their items on the list faster. Gabrielle took care of getting the food and herbs since she was considered the cook between them. Xena was in charge of the medicines, a new fur, wine or water, and Argo's small supply of feed.

Gabrielle had just finished bartering for the fruits and dried meats that they needed. Her satchel at her side was heavy with the items but she used her staff to lean against while inspecting some cooking herbs. She skipped over the herbs that were complete and went to the ones that were grounded or in small pieces. As she checked through the items, the merchant watched her and numbers were running through his head.

"How much for these?" Gabrielle held up tiny leather satchels that were in various groups but thyme was one of her favorites.

"Ten dinars but for you I'll make it eight," offered the merchant.

The bard widened her eyes in exaggeration. "Try two dinars."

The merchant returned the outrageous look. "Six dinars and that's as low as I will go."

The Amazon Queen muffled a laugh before challenging, "Fine, three."

"Five."

"Three," repeated Gabrielle. "I don't have much left."

The merchant sighed then asked, "How about four dinars?"

The bard beamed. "I can do that." She fished around in her satchel until she discovered the money she needed. She handed it over then took the three satchels of herbs. She tucked them away while walking off. She had everything they would need for now so her next mission was to catch Xena at their meeting point. Gabrielle made it there in record time despite she had a full load at her side.

The bard stood beside the town statue, which actually was a small fountain of sorts. It was fairly nice especially for such a tiny village. She admired the statue of Apollo made of white marble. Finally she turned her back to the statue and sat on the ledge. She let out a huge sigh while wondering what was keeping Xena.

Then from the corner of Gabrielle's eye, she noticed two guys close by and staring at her openly. She tried not to let them notice her uneasiness as they seemed fairly gruff. If it was one thing she picked up from Xena it was never to display your fears or else people would use them.

Slowly the two guys crossed the distance and approached the bard. The husky guy on the left grumbled out, "Have any spare change, ma'am?"

The Amazon Queen casually arched her eyebrow, her best Xena impression, and coolly stated, "No, sorry." Her right hand unknowingly adjusted on her staff.

"Well what's that you got in your bag?" The thinner, taller man signaled to the satchel.

"Nothing." Gabrielle now stood up hoping her stance would deter them.

"That's quite a heavy nothing there," noted the large man.

"Listen fellas, I don't have anything for you so please just leave." The bard now grabbed her satchel's strap and brought it over her head so that it crossed her chest.

"I don't know, I think you have something for us," offered the large man, he stepped forward.

Gabrielle's expression darkened as a warning. She stepped backwards for some space with her staff lifting. "Trust me, you don't want to start anything." She noted how everybody that was in this small circle had suddenly disappeared. She huffed at the idea of any of the villagers offering her some help.

"Ooo we enjoy starting something especially with little cuties like you," taunted the taller man. He produced a short sword from his sheath at his side.

The larger man felt as if his hands were good enough. He figured the girl couldn't be any good with her stick anyway.

"Back off," threatened Gabrielle. When they didn't heed her warning, she stepped

back once then took a shot at the larger guy first.

The guy yelled as his feet were taken out from under him. His head slammed into the ground and he moaned.

The taller guy was remotely impressed but it didn't stop him. He came at Gabrielle.

The Amazon Queen was prepared and she stopped each of his attacks with ease. She then noted the other guy was getting up, which didn't excite her. Yet what did calm her nerves was when she saw a tall and very angry warrior hurrying into the center.

Gabrielle refocused on the task at hand. She battled her opponent and kept him busy while his partner's ass was being beaten by Xena. The bard saw that her enemy was losing steam against her relentless defenses so she took an opening. She quickly moved and brought her staff across his sword arm then at his hand.

The man yelped and lost his sword. He stared wide eye at Gabrielle then his eyes flickered to the sword between them.

Gabrielle smirked then whispered, "I wouldn't."

The man dashed for his sword in hopes to win.

The bard won though and she cracked him over his back. She watched in satisfaction as her opponent fell on top of his sword. She settled her staff down some and her eyes lifted to Xena.

The Warrior Princess had long taken care of her enemy; he wasn't even around anymore. She merely stood aside, hands on her hips, and watching her partner deal with the taller man. She now dropped her hands from her side and came up to Gabrielle. Just as she started towards Gabrielle, she spotted Gabrielle's opponent getting up with his sword.

Gabrielle hadn't seen it though.

Xena quickly moved but even she wasn't fast enough to stop him.

The bard suddenly cried out when her left leg was sliced by the cold steel. She completely lost her balance between the pain and the heavy satchel. She hit the ground hard with the satchel ramming into her right side.

The warrior was furious at the man's attack on her friend. She'd bent down, grabbed his own sword arm, and forced his blade to his throat. She growled, "You really shouldn't have done that."

The man hissed, his eyes closed, and he struggled against the powerful warrior. Yet very slowly his sword crept closer to his neck until it finally began cutting his skin. He cried out even louder when Xena's knee connect into his back and pressed down very hard.

Gabrielle softly moaned and her eyes opened. Her hazy vision focused on her

fingertips that were a breath away from her staff. She forced herself to sit up despite all the pain ripping through her body. She now realized what was happening to her earlier opponent and it stunned her. She'd never seen Xena so enraged or seen Xena slowly kill somebody through immense suffering.

The warrior was so focused on her task that she hadn't realized that Gabrielle was up.

The bard shook her head in disbelief then called out, "Xena, stop."

The Warrior Princess's angry haze was starting to clear from Gabrielle's voice.

The man's face was dirty and stained by tears. He was rasping his last breathes while his own sword was just slicing through his trachea. "Please," he begged.

"Xena, don't do this," called the bard.

The warrior's fiery eyes grew somewhat calm. She'd stopped moving the sword any deeper into the man's throat.

"He's done, Xena. Come on." Gabrielle tried to hold herself up with her right hand so that her side was at least off the satchel. "Let him go."

The warrior suddenly growled hotly, threw the sword far away, stood up and hauled the man up onto his feet. She threw him around some by his shirt then shoved him away. "Get the Hades out of here before I..." Xena didn't bother to finish her threat as the stumbling man was fleeing, his hand covering his throat.

"Xena," softly called the bard.

The Warrior Princess broke from her angry fog completely. She knew Gabrielle needed her so she hurried to Gabrielle, kneeling down near her stomach. "Let me look."

The bard decided it was best to let go of what happened. She silently allowed her partner to inspect her wound.

"How you feel?" whispered the warrior.

"Never better," complained the bard. She saw Xena's eyes flicker up to her then back down to the wound. She hissed loudly when Xena's inspection caused her pain.

"Sorry," offered Xena. "It's not too bad." She then turned her head to Gabrielle. "Your side?"

"I don't think I broke anything... maybe bruised," offered the small woman.

Xena nodded. "Here..." She quickly reached and removed the satchel from Gabrielle. She set it aside then moved the staff too. "Let's get you up." She supported her friend as they carefully worked together to get Gabrielle onto her feet again.

The bard bit her lower lip when the pain shot up and down her left leg. She peered

down and finally saw the perfect vertical cut. Her blood was already seeping down and into her boot. She would need to clean it later.

"Sit here for a moment." The warrior helped Gabrielle to the fountain's edge and sat her down.

Xena was calmer yet her emotions were still full of anger. She knew she should have skipped dropping the supplies off at the stables where Argo was located. Now that she'd been late her friend was caught up in a fight.

Gabrielle watched as the silent warrior gathered the satchel, put the strap over her head, and faced her once more.

"Let's get you back to the stable and we'll take care of that." Xena grabbed the staff as well.

The bard solemnly nodded. She quickly tried to get up.

Xena hurried to help Gabrielle up. She got onto Gabrielle's left side so that her body was extra support.

Gabrielle adjusted her arm around Xena's waste then she began the slowly, painful limping to the stables across town.

The Warrior Princess was very inclined to merely pick up Gabrielle and carry her yet she knew Gabrielle wouldn't allow her. She inwardly sighed because she knew it were times like these that Gabrielle tried to play the strong warrior much like Xena. As they went on their silent trek back to the stables, Xena's thoughts wondered back to her earlier actions with that man. She knew she'd poorly handled the situation and let her protective streak over Gabrielle get the best of her.

Finally they arrived at the stables and the boy that had been attending it was nowhere in sight. That turned out to be perfect as Xena was able to lower Gabrielle into the stool in the corner. She then rushed into the stalls and hunted for the medical supplies.

Gabrielle sighed and dropped her head against the wall, her left leg stretched out. When she sucked in a heavy breath, her ribs screamed at her. She slightly winced.

"Watch your breathing," offered the warrior that had silently appeared again.

Gabrielle's blurry emeralds opened and focused on the warrior kneeling down in front of her. Her skin now burned from Xena's comforting touch. "Do I need stitches?"

"Only two or three." Xena licked her lips as she carefully pressed an alcohol soaked rag against the wound.

Gabrielle's eyes slammed shut and she vibrated her right leg quickly in hopes it'd distract her from the searing stings.

The warrior held the rag tightly against the wound in hopes the alcohol would run through her wound and kill any possible germs. She finally pulled the rag away and

noted Gabrielle relaxed again. She reached into the satchel by her side and produced the stitches and needles she would need. She debated whether to make her next offer or not and decided it was best to. "Do you want me to use the pressure points before I do this?"

Gabrielle considered it quietly then shook her head. "It's only a few." Yet her body instinctively stiffened in anticipation for the sharp needle.

Xena had the needle threaded, she guessed the amount of thread, and cut it with her small dagger she kept separate in the medical kit. She then took a heartbeat to assess where to start then she quickly drove the needle in.

The bard's right leg started shaking again and she dropped her head against the wall. Her mind replayed the fight she had earlier with her opponent. She would have been fine if only she'd been pay attention at the end. Finally the sharp points of pain stopped in her leg and now Xena's gentle touch was rubbing in salve into the wound. Gabrielle bent forward now, her arms resting on her legs. "I'm sorry about earlier, Xena."

The warrior glanced up but went back to watching her hand work the balm in. "It's not your fault."

"No," argued the bard, "I should have been paying attention. You always tell me to mind my surroundings."

Xena sighed at the unavoidable debate between them. "Well I should have been on time... the one time I'm late and...." She shook her head but picked up the rag and wiped her hands clean. "Listen, I want you to ride Argo but I'll ride with you. I don't want your feet in the stirrups."

"But I'll lose my balance if I ride alone," finished Gabrielle.

Xena mutely nodded then picked up a clean wrap from the medical kit. She carefully wrapped it around Gabrielle's leg several times then tied it off. "Why don't you just stay here while I get Argo ready."

Gabrielle did exactly that while her partner gathered up the medical kit and went into the stall. She let out an aggravated sigh because her discussion didn't come out the way she planned. She could tell Xena's thoughts were dark and that never comforted the bard. She knew it could be a variation of things between Xena thinking she was at fault to something as extreme that Gabrielle will only wind up dead around the warrior.

The camp fire snapped loudly and Gabrielle was jarred from her memories and thoughts about earlier today. Her eyes floated to her scroll in her lap then down to the wrapped wound on her left leg. She'd taken her boots off earlier and when she tried to clean her left boot of the blood, Xena wouldn't allow her. Instead the stoic warrior took care of it and now her boots rested down by her bedroll.

Gabrielle's ears rang with Xena's sharpening again so she gazed over.

Xena sensed the bard but she didn't acknowledge her at all. Right now she needed to feel the comfort of her sword and sharpening ritual. It was one of her calmer ways of dealing with her emotions and thoughts.

The bard knew why Xena kept herself separate far off to the left, sitting alone on a cold, large stone. She decided her muses tonight were too quiet and to let it go. She rolled up her scroll and stashed her scroll and quill into her satchel. She just left her satchel by the log not wanting to fuss with it tonight. She carefully got up to her feet and limped over to the bedroll near the fire. Xena's was close by but on the outside so that Gabrielle stayed warmer with the fire. Gabrielle cautiously crawled into the bedroll and adjusted the furs over her body. She debated whether to say goodnight to her friend but decided against it. She knew later on when Xena would come to bed, she would kneel down by Gabrielle, kiss her forehead, and wish her sweet dreams.

Gabrielle snuggled deeper into her furs and closed her eyes. She continued listening to Xena's sharpening, which lulled her into her dreamscape.

The warrior sharpened her blade for another half of a candlemark. She knew she needed some rest despite it wouldn't be very good quality. Today's events would make sure of that. She put her whet stone away, placed Gabrielle's scroll satchel by their things, and finally she put more wood in the fire.

Xena disarmed herself and placed her weapons by her bedroll. She then sat down and slowly began the project of removing her armor, bracers, and boots. When she finally had everything off, she went to Gabrielle's side and knelt down.

If it was one promise she made to herself and Gabrielle it was that she would never go to bed without saying goodnight. She didn't care if she was fighting with Gabrielle or everything was just right. She would say goodnight and wish the best dreams to the bard. After the quick kiss to the temple and murmured words, Xena crawled into her bedroll and settled in for the night.

Only after a candlemark from falling asleep, Xena was chaotically awakened by Gabrielle's raging screams. Xena burst from her bedroll just as the sleeping birds in the trees frantically flew off. Xena rushed to Gabrielle's side as Gabrielle was fighting her nightmare.

"Xeenaaaaa!" The bard suddenly flew up in her bedroll but her aching side rejected the motion with a sharp pain. She hissed and almost fell to the side but strong hands stopped her.

"It's okay, Gabrielle." The warrior carefully held the bard on either side. "I got you. It was just a dream." She'd never once seen Gabrielle scream so loud in her dreams. She could only wonder what it was about especially since Gabrielle was yelling Xena's name.

Gabrielle dropped her head, her hands coming up to cover her face. "Gods," she moaned. Her throat filled with a lump as her nightmare continued to fill her senses. Her emotions were overloading between today and her dream.

"Hey, hey." Xena was desperate to calm her friend. She quickly acted by slipping into

the bedroll some and positioning herself behind Gabrielle. "Come here." She urged the bard to lean back.

The small woman settled back into Xena's supportive and protective body. She suddenly felt the nightmare's control drain away and all that was left were her emotions.

Xena leaned forward until she had her arms around Gabrielle and her legs propped up on either side.

Gabrielle finally settled down as she realized she was completely cocooned by Xena's powerful body. She roughly ran her fingers through her hair.

"I think we need to talk about this," whispered Xena.

The bard's hands fell into her lap and her emotional voice murmured, "Did you just say that?"

The warrior could tell Gabrielle was trying to tease despite the situation. "Yes." Xena rested her chin down on her shoulder, her eyes focused on the side of Gabrielle's face. "You can grade me after we're done."

Gabrielle snorted at the joke. "Funny." She now pulled her legs up and into her body. Her body was fully encircled by the warrior now.

"What was the nightmare?" tried the warrior.

The Amazon Queen shook her head then without a word she lowered her face to her lifted knees.

Xena had her arms around the small woman and locked together by holding her wrists. She freed one hand touched her friend's closest knee. "Come on, Gabrielle."

The bard knew her partner was trying hard and she needed to try too. She lifted her head but settled her chin on the tops of her knees. When Xena's hand moved back to where it was earlier she started talking quietly. "I had a dream that it was tomorrow and because of what happened today you got it in your head that I would just end up dead with you." She licked her lips then continued her story of the nightmare. "So you decided that I needed to go back to Potidaea and we started in that direction. It wasn't until a couple of days later that I figured out your plan. I became really angry at you."

Xena remained quiet and still as she carefully listened. She wasn't about to interrupt.

"You wouldn't listen to anything I had to say," continued the bard, "We made it to Potidaea... just by the outskirts. You got off of Argo and gave me my things." Gabrielle debated whether to finish her story but she knew she needed to. "It was like I couldn't move because I couldn't believe what was happening. You said nothing... got on Argo and took off. I couldn't move... come after you or anything. All I could do was scream for you but you never looked back."

Xena shut her eyes against her conflicting emotions. What brought her back to herself

was when Gabrielle's small hand toyed with her own hand. Xena silently enjoyed the touching but she returned her focus to the topic. "I'm sorry, Gabrielle."

The bard shook her head and release Xena's hand. "It was only a dream."

"But still," argued the warrior, "you wouldn't be having such dreams if something didn't warrant them."

Gabrielle sighed before resting the side of her face on her knees. "I just know sometimes you probably think about how it's probably safer for me to be back at home. That somehow I'll end up dead and you'll blame yourself."

The Warrior Princess considered her friend's words then softly spoke. "I'll be honest, it has crossed my mind a few times to take you home but I realize too that it'd be pretty dumb on my part."

"Why?" murmured the bard.

"Gabrielle, I do realize it has always been your choice to be here or not. I do not force you to follow me."

Gabrielle was surprised by her partner's statement. She now had to get a look at the warrior so she cleverly shifted around until she was facing Xena. She sat cross legged between Xena's propped up legs and used Xena's encircled arms for support on her back. "There better."

The warrior chuckled but she lost her amusement. "And I often do think about how you'll end up killed because you're around me. After a day like today, I am reminded how easily it could happen."

"It could happen to you too, Xena." Gabrielle's memories suddenly flashed in her mind then she muttered, "It has."

The warrior frowned at the old memories of her reckless death by that horde leader. She shoved the memories away. "I'm not worried about myself, I'm worried about you."

"Yeah well it doesn't exactly do us any good if you don't care for yourself, Xena." Gabrielle had a challenging look. "Otherwise you can't very well care for me along the way." She mimicked Xena's arched eyebrow technique. "You proved that when you died." She noticed how Xena averted her gaze, her eyes hooded. Gabrielle knew in this moment nobody else could say they've shared this with Xena. Once a mere farmer girl debated with a former, ruthless warlord.

"You're right," gave in Xena. Her firelight blue eyes met Gabrielle's again. "And I did prove it when I died." She chewed on her next thoughts but decided to speak them. "I heard your thoughts while I was in Tartarus... I realized I had to come back."

"I know," murmured the bard. The memories from at least six moons ago filtered back; she preferred to ignore them.

"I was ready to give up, Gabrielle... repay the last of my horrors there in Tartarus, it seemed so much easier."

Gabrielle gently touched her friend's cheek. "You never told me why you fought to come back."

Xena's distant stare refocused on Gabrielle. "You." She sensed the confusion from Gabrielle and her eyes closed as her mind raced back to her time in Tartarus. "You said," she whispered, "Fight to come back. This world needs you. I need you."

Gabrielle remained still and was surprised that Xena remembered her words so perfectly. "I didn't think... that any of it would mean much."

"It was everything," argued the warrior. "I didn't realize until then just how much I'd come to mean to you. For the first time in my life, somebody needed me... not my skills, my mind, body... just simply me."

The bard's emotions stirred deeply, her hand still touching her friend's cheek. She sighed and lowered her hand to her lap but her expression was still solemn. "I've never felt so lost until you were gone." She sighed with a shake of her head. "I just..." She couldn't form her words right and she was a bard. Her palm was up and opened as if she were trying to clutch something. "You always say how I'm your light," she tried, "but in that time you were gone it was like all I saw was darkness. It really scared me. All I had to grab onto was the Amazon Nation... at least being a queen would have brought repetition and some stability."

"But you were numb to the world... to yourself."

Gabrielle's hand finally clenched and fell to her lap. "Exactly."

The warrior sighed as she understood what her partner had felt those days. She slightly dipped her head down while quietly saying, "It doesn't change the fact that I fear for your life, Gabrielle." She lifted her head. "Hades that's all I provide to you... constant danger. You don't even have a roof over your head or two dinars to rub."

"Okay... so I don't have a roof." Gabrielle demonstrated by looking up to the sky. "I have stars...that's fine by me." She lowered her head back down. "Much more beautiful too." She then slightly grinned. "And two dinars only take me ten heartbeats to make with a brief story." When Xena sighed at her arguments she kept running with the ideas. "I have a more exciting life than most people." At Xena's grunt of irony she reformulated her debate. "I mean how many people can say they've seen as much as I have? Done all that I have? Met so many people?"

"Which ones? The ones that want to hold you hostage or kill you?" countered the warrior.

"Come on, Xena there are others out there." Gabrielle suddenly rested her hands on her friend's shoulders. "And how many people get to say they've traveled with the Warrior Princess?" She used that grin on her lips that she knew Xena couldn't resist.

The warrior tried to keep stoic but she lost it. "Not many," she relented with a distant

grin.

"Anybody can have a roof over their head, Xena. Or get pregnant and have kids... get married." Gabrielle lowered her hands back to her lap. "I much rather walk the path I've been on and risk a sooner death than live the common life."

"That's why you left Potidaea," reminded the warrior.

"Mmmhmm. I am very happy being right here." Gabrielle took a deep breath even though it hurt her side some. She ignored it though. "And you have to keep your promise if something happens to me." When Xena turned her head away, Gabrielle touched Xena's cheek with her fingertips to get her to turn her head back. "You can't become that monster again, Xena."

"Sometimes I'm not sure if I can, Gabrielle. Look what happened today? That man cut your leg and I went crazy."

"Well I guess you're not perfect after all," chided the smaller woman. "But you made me a promise a long time ago, Xena."

"I know," murmured the Warrior Princess.

"Please don't destroy your memories of me by destroying everything I've helped you through." Gabrielle slowly leaned her head forward until their foreheads touched. She and Xena close their eyes together as their emotions battled inside of them each. "Please," softly begged the bard.

"I won't, Gabrielle... I swear," rasped the emotional warrior. She lifted her head and placed a promising kiss against Gabrielle's forehead. She then shifted her lips closer to Gabrielle's right ear and softly stated, "Besides one day we're going to settle down." She pulled back and her face was less constricted.

Gabrielle chuckled as her gaze met Xena's. "Can we settle down in Amphipolis?"

"Wherever you want," offered Xena.

"We can run the tavern with your mother."

Xena's instant response was a groan.

"I guess I'd have to do the cooking though," rattled on the bard, "And you could handle taking care of the building itself. Then if we have any ruffians come in-"

"I'll be too old to deal with it," joked the warrior.

The Amazon Queen giggled and smiled at her friend. "And we have to live together."

Xena's mouth opened but she had no chance to say anything.

"I don't care!" Gabrielle held up her index finger. "I will not have gone through all this traveling with you just to split up." She saw the amused look on Xena's face. "Besides

that we're already pretty much settled down as it is... just we...." Gabrielle now waved her hand. "We're constantly moving and settling but we're still kinda settled."

Xena licked her lips then tease, "Ooo what the townspeople would say, Gabrielle."

"Ooo I don't give centaur shit about social standards." Gabrielle then poked Xena in the chest. "Neither do you."

The warrior's amused expression never left but she leaned forward then purred, "So does that make me the husband?"

The smaller woman snapped out of her musings at the question. "Hmmm... does it?" She really considered it. "Well I cook, and I usually clean our stuff while you always do the hunting." She paused as her lips puckered in thought. "Although you're a much better sewer than me."

Xena started laughing now.

Gabrielle broke from her thinking as her attempt to humor Xena worked. She smiled brightly as she enjoyed Xena's lightheartedness.

Xena then shifted into a more serious manner. "So Gabrielle, between your observations and future plans about being settled, are you trying to tell me we're a couple?"

Suddenly Gabrielle lost all her bravado and her cheeks started the flush that spread over her forehead, down her neck, and over the top of her chest. "I um... I uh..." She completely stumbled over her words. Now Gabrielle didn't feel so cocooned by Xena but more trapped than anything. "Well I just... I mean... we're so use... and I couldn't... why would we... ijustdidn'tthinkyou'dsettledownwithanybodyelse."

Xena completely lost it with her laughter. She fell onto her back and her stomach ached from the laughing.

Gabrielle groaned and covered her face with her hands. Her body felt as if it was on fire.

The warrior knew she needed to calm down. She worked out her last few chuckles and sat up again. When she took in Gabrielle's embarrassed demeanor she completely went serious. "I'm sorry." She placed her hands over Gabrielle's and pried them from hiding Gabrielle's face. "Come on."

The smaller woman surrendered despite she was still embarrassed by her assumptions. She felt comfort though when Xena laced their hands together.

Xena sat cross legged now, her knees pressed against Gabrielle's and their linked hands between their laps. "I'm sorry," sincerely apologized the warrior.

"It's okay," muttered the bard.

"Your reaction was just cute," cleared up Xena. Her eyes were light and gentle.

Gabrielle's smile now shaped her lips. It was the first time Xena had ever called her cute. Her head was slightly hung down but when she lifted it and her eyes met Xena's, something moved in her. "Xena?"

The warrior squeezed her partner's hands. "Yeah?"

Gabrielle now realized what she had to do and everything made sense. She must break the long silence between them that's been ever since Xena's death. "You were right when you said I needed you that it's never been about anything else for me when it comes to you. The first day I met you... I was fascinated and wanted to know everything about who you are, from past to present." She hesitated as her head slumped some, her thoughts running fast but when she lifted her head there was so much conviction written in her face. "When you were gone I was absolutely lost and I really didn't care what I did at that point. I just knew I couldn't be, without you." She suddenly choked up and tried to swallow her emotions down but she couldn't.

Xena sadly smiled at the bittersweet confession. Her heart pounded wildly as she saw the tears escaping from her friend. She freed her right hand and wiped the tears away. Then on impulse, she leaned in to capture the last tears between her lips, her hand still cupping Gabrielle's face.

Gabrielle's eyes were shut and she whimpered against the gentle touches, her cheek nuzzling against Xena's.

The warrior was amazed that her body was slightly shaking. "Gabrielle?" she whispered in worry.

"Its okay," assured Gabrielle.

Xena placed one last feather kiss to Gabrielle's cheek then she sought out Gabrielle's lips.

Gabrielle whimpered again when her lips finally sealed over Xena's. She'd freed one hand and tangled it in Xena's hair as she leaned forward some. She could taste the light salty mix between their lips.

Xena cautious slipped her tongue into Gabrielle's mouth. She was rewarded by a sweet moan from the bard. She slightly twisted her head so that she had better access.

Gabrielle's stomach was blazing with nervousness. Her tongue moved across Xena's then when Xena started to back away, Gabrielle merely teased her back. Her body flashed with excitement when Xena growled at her teasing. Finally when Xena began pulling away, Gabrielle ended the kiss with a light nip to Xena's full lower lip.

The warrior breathed heavily while leaning her forehead against Gabrielle's. She was amazed by her body's reaction to Gabrielle. She knew it was strong but this was beyond her or even Gabrielle's words. She could tell Gabrielle desired more just as she did so she went in for another kiss.

This time Gabrielle had the heat of passion tearing through her entire body. She ached

to touch the warrior more than anything. She wanted her skin against Xena's and nothing in between. She paused in the second kiss and rasped, "I want us to be together...." She returned to the kiss but managed to whisper at the end, "In every way."

Xena slightly receded but her fingertips were tracing over Gabrielle's cheeks, brow, and down to her jaw line. She knew she didn't need to question Gabrielle because if it was one thing about Gabrielle, she was always sure of her own emotions and decisions. "I want the same, Gabrielle. No matter what happens I will always need you."

Gabrielle couldn't control her smile. She realized that Xena had come to figure her out. Xena wasn't questioning her intentions or the possibility of the relationship but most importantly saying what she wanted too.

"I'm not the best at relationships," admitted the warrior, "for lack of experience but I will try." She brushed her lips over Gabrielle's right cheek.

Gabrielle's senses were filled by leather and spice; she absolutely loved it. "That's more than I can ask." She unlocked her fingers from Xena's hair and rested her hand on her warrior's shoulder. "I have to confess one thing though."

Xena knew by Gabrielle's tone it was serious. She pulled back some so that they could study each other but when Gabrielle faltered she became curious. "What is it?" She placed her hand under Gabrielle's chin and lifted her head back up.

The bard clasped her hand through Xena's that was resting under her face. "I um... well..." She chuckled merely because she was shy. "I've never...."

Xena tilted her head some, a soft grin on her face. "You and Perdicus didn't....?"

Gabrielle licked her lips and shook her head. "Consume our marriage?" She slightly joked. "No, we never did... I kind of didn't let it happen," she admitted.

Xena was shocked but she also was curious. "Why?"

"Wwwell, I told him it was because I was nervous and scared." Gabrielle chuckled but it was a halfhearted laugh. "Honestly, I didn't feel right about having sex with him." Her gaze locked on Xena. "I guess I knew I wasn't suppose to be with him." She swallowed then whispered, "I've always wanted you to be my first... as silly as that sounds."

The warrior's heart melted at Gabrielle's gesture and seeming faith to wait for the right moment. "Gabrielle, there were so many boys that you use to-

"Gush over? I know." The Amazon Queen shrugged though to disregard it as unimportant. "I've always wanted you to be my first even though at the time I didn't know what that meant or entailed. But I wanted to wait incase it was some... hero-worshipping thing plus I knew you'd think it was too." Her lips puckered a little. "I was so young then." She shook her head then chuckled. "Not to say I'm still not naive in the way of sex."

"Imagination, my bard," bantered the warrior.

Suddenly Gabrielle's eyes grew dark and twinkled. "And lots of Amazon scrolls for educational purposes." She quickly won one over Xena as Xena's jaw fell and she had a shocked expression. Gabrielle laughed at the sight because she knew she'd catch Xena on that one.

"Innocent," huffed the warrior, "yeah right."

Gabrielle released the last of her giggles. She shrugged then reminded, "Still there's a difference between reading it and doing it."

"That there is." Xena leaned in some, her lips just before Gabrielle's. "Let me show you," she purred.

The rumbled of Xena's voice sent a thrilling chill up Gabrielle's spine. She released a moan when Xena's burning lips met hers. She molded hers perfectly against Xena's then she couldn't ever recall how it happened but Xena had managed to put Gabrielle on her back in the bedroll.

Gabrielle opened her eyes to find loving ones studying her face. "What is it?" she murmured.

Xena lowered her head and kissed Gabrielle's temple while whispering, "You're so beautiful. Thank you for waiting."

The bard had a cute smile. "Only for you."

"Thank you," repeated the Warrior Princess. She shifted her head down lower and her teeth grazed their way until they nipped at Gabrielle's soft neck.

The bard sucked in her breath. Her neck slightly arched into Xena's wonderful onslaught.

The warrior continued her biting and sucking at different pulse points on Gabrielle's neck. Her right hand was busy supporting her body but her left hand lightly ran up Gabrielle's taut stomach. Her fingertips trailed along underneath the trim of Gabrielle's halter top.

Gabrielle dug one hand into the bedroll while her other latched onto Xena's back. "Xena," she pleaded.

The warrior enjoyed her name on Gabrielle's lips. She would make sure that Gabrielle would repeat that time over time. She brought to life every emotion in Gabrielle and let the passion sweep through her. Each positioned kiss and each planned touch lifted Gabrielle higher.

Slowly the warrior's touch traveled lower and lower until her fingertips dipped into Gabrielle's passions. She never felt more connected with another being as she did when she entered her lover. At first she started the movement small and careful, just at

the edge of Gabrielle's wall. Xena moved her body perfectly so that all of her skin molded against her bard's.

Gabrielle was consumed between her heart and her desires. She was completely at Xena's control as she rode on Xena's touch. Suddenly her heart paused in a beat when Xena pressed deeper into her and broke the wall between them. She rasped Xena's name in passionate throws.

Xena murmured every promise she had in her hidden heart. Her hand gradually brought Gabrielle's fire to a crescendo while her tongue teased perfect nipples.

Finally Gabrielle's emotions reached higher than her cries for Xena ever could. She was taken into a world far beyond the stars and under Xena's loving words she floated back to herself. Her labored breathing seemed to take ages to find calmness again.

The warrior gingerly separated her fingers from inside Gabrielle. She then rolled Gabrielle onto her right side that wasn't aching from earlier today. She finally held her lover close with all of her heart.

Gabrielle felt her mind gradually clear from the climax's heat. She laced her hand through Xena's at her stomach while her other hand was tucked under her head. "Xena?"

"Mmmm?" The Warrior Princess placed a feather kiss to her lover's shoulder.

"I've concluded there's certainly a difference." Gabrielle let out a huge breath then added, "I'm glad I don't have to read about it anymore."

Xena now laughed, her shaking chest vibrating against Gabrielle's hot back. "Did you enjoy it?" She knew her words were a bad choice but she wasn't the bard.

Gabrielle shifted around until she was on her back again, she had to see Xena. "You always have a knack for understating things." At Xena's grin, she too grinned but yet she knew Xena wanted the truth especially since it was Gabrielle's first time. "It was beyond what I imagined." She slightly lifted her head for a brief kiss. When she settled back down, she smiled and traced Xena's face. "It was everything, Xena."

"I wanted it to be," murmured the warrior. She lowered her head closer to Gabrielle's. "You're everything to me, Gabrielle."

The bard couldn't have heard truer words from her warrior. She knew it was also a promise in other forms. She touched Xena's cheek and guided her down for a long, tender kiss. When they drew apart, Gabrielle still had her smile from earlier. "I love you, Xena."

Xena had no control over her defining smile. Her eyes were lit up by her heart. "And I love you, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle could taste the new weight to Xena's words. She'd heard Xena say those words before in the past on rare occasions. But tonight Xena meant it on another level and one that Gabrielle would always feel complete. She now pressed her left hand

against Xena's shoulder and started to push while moving her body up.

The Warrior Princess went with the motions and rested on her back with a beautiful bard on top of her. She knew Gabrielle would be the first and only person she would let go with, let go of her control. It was only Gabrielle that she trusted so wholly.

Gabrielle brought her mouth over Xena's and enjoyed a slow but hot kiss. When she separated her face was full of amusement as her light voice teased, "By the way you get an A plus for tonight's talk."

Xena chuckled and decided to banter back. "Be careful, I might catch up to you one day."

The bard grinned lowered her lips close to Xena's ear. "Maaaybe." She brought her tongue lightly across the rim of Xena's ear.

The warrior moaned and her hands went to Gabrielle's back.

"But right now, I'm going to make love to you." Gabrielle's hot breath caressed Xena's ear perfectly.

And true to Gabrielle's word, she took Xena to the same amazing heights that Gabrielle had reached earlier. Then Morpheus quickly found them but his grasp on them didn't last long. For the lovers awoke with burning needs to feel each other over and over until they could do was rest.

Tomorrow would soon come for the couple but they had a greater purpose next to the Greater Good- each other. It was possible that Xena could die tomorrow or in a few days Gabrielle. Yet Xena and Gabrielle realized that it would never matter now because they would be together no matter where they were. The danger would always continue, the threats greater than yesterday, and Celesta always lurking in the shadows but it would not stop love. So they saw tomorrow, just like all the other days, as another stepping stone for their soul.

The End.