

~ The BIG Tease ~

by Red Hope

Disclaimers:

Violence: Non-plot driven story, so no violence.

Subtext: That's always a, yes.

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Dedication: This story is for Murphy. The one person that can not stand a tease, especially from me. Murphy, see, I did write a complete story for you in less than four days. Don't ever ask for me to do it again! <laugh> I am exhausted! So enjoy this one, girl, its for you.

Feedback can be sent to me at... redhope@redhope.net

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Series: **Other**

Red Hope strolls along into the village. She sighs contently while taking in the cool air around. "Love it here." She passes by some bards and readers in the village. "Hey, hey Mark!"

Mark flashes a smile back and says, "Nineteen-forty."

The short bard rolls her eyes. "Nineteen-forty four, hun."

Mark Annetts sticks his tongue out for a brief instant.

Red Hope laughs quietly. "One of these days, Mark." She shows a grin but keeps strolling to her hut. Before she gets that far, she spots Sam Ruskin strolling along. Red Hope suddenly sprints towards the other bard. "Sam," she says in a taunting voice.

Sam Ruskin stops dead in her tracks as the smaller bard engulfs her in her daily hug. "Thanks, Red."

Red Hope chuckles and releases Sam. "There's your hug. Catch you later."

"Bye, sweetie."

The small bard grins and makes a beeline for her hut again. She reaches her hut door, and grasps the handle.

"Red!" called Susan Rice.

The short bard glances down at Susan. "Heya, Sue. What's up?" She then notices how Susan has been running; breathing hard. "What's wrong?"

Susan Rice sighs dramatically and shakes her head. "Mom..." she rasps.

The shorthaired bard releases the handle and turns to her friend. "What about MomBard?"

Susan takes a deep breath and peers up. "She's been... singing... again." She stresses the again part.

Red Hope groans dramatically. "Oh no... when?"

"Just now, she was in my hut... singing." Susan shakes her head. "Lady and I just escaped." She grins at the other bard.

Red Hope chuckles but asks, "Where's Lady?"

Susan glances back and sees the husky coming. "Here she is now." She reaches down and pets her dog gingerly. "Well..." she looks up. "Thought I'd come and warn you. MomBard is in a real singing rampage."

Red Hope shakes her head. "But its not Saturday... tomorrow is Singsong Saturday." She snickers.

Susan chuckles and replies, "MomBard is a day ahead of schedule. Actually on her own personal schedule. You know how she is."

The short bard rolls her marble, blue eyes. "Yup, we both do." She sighs. "Alright, I need to get back to my writing. Need to hide in my hut?"

Susan shakes her head. "Nah, Lady wants a walk and I may go visit Lu. Hopefully when I get back, MomBard will have stopped." She shrugs.

"Probably not."

"Thanks for the optimism," deadpanned Susan as she strolls away with her dog.

Red Hope laughs and shrugs. "I try." She opens her door. "See ya, Sue. Thanks for the warning."

"See ya, Red."

The short bard comes into her hut, and she turns on the lights. "Boy am I glad we *finally* got electricity in the village. Ssso glad our Queen decided to install that as her Christmas gift to the Village." She grins while she closes her door. "Now if we could just get LJ to install flushing toilets, we'll be in business," she mutters to herself. After she closes the doors, she walks over to her desk and pulls out the chair. Flopping down in it, she pulls out one of her unfinished stories. "Let's see, *The Sunrise of Heroes*... yeah I need to work on that one." She reaches up and pulls her quill out of the ink well. Right when the tip of the quill touches the parchment, a knock came at the door.

Red Hope groans and closes her eyes. "Come in," she says forcefully while opening her eyes.

The door swings open, and there in all of her glory, stands MomBard.

"You're truuuue colors!" MomBard comes twirling in while singing, "The darkness inside of you. Makes you feel so small." She stops and stands tall, as her short height

will let her. She grins at Red Hope and takes a deep breath. Again she sings, "But I see your truuuuue colors! Ssshhining through. See your true colors." She pauses for a second and points her finger at Red Hope then, as loudly as she could, she sings, "And that's why I love youuuuu!"

Red Hope sits in her seat, completely terrified by this crazy woman singing in her hut. "MomBard!" she screams.

MomBard starts swaying her hips and singing, "Show me your colors! Show me your rainbow!"

Red Hope leaps out of her seat and covers the other bard's mouth in a flash. "Oh my god, no!" She breathes heavily. "Mom, don't sing in my hut," she warns. "Especially not a good Phil Collin's song like that," she begs.

MomBard just grins as her eyes gleam with mischief. "Chan yo phove yo fan?"

"If you promise not to sing in my hut?" The small bard raises an eyebrow. "Promise?"

The older bard considers for a moment but nods. "Fromise."

"Okay." Red Hope removes her hand.

"Your truuuu-" MomBard is cut off by the hand over her mouth again.

"Mom, you promised."

The older woman snickers behind the hand. "I phont shing sno shore."

The younger bard sighs, removes her hand, and hears... nothing. She smiles softly. "Thank you."

MomBard chuckles and watches her friend sit back at her seat. "So, what you up to, Red?" She mingles over to the other bard's desk.

"Workin' on the sequel to *A World Away*." She peers up at MomBard. "Why'd you stop by... other than to terrorize me with your singing talent?"

"Well..." The older bard blushes faintly and looks down at her feet. She lifts her right foot and turns her shoe tip on the floor like a kid.

"Uh oh... what?" inquires Red Hope.

MomBard chuckles while she kicks at the floor as if there is a stone. "Can I burrow one of your stories?"

"Which one?"

"*How I met a Cow Girl*."

"Mom!" yells the younger bard. She laughs and shakes her head. "You just read it the other day."

"Yeah... I know." The older woman holds up her hands, bends her knees slightly as a begging look comes on her faces. "Please? Can I help it that you write well... you're just brilliant, marvelous. Sweetie, please!" She folds her hands together and bats her

eyes. "Don't make this old woman beg."

Red Hope laughs and shakes her head. "Alright... alright. Just don't lose the scrolls, okay?"

"I promise." MomBard bounces up on her feet in excitement. "You know you can trust me. I'd neva upset you."

"I know." The shorthaired bard opens her drawer of recent stories. She hunts through them and pulls out, what she thinks, are the three sections of *How I met a Cow Girl*. She smiles up at her friend. "Here you go, be nnnice to them."

MomBard carefully takes them and nods. "I promise, I'll bring them back soon." She rushes to the door.

"Just don't copy them!" Red Hope calls. "I remember that trick you pulled last time with *A World Away*."

The older bard laughs from the doorway. She glances back over her shoulder. "Sorry, it was for a good cause."

"Like what?"

"Like to keep me off your hands from begging for the story." MomBard snickers and disappears out of the hut while closing the door behind.

Red Hope groans dramatically. "Friends... can't live with them... can't live without them." She chuckles and goes back to her story. "Especially MomBard," she mutters under her breath. She starts writing her first sentence and once she finishes, another knock came. "Oh lord, now who?" She drops her quill and glances back to the door. "Come in."

Slowly, the door opens and in pokes a head. "Heya, Red."

Red Hope smiles softly at the tall bard. "What's up, Murph?"

Murphy grins, comes in, and closes the door behind. "Working on any good stories?"

"Of course, I gotta keep teasing you," taunts the smaller bard.

Murphy huffs. "Don't I know." She folds her arms while standing very tall in the low ceiling hut.

"Need something?" Red Hope grins.

"Just a complete story," states Murphy with a very hubris attitude.

The smaller woman chuckles and replies, "I'd give you one if I could write." A sparkle enters her eyes.

"Awe, you don't have any now?" begs Murphy.

Red Hope takes a deep breath, lifting her shoulders and ponders. "Mmmmm... maybe."

"Give." Murphy chuckles and grins. "Come on, Red... you've hardly been posting

stories out there lately. What you've been doing?"

"Fartin' around," teases the tiny bard. She bounces to her feet. "Alright, I have one done... I haven't posted it yet sssso... you'll get a preview." She signals her bed. "Sit down and I'll read it to you."

"Sweet." Murphy's grin gets larger and she strolls over to the bed. She hops up on it and crosses her legs, settling in. She glances over at her friend by her desk. "You'll post it today though?"

"Yeah sure." Red Hope keeps roaming through her scrolls in her drawer, trying to find the two scrolls. "Its post day, right?"

"Yup, Friday," responds the tall bard on the bed. "Don't keep track of the days?" she teases.

Red Hope laughs and straightens up with her two written-in scrolls. "Nope, I just rely on you screaming out every morning that it's post day." She strolls over to the bed.

Murphy laughs deeply and asks, "Not me and the others running around in the nude?"

The shorter bard widens her eyes. "Nnnnno, I hide." She hops up onto her bed and faces her friend.

"Awe shucks... we'll have to come storm in here." Murphy's grin becomes very evil. "And jump on you."

Red Hope raises the two scrolls in either hand. "Do you want me to read these?" She points the ends at the older bard.

"Yes."

"Then don't ever... ever jump on me while you're nude."

The older bard laughs evilly yet she nods. "I'll... be nice." For now, she added mentally.

The small bard chuckles and unrolls her first scroll. "Okay, I'll tell you the time frame." She peers up. "Its right after *The Return of the Valkyrie*."

0Murphy nods and settles in more, getting excited. "What's the title?"

Red Hope takes a deep breath, lowers the scroll in her lap. "Its titled *Becoming One Forever*."

The taller bard laughs deeply and asks, "A classic Red Romance?" A sly grin takes her lips.

"Murph," warns Red Hope. She chuckles but stops. "Ready?"

"Yup, weave the tale."

The small bard takes another huge breath then proceeds to read her story.

"After Xena and Gabrielle had returned the Rhinegold to the Rhine maidens, they

decided to travel for a few candlemarks. They'd shrugged on their cloaks, collected packs of food from the local village, and started the trek south bound.

Gabrielle had finally felt herself relaxed after getting her soul mate back. That single year of being asleep was nothing but the purest torture for her mind, body... and soul. It was a repeated cycle of a nightmare. Each time, she was so close to capturing Xena but something would stop her. Another wall... another barrier, it was an endless cycle or so she thought. Then one nightmare started changing more into a heavenly dream. And the next thing she knew, her lips were gently being claimed by her soul mate.

The small warrior had arisen from her nightmares and found the most royal blue set of eyes loving her. She'd return to the world of breathing, feeling, and touching... to be complete again with Xena. But at what price had this all cost them, this adventure? Another year- wasted away from yet another god. Gabrielle was purely sick of this, sick of the gods and their stupid games.

"Hey, how you doing?" questioned the warrior softly.

Gabrielle came out of her thoughts. "Okay," she whispered. She peered up at the older woman with a smile. "You?"

"A lot better," replied Xena. "A lot better," she repeated more quietly.

The warrior-bard chuckled and..."

Red Hope stops and peers up at her friend. "I forgot to mention... Xena and Gabrielle aren't lovers yet."

Murphy is bug eye. "This is the sixth season and they're not together?"

The smaller bard chuckles, moves her head in a now, and she answers, "Nope, which's what makes it interesting."

The older woman slowly nods. "Alright... keep going," she orders with a smug look forming.

Red Hope laughs quietly while her eyes focus back on her small handwriting.

"The warrior-bard chuckled and nodded in agreement. She sighed deeply, and she studied her surroundings of the forest. "You know, I can't wait to get home," mentioned the small warrior.

Xena smiled softly at that. "To the warm air?" she teased.

Gabrielle shivered just at the thought of being so cold. "Basically, yeah." She combed her fingers through her long hair. She chuckled, while she lowered her hand. "Its odd having long hair again."

The warrior stopped walking suddenly.

The warrior-bard did the same and raised an eyebrow in question.

The Warrior Princess grinned, faced her friend, and took a few steps back. She

examined her friend with the long blond hair again. Her head bobbed.

"What?" asked the younger woman shyly.

"The short hair," replied Xena, "like that better."

The small woman considered her partner's words then smiled. "Me too."

"So..." Xena folded her arms. "Want me to cut it again?" She grinned.

Gabrielle formed her own grin. "Can I trust you not to mess it up?"

"I have many skills," replied the older woman.

"You still didn't answer my question," provoked Gabrielle. "Can I trust you?"

Xena chuckled and countered, "Can you?"

Gabrielle laughed a lightly patted her friend's stomach. "Come on." She continued their journey towards Greece.

The warrior grinned, tugged her cloak closer, and followed after her friend. "So what'd you think of the flying horses?" She questioned as she walked briskly, trying to catch up.

The warrior-bard spun around, walked backwards, and replied, "It was different." She shot a grin.

Xena laughed deeply and asked, "Good or bad?" She caught up with her friend.

The short warrior spun around on her feet and strolled along side Xena. "Not sure yet."

The Warrior Princess smirked and taunted, "You hhhhated it."

"Hate is a strong word," murmured the younger woman. "It was different," she stated once more.

The tall woman shook her head. "I'll just... take you on another ride... someday."

Gabrielle grinned. "Don't you dare."

"Then it was a bad difference."

"I didn't say that. Now did I?" The warrior-bard gazed up at her soul mate. "Don't put words in my mouth," she teased.

"I was simply making a conclusion on your... emotions towards flying horses," replied Xena.

"Uh huh." The small woman walked a little closer to her friend. "Don't assume anything." She grinned. "I don't like being made an ass."

The tall woman huffed but smiled none the less. "You liked it," she decided aloud.

Gabrielle's shoulders drop. "It was a flying horse without wings!" She threw up her

arms. "Does that! not seem odd to you in the slightest?"

Xena sucked in a breath, thought, started nodding, then she said, "No." She grinned. "Considering what we've been through."

The small woman opened her mouth to debate that but well... she really could not. "Alright... you've got a point," she grumbled.

"I know," stated Xena. "I mean, what? We've only fought harpies, dryads, gods, goddesses..."

"Bacchae, giants, Titans..."

The warrior tilted her head, "Cyclopes, cannibals, centaurs, the Fates..."

"Time," mumbled the small warrior.

"Well..." Xena smirked at her partner. "We've only been through a few supernatural things huh?"

Gabrielle rolled her eyes then she grinned. "Not to mention Grinhilda as a monster," added Gabrielle with a small laugh.

The Warrior Princess laughed deeply. "Yup, I can see how flying horses is sssso out of the ordinary for us," she mocked.

The warrior-bard growled faintly and pushed her soul mate away. "Don't talk to me," she teased.

Xena laughed and walked closer again. "Rrrright," she drew out. She sighed then gazed around the area. "Feel like stopping for the night?"

"Yeah," agreed Gabrielle. She noted the sun low in the west. "Just enough time to make camp."

"Yup." The warrior stopped suddenly and put her hands on her hips.

Gabrielle stood there- she waited. She peered up with amused eyes. She loved watching how her partner work. She rubbed her neck a little and inquired, "Find that perfect spot?" She grinned at Xena when blue eyes lowered to her.

Xena chuckled and nodded. "This way... partner," she teased. Once past Gabrielle, Xena led the way off the trail they'd been following. Xena went past some pine wood trees and into a small clearing. "Walla, look good?" She spun around with her arms out.

The warrior-bard's head moved up and down in approval. "Not too shabby."

"Yeah well, it won't be my fault if you find pine needles up your-"

"Alright." Gabrielle raised a hand. "Don't say it... the visual is baaad enough." She chuckled.

The warrior snickered quietly before she neared her friend. "You take care of the fire-"

"You take care of dinner," finished Gabrielle. "Let's get cracking." She patted her

friend's stomach.

The tall woman nodded, took her pack off, left it on the ground, and she disappeared into the sunset-lit forest.

The short warrior took a shaky breath as her breath formed in the air. She watched it vaporize before she took her pack off as well. After the pack was on top of Xena's, she headed into the nearing edge of the forest and collect the wood. Within a few minutes she was done and squatting in the middle of the soon campsite. She worked on putting the fire together.

Xena strolled back towards the camp with three quails in hand. She stopped short on the camp's edge. She stood there and studied her best friend starting the fire. Her heart filled with a yearning as she watched her friend. Her friend, her sister, her soul mate but no never her lover. Lover was still words she only whispered inside herself and in her dreams. Conceived in her heart, seen through her eyes, but she'd never shown it physically. That was the funny part in their relationship, they were everything to each other except lovers. It always struck Xena odd, considering the numerous years they'd been friends.

To Xena, it was the piece of the puzzle she was missing to be complete. Yet, she would not dare push her friend into anything. For she didn't know how Gabrielle viewed her these days. So here she stood, on the edge of the campsite, still dreaming, still yearning, to make sense of this flame inside herself.

Gabrielle finally had the fire burning the wood. She stared into the tiny flame, it couldn't match the fire inside of herself. She slowly rose up with her cloak falling down in protection from the cold. Gabrielle folded her arms, still having not noticed Xena off to her side. But then it was as if something in her told her that Xena was there. Slowly a smile eased across her lips, she turned her head towards Xena.

The smile spread across Xena's lips at a slow pace.

The soul mates stared into each other eyes across the camp. They stared and searched for answers to questions they'd already answered without knowing it.

Xena tilted her head faintly. Maybe it is magic, she reconsidered the Rhine maiden's words, the magic is Gabrielle. She breathed deeply then she joined her friend by the fire. "Look good?" She signaled the quail.

"Oh yeah," whispered Gabrielle. She studied the quail momentarily before she glimpsed up at her best friend.

The older woman bit her lower lip, she could see that need in her friend's eyes. She bent forward, settled the quail on the ground, and turned back to her friend. "Come here," she whispered.

Gabrielle moved in and instantly wrapped her arms around her soul mate.

Xena pulled her partner in closely. Her arms tightly holding her soul mate and protecting her. She kissed Gabrielle's forehead and then dug her head down into Gabrielle's.

The small warrior closed her eyes and swayed her body with Xena's. "Another year,

Xena."

"I know... I know... at least it was not another twenty-five years," whispered the warrior.

"That was bad enough," replied Gabrielle quietly. "Plus another year now?" Her voice was filled with pain. "What?" She lifted her head. "I'm thirty-one now?" She laughed bitterly. "You're thirty-four." She shook her head.

"If you calculate in the twenty-five, we could be looking at our early fifties, Gabrielle." The tall warrior searched her friend's eyes. "I'd take this one year over the twenty-five we were froze through."

The small woman shook her head. "We missed Eve's childhood," she uttered.

"But we'll be there to see the rest of her life... considering how young we are ourselves." Xena tried giving a smile despite she hated this topic herself. "She'll be growing gray hairs with us."

Gabrielle chuckled a little but sighed sadly. "I still can't believe it." She scanned her soul mate's eyes. "We lost another year between each other."

Xena just realized she'd found the opening she'd needed. The opening to find out exactly what Gabrielle wanted from her. "And as they say Gabrielle... don't take things for granted." She held onto her friend's arms. "Don't expect things... people will always be there."

The small woman lowered her eyes. "I know," she whispered. "I know but I never follow through with my own morals half the time." She laughed at herself. "Oooh god," she groaned and ran her hands through her hair. She relaxed and said, "It could have been worse huh?"

"It really could have," agreed Xena. "We could be dead."

Gabrielle chuckled. "We could be a lot of things."

"But we're not," stated Xena. "We're right here, right now, trying to do the right things."

The warrior-bard nodded and smiled softly at her partner. "Thank you," she whispered.

Xena chuckled and said, "Repaying you for all those pep talks you've given me." She grinned.

The small woman smiled and nodded. "Tell me about it." She sighed. "Alright, I better get dinner going here."

The Warrior Princess gazed west and noted the sun almost gone. "Yeah... good idea." She brought her attention back to Gabrielle. "Come here." She pulled her friend in for a strong hug.

Gabrielle returned the huge hug. She still had things to discuss with her best friend, but this was not the right moment. Yet, she best not wait too long.

Xena squeezed a little hard and whispered, "I love you."

Gabrielle smiled and released a small laugh. "I love you too." She gave a hard squeeze then let go of her friend.

"Oh damn," mumbled the warrior. "Would have helped if I skinned them huh?"

The warrior-bard lifted the dangling quail. "Just a little." She crinkled up her nose with a smile.

The older woman sighed quite dramatically but took the quail. "Be back." She went into the forest again and skinned them in the last rays of light.

Within an hour the pair had eaten a roast quail dinner, which left them pretty filled. By the end of dinner they were sitting near the fire, knee pressed against knee.

"You know what Brunnhilda said to me while you were fighting the Valkyrie?"

"When I had the ring on?" questioned Xena softly.

Gabrielle nodded.

The warrior considered the entire adventure from start to finish then she whispered, "She was in-love with you?"

The younger woman nodded and gave a heavy sigh. "Yeah... while I was trying to get back to you. She kept telling me how much she loved me since the moment we'd met. She asked me to be with her."

"What did you say back?" asked Xena quietly.

"Well not yes, obviously." Gabrielle grinned at her soul mate then stared into the fire once more. "Just that I belong with you. You know, that you and I didn't mean to be soul mates but its destiny." She paused then added, "She was pretty jealous at first."

Xena huffed. "Everybody is jealous that we're soul mates," she teased.

Gabrielle chuckled and nodded. "Isn't it the truth?"

The Warrior Princess leaned towards her friend, she bumped her shoulders against Gabrielle's. "Eeeeverybody has the hots for my soul mate," she teased with a grin.

The small woman rolled her eyes. "I think they're more after you than me."

"Nah... people prefer green eyes than blue."

"Whatever," grumbled the small woman. "Its like..." she put her hands on the ground, turned her body to face her partner. "Its like we walk into a tavern, I'll come in." She grinned. "Then... *you* come in. Everybody's jaws drop open at the tall, dark, blue-eyed and dangerous one."

Xena shook her head. "No, its more like I walk in... everybody shudders and turns their gaze away." She grinned. "Then you walk in, everybody looks and not only does their jaws open but they hit the floor," she teased, "at the muscular, tanned, shorthaired blond, with green eyes."

Gabrielle rolled those green eyes. "They don't."

"Hmmm, you'd be surprised," replied the warrior. "I see and hear things that you don't."

"Like what?" inquired the warrior-bard.

Xena shrugged and looked away. "Just... stuff." A grin creased her lips.

"No, tell me," urged the small woman. "Come on, tell me."

The warrior shook her head and looked away. "You don't want to know... not even I did." She sighed.

"That bad huh?" whispered Gabrielle. She nodded. "Sounds about right."

"Why you say that?" questioned the older woman.

The short warrior sighed this time. "I think I've lost count on how many people I've slugged for what they've said about you." She gave a grin to her friend.

"Gabrielle," warned the older woman, "you could have-"

"Nah," cut off the warrior-bard. "They didn't hurt me after they saw how angry I was... and you weren't too far away." She laughed faintly. "Kinda finny now."

"I guess," muttered Xena.

The younger warrior leaned against her friend. "Cut my hair tomorrow?"

"If you want," replied the warrior.

"Yeah." The warrior-bard closed her eyes as her head leaned on her soul mate's shoulder. "Be nice to have short hair again."

Xena chuckled then asked, "Are you really that tired?" She teased a grin on her lips. "You've only been sleeping for... a year."

Gabrielle snickered lowly. "Hey, I had a lot of catching up to do after how many times you woke me up early."

The older woman grinned but sighed contently. "Ready for bed?"

"Hmmm yeah." The warrior-bard sat up straight and got to her feet.

The tall warrior stood up as well, she trudged over to the bedrolls on the other side of the fire.

Gabrielle followed along side, once by the bedrolls, she knelt down and took her sais out. She placed them in arms reach from her bedroll.

Xena worked her armor off at a slow pace. "God, I think I'm finally getting sick of this armor," she muttered.

The smaller warrior snickered got up, and she helped her friend. "Here."

The Warrior Princess dropped her hands and let her friend take care of the clasps. She closed her eyes while the tired, drained feeling washed over her.

"Tired huh?" whispered Gabrielle.

"Well... I didn't have a years sleep like somebody did," teased the older woman.

"Oh is that what it is?" taunted the warrior-bard, "Thought it was your... age."

"No," growled the warrior. She started shrugging out of her armor and put it on the ground, out of the way. She then bent down and picked up her cloak.

Gabrielle helped her soul mate put the cloak back on. She knew they'd needed their cloaks to sleep with considering out cool it was out.

Xena had already removed her chakram and sword, they rested above the bedrolls. She carefully crawled down into the bedrolls.

The younger woman followed suit and got under the furs next to her friend. She was closer to the fire because Xena always said that she keep herself warmer than Gabrielle. So that's how their sleeping arrangement worked out during the cold times. She sucked in a deep breath and studied the stars far up.

The warrior did the same exact thing.

As the pair silently stared at the stars, they realized this was one of the ways their friendship had first grown. They'd always did star gazing together since their first year together.

For a certain reason, that struck a cord in Gabrielle. She turned towards her partner, and without asking, she simply laid on her friend.

The warrior was a little worried; she pulled the fur over their bodies then she pulled her small partner in closer. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," whispered Gabrielle. She pushed the side of her head under her soul mate's chin and clung to her.

Xena considered this, and figured the year of being apart had taken a larger toll on the warrior-bard than she cared to admit. But she couldn't disagree; the year without Gabrielle had caused her to take another step closer to Gabrielle. She was growing more dependent and more in-love with her friend.

"Are you okay?" asked Gabrielle quietly.

The older woman broke out of her thoughts. "Yeah."

The warrior-bard chewed on her lower lip. "Xena?"

"Hmmm?"

The small woman breathed steadily and said, "I know we haven't really talked about it." She stopped then asked, "But do you... do you think we're soul mates?"

Oh boy, thought the warrior, this could be touchy ground if I say the wrong things.

She breathed in then released the air carefully. "Yes," she stated sincerely.

Gabrielle faintly nodded.

"Why?" questioned Xena in concern. "Are you... doubting?"

"No, definitely not." Gabrielle chuckled then she said, "Just want to make sure you agreed." Her eyes casually opened. "I guess... I'm just wondering *how* we know... can be sure."

"You don't question it, Gabrielle." The warrior ran her fingers through the long blond hair. "You accept it because its destiny talking." She leaned her head against Gabrielle's. "Its just *how* it is, always will be."

The small woman nodded slowly and closed her eyes. She said nothing more that night, too immersed in her thoughts and emotions.

But sleep soon caught up to her and also up to Xena.

~*~*~*~

The sun just peeked over the horizon, her rays instantly warmed the air around. The darkness from the night fled in defeat of the sun's rebirth.

Within two hours after the sunrise, Gabrielle awoke in her friend's arms. She sighed contently opened her eyes and stared at the dead fire.

Xena had been awake already, she just wasn't about to move or release her friend until she had to. "Morning," she whispered.

"Mornin'," grumbled the younger warrior.

"How'd you sleep?"

Gabrielle chuckled. "Was mighty comfortable on this bed." She moved her hands and pushed her hands down against the stomach under her own.

The warrior laughed lightly. "Oh I see, this is what I'm good for huh?"

"Oh yeah." The small warrior shut her eyes. "A portable bed." She grinned to herself. "We'll have to do this again, sometime."

"Oh joy," deadpanned the older woman.

"Hmmm, wonder how it feels the other way." Carefully and slowly, Gabrielle turned herself over and her back pressed into the other woman's body. There was a small crack as Gabrielle's spine realigned. "Oooh... damn."

"Here, sit up." The warrior sat up with her friend and she repositioned Gabrielle a little in her lap. "Think you can take your cloak off?" she asked carefully.

"Yeah." The warrior-bard removed her cloak and set it aside near her sais. She then reorganized the furs in her lap. She then felt large fingers press into her lower back and started massaging. "Oooh, that's real nice."

"Just relax," whispered Xena.

Gabrielle grinned and lowered her shoulder, breathed at a normal rate as she relaxed her mind. "See what a sleeping a year on a rock does?"

The tall woman huffed. "Now I can understand why you'd find my body comfortable."

"Uh huh." The small woman's eyes drifted shut as the massaging completely mellowed her. "Mmm, have to do this more often," she murmured.

Xena grinned as her hands slowly roamed up the muscular back. She tried steadying her breathing from being so close to her friend.

"God... I really missed you, Xena," whispered the younger warrior.

"I know," replied the warrior softly. "I missed you... without even knowing it at the time." She leaned forward a little and kissed her soul mate's shoulder. After she leaned back, she continued the soothing massage. "I had so many dreams about you." She shook her head. "Flashbacks."

Gabrielle nodded and held back a moan that formed in her throat. Her friend's touch was more than just relaxing now, more intoxicating than anything. "I know... I kept coming after you."

Xena sighed and worked her partner's shoulders. "But in the visions you at least had short hair," she teased, in hopes of detouring the sexual air forming between them.

The small woman chuckled. "You need to cut my hair this morning."

"I will," promised the warrior. "Exact same way?"

"Definitely."

The Warrior Princess picked up on how her soul mate was in a very physical mode. Only due to the fact they hadn't been around each other in a year. Gabrielle wanted to feel her close to reassure herself that Xena was beside her again.

Xena, well, she wasn't going to argue because she felt the same way. So, she finished massaging her friend's shoulders and neck. She then wrapped her arms around her friend's waist casually and laid back down.

Gabrielle went with it and stretched her body over her partner's. "Talk about a leisure morning," she mentioned.

The tall woman laughed deeply. "Why not? After what's happened, a little quiet time together is something I think we both need...?"

"Mmm, yes... can't go against that... won't." Gabrielle grinned and folded her hands on top of her lower stomach. She then sensed larger hands covering her own. "You know, its amazing how far we've both come since our first year together."

"We have... together we have." Xena moved one of her hands off Gabrielle's. She idly had begun trailing her fingertips over her soul mate's stomach.

The warrior-bard closed her eyes as the one single hand over hers seemed to burn her skin. But the fingertips grazing over her stomach sent tiny shots through her body. She attempted ignoring it but could not fully reject the sensual feelings. "Remember when I first started using the staff?"

Xena grinned devilishly. "Did you ever keep count of how many times you hit yourself?"

Gabrielle growled, "No."

"I know I didn't... couldn't keep count."

"Alright, I hear ya, grump."

The older woman furrowed her eyebrows. "What's that suppose to mean?" Her voice was casual.

"Ooooh, you were such the grump in our first year." The warrior-bard chuckled. "Gabrielle, don't do this, don't do that, sshh don't say that, stay here, keep out of trouble, don't talk to strangers, stay close to me, don't touch my chakram, don't go somewhere without me..." She sighed melodramatically. "You were sssso damn stinge."

Xena laughed then thought as she kept running her fingertips over her friend's stomach. "What'd you expect... I mean you were just a kid," she mocked.

"Ha, ha." Gabrielle smirked and said, "I was one smart kid though."

"If you say so."

"Okay that's it, no more bonding time." The small warrior started sitting up but didn't get far before Xena pulled her back down.

"Not yet," growled the warrior as a grin crossed her expression.

Gabrielle's shoulders drooped while she settled back in her soul mate's arms. "I get nnnno credit."

"No, you were very... spunky back then."

The warrior-bard laughed and asked, "Spunky... okay... how is that?"

"You had a lot of energy, Gabrielle... a lot. I couldn't figure out where in the Hell you got it all from."

"I don't understand how you see that, I mean by the end of the days, I was exhausted. Trying to keep up with you along with the traveling."

Xena shrugged. "You were wired, Gabrielle." She grinned. "You asked questions non-stop."

"And talked non-stop," added the small woman. "I've really settled down since then huh?"

"Wouldn't say settled down," replied the warrior. "You've just changed a lot over the

years." She smiled softly while her hand came up and gingerly brushed Gabrielle's hair behind her ear. "You've become quite the beautiful woman," she whispered. "Each day you seem to glow more."

Gabrielle took the words to heart and it made her tingle on every spot of her body. "You know, you've changed so much since the first year?"

"Oh?"

"Oh yeah," responded the younger warrior. "Think about it." She smiled brightly. "If you were the same person then right now. Do you think you'd be holding me right now?" she asked gently. Holding me right now, repeated Gabrielle mentally. She's holding me... we've never really done this before. So why now? Gabrielle shook the thoughts and put them away; not really sure if she wanted to understand it at all.

"True," answered Xena. "I've gone soft huh?"

"Yup," replied the short warrior. "You're so perfect like that. On one hand you can be very soft and caring. But on the other, you can be a real-"

"Hard core, bitchy warrior," finished Xena.

"Now, I wasn't going to say that," stated the small woman.

"I did," declared that warrior.

Gabrielle laughed faintly. "Well, either way... you have that balance... finally."

"Finally is right," agreed Xena, "Finally and thankfully."

"Uh huh." The small woman smiled. "Nobody beats my soul mate." She patted her friend's leg before she sat up. "Let's get the day rolling huh?"

"Yeeeah." Xena stretched then got on her feet after her friend was up. "Breakfast or hair cut first?" She revealed her amusing grin to her partner.

Gabrielle chuckled and replied, "Breakfast."

~*~*~*~

The warrior-bard slipped the tiny mirror back into her pack. She closed up her pack and swung it on. "It looks just as it did," she stated while she ran her hand through her short blond hair.

Xena turned around with a grin. "Of course."

"Didn't think you were a hair dresser," taunted the small woman.

The warrior laughed and picked up her pack. She slung it on. "I have many skills," she joked.

"God! that line is old," she teased her friend.

The tall warrior neared her friend and pushed away by the shoulder. "You love it."

Gabrielle stumbled faintly away from Xena after the push. "Oh yeah, will ya say it

more often?" She rolled her eyes.

"I have-" Xena was instantly cut off when two hands came over her mouth.

"Don't you dare," breathed Gabrielle hotly yet she was smirking. "I can't take much more of it after five. Count them five years of you saying *that* line." She lifted an eyebrow. "Get a new line." She removed her hands.

"What you want me to say?" inquired the warrior. "I have many talents? Sounds real lame."

"And you don't think the skills is after so many times?" chided the short warrior. She started traveling. "Try a totally new line."

The Warrior Princess laughed lightly and shook her head. "Wouldn't be the same." She peered over at her friend. "It'd be like changing my warcry... it doesn't happen."

Gabrielle's head swayed left and right while her lips pressed together. "Aaah, I can see that." She studied her friend briefly then put her focus on the forest around. "Alright, don't change it."

"Thank you," stated the warrior. She arched an eyebrow at her friend. "Why don't you change your name?"

"What?" roared the small woman.

Xena shrugged her shoulders. "It's getting old after... thirty-one years." She grinned. "Same boring name." Her eyes twinkled with such glee of laughter.

"Yeah well, so is the name Xena," snapped the small woman.

"Oooh? I thought it was a little unusual myself. I don't know any other Xena." The warrior's grin became very evil. "Gabrielle is as common as... dirt," she purred.

A growl rumbled up from the small warrior's throat. She stopped dead in her tracks. "Your name is about to become dirt." Her green eyes flashed.

The tall warrior faced her friend, straightened her back out, and put on her warrior mask. She slowly lowered her head and got in her partner's face. "Now... you understand why I won't change my lame line." Her hard expression went smug.

Gabrielle took a deep breath, ready to debate that but stopped short. "Shit," she grumbled.

Xena patted her soul mate's shoulder and straightened up. "Made my point." She walked on.

The warrior-bard, however, was still hot; her hands fisted up.

The warrior noticed her friend not coming, she stopped and turned back. She sighed at seeing her soul mate still angry. She came back, smiled at her best friend, and lifted her hand. "Come on," she offered.

Gabrielle sighed and un-fisted her hands. She took the much larger hand before she walked along with Xena.

Xena squeezed the small hand and carefully said, "I didn't waste a year away to come together again and get into a fight over lame lines."

The younger warrior lowered her shoulders and squeezed back her friend's hand. "Sorry," she apologized.

"I provoked you."

"No, I provoked you first," countered Gabrielle.

Once more, the warrior stopped and faced her friend- she still held the small hand. "We're both sorry." She grinned but went serious. "Let's just not... take each other for granted for now on huh?"

Gabrielle nodded and smiled. "You're right."

Xena lowered her head and pressed her lips against her friend's forehead. "Thank you," she whispered.

The small woman's smile eased into a deep warmth. "I love you," she uttered sincerely.

The warrior peered into her serene, ivy eyes. She saw that love and really studied it; she realized it was that love of full acceptance. That's when Xena knew, she just knew she could become Gabrielle's lover. Why wasn't she already? Because she was simply too worried about her friend's reaction. Yet here before her was the most accepting, understanding person she'd ever find. The one person that yearned to be everything to Xena even though she faltered to voice it. It was just a matter of pulling the new perspective out of the shadows.

So, Xena went into the shadows and grasped the idea. She slowly came out with it and showed this by leaning down. Her lips then carefully, faintly touched Gabrielle's lips.

Gabrielle's heart pounded as the smooth lips brushed hers. She'd experienced it before, twice now. This time around, not only could she not breathe but her body screamed with searing heat.

The warrior pulled back and opened her eyes. She revealed all her passion in her eyes that she held for her soul mate physically.

The small warrior could only stare, completely caught off guard by her friend's openness of desires. But she wasn't scared, she was more relieved than anything to see it. Although, for her it was so much at once she needed breathing space and she squeezed her friend's hand.

Xena picked up on the signal. She closed her eyes briefly then opened them again once her emotions were back under an iron fist. "We'll talk about it later huh?" she reassured.

"Yeah," replied Gabrielle, "just need to... think."

"Don't be scared," whispered the warrior. She kissed her friend's cheek then fully straightened up. She started releasing the small hand.

Gabrielle refused that, and she tightened her grasp. "I'm not," she finally spoke up.

Xena smiled and readjust her hold on the small hand. She begun traveling again along side her friend. She felt content in her actions, assured they were the best ones she'd done in a long time. At least she thought, she didn't quite feel that way, however.

Now, they only had to talk. Express the truth and every last emotion. Xena just wasn't quite completely sure though that Gabrielle wanted to be with her. There was always, always that powerful doubt inside her. There were numerous good reasons for Gabrielle to easily refuse Xena, numerous. Too, too many that it truly left Xena feeling sinking down and regretting her actions earlier. There were just numerous good reasons why not.

Continue to Section Two."

Red Hope peers up with a smile. "Ready for the next part?"

Murphy frantically nods. "It's on a cliff hanger. Come on, hurry up."

The short bard laughs quietly and rolls up the first scroll. She puts it aside then grasps the other one. "You're sure?" she asks teasingly while opening the second scroll.

"Yes," growls Murphy but she was grinning from ear to ear. "You know I hate teasing."

The small woman huffs and moves her head back and forth. "Don't I," she mutters. Slowly, her eyes lower to the second scroll in her lap. She opens her mouth, about to recite the lines, but falls short. "Uh oh," she whispers.

"What you mean, uh oh?" inquires the older woman.

"Wrong scroll," replies Red Hope. "Hold on..." she jumps off her bed and rushes over to her desk. She hastily opens her drawers, searching for the second section of her story. She opens all her scrolls partially, checking the titles, and once through all of her scrolls, she realizes she doesn't have the scroll. "Oh Hell," she mumbles.

"What?" Murphy uncrosses her legs and gets up. "You can't find it?"

Red Hope turns around with her right hand behind her neck. "Um... MomBard must have it." She holds up the scroll in her left hand. "This is the second section of *How I met a Cow Girl*, sssso MomBard must have the rest of my other story." She sheepishly grins. "Sorry, Murph."

"Well, let's go get the rest of the story," states Murphy. "I have to find out what happens!" She folds her arms. "We're going to go get it," she declares.

The smaller bard drops her freehand down. "Welp... not rrreally, Murph." She leans against her desk. "I am not 'bout to go into MomBard's hut." She shakes her head. "No way, no how. Not when she's reading one of my scrolls." She pauses then explains, "She hates, hates to be disturbed." Her eyes stare at the floor while a grin shapes her lips. "Besides that, she's in a singing mode." A shiver ripples up and down her back.

"Red," whines the tall bard. "I gotta know what happens. This is worse than you not

having a complete story." She throws up her arms. "Its complete and I can't read it!"

Red Hope shrugs. "Go ask MomBard for the rest."

"Come with me," Murphy begs.

"Ooooh no," states Red Hope. "You couldn't pay me." She grins. "You're going to have to go get it from her." She folds her arms with the scroll for her other story. "I'd recommend emailing her first... just don't walk into her hut and disrupt her. She wouldn't give you the scroll then." She chuckles.

"Red," whines Murphy again. "Please!"

"Nope." The small bard shakes her head. "You're the one that wants the rest of the story. So you can go ask her for it." She reveals a smug look. "Good luck," she taunts.

"You're evil, woman." Murphy grumbles to herself then she goes to the door. "Email her first huh?"

"Yes, definitely," states Red Hope. "Go back to your hut and email her. I promise you, if you email her asking for it, she'll give it up."

The tall woman nods, opens the door and almost leaves but stops and glances at her friend. "She'll give me the scroll, you prrrromise?"

Red Hope chuckles yet she nods. "I swear, just email her."

Murphy breathes deeply before she leaves, closing the door behind.

Red Hope laughs quietly while she strolls back to her desk. "Murph better email MomBard." She sits at her desk; settling the scroll back into her drawer. "'Cause I know I don't have a copy." She shrugs, picks up her quill and continues writing.

MomBard strolls in the direction of Murphy's hut after getting the email about the mixed up scrolls from Murphy. In her right hand is the second section to *Becoming One Forever*. She knocks on Murphy's door.

Murphy instantly opens it up. "Did you bring it?" she inquires.

MomBard held up the scroll and waved it at the tall woman.

Murphy holds out her hand. "Please, MomBard."

The smaller bard grins while taking a step back. "I want something in return," she taunts.

The tall bard droops her shoulders. "MmmomBard, pllllease give me the scroll." She gives a pout.

MomBard snickers evilly and waves the scroll again. "If you get me the second section to *How I met a Cow Girl* then mmmaybe I'll give you this scroll." She grins devilishly.

Murphy sighs dramatically and rolls her eyes. "Go ask Red for it."

"Oh no." MomBard chuckles and shakes her head. "I won't be caught dead in her hut while she's writing." She wags the scroll. "She's been disturbed too many times. She has one mmmmean temper too."

The tall bard groans, closes her eyes, and breathes calmly. "You want the second section?"

"Uh huh." MomBard chuckles. "Desperate times call for desperate measures... I should know." She giggles to herself.

"I'm desperate... that's it." Murphy closes her hut door and says, "Stay here." She breaks off into a run towards Red Hope's hut across the Village.

MomBard grins as she leans against Murphy's hut. "Red is bad," she murmurs, "glad she emailed me before Murph emailed me." She snickers evilly while lifting the scroll in her hand; she studies the top of the scroll. One thing noticeable about the scroll is that it looks fairly new- unused.

Murphy storms into Red Hope's hut without knocking. "Red?" she gasps. "I need the... second section to... to *How I met a Cow Girl*."

Red Hope drops her shoulders from being disturbed the third time today. "Murph," she growls without looking at her friend. "I was just... just in the middle of a good scene."

The taller bard pouts, she comes over to her friend. "I'm sorry but I am getting desperate here," she practically yells. "Red," she whimpers. "Please... I gotta know what happens in the end of your story."

The tiny bard peeks up at her friend. "Can't you guess?" She raises an eyebrow.

"No... please, come on." Murphy shakes her head. "MomBard won't give me the scroll unless she gets the second section of the your cowgirl story," she explains hastily.

"Oooh I see..." Red Hope goes back to writing.

"Red," growls the older bard. "This is worse than an unfinished story."

The small bard laughs quietly and nods. "Alright, alright." She opens her drawer and pulls out the second section of *How I met a Cow Girl*. "Here you go."

"Thank you, Red." Murphy rapidly walks exits the hut and heads back to her own. She spots MomBard patiently waiting, she reveals the scroll when she comes up to the other woman.

MomBard chuckles. "Thanks, Murph."

The pair exchange scrolls, Murphy goes into her hut while MomBard briskly walks back towards her hut. On the way to her hut, she drops into Red Hope's hut. "Hey sweetie," she calls when she opens the door.

The tiny bard glances at her friend by the door. "Did you switch?"

"Uh huh." MomBard grins evilly. "She'll be here any moment, ramping and raving."

She gives a small laugh.

Red Hope flashes her own wry grin. "Thanks, you were a huge help."

"No problem, sweetie." MomBard winks and leaves; knowing who is coming. She quickly disappears back to her hut.

Murphy sits down on her bed, unrolls the scroll slowly and studies the words. It read...

Hey Murph! Looking for the rest of *Becoming One Forever*? Guess what? Wrong scroll again! -Red Hope

She growls, sucks in a deep breath, races to her door and opens it. "Red!" she yells across the village.

Red Hope lifts her head and hears Murphy's yell. "Uh oh, I'm in for it now." She snickers lowly. She gets up from her chair with a scroll that has been tucked away in her top drawer, hiding. When she turns around with her hands behind her back, her door swings up from a strong force.

"Red," snarls Murphy as she stomps over frantically waving the scroll. "Where is the rest of the story?"

The tiny bard never falters her teasing grin. "Not too far away."

The larger bard stands directly in front of the smaller one. She takes the letter scroll and pokes it against Red Hope's chest. "You didn't finish it did you?" she accuses hotly.

"Awe, come on, Murph... I'm not that mean." The younger bard chuckles and brings her hands around with her scroll. "I said I finished the story, I don't lie."

Murphy sighs in completely relief. "You had me going." Again, she pokes her friend with the letter scroll. "You tease me too much."

Red Hope grins but softly. "You're sso much fun to tease too." She points at her bed with the scroll. "Sit down, we'll finish it, promise."

The tall bard leans forward and places the letter scroll on her friend's desk. She nears the bed and flops down on it.

Red Hope unrolls her scroll while she strolls over to the bed. Getting up on her bed, she glances at the other woman. "Ready?"

"Oh my god, yes. Go please," commands the older bard.

The tiny bard smiles while her eyes focus on the words on her scroll.

"Xena and her partner had been traveling all day, in pure silence. Neither knew what to say or how to say it even if they knew what to say. They'd known each other more than five years and now they feared... only fear itself. They'd been fearing fear since they'd met.

The warrior squeezed her friend's hand; they hadn't released hands yet. "Want to stop

for a break?" she questioned softly.

Gabrielle just nodded- she knew what kinda break this would be. A break from all around them.

The tall woman led her friend off the trail and to a log. She sat down on it and pulled her friend down. After her pack was off, she focused her attention on her companion.

The warrior-bard took her pack off, placed it on the ground, then she sat on the log; she faced her friend. She stared down at the forest floor because she couldn't make eye contact at this moment.

Xena examined her soul mate briefly then she reached forward with her freehand and tilted Gabrielle's head up. "We do... need to talk."

The younger warrior nodded and tried reminding herself that she was old enough, she could handle these things. "Alright," she whispered. She calmed down because this was her best friend; they'd been to Heaven and Hell and back again. First, she said, "I'm sorry," sincerely.

The older woman knitted her eyebrows together. "For what?" she asked in a hushed tone.

"For never considering, mentioning... let alone discussing a... well a sexual relationship with you," replied Gabrielle.

Xena grinned. "Not too many friends do."

The smaller woman exchanged a skeptic look. "That's how a lot of love relationships get started... from a simple friendship."

The Warrior Princess sighed. "You're not working with me here," she joked; however she went serious again. "We're doing it now, right?"

Gabrielle nodded and smiled. "Right." She hesitated for a second then added, "Okay, I know how you feel about a love relationship."

Xena chuckled and tightened her grip on her partner's hand briefly. "Up to you."

The small warrior studied their locked hands and she seemed to realize something. "No its not, its up to us." She lifted her head. "We're soul mates, we do things together," she stated clearly. A warm smile creased her lips. "And I am definitely, and I have been taking you for granted." She shook her head. "We're not going to be around forever."

"No, I have other plans for my next life," teased the older warrior.

Gabrielle grinned, briefly. "Rrrright, let's worry about this one," she teased back before she returned to the original conversation. "I'd... I'd love to have a relationship with you but... the last one I had didn't turn out so great." She sighed then added, "I'm just scared... of a lot of things. We lead a crazy life together where just about anything can happen to either of us."

"And isn't that more the reason to be together?" questioned the warrior. "To use whatever time we have together?" She reached up and caressed her friend's cheek.

"But I am content to be your friend... I'll take what I can get."

The small woman smiled at her friend's words. She slowly released the larger hand and scooted away from her friend. She stood up, her eyes never leaving her soul mate's. She stepped over the log, knelt down and peered up at her partner.

"Would they call me crazy, stupid if I turned my back on a person such as you?" she whispered. "But, I think, I'd just shake my head and wonder why I ever had." She tilted her head as she studied sapphire pigmented eyes. "Right here and right now, makes me think why I haven't been with you sooner." She laced her hands together on top of Xena's knee. "Five years floated off between us that we could have been lovers."

"Is that how you would really look at it?" whispered the warrior. "Five years of nothing? Or five years of being together, learning each other and ourselves? Five years to prepare for this day?" She smiled in promise. "We still have a far journey ahead of us."

"That's... what I am praying for," whispered Gabrielle.

"We do, Gabrielle." Xena leaned towards her friend. "Its forever because we're soul mates." She smiled as the love swirled in her eyes.

"Its never too late to do the best thing, is it?" asked Gabrielle.

"Its too late when you never do it," replied the warrior. She, now, gently traced her friend's jawbone.

"Just as long as it's slow... at first." The small warrior closed her eyes.

Xena chuckled and asked quietly, "Just to be sure?"

"Yeeeah... well not even that." Gabrielle shrugged. "Just so I can get use to the idea." She grinned while her eyes drifted opened once more. "Ah, why not?" her voice was teasing now. "I mean shoot, I eat with you, sleep with you, travel with you, fight with you, swim with you, spar with you, kick bad guys' butts with you, crack bad jokes with you, mmmm just do everything with you practically." She shrugged. "Why not have sex with you?"

That did it for the Warrior Princess. Without warning, she instantly pushed her soul mate to the ground by the shoulders. "I'll remember that in the future when you're sexual frustrated."

Gabrielle was lying on her back and laughing hysterically.

Xena shook her head- she grinned. Once she was off the log, she crawled over top of the smaller woman.

And well, Gabrielle quickly stopped her laughter. She swallowed and peered up into the darker blue eyes above her. "Slow," she reminded.

The warrior chuckled but grew a grin over her lips. "Just going to give you a taste of things."

"You like to do that," mentioned the warrior-bard.

"Oh yeah, its good for you." The Warrior Princess lowered her head and carefully pressed her lips against Gabrielle's.

The smaller woman felt those heat spots reappear across her body. They formed the first fragments of passion and she pulled Xena's head down more.

Xena easily responded and opened her mouth. Her stomach was shocked by a passion wave. The wave exploded when a warm tongue entered her mouth. Her tongue quickly made contact with Gabrielle's.

A moan rolled up from the short warrior's chest. She tasted Xena all the while sucking on her soul mate's tongue faintly.

The warrior had to pull away from the intensity. She breathed coarsely while she finally opened her eyes. She peered down into deep, forest eyes.

"Well... that did taste good," joked Gabrielle. "But..."

"But?" The older woman raised an eyebrow.

"But that was just the preliminary taste test." Gabrielle grinned. "Need a little more to make a better judgement."

"Mmm, no problem." Xena grinned and brought her lips back over her soul mate's.

As they kissed again, there was a small tree branch snap.

Soon, the pair were doing one kiss after another, trying every angle.

Xena lifted her head faintly but her lips were still scant inches from Gabrielle's.

"Two to your right," whispered Gabrielle.

"Three to my left," added the warrior. She leaned back down and captured her friend's lips.

They started whispering between the kissing.

"I got... the two," mentioned Gabrielle at the end of one kiss.

"Got the three," replied Xena as she went in for another sensual kiss.

Gabrielle grasped her partner's hips. "Be... careful," she mumbled between the kiss.

"I gotcha... back," uttered Xena as she lifted her head. She kissed her soul mate's forehead. "Be careful too."

The warrior-bard grinned, lifted both her feet up, reached down and pulled out her sais. "Ready, partner?"

"Anytime you are."

"Let's go."

Xena winked- she stood up. After her sword was unsheathed, she gave her warcry.
"Come out, boys."

Gabrielle rolled a little on her back then flipped up onto her feet beside her friend. She flipped her sais' blades on her wrists.

Five men suddenly emerged out of the surrounding forest, hollering and raised weapons.

"Oh yeah," whispered Xena. "Party time."

Gabrielle snickered, raced forward towards the two trees between her and her two enemies. She spun her sais' blades back out and came between the two close trees before the men. She rammed her sais into either tree at her sides. When her enemies neared, she suddenly lifted herself up off the ground by her arms with the sais as support. She gave a hard kick and sent her opponents reeling across the forest.

The warrior-bard landed back on her feet and jerked her weapons out. She raced forward and started finishing her enemies.

Xena's war cry exploded from her lips as she continued taking out her enemies.

All at once, the three men slashed at the warrior.

The Warrior Princess dropped down and did a roundhouse spin. Her opponents all fell onto their backs.

Gabrielle kicked one of her enemies' swords from his hand. She smirked at him and punched him hard. She then ducked as the other man slashed at her head. She gave a hard kick and sent him hard on his back.

She went back to the guy she punched earlier, and she saw him recovering. She quickly pushed her right sais hands out and slammed him hard against the head.

The man fell down in a lump- unconscious.

The other man that had been knocked down, unsheathed a dagger from his side. He saw the small woman off guard and suddenly sprung forward.

Xena whirled around after taking out two of her enemies. She fought the last one. She glanced at her partner across the way. Her eyes widened. "Gabrielle!" She stopped the sword coming at her.

Gabrielle faced her other enemy but was too late.

He slammed his body into hers and he brought his dagger forward.

The dagger plunged into the warrior-bard's right side and was slashed up her side.

The short warrior screamed in pain and fell down onto the ground with the man on top of her. She opened her eyes and saw the man sit up with his bloody dagger. He brought it over her chest, prepared to stab her for good.

Xena growled, lashed at her opponent and cut him at the throat. With little time left, she grasped her chakram and hurled it at the man getting ready to kill her soul mate.

The chakram screamed through the air, aimed for the man, and zeroed in on him. The chakram drove into the man's side hard, sending him off Gabrielle's body.

The small warrior closed her eyes and clawed at the ground from the immense pain. "Xena," she half growled, half yelled. In a second, her warrior reappeared; kneeling down beside her.

"Its okay, its okay," said the warrior frantically. She touched her soul mate's chest. "Try to be still." She got to her feet and ran to the packs. She tore one open, she searched through it and found the medical kit. Back at her friend's side, she knelt down. "Hold on," she whispered.

The younger woman nodded and closed her eyes. She tried not letting her mind focus on the scorching heat at her side. She could sense the blood oozing out.

The warrior pulled out some wraps and pressed them against Gabrielle's wound.

"Shit," growled Gabrielle.

"Ssssh," comforted the warrior. She grabbed more wraps and lifted her partner's mid body up a little. She hastily wrapped the small woman's entire stomach to hold the wraps in place.

There came a low groan from one of the unconscious men.

"Damn," mumbled Xena. She quickly finished the wrap in hopes it would slow the bleeding. "We need to get out of here." She stood up with the medical kit, went to the packs and tossed it in. She put on a pack then the other over top of the first one. Back at her friend's side, she jerked her chakram free of the man's side, cleaned it in the grass then put it back. She knelt down at Gabrielle's sides and carefully scooped her up.

Gabrielle moaned softly as her head rolled into her soul mate's arm.

The Warrior Princess could see the blood loss was sending her companion into unconsciousness. She briskly started walking, she wanted as much space between her and the three still alive men as she could get. As she walked, she felt a warm liquid roll onto her arm. She closed her eyes briefly because she knew it was blood.

Xena was never sure how far she'd traveled between that time of the fight and later on when she'd found a cave. All she knew was that the cave would be the best place to keep Gabrielle protected in. So she went in, carefully placed her soul mate down. She took off the packs and unattached a fur. She placed it over top of the small woman. After that, she rolled out a bedroll and placed it next to Gabrielle.

The warrior brushed back blond hair before she went to the cave's entrance. She stopped short and noted the blood trailing leading in. She sprinted into the woods and collected a load of wood. Once she came back in, she started a fire but kept one stick's tip in the fire, slightly burning.

The Warrior Princess went back to her friend's side. She had no time to be emotional, only time to act. She removed Gabrielle's cloak then removed the red wraps. She lifted her soul mate into her arms and neared the stick lingering in the fire's edge. She sat down and rolled her small woman onto her side so that the bleeding wound was on

top.

Xena pulled out the stick, reached around and grasped Gabrielle's hand. She knew the warrior-bard would wake up screaming when this searing pain would come. She gradually lowered the tip of the glowing stick and pressed into the open wound.

Gabrielle's eyes flew open as the scream soared from her lips in utter pain. She clung to the large hand while she cried out.

The warrior gritted her teeth as she rolled the hot stick down the deep slash wound. Once she'd burned the skin back together, she threw the stick into the fire. "Its over, its over," she repeated with desperation.

The younger warrior gritted her teeth while breathing heavily. She closed her eyes, trying to shrink away from the incredible pain tearing through her side.

Xena stood up carefully with Gabrielle in her arms. She placed her partner in the bedroll but on her unwounded side. After getting the medical kit, Xena pulled out a sort of white cream and placed it on a clean wrap. She carefully rubbed it against her soul mates wounded side.

Gabrielle could start relaxing as the cream cooled her side.

The warrior then rewrapped the wound to keep it clean. She then rolled Gabrielle onto her side and grabbed the fur. She covered her smaller warrior and peered into pain tinted green eyes. "You'll be okay," she whispered in reassurance.

Gabrielle nodded and closed her eyes. She could only think about sleeping- an escape from the jarring pain.

Xena softly kissed her soul mates forehead. Now, she only had to wait... if their enemies didn't find them first.

~*~*~*~

Xena pulled her cloak close and crossed one ankle over the other. She continued leaning against the cave's entrance in the dark night. She peered back into the cave at her partner sleep near the fire. She sighed and returned her focus to the surrounding forest. The sun had set about a candlemark ago or so.

Faintly the sound of movement, through the forest, vibrated towards Xena.

The warrior lifted herself off the cave's entrance and unsheathed her sword. Once around the corner of the cave, she hid in the darkness.

The three men followed the blood trail through the woods in the full moonlit night. They stopped when they spotted the glowing cave ahead. All together, they unsheathed swords and slowly stalked towards the cave. Carefully they neared the mouth of the cave and stepped in then noticed the small female sleeping by the fire.

"Where's the larger one?" asked one of the men.

"Who cares? She's probably off doing something. We'll kill this one before the bigger one returns," whispered one man.

"I don't think so, boys." Xena reappeared at the cave's entrance. "I'm vvvery protective of that little one."

Two of the men whirled around and took the tall warrior.

The third man stepped back and watched his two friends fight the female warrior. He threw a glance at Gabrielle over his shoulder. He grinned and closed in over her sleeping form with his sword raising up.

The Warrior Princess hadn't expected that, she jumped back from her two opponents, ran then leapt over their heads. She just skimmed the cavern ceiling before she landed behind Gabrielle's attacker. She instantly wrapped one arm across his chest. Xena then grabbed the side of his head and snapped it the opposite way- she broke his neck.

The man instantly fell dead onto the ground.

Xena turned around with a twirl of her sword. "Who's next?" She breathed heavily in anger as her dark eyes flashed. "Come on," she snarled.

The two men held their hands up, dropped their swords, and ran out of the cave. They sprinted for dear life into the forest, disappearing.

The Warrior Princess grinned because she was completely amused. She spun around on the heels of her boots and studied her sleeping soul mate. "Simply amazing," she murmured, "she's still asleep."

~*~*~*~

Gabrielle groaned and opened her eyes; she peered around.

"Afternoon," greeted the warrior, as she sat down beside her soul mate.

The small warrior rubbed her face and ran her fingers through her hair. "Did I miss anything interesting?"

"Nah," replied the warrior. She gently caressed Gabrielle's face.

"So what *did* happen?" The warrior-bard lifted an eyebrow, she knew something happened.

The older woman shrugged. "Our three attackers came after us."

"Oh... let me guess, you sent them off running for their lives."

"Basically," agreed the warrior.

Gabrielle chuckled while she grinned.

Xena peered at her friend's side. "How's it feel?"

"A lot better," answered the small woman. She rolled onto her other side because she knew Xena would want to check the wound out.

The Warrior Princess carefully lifted the bandaging and noted how red the flesh was still. Yet, the skin was starting to mend together to form new skin. "I don't think you'll

get a scar but you will at first." She gently put the bandaging back down. "Feel likes something to eat?"

"Yeah."

"Good, don't move, I'll take care of it." The older warrior rose up and made a light breakfast. She placed the food near the cave wall, strolled over to her partner and picked her up. She back up to the cave wall, carefully sat down while she pulled Gabrielle into her lap.

The warrior-bard settled in her soul mate's lap before she was handed the food. "Did you get something to eat?"

"Yeah," responded the warrior. "Come on, eat." She encircled Gabrielle's waist and carefully rested her chin on her soul mate's shoulder.

Gabrielle slowly ate, she was still shook up by what happened yesterday.

Xena noted how her partner was faintly pale from the loss of blood but not quite as pale as she was earlier.

"Are we going to travel today?" questioned the smaller warrior.

"Maybe, let's see how you do huh?"

The younger woman nodded and finished eating. She placed the bowl on the ground then she leaned back into her friend. "That was a close one huh?"

The Warrior Princess shifted a wry grin on her expression. "Isn't it always?"

"Yea, anymore." Gabrielle sighed and mentioned, "Sometimes I almost want to stop fighting just because of things like that."

"I know." Xena tightened her arms. "But could we really, truly settle down?"

"Ever turn our backs on this way of life?" The smaller warrior shook her head. "Not till I am growing gray hairs... if even then."

The older woman chuckled quietly. "But I do wonder if there'll be that day we both decide its either our life together or death." She paused. "Is our life about being together or about the greater good?" she whispered.

"We're here to follow our way," replied the warrior-bard.

"What is our way?" questioned Xena. "The way of warriors... or the way of soul mates?" She nuzzled her partner's neck. "I think, that's something we can choose."

"And need to figure out," expressed Gabrielle. She brought up her right hand and ran her fingers through midnight hair. "If we do warriors... well we'll be asking for an early death." She laughed quietly. "Soul mates well... who knows."

"We could... find out," stated Xena as a grin tweaked her lips. "Being warriors is more... entertainment for us."

Gabrielle laughed and nodded. "That's... that's a honest analogy. " She shifted into her serious state and partially moved in her soul mate's lap. She turned her head as Xena

peered down at her. "I know... I need to spend as much time as I can with you here in this life. That's what I want too."

A sunrise smile dazzled onto the warrior's lips. She leaned in and pressed her lips against her soul mate's temple while she whispered, "Only you." She raised her head. "I only need you to breathe and exist."

Now it was a smile of ever lasting love rising Gabrielle's lips and touched her glowing, forest eyes. "Welcome to the way of the soul mates," she whispered. She finished the slim distance and gave her lips to Xena in the kiss of love.

The warrior went from a bitter darkness into the warmth of the sunlight with her soul mate. She gave her eternal over to her soul mate in the kiss because there was no returning now.

They pulled away from the kiss and entered their world with soaring emotions.

"I love you," whispered Gabrielle in a voice of dependence.

"I love you too."

The soul mates claimed each other's lips in another long, soft kiss. They still had a far journey ahead of them and a new path to explore. Would the magic *of love* ever cease to exist? Who knows... who knows...."

Red Hope's voice trails off as she glimpses up to her friend.

Murphy was smiling but it soon forms into a grin. "Yup, another Red Romance."

The tiny bard laughs and swats her friend with the scroll. "I hear ya, I hear ya." She carefully rolls up the scroll. "So, there's your *complete* story for once." She winks. "No teasing."

The older bard rolls her eyes. "You teased, Red... bad bard." She hops off the bed.

"You just said I couldn't tease you with an incomplete story," taunts Red Hope. She places her scroll on her desk then she nears her friend again. "Well... I did live up to your challenge." She grins and takes a step closer. She gives the much taller bard a big hug and receives one back. After the hug, she backs up to her desk. "Alright, out with you. I need to work on my stories."

Murphy laughs quietly and goes to door. "Until the next one, Red," she teases as she leaves.

"No next time!" calls Red Hope. "This one was bad enough on short notice," she grumbles with the shaking of her head. She grins after her friend leaves. "Such demanding audiences these days." Sitting back down, she starts writing once more. "And I love it too." She laughs while scribing along her next fanfiction adventure for her readers.

The End