



Fanfic cover by Silvermoonlight.

Seasonal Passion series, Vol. 3:

What matters most

written by maggielassie

Genre: *Xena Warrior Princess* alternative fan-fiction; Xena/Gabrielle femslash; hurt/comfort.

Disclaimer: I don't own the *Xena: Warrior Princess* characters. Universal/Renaissance does.

Timeline: This story takes place just after the Season Three episode *Forget Me Not* (but before *Fins, Femmes and Gems*).

Warning #1: This story contains sexually explicit erotic moments between two consenting adult women. If this offends you, please refrain from reading. **If you are under 18 years of age, please do not read this** and come back

later when you're older and you can read it. If lesbian romantic/sexual relationships are illegal in your country or state, please advocate a change in laws.

Warning #2: This story contains a male-on-female attempted rape and some violence. It also contains some references to the infamous "Gab-drag" and to Gabrielle's rape by Dahak. It contains some post-rift angst and it is somehow part of the 'hurt/comfort' genre too. However, all this was necessary to the small plot of this story.

Author's note: (1) I felt there were still some problems left unresolved regarding the rift arc, hence one of the reasons why I wrote this. (2) This is not a first time story. I think there are enough first time stories out there. Also, I believe that Xena and Gabrielle can still be intimately passionate with each other after their first time. My femslash stories sometimes remotely follow each other; my first two were called *Closer than blood bonds* and *Circle in the sand*.

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Feedback: see feedback page.

There were two or three candlemarks left to go before sunset. Xena had already set up camp a while ago. She had built a fire and prepared a bedroll for the night that was to come. The three friends were sitting on a tree trunk in the middle of the woods. Argo was grazing nearby. Xena, Gabrielle and Joxer were eating the warm stew the bard had just made, right after she had finished writing the last day's events on a scroll.

The Warrior Princess finished her portion of food. She immediately grabbed her sword to sharpen it. She often did this after supper. She was sitting beside her blonde companion. Joxer was seated on the other side of the log, consuming the last bit of his meal. He turned to the bard who was next to him.

"You've always been such a marvellous cook, Gabrielle," he said, smiling.

"Thanks, Joxer." Gabrielle grinned back at him.

After finishing his food, Joxer suddenly belched. "Excuse-me," he said, looking sheepish, while glancing at the two women beside him. "I'm sorry." He could not help himself and felt very embarrassed for behaving so rudely in front of Gabrielle.

"It's okay, Joxer." Gabrielle sighed. She turned towards her dark-haired lover and whispered something in her ear. Xena stopped whetting her blade to hear what the bard had to say. "Xena, can you please tell Joxer to leave?" The shorter woman quietly murmured. "I don't wanna be nasty to him, but we're gonna need a bit of privacy." The taller woman simply put her weapon down and stood up. She spoke to the young man.

"Joxer," the Warrior Princess said, trying to keep a kind expression on her face.

"Yes, Xena?" Joxer looked up at the tall brunette, wondering.

"I really would not like to sound rude," Xena smiled at him in a somewhat condescending way, "but would you mind going to find someplace to sleep in the next village and leave us a bit of privacy for the night?" She knew the young man was used to hearing that. She had asked him to go quite a few times so that she and her lover could be alone at night, or for a couple of days.

“Er... Sure, Xena. As usual, I don't mean to bother you two, you know?” Joxer rose from his seat and looked at the two women with a timid expression on his face.

“Yes, we know that, Joxer.” Gabrielle nodded, politely grinning, while eating. She was glad to get a bit of her appetite back. “Don't worry... Goodnight, Joxer! And thank you for bringing me back from the temple of Mnemosyne.”

“It's all right. Goodnight, Gabrielle,” he said, glancing at her with enamoured eyes before turning and starting to walk away from the warrior and her bard.

“ 'Night, Joxer. Thanks.” The Warrior Princess sighed and went to sit back down to resume the sharpening of her weapon.

Joxer trudged away into the woods, aiming at reaching the next village. He thought about Gabrielle. He really wished it had been his name the bard had written on her scrolls when talking about the love of her life, instead of Xena's. The young man exhaled, feeling a little sad, and walked further away.

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“Thank you, Xena.”

“No problem, Gabrielle.”

When they were alone, the two lovers felt more tranquil. Gabrielle was consuming an apple after she did not manage to finish her stew while Xena was nearly done with the whetting of her blade.

“You still haven't gotten your full appetite back yet?”

“No, not quite, Xena.” Gabrielle slightly shrugged, giving her lover a brief small smile. “I'll be all right though.”

“I hope so.” Xena went to put the whetstone down. She stood and unfastened the scabbard that was on her back, along with the chakram on her waist. She went to place her weapons near their gear that was lying in a small pile on the forest ground. She sat back down next to Gabrielle on the log. The younger woman looked pensive while chewing on her fruit. Xena studied her younger lover's face with concern. After a few moments, Gabrielle turned to her and started to speak.

“Xena.” She tossed her unfinished apple onto the ground as her sea-green eyes stared into blue ones.

“Yes, Gabrielle.”

“Are you really sure this is all over?”

“Yes, Gabrielle. We don't really need to talk about any of this anymore. I forgave you for what happened in Chin, didn't I?” Xena kept gazing at Gabrielle as she felt a pang of anxiety unsettle her.

“I know, even though I'd almost got you killed... Sorry, Xena, I still need to talk about this. I chose to keep my memories today after all...” Gabrielle looked sad and depressed.

“Come here, sweetheart.” The Warrior Princess wrapped an arm around the bard as she used her other hand to caress her blond hair while they were still sitting beside one another. “I've already forgiven you. You know, as I said earlier on, I've heard you when you talk in your sleep...” She paused. “... I know you were jealous of my former

lover and teacher Lao Ma, but it's all right, Gabrielle. I understand now that you were so unhappy I'd left you behind so I could go to Chin because I owed something to someone I used to love."

"Yes, I was jealous, Xena." The blonde woman gently rubbed her lover's upper arm as the other woman was hugging her in a half-embrace. "I'm sorry."

"I understand you for being jealous, my love. Lao Ma was my first female lover after all, but you are my best." Xena kissed the top of the younger woman's head. "And I'm so sorry I lied to you about Ming Tien."

"It's all right, Xena. I don't care about Ming Tien anymore." Gabrielle raised her head to look up at the warrior. "I've done so many terrible things these past months. I don't just mean what happened in Chin. I know you forgave me for that now. I'm also talking about the rest. I'm so sorry I've lied to you, Xena. And all those painful memories..." Tears started escaping the bard's eyes. She would never dare mention Hope or Solan. She knew the dark-haired woman was not ready to hear those names yet, as her lover was still recovering from her son's death.

Gabrielle uttered unhappy moans. "Uhh... When I was in the temple of the Goddess of Memory and while I was still combating the shadows in my mind, I still couldn't decide to get rid of everything, because that would have meant I wouldn't have remembered you and all the wonderful things we've shared together; I wouldn't even have remembered myself." She sniffed, as her older lover kept trying to comfort her. "It's just those painful memories, you know..."

"Do you wish you had gotten rid of them, Gabrielle?" The warrior was worried. She had wanted Gabrielle to go to the temple of Mnemosyne by herself for a reason. She had wanted the bard to deal with her own pain and decide for herself if she wanted to erase all this from her mind, including what they had together. Xena was glad Gabrielle had chosen to remember her, but the blonde woman's pain still made her uncomfortable. She gently cradled her lover's head in one arm while stroking her back with her other hand.

"In a way, yes, Xena, though I had no real choice but to keep them if I wanted to remember other things." The bard sighed and reached around to place her hands on the top of Xena's back while the taller woman was still trying to console her. She could feel the warrior's breastplate near her cheek and ear as she closed her eyes and kept speaking. "I just wish I hadn't lost my blood innocence. I also wish Dahak hadn't raped me." She moved slightly back from her lover's half-embrace to be able to stare up into Xena's eyes. "That's when it all started, my love. Sorry, I've not talked much about this before but I really have to now."

"Gabrielle..." The Warrior Princess' tone sounded compassionate.

"When I killed Meridian... when I opened up the gate to release Dahak into the world..." Gabrielle was still crying as she continued: "... that's when all those horrible things that happened between us started. Xena, when Dahak raped me above that altar, when he thrust into me, I thought I was going to die. And maybe I actually wanted to die, because it hurt so much inside..." More teardrops ran down the bard's cheeks as she whimpered in anguish. "I knew from that day on that everything had changed... everything."

Xena quickly stood and went to get a piece of cloth from one of their saddlebags. She sat back down next to the blonde woman on the log, delicately lifted Gabrielle's chin and dried her tears with the soft material. "Here, my bard... Don't cry, my love." She hugged her and as she gently stroked her back, she said: "You know, Gabrielle, I've been thinking. What happened in Britannia was my fault," Xena finally admitted as she moved back to gaze into the younger woman's eyes. "I shouldn't have left you behind as I was going into battle. If I hadn't left you in that temple, you wouldn't have killed Meridian... You wouldn't have been raped. I'm so sorry, Gabrielle." The warrior shook her head in sorrow. She was tenderly holding her girlfriend's upper arms as the other woman placed her hands on her own to reciprocate the affectionate gesture. At the same time, they were looking deeply into each other's eyes.

“It’s alright, Xena. I shouldn’t have killed Meridian. I shouldn’t have trusted Khrafstar.” The bard still looked quite dismal.

“Gabrielle, how could you have known who he really was? Oh, sweetheart, none of this was your fault! You killed Meridian because you were trying to save someone.” Xena softly rubbed the side of her younger lover’s face with the back of one hand as her other one resumed caressing the long blond hair. At the same time, she stared intensely into Gabrielle’s eyes. “As for what happened after that, you should not feel responsible for your own rape. By the gods, I would have killed him for raping you if he’d only been a mortal.”

“I know you would have, Xena... Gods, it hurt so much inside... I had never had anyone forcing anything into me before that happened... but when I was being suspended above that altar, in the midst of Dahak’s flames...” Gabrielle sniffed again. “... it felt so horrible. I wanted to die at that moment.”

“Oh, I’m so glad you made it, Gabrielle. I’m so glad you’re alive. I’m sorry you had to go through so much pain when he raped you. Come here.” She hugged her closely again. “It’s all going to be all right now. Everything’s going to be all right.”

The bard gently broke the hug to look at Xena again. “No, Xena, nothing is ever going to be the same and we have to live with it now... I’m just glad that we made our way back towards one another. I love you so much, warrior.” She stopped crying.

“I love you too, my sweet little bard. I’m glad too. I’d nearly lost you and I’m so glad you decided to make your way back home after you went to the temple of Mnemosyne today.”

Their mouths instantly joined as they kissed tenderly for a while. The kiss became slightly more heated as their tongues touched and entwined. Gabrielle started to moan against Xena’s lips and tongue.

“What is it, Gabrielle?” the Warrior Princess asked as she broke the kiss.

“I want you to love me, Xena, right now. Is that okay?” The blonde woman claimed her lover’s mouth again. She wanted to dispel the thought of Dahak penetrating her as far away from her memory as possible. She knew she could not completely do that but she wanted something else to keep her mind occupied right now. Her warrior making sweet love to her would be the right thing.

“Are you sure?” Xena asked, while alternatively brushing her lips to her younger lover’s and tasting her mouth.

“Yes, Xena. I don’t want to think about my rape anymore. I just want to be loved by you right now... I need your touch.”

“All right, my love... Come with me.”

The warrior took the bard’s hand into her own and stood up. Gabrielle rose with her. She gave Xena a small smile as the warrior led her to their bedroll. It had been placed in front of a tree not far away from the campfire, which was in the middle of that little clearing they had found at the heart of the woods earlier on as they had been walking together with Joxer after Xena had arrived.

“Lie down, sweetheart.” The smaller woman complied. Her taller lover took her gauntlets, armour plate and boots off before she went to lie down beside her on the blanket. Gabrielle just lay there, looking at the other woman.

Xena first took her younger lover’s boots off and chucked them aside. She then pulled at the laces of the blonde’s green top, opened it and revealed the familiar gorgeous breasts to her lustful gaze. The warrior then reached underneath the bard’s skirt, slid her hands up the smooth thighs and slowly removed the petite woman’s breeches. She pulled them down to Gabrielle’s ankles and then lifted her lover’s legs to fully take them off. Xena tossed her

girlfriend's undergarment to the side of the bedroll. She went to cover her younger lover's body with her own as she intensely kissed her again while running a hand along one of the bard's thighs.

They sometimes made love with some of their clothes still on, in case of an impending attack. They thus would be quickly prepared if they ever had to fight someone off. Still, the feeling of partially keeping their clothes on occasionally heightened their lovemaking. Gabrielle loved this and so did Xena. The bard would be able to feel the sleekness of the warrior's dark outfit and the cold brass of her arm bands pressing against her skin as her older lover would be making love to her. Remaining partially dressed was a blissful way of spicing things up for both of them. The Warrior Princess simply kept the storyteller's green upper garment open and had the younger woman's breeches off so that she could have easy access to all the intimate parts of her smaller lover.

Xena leisurely ran her lips across Gabrielle's neck. She kissed her way downwards and brushed her lips onto one of the bard's nipples as she kneaded the doughy flesh of the other breast. The blonde woman closed her eyes, pleasantly moaned her dark-haired lover's name several times as she totally surrendered to her touch. Xena's long hair softly tickled her ribs as the warrior's mouth took possession of each of her sensitive breasts –one at a time, suckling the nipples, licking around them, cupping the mounds with her hands, loving them, lavishing them with her tongue...

“Oh... Yes... Love me, Xena...”

It all felt so wonderful. They had slept together again quite a few times after the tragedies that had nearly separated them over the past year. They had made love intensely again especially after Xena had fought against a whole army of Persians and saved Gabrielle from a deadly poison. They both wanted to forget the misfortunes that had befallen them before that, by pretending they never happened. They both tried hard to compartmentalise their memories as much as possible inside their minds while making love. They wanted to remember only the good things that had gone on between them, not the bad ones, during those heated moments.

The Warrior Princess gently nipped at the bard's silky skin as she moved her way down her lover's body, savouring every inch of her lover's abdomen and causing her girlfriend to utter more pleasure noises. When her mouth got near Gabrielle's leather belt, she raised her head, lifted the younger woman's skirt and put it on her belly. She delicately spread the blonde woman's legs before placing them over her shoulders.

“Yes... Xena...”

Xena kissed the smoothness of each inner thigh, before softly nuzzling the golden curls of the bard's triangle. She then used her fingers to spread the outer labia of Gabrielle's sex and slowly glided the tip of her tongue on the area around the clitoris, which made her younger lover moan again in enjoyment.

“Gods... Xena... Yes... Love me...” The bard trembled in delight. She raised her hips to take more of her older lover's oral ministrations. She also put her hands on the back of the dark-haired woman's head, driving her closer to her need. Her warrior woman knew how to love her. That was for sure.

As Xena's tongue unhurriedly carried on delving its way into the tender pinkish folds and delicate textures of Gabrielle's centre, the warrior reached under her lover's buttocks to give herself optimal access. She knew how much she loved it every time she tasted and savoured her younger lover's precious flower. Its delicious scent and the sweet flavour of its nectar always felt so appetising to her. She sank her tongue inside the bard's opening and moved it in and out of it for a while. The dark-haired woman then licked her way back up the blonde's cleft and took the sensitive nub into her mouth. She alternatively sucked and stroked her tongue on the sensitive bundle of nerves.

Gabrielle's vulva was now fully swollen with gratification as she kept arching her back off the bedroll. Feeling Xena vehemently pleasure her like this again, it did not take her long to reach climax and scream her lover's name. “Ohh... Xeeenaaa!” She fell back onto the blanket beneath her, her body limp and spent.

The Warrior Princess licked the remainder of the bard's honey-dewed essence before leaving a trail of loving kisses while on her way up her smaller lover's body. She took her girlfriend's mouth into a searing kiss. The storyteller felt the taste of her own excitement on Xena's lips. The two lovers rested, kissing and cuddling for a quiet moment. After a while, the older woman started to speak.

"You are my beautiful little treasure, Gabrielle," said the warrior, propped on one elbow and watching the supine woman next to her. At the same time, she leisurely caressed the curves of the bard's voluptuous shape. She basked in the feel of her blonde lover's satiny skin.

Gabrielle stared back at Xena, wanting to drown in the splendour of the dark-haired woman's azure blue eyes. "And you are my magnificent warrior goddess." She beamed and tenderly rubbed her taller woman's shoulder and upper arm. "Xena, I want you to take me right now. Please do it like that time... just before you went to save Ulysses last year."

"You mean like that day we did it in that barn?" Xena asked, remembering vividly the intimate moment they had both shared as she had made intense love to her bard up against a stable door.

"Exactly, Xena, that day before we headed for the sea. When we did it in that barn, it was so ardently spicy, my warrior. I'd totally loved it." Gabrielle grinned.

"Are you sure this is what you want now, Gabrielle?" The warrior wondered. "I mean, this had happened some moons before..."

"Before all those awful things started," the bard interrupted, "I know." She gave her older lover a solemn look. "This is exactly why I want you to take me like that day, warrior. It was all so fiercely passionate between us. Also, apart from my wedding to Perdicus and the usual risks we took during our adventures, there had never been anything too serious or dreadful that had torn us apart from one another at that time." Gabrielle sat up as she kept staring into the Warrior Princess' eyes. "Oh, please take me, Xena... like that day, when you made love to me against that stable door."

"Okay..." Xena warmly said, "if this is what you want, my bard." She always gave her lover whatever the younger woman wanted in the bedroll. She rose to a kneeling position on the blanket. Gabrielle did the same. The dark-haired woman claimed the blonde's mouth into a sizzling deep kiss. Their lips united and opened widely at the contact of each other as their tongues battled for control inside their mouths. The warrior then placed her hands onto the bard's shoulders and gently turned her around. "Please go kneel in front of that tree there, my love," the taller woman said, motioning to the large trunk that was just behind their bedroll as she tenderly kissed her lover's neck.

Gabrielle went to kneel in front of the oak with her legs slightly apart and her thighs remaining in an upright position while she had her back to Xena, who had followed closely behind. The storyteller, with her skirt still encircling her hips and thighs, was still wearing her open green top. She fervently anticipated the sultry moment that was to come.

"You're a bit overdressed, sweetheart," Xena decided to merely remove her younger lover's upper garment. She slid it down Gabrielle's arms and tossed it aside. The Warrior Princess swiftly reached underneath her own battle skirt to take off her breeches, which she also chucked out of the way. Kneeling upright behind Gabrielle, she moved her lover's long blond hair to the side of her neck and lovingly kissed the top of her back.

"Now, please, put your hands on the tree, Gabrielle," the warrior softly commanded. "It will replace the barn door from that other time."

The bard immediately placed both her hands on the tree before her. She felt an utterly thrilling shiver run down her spine as strong female hands reached around to knead her breasts. She could feel Xena's leathers pressing against the skin of her back as the warrior softly nibbled her earlobe. "Xena... please... I crave your touch."

Releasing one breast, Xena slid one of her hands down her lover's belly. She then reached down to the front hem of Gabrielle's skirt, pulled the garment up and put her hand into the heat of the blonde's sex. "Hmmm... so wet, my bard." Xena slid her fingers in between Gabrielle's folds and started circling the area around the clit in a gentle way. With her free hand, she moved her fingers up to trace the bard's lips and felt the storyteller passionately suck them into her mouth at once. They both groaned in arousal at the fierce intensity of this erotic moment.

"I'm going to take you now."

"Oh... yes... Xena, please!" the bard groaned against the warrior's fingertips, before sucking them again. She slightly bent forward while firmly holding the tree in front of her.

Her hand still on Gabrielle's sex, Xena delicately pushed two fingers into the bard's drenched entrance and stilled them in there for an instant. She removed her other hand from the blonde woman's mouth and reached down to pull the back of her younger lover's skirt over her hips, exposing Gabrielle's sweet round cheeks. The warrior then lifted her battle skirt up, brought her fingers between her own sexual lips and parted them. She then stuck her soaked folds onto the bard's plump rear. Her sodden centre's contact to the silky skin of the bard's butt cheek made her shudder in delight. She immediately began to move her fingers up and down inside Gabrielle while her free hand also reached around to cup one of the younger woman's breasts again.

"Gods... yes... Xena!" The bard kept both her hands on the oak as she pushed herself back against the warm, wet flesh pressed against her backside. She tilted her head back into the warrior's powerful, affectionate and seductive embrace –the feeling of her lover's leather outfit near her back. Gabrielle freed one hand from the tree to reach around and grip her older lover's firm ass, yanking her body closer to her own.

Xena rocked herself harder against Gabrielle's cheek. She pushed further inside the blonde's sex too, making her cry out her name again. The Warrior Princess came very quickly, from the rapturous friction of her clit against the bard's delightful rear. "Gabrie-e-e-e-elle!" Nevertheless, since her storyteller had not orgasmed yet, she carried on making love to her, thrusting deep inside her. She removed her other hand from Gabrielle's breast to move it down towards her lover's centre. She skilfully played with her little girlfriend's clit as she suddenly changed her fingers' motions inside the soaking wet cavity.

"By the gods... Xena..." Gabrielle had already put both hands back on the tree as she felt the warrior slow down and lightly curl the tips of her digits inside her. Xena's fingers were now making careful but intense swirling movements against the hard spot within her while the taller woman's other hand simultaneously massaged her sensitive button. The bard turned her head sideways and immediately felt the dark-haired woman lean down and briefly claim her lips. The warrior brought her over the edge in a few more heartbeats.

"Xeeenaaa!" Gabrielle then let Xena eagerly kiss the side of her neck as she dropped her hands onto her older lover's forearms. She leaned back into the Warrior Princess' strong embrace. They both stayed locked into this intensely intimate position. The torridly passionate connection lasted for another minute or so before the warrior withdrew her fingers, sucked them clean and gently carried the bard backwards until they both lay back down onto the bedroll.

Xena pulled a blanket over them both. She tenderly spooned in behind Gabrielle while stroking her sleek blond hair. The aftershocks of their glorious lovemaking were still rippling through both their bodies as they kept panting. After they rested for a short instant, the warrior woman softly spoke in her younger lover's ear.

"I love you, my naughty little bard. You're my beautiful little sunshine, Gabrielle."

"I love you too, my warrior. Thanks for doing it in one of the ways we used to... before all that horrible stuff happened..." Gabrielle felt happy to have found a pleasant distraction that temporarily kept her mind off the fact that her bad memories were still there.

“No problem, my love. Now rest.” Xena kissed her younger lover’s cheekbone.

The Warrior Princess briefly got out of the bedroll to throw a few more chunks of wood in the nearby fire. Night was drawing near. She quickly checked on Argo and then went straight back to lie by the bard’s side between the blankets. They both entered the Land of Morpheus shortly afterwards, as soon as darkness fell over the woods.

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In the middle of the night, Gabrielle started growing more agitated in her sleep. The blonde woman lay on her back, a short little distance away from the warrior lying next to her. Xena lay curled up onto her side in a foetal position, facing her lover. The dark-haired woman was being absorbed into a deep, peaceful slumber and had her eyes tightly shut.

Tormented by a disturbing dream, the bard slowly turned her face from side to side as she was still asleep while one of her hands softly grasped at the cushiony material that supported her head. She started to emit barely audible whimpers of distress.

At the centre of the Amazon village, she was being carried in Joxer’s arms while she heard Xena looking for her while fighting a bunch of her Amazon sisters. The Warrior Princess suddenly arrived in front of her and Joxer. She called her lover’s name. Gabrielle could see the hateful, enraged look on Xena’s face staring at her. This was not her Xena, not the Xena who had always protected her and cared for her. Oh, no, this Xena was a completely different person. She hated her for having caused Solan’s death.

As Gabrielle jumped out of Joxer’s arms, she turned away and attempted to escape Xena’s fury. However, she abruptly felt the warrior’s harsh whip snag around her ankles, catching her and pulling her down. She fell onto the ground and briefly saw Xena quickly climb onto a horse. Then she felt herself being painfully dragged by the legs across some jarring ground which was painfully cutting her, battering her, tearing at her skin. She passed out...

“No, Xena... No... Don’t...” Gabrielle was uttering moans of scare and woe in her sleep.

Xena made her way out of the Land of Morpheus, as she subconsciously noticed that something was going on with her lover. The warrior’s sleep rapidly became shallower until she woke up to see the younger woman tossing and turning beside her. The storyteller kept stirring her body on the bedroll while having a nightmare.

“Gabrielle?” Xena, only half-awake, quietly said her girlfriend’s name. With one keen ear, she listened to the bard talk in her sleep.

“Xena, please... Don’t hurt me... No, don’t drag me behind that horse...” Gabrielle groaned, as she carried on having the haunting dream...

When she regained consciousness, Xena was trying to throw her off a cliff. She thwarted her by kicking her in the face. They both fell, and she stood up. She yelled her utter hatred at the Warrior Princess. She hated Xena for abusing her. She used to believe her older lover would never do such a thing. Wrath consumed her too. She hated Xena so much now. She angrily and violently ran towards her. She wanted to push her over the cliff...

“No, Xena... You shouldn’t hurt me... No...” As Gabrielle was now shaking her body from side to side, she sobbed in sorrow.

Xena, more awake now, immediately sat up and gently shook her lover to wake her up. “Hey, Gabrielle, wake up. Everything’s okay.” She tenderly caressed the side of her lover’s face. The bard opened her eyes and lightly jerked as she awoke at once.

“Huh!” The blonde woman gasped.

“Hey, hey, my bard!” Xena reached underneath Gabrielle and gingerly lifted her back to take her into her arms. “It’s okay, Gabrielle. Don’t worry. Everything’s alright.”

“Xena...” the bard murmured. As the Warrior Princess lovingly hugged her, Gabrielle affectionately put her hands on Xena’s shoulder blades. “I’m glad you’re here, my love.” Gabrielle did not want to tell the warrior about what she had just been dreaming of. It had felt all too real. It actually had really happened. Nonetheless, she did not want to think about this right now. It had felt so horrible, and she still loved Xena more than anything else.

Inside her mind at this precise moment, Gabrielle simply wanted to block out the hurtful memory of the abuse and attempted murder she had sustained at the hands of her lover. She wanted to blank this out as much as the other gruesome memories of, for instance, Xena holding her dead son in her arms or Gabrielle being herself responsible for Hope killing him. Moreover, the bard knew it had not been her true warrior lover harming her. Solan’s spirit had created Illusia, and that had sorted things out for both of them. Her cuts and bruises from being dragged behind a horse had disappeared, been washed off by the Waters of Illusia. Her Xena was not like that. Her Xena had fought against a whole army of Persians in her honour and had managed to prevent her death from a lethal poison. Her Xena was now cuddling and comforting her after this awful nightmare.

“Yes, I’m here, sweetheart.” The Warrior Princess kissed the top of the younger woman’s head and carefully laid her back down on the bedroll after she finished enfolding her into a warm, soothing embrace. She lay back down next to the bard and kindly placed an arm around her lover’s tummy. “Sleep now. You’ll be all right, Gabrielle. I’ll be watching over you. Even if I fall back into sleep, I’ll always keep an ear to perceive your every move.”

“Thank you, Xena.” Gabrielle closed her eyes.

Xena studied her blonde lover’s presently serene face as the younger woman drifted off to sleep again. She had not asked the storyteller what she had just been dreaming about because she knew exactly what it had been. Gabrielle had been dreaming about the day when the warrior had attacked her in a rage over the death of her son.

This was the first time the dark-haired woman had had to wake her girlfriend up from such a dream ever since they had come back from Illusia. Obviously, Xena had countless times listened to Gabrielle while her younger lover talked in her sleep. It was in this way that she was able to tell what her partner was dreaming of. She had also had to carefully wake her up from quite a few bad dreams lately, after all the dreadful events that had almost separated them. However, to the best of the warrior’s knowledge, the bard had not been having nightmares about the day Xena had dragged her behind a horse before tonight.

Judging from what she had heard the storyteller say in her sleep over the past moons, Gabrielle’s occasional bad dreams in the aftermath of their tragedies had mostly been about her first killing in the Temple of Dahak, the emotional conflicts that had ensued the birth of her daughter, Solan’s death and when she had had nearly committed suicide after poisoning Hope. Xena figured that Gabrielle probably had never had a nightmare about what the Warrior Princess had done to her three days after their children’s funerals before now.

The older woman let out a low sigh and shut her eyes. Gabrielle was bound to eventually dream about this after all. The warrior knew she would have never attacked her lover had she not been blinded by rage and hatred, even though her thoughts sometimes reminded her about the fact that she had done such a thing. But what counted now was that she and the bard had both returned safe and sound from the Land of Illusia. They had been reconciled by Solan’s love and concern for the two of them. Gabrielle’s injuries from the attack had miraculously vanished before she and Xena had gone back to reality. The warrior was thankful of Solan and Illusia for that.

What was important now to the Warrior Princess was that the bard apparently trusted her again. Keeping her eyes closed, Xena let the harmonious sound of crickets chirping in the woods gradually carry her back into the Land of Morpheus. Her mind was at rest, for now.

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As the first light of dawn appeared through the trees, Gabrielle showed more signs of unease and disturbance in her sleep. While another dream still replayed the same horrendous event as in her latest nightmare, she shook her head from side to side and whined in distress while still having her eyes closed. Her recurring agitation woke Xena up.

“Gabrielle?” Xena called out, as soon as she opened her eyes and saw the bard stir and moan.

“No, Xena... No... Please don’t hurt me... No... You shouldn’t drag me behind a horse, Xena...”

“Gabrielle, I’m here,” said Xena, as she delicately roused her lover anew by tenderly moving her more closely towards her on the bedroll. “Everything’s okay.”

Gabrielle jerked awake and looked into the warrior’s eyes. She slightly gasped. “Xena...” She wrapped an arm around her partner as she silently stared on at the face of the woman lying next to her.

“Everything’s okay, my love,” replied Xena.

The storyteller remained quiet for another moment or so before fatigue overcame her again and she fell back asleep, thinking about her Xena being nice, soft and protective of her –unlike in this same haunting dream she had just had.

The Warrior Princess watched as the bard moved to lie onto her back again and drifted back into the Land of Morpheus. Xena did not like this. This was the second time in the same night that her lover had been dreaming of being attacked by her.

The taller woman turned her head to gaze up at the early daylight. The morning birds were already making a lot of noise out here. Although her younger lover had had no difficulty going back to sleep, the warrior had been made too nervous by this second abrupt awakening to be able to return to the Land of Morpheus right away. She could not help but only stare up into the pink-blue dawn sky and listen to the birds’ early morning chants while thinking about her partner’s latest nocturnal disturbances.

Why did Gabrielle have the same bad dream again? Had the bard not really forgiven her for what had happened three days after Solan’s funeral? It certainly did not look like it. Gabrielle still loved being around Xena just as much as ever before. They were still having heated lovemaking sessions, and last night her younger lover had even asked her to do it in just one of the ways they used to before all the horrible things they had had to go through. Moreover, Gabrielle sounded a lot quicker at blaming herself than blaming Xena when talking about the awful things that had happened between them. The warrior did not understand. Her lover’s cuts and bruises from being dragged had all disappeared after visiting the Land of Illusia, so why was the bard now having these nightmares about that day Xena had hurt her?

Anyway, the taller woman kept thinking, Gabrielle had never talked about being attacked by her ever since they had both made their way back from Illusia, and this was not the time for the Warrior Princess to start talking about this now –not now that everything was going to be fine between them again, or at least she hoped.

After spending a couple of candelmarks awake and thoughtful, Xena turned herself onto her side, her back to Gabrielle, and started sleeping again. She was still too tired to get up yet.

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Another couple of candelmarks went by. Bright sunlight shone through the trees. Xena awoke from her unusually late morning sleep. She sat up on the bedroll and looked around her. Gabrielle was no longer lying beside her. The bard had managed to get out of bed before her, which was rare, but the warrior thought this was probably because she had had a little difficulty going back to sleep in the early candelmarks of the day, while the blonde woman had not.

Xena looked at the empty space beside her on the bedroll. Where had Gabrielle gone? Knowing that she would find out where if she searched the vicinity, the Warrior Princess put her boots on and got up. She briefly looked at how Argo was doing. Then she started walking through the forest. She strolled amidst the beautiful trees and green foliage, looking around, until she walked down a slope, a small soil path with a few scattered pebbles. She found another clearing down this way, with a cascade at its centre.

It was a very splendid landscape. The little waterfall descended from a succession of huge rock steps before flowing inside the stream at the bottom of this small valley in the middle of the woods. Xena approached the fresh, green grass that surrounded the water. She saw that Gabrielle's clothes and boots had been left on the ground by the water's edge. She looked towards the other side of the stream, at the undercutting of the rock that was behind the cascade. There seemed to be a small cave formation behind this waterfall. The Warrior Princess knew that the bard would be in there. Gabrielle loved to wash herself under cascades. Xena took off all she was wearing and started walking into the stream before her. She walked to the bottom of the waterfall that spilled ahead.

She hoped the bard would not be mentioning the dream, as she was planning herself to avoid bringing that up. She would not tell Gabrielle she knew what the nightmare had been about, not now anyway. This had disturbed her enough last night and this morning.

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Gabrielle had made her way down here one candlemark after Xena had gone back to sleep. She was now inside the little hollow of the rock behind the waterfall, letting the water from the back of the cascade shower her. She had just finished pampering herself with the soap she still held in one hand. The last thing she currently wanted to think about was the horrible reminiscent nightmare she had experienced twice last night. She kept pushing that dream away from her mind until it no longer came up into her conscious thoughts, at least temporarily.

It was not too dark in this little cave thanks to the light coming from the other side of the waterfall. The rippling surface of the water that was surrounding her threw bright little caustic reflections against the rocky wall inside this undercutting. The bard nevertheless kept her eyes closed under the noisy flow from above. She was too preoccupied on rinsing her hair to see or hear Xena coming.

The Warrior Princess quickly made her way to the other side of the falling water. What she saw as she got in there was so appetising to her sight. Gabrielle, with the water from the stream reaching her somewhere above the knees, was completely naked. The cascade flowed on her blonde head and down her slender, shapely and dainty figure. The younger woman had her eyes shut as she lifted her face up towards the falling water. The liquid slid down the sublime contours of her body, immersing the voluptuous smoothness of her skin while the bard absentmindedly caressed her own rib with a bar of soap.

Xena breathed in deeply at seeing her lover like this. She knew, judging from the loud sound of the water, that Gabrielle had not noticed her presence yet. She wanted to surprise her. She quietly walked around the blonde woman, until she got behind her under the cascade and tenderly wrapped her arms around her.

The bard did not jump when she felt well-toned arms encircle themselves around her ribs and abdomen. She already knew who it was. Her older lover gently pulled her backwards, a little away from the flowing water.

"Came in here without me, didn't you?" Xena kissed the blond head.

"I did not want to disturb a warrior's peaceful sleep." Gabrielle smiled while she felt Xena's breasts pressing against her back. She slightly turned her head to be able to kiss the dark-haired woman and felt the warrior's lips cover hers. As the strong hands moved up to cup her breasts, she arched herself into the loving touch. Then she delicately took the Warrior Princess' hands into her own and turned to face her lover. She immediately wrapped her own hands around Xena's neck. They kissed again, as the warrior reached behind Gabrielle and briefly grasped her rear.

“There’s hardly anything in this world that equals your beauty,” Xena said, as their mouths slowly separated and she had now moved her hands lightly up the shorter woman’s back.

Gabrielle stared up into the taller woman’s azure blue eyes. “Huh! Been watchin’ me, haven’t you?” She smirked.

“Only for a few seconds...” The warrior gave her bard a charming and playful look. She leisurely stroked her long fingers along her younger lover’s spine.

“Well, now let me wash you.” Gabrielle kissed Xena a few more times on the mouth, as she started running to soap onto her lover’s muscles. Gabrielle took great care in cleaning the well-sculptured, magnificent bronze body before her. She went on to wash the warrior’s hair. The brunette went to rinse herself under the cascade and the blonde relished in the sight of water falling down Xena’s well-toned, superb frame.

As the older woman stopped showering herself, she moved away from the waterfall and walked back towards the bard. Gabrielle’s attention focused on the droplets of water that were trickling down the Warrior Princess strong female shape, ample bust and sleek skin. Xena had a few battle scars but she surely always displayed a constantly enticing beauty.

A torrent of excitement suddenly rushed through the storyteller’s body. She gazed up into Xena’s eyes again and mischievously grinned. “Okay. Now I want you, warrior; but I want to be able to take you on dry grounds.” She instantly took her taller lover’s hand and led her out of this hollow space. They made their way back to the other side of the cascade, into the lake.

Xena chuckled at the boldness of her younger companion as she followed her in their way back across the stream. They swam a little. Their clothes still lay on the perimeter just outside the water. Gabrielle tossed the soap on the grass, turned towards Xena and kissed her again.

“Now lie down, my warrior... please,” the bard requested, in a self-assured tone. Her blue-green eyes twinkled with gleeful anticipation.

“All right.” Xena chortled. She gave the shorter woman the slight half-smile her lover loved so much. The warrior woman complied and went to lie on her back, onto the green ground. Gabrielle immediately pounced on top of her like a little tigress. The brunette suppressed a laugh, as the alluring petite blonde looked down at her in a very lustful way.

“I’m going to make love to you, Xena. I love you so much.”

“I love you too. Yes, Gabrielle. Make love to me, please.” The Warrior Princess submitted herself to this precious moment. She had allowed the bard to gain control over their lovemaking on a slightly greater number of occasions than before, ever since they had been reconciled. Xena could see that, following the past year’s tragedies, Gabrielle was somehow becoming a much more grown up person and thus she was willing to give her a bit more opportunity to take the lead in the bedroll these days. Furthermore, after the misfortunes that had almost broken their relationship to pieces, Xena felt she might be becoming a much softer warrior than ever before, someone who simply wanted to occasionally give her younger lover a little more leeway during their intimate moments.

The warrior parted her lips as the bard’s mouth vigorously covered hers. Their tongues mingled together in sensuous motions. Gabrielle’s kiss lingered until she began moving lower, running her lips along Xena’s neck and chest. She cupped the older woman’s breasts, loving the feel of kneading those two sublime mounds, and started taking as much as she could of one of them into her mouth.

“Oh... Gabrielle...”

As the Warrior Princess observed the bard suckling onto one of her breasts while fondling her other one, a few straying thoughts started wandering inside Xena's mind. Gabrielle was such a lovely little blonde bard. Xena could not help but feel only love and respect for such an admirable younger person –one who always loved her, supported her, adored her and treated her right. Gabrielle was the dearest thing to her in the whole world and she would never want to lose her. Suddenly, a particularly dark thought crossed the Warrior Princess' mind as she saw the bard move to her other breast and felt the sweet tongue flicking around her other nipple. As Xena's body enjoyed her lover's ministrations, her mind wandered away towards a terrible thing she had done.

*To think that one day not so long ago I was so enraged that I furiously rode into that Amazon village in an attempt to destroy Gabrielle. How could I? What if it had worked? What if I had been controlled by hatred and rage to the point that I would have managed to kill Gabrielle? I'd probably be wanting to die right now, if I hadn't killed myself already. None of my life would ever have meaning without Gabrielle by my side. She's the only light there is inside the whole temple of darkness that represents my life.*

She did not know why she was thinking about those things at such an inconvenient moment, right in the middle of sharing intimate acts with her lover, but she could not help it after what she had heard Gabrielle say in her sleep last night and early this morning.

After her enjoyment in suckling Xena's breasts, the blonde woman planted a few kisses onto the warrior's belly. This awoke Xena from her dark thoughts. All she wanted right now was to see Gabrielle while the bard would be making love to her.

"Gabrielle." She quickly reached down and carefully lifted her younger lover's chin.

"What is it, Xena?" The storyteller gazed into the warrior woman's face, surprised. "I thought you liked it when I..."

"I do, Gabrielle," the warrior woman interrupted. "I love it very much... but right now I just want to be able to see you, sweetheart. Please." She gave her a small, tender smile.

"Okay." Gabrielle moved back up the taller woman's body and looked down deeply into her eyes. Maybe something was perturbing her dark-haired partner, but she could not guess what it might be and thought the older woman was not going to tell her, not now anyway. "What do you want now, Xena?" she calmly asked, wanting to know what would please her lover the most at this precise moment.

"I want you, Gabrielle... inside me, and I want to be able to see your face, to look into your eyes as you pleasure me. I need to see you make love to me right now."

Xena's seductive tone felt so pleasant to the bard's ears. She pressed her breasts against the warrior's as she lay on top of her lover, kissing her deeply again. The Warrior Princess revelled in the exquisite sensation of their nipples touching. She then felt Gabrielle move her body to straddle her strong thigh.

"Hmmm..." The smaller woman basked in feeling her drenched centre's contact to her strong lover's firm muscled leg. The bard rested one arm on the grass, by the side of Xena's shoulder, as she brought her other hand to her older lover's warm sex and began teasing the dark curls with the back of her knuckles.

"Oh, yes, Gabrielle... Please... Take me..." Xena parted her legs wider, pushing the muscles of her thigh more tightly against the blonde woman's centre in the process.

"Oh... Xena..." Gabrielle raised her upper body by shifting her forearm upwards while leaving the palm of her hand against the smooth verdure underneath. She looked into the brunette's piercing blue eyes. Meanwhile, the fingertips of her other hand slid in between Xena's folds to find some heated wetness there. Gabrielle pleasingly tickled the warrior's clit before sliding her fingers further down between the tender lips and slipping two digits inside the

soaking wet cavern. Its sleek walls squeezed tightly around her fingers as she moved them back and forth inside her older lover.

The bard simultaneously rubbed herself energetically against Xena's muscular thigh. She kept invading the Warrior Princess' hot and welcoming depths while gazing down at the magnificent creature she was making love to. She loved mounting Xena. To Gabrielle, it always felt so delightful to see when the warrior was being conquered by her touch. As Xena was now willingly opening herself again to her deep thrusts, the blonde woman felt even more excited.

"Gabrielle... By the gods... I love feeling you inside me... Oh... Yes... Make love to me, my bard..." Xena had one of her hands gripping at the small of Gabrielle's back while the bard continued making love to her at a rhythm she found pleasurable. The warrior curled her other hand into a fist as her fingers pulled at a bunch of grass from the green ground next to her. She let out moans of ecstasy as her younger lover's thumb started pushing against her engorged nub and one more finger entered her. She kept staring up into the sea-green eyes as Gabrielle kept penetrating her with all her love.

"Yes... Gabrielle..." The warrior's eyes were completely absorbed in the glorious sight of the bard as they moved to follow the exquisite features, dangling damp strands of hair and creamy skin of the woman above her. The beauty of Gabrielle utterly fascinated her. While the lovemaking carried on pleasuring her physically, Xena's mind drifted away again.

*I can't live without her. I couldn't ever bear the thought of losing Gabrielle. I've always loved the feel of her skin pressing against mine, the sight of her gorgeous face, her wonderful ways of looking at me with her cheerful eyes, the touch from her hands while she makes love to me... Oh so many things... I also love the way she speaks to me, loves me, listens to me, tells me stories, supports me through hard times... She's my only hope in this new, post-warlord life, my only hope. Have could have I ever wanted to destroy her? I'm supposed to protect her. Why did she have that dream last night? Does she wish she'd lost that particular memory at the Temple of Mnemosyne yesterday? Gods... She's so beautiful, a precious gift that was given to me, really...*

"Gabrie-e-e-e-elle!" Xena abruptly screamed. An intense orgasm roused her from her wandering thoughts.

Gabrielle removed her fingers from Xena's centre and eagerly sucked the wetness off from them. She then had both her hands positioned on either side of the warrior's body as she resumed the grinding of her clit against the taller woman's muscular thigh. "Oh... Gods... Uh... Xena..." She kept gazing down at her beautiful Warrior Princess.

Xena grabbed the bard's rear with both hands as she helped with the friction by moving the muscles of her leg against Gabrielle's wet folds. She always felt great joy at feeling up her younger lover's backside. The luscious essence coming from the blonde's sex trickled down the skin of her thigh.

"Xeenaaaa!" Gabrielle came and the weight of her body dropped onto Xena. The warrior moved her hands up to envelop the bard's back, hugging her into a tight embrace. They kissed and exchanged words of love while the incredibly gratifying aftershocks of their lovemaking still reverberated wonderfully inside their heads. They always experienced the agreeable post-orgasmic feeling that came right after their soul-uniting intimacy in this way. It was as if a swarm of colourful butterflies had just been flying through their skulls.

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During the following three candelmarks, the two lovers had walked back up towards their current campsite, had both gotten themselves completely dressed, had brushed and dried their hair under the sunlight, had found something for their meal and had cooked their lunch. Gabrielle still was not particularly hungry so she only took a small portion of food in her plate.

They had nearly finished eating and were now chewing on some berries for dessert when, in the beginning of this sunny afternoon, a Greek Amazon approached their site in the middle of the woods. She stopped walking when she was only twenty feet away from where Xena and Gabrielle were sitting.

“Queen Gabrielle?” She made the Amazon peace sign, which was instantly reciprocated by Gabrielle. The Amazon had thick and straight red hair with some of its streaks styled in small braids and tied towards the back of her head. She was dressed in a brownish-red outfit that consisted of a short leather skirt and a sleeveless top that supported her bust. In one hand, she vertically held a long spear, which was her weapon in case of an impending attack.

“What is it, sister?” The bard quietly and respectfully asked. She could not remember that particular Amazon. “What is your name?”

“My name is Gaiane, my queen. I come from the village of Ephiny, who is being our queen during your absence, as you already know. She asked me to come find you in order to deliver you a message from her.” Gaiane smiled at the blonde woman. She kept talking: “Sweet Artemis, it took me weeks to find you, my queen! I’ve been looking all over quite a few areas in Greece before I came upon a nearby village where I met a male friend of yours who told me where to find you, and so here I am.”

“Was it Joxer who told you where to find me, Gaiane?” It would normally have felt a little odd to Gabrielle that the Amazon messenger had not even bothered greeting Xena or at least acknowledged her presence, but considering that the Warrior Princess had stormed on horseback into their village the last time they saw her, the storyteller understood why Gaiane had not. Xena just remained seated beside the bard, keeping silent.

“Yes, he said his name was Joxer, my queen.”

“All right.” Gabrielle got her mind prepared concerning whatever unpleasant thing the other Amazon might end up mentioning. “What is your message from Ephiny?”

“Can I please speak to you privately for a few moments, my queen?” The messenger felt somehow troubled by the Warrior Princess’ presence. After all, that was the woman who had violently ridden into their village, attacked them and attempted to murder their queen only a few moons ago. She wanted to talk solely to Gabrielle.

The bard turned towards her dark-haired companion. “Xena, it will take only a few minutes. Sorry, I will have to go speak to Gaiane alone,” she murmured.

“Sure, go ahead,” Xena replied, in barely a whisper. Her face was neutral, unsmiling.

Gabrielle stood up and walked towards Gaiane. The two Amazons walked further into the forest, some distance away from the campsite and Xena. They stopped by some bushes and trees and stared at each other.

“So... What is it, Gaiane? What message does Ephiny have for me?”

“I’ll tell you now, my queen. At the latest Amazon Council meeting in our village, the leaders of our tribe reached a decision...” The messenger paused. She cleared her throat. “...regarding what your partner, Xena, did...” She hesitated a few seconds. “... on the day we saw her dragging you behind a horse. Huh... How have your scars healed, my queen?” Gaiane wondered. “Was it difficult?” She looked up and down the blonde’s body and it felt very strange to her not being able to see even the remnant of a scar from a deep cut.

“Er...” The abhorrent thought of Xena assailing her abruptly crossed Gabrielle’s mind and she briefly shuddered. This particular event had never been mentioned directly to her before today. “It’s a long story, Gaiane. My scars got washed away in sacred waters, I think. Xena and I have made up since. Everything is all right now.” Gabrielle gave her a reassuring nod. “So, please, can you tell me now what the Council decided?”

“Xena is barred from entering Greek Amazon territory for one year. Should Xena ever attempt to enter any of our villages during that period of time, she would be brought to trial and could be executed. Ephiny said it really was the least harsh decision they could make, considering the letter you’d sent her to say you were doing fine.”

The bard remembered she had paid a professional messenger to carry a letter to her Amazon village not long after she had come back from Illusia with Xena. She had wanted Ephiny and her tribe to know that she was alive and well and that the Warrior Princess had not been her real self on the day of the attack. “So Xena is not allowed to visit any Amazon village for one year? Is that all?”

“Well, in Greece, at least. That’s right. It was the most considerate penalty, my queen. The council also took the fact that Xena had just lost her son into account.”

“Thank you, Gaiane. I’m truly sorry about what happened at the Amazon village the last time I was there.”

“You don’t have to be, my queen. It wasn’t your fault. This temporary ban on Xena is mainly because she attacked us and injured Ephiny’s arm before abducting you, wounding you. I’m just so glad to see you’re fine and you don’t even seem to have any scar, Queen Gabrielle.”

“I’m okay. How is Ephiny’s arm?” Gabrielle worried.

“It’s fully healed now. She’s fully recovered, my queen,” Gaiane assured her. “I’m gonna have to go soon now that I’ve delivered you her message. I’m sorry, my queen. It will take so many days of travel for me to get back home. And I miss my lover Charis, who had to stay in our village because of different Amazon duties that were assigned to her.”

“I understand, Gaiane.” The bard sympathetically grinned at her.

“Thank you, my queen.” The Amazon messenger bowed in respect. “I’d just like to say a few more things before I go.”

“Yes, what are they?”

“Queen Gabrielle, please remember that, while Xena is temporarily barred from entering the lands we own, you are not, and you never will be. We’ll welcome you anytime, my queen, if you decide to come and see us without the Warrior Princess.”

“Thank you very much, Gaiane, but I think I’d rather return there in a year’s time. I don’t usually go on a trip anywhere without Xena by my side. I’m sorry.” Gabrielle gave her a look of apology.

“Ephiny is not going to like this, my queen.” Gaiane’s expression displayed a tinge of sadness. “She kept wondering, after receiving your letter, how you can still remain with your partner after what she did to you.”

The storyteller sighed. Some degree of annoyance overtook her. “Gaiane… there is nothing that can separate Xena and I. We’re just simply meant to be together. Besides, all my physical wounds miraculously healed after that awful event.”

“But what about your mental wounds, my queen? Are they really gone too after what happened that day?”

The bard paused to think about the painful dream she had just experienced twice in the same night. It was a very unwelcome thought and she immediately tried to shake it off from her mind. “I know that she was not herself that day, Gaiane,” Gabrielle slightly raised her voice at the Amazon messenger. “She was being trapped in a state of rage over the death of her son!”

"I understand that, my queen." Gaiane accepted that there would be no point in pressing the issue further. She already knew that Gabrielle loved Xena more than anyone else on earth. She simply gazed at the bard with some empathy and concern showing in her eyes. "I'm sorry, Queen Gabrielle. I just hope for you that such a thing will never happen again."

"It won't, Gaiane," Gabrielle simply said. Her tone was now quieter.

"Goodbye, Queen Gabrielle. I hope that, someday, you'll come and visit us again." The Amazon messenger bowed anew.

"I will. Don't worry. Goodbye, Gaiane. Tell Ephiny I will be glad to see her again, next year." The blonde woman bowed her goodbye to the messenger.

"No problem, my queen." Gaiane turned and started to walk away. Gabrielle watched her leave until she was no longer in sight. The storyteller then began making her way back to her campsite, towards her lover.

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Xena was still sitting on the blanket after she'd eaten all the berries and could see Gabrielle walk back towards her. She figured the Amazon messenger must have left. She did not like the fact that she had come to disturb their peaceful day. The warrior had not needed to go spy on the conversation, even though she had been able to make out the sound of Gabrielle somewhat raising her voice back there.

Considering what she had done the last time she had gone to the Amazons' village, the warrior had known exactly what Gaiane had been talking about. What she did not know was what the Amazons wanted to do about it, but she trusted that Gabrielle would tell her what Ephiny's message had been. Xena felt a bit anxious inside, but she still kindly smiled at her younger lover as she saw her approaching.

The bard went to sit back down next to the warrior. Her long golden hair brightly shone under the afternoon sunlight. "You ate all the berries."

Xena looked at the empty wooden fruit bowl she had put down on the grass and moved her eyes back up towards Gabrielle. "Yeah... Huh... I'm sorry, sweetheart. I was very hungry," the Warrior Princess said, a little sheepishly. She regretted having consumed all the berries out of nervousness.

"It's all right, Xena." Gabrielle gave her a small grin and shrugged.

"So... What was the message Gaiane had to deliver you?" the dark-haired woman carefully asked.

"Do you really want to know, Xena?" The blonde woman stared solemnly into the silvery azure eyes of her taller lover. "'Cause if I tell you, I might bring some things up you may not want me to."

"I don't care, Gabrielle. Go ahead. Tell me what the Amazons have decided for my case?"

The storyteller softly breathed. "Well, after taking into account all of the facts that preceded and followed your attack, including the anger over the death of your child and the fact that I'm still alive, they agreed to only impose a temporary ban of your presence in all the Greek Amazon territory. You are not to enter any of their villages for a whole year. If you do, further actions will be taken under Amazon Law. That's basically what Gaiane said."

"Is that all?" The warrior woman could only blink.

"Yes, that's all, Xena."

“Fine, then.” Xena calmly shrugged. “I’ll just avoid going into their lands for a year. Will you still go visit the Amazons since you’re their queen?”

Gabrielle shook her head. “I don’t think so, Xena. I always travel with you, and if you’re not welcome there, well... Ephiny will make a perfect queen in my absence. I’ll go and see them again in one year’s time, with you.” A brief smile showed itself across the bard’s features.

“Are you sure this is what you want? I don’t want to keep you away from your tribe, Gabrielle.”

“Xena, you’re not keeping me away from them. This is my choice, what I have decided. I don’t want us to get separated on our travels. I’m sure of it,” the storyteller asserted.

“All right.” Xena nodded.

There was a moment of silence. Gabrielle turned her head away from her partner to look down absentmindedly at the ground. She just sat there with a detached expression on her face. Some of the things Gaiane had just said to her had unexpectedly brought some disquiet within her mind, and talking with her lover about the Amazon decision over Xena’s terrible actions after their children’s funerals had not helped. It kept reminding her of the dreadful event she kept trying to rid her mind of.

Xena pouted her lips and lowered her head. She thought for a moment about the nightmare that she knew Gabrielle had. She still did not really want to bring that up but now, after the Amazon messenger had come out of the blue, she thought she could ask her lover a few questions. The warrior felt a bit worried about what the bard might be thinking now that a consequence of what she had done had suddenly emerged, especially because it was the first time such a thing was being brought up ever since they had come back from the Land of Illusia. She looked back up at the younger woman. “Gabrielle...”

“Yes, Xena?”

“Sweetheart... I know we got reconciled with the help of Solan’s spirit in Illusia. I also know you’ve been telling me many times that we’re meant to be together but...” The Warrior Princess hesitated. “I really need to know something right now, regarding what I did last time I was at the Amazon village.”

“What is it, Xena?” Gabrielle suddenly began jittering at the vivid memory of her abuse at the hands of her older lover, which had oddly come up in her dreams during the past night. The bard did not mean to feel so nervous but she just did.

“Well, Gabrielle, I’ve got to admit I’ve heard you talking in your sleep last night, again, and I was wondering...” This felt incredibly difficult for Xena to talk about these things, especially as she noticed the shorter woman shaking. She carried on anyway. “Are you sometimes scared of being with me after what I did to you? I mean, I know your cuts and bruises miraculously disappeared, but... I just need to know how you really feel, deep down, about remembering this.”

“Well...” The bard kept feeling tense. She was still not making eye contact. “I love you more than anything, Xena... It’s just that... I kept having this horrible dream last night.”

“That’s my point, Gabrielle. I know this. I heard what you said in your sleep,” the dark-haired woman stated in a mild and cautious tone. “Now I just need to know, why do you think you were having this nightmare? Do you wish you’d lost that particular memory at the Temple of Mnemosyne yesterday?” The brunette softly placed her hand onto the blonde’s upper arm, but Gabrielle instantly jumped at the touch. Xena removed her hand.

“Huh... I don’t know, Xena...” The younger woman’s heart was beating fast in her chest and her breathing accelerated. She did want to feel like this but it just happened to be the case. She looked back towards the warrior,

still trembling at unwelcome thoughts she had no control over. “Er... Would you just let me go for a walk just for a couple of hours, my love, please?” There seemed to be a smattering of apprehension in the storyteller’s voice. “I just need to go think on my own. I’ll get back to you on your questions later on, I promise.”

“Sure, my love,” the Warrior Princess resolved to let her go so that she could think about it. She did not want to lose Gabrielle but she also felt unsettled by the bard’s latest reaction to her touch. She wanted to give her younger lover what she needed, so that everything could then perhaps be all right again.

The shorter woman stood up and started walking into the woods. She fleetingly stopped when she heard Xena call from behind her: “Gabrielle?”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry if I ever mentioned anything you didn’t want me to.” The warrior woman remained seated, looking up at the back of the blond head. “You know, Gabrielle... if you secretly wanted to leave me, because you somehow don’t feel safe around me, you know you could.” Xena gasped at the thought of Gabrielle leaving her, but she always cared about the bard’s well-being. “I love you, Gabrielle, and I don’t want you to feel like you haven’t got the freedom to just go.”

Gabrielle sighed. She still did not turn to look at the Warrior princess. “I am *not* leaving you, Xena. I just need to be alone for a while, so I can hope to find out what can possibly be going on in my head.”

“Okay,” Xena simply replied. She watched as her blonde lover peacefully resumed her stroll into the huge forest. She surely did not like to see Gabrielle walking away.

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The bard wandered aimlessly among the trees and the bushes for one candlemark or so. She had traversed a great part of the woods and was now a long distance away from the campsite when she found a very small rock. It lay somewhere between a couple of large oaks. She decided to sit there, just to concentrate and think. Gabrielle started replaying today’s and other events in her mind. She felt more relaxed and could finally breathe now that she was alone. She realised there was something ugly she could no longer attempt to block out from her mind, not after Gaiane had mentioned it and certainly not after Xena had as well.

What is happening in my head? I love Xena. I want to be in this relationship with my best friend more than anything. We’ve even been making love in ardently passionate ways ever since we got back together again, even more so after she vanquished a whole army in my honour and saved me from that poison. I’m so incredibly in love with her. I want to spend the rest of my life with her. I fully understood that she was not being herself during what she’d done to me after Solan’s death. The miracle of Illusia cleaned off my wounds. My physical injuries were no longer visible. So why exactly did I have the same nightmare twice last night? Why did I feel so anxious when Gaiane and, especially, Xena were trying to talk to me about it? What’s going on? Am I afraid of something?

Then, suddenly, it hit her. Something had been shattered to pieces on the day Xena had dragged her behind a horse. She had been so used to believing that Xena would never physically assault her prior to that. She had always known there was this ‘fine line’ that existed within Xena between her dark side and the better part of the Warrior Princess, but Gabrielle had always thought she was able to control the dark side of her lover, to tame the beast within. She had always felt secure in Xena’s arms before that murder attempt. Even during some of their heated lovemaking sessions, Gabrielle had pleasurably noticed that the warrior could use her wild side in a safe and positive way, one that did not hurt. After the abuse, the bard had been able to feel safe again in the taller woman’s arms only insofar as she had managed to mentally shut down this particular memory. It had been so painful that it had had to be dissociated from her conscious mind as much as it could be.

Gabrielle understood why she had been dreaming of what happened all over again last night. In the realm of Morpheus, the subconscious mind operated freely. Before the past night, most of her nightmares had been about Hope, the loss of her blood innocence or when she had wanted to take her own life after feeling responsible for Solan's death. However, this new nightmare, about what Xena had done to her after three days following the funerals of their children, was bound to arise at some point while she was asleep. There had been no escaping it.

Yet the bard had still been able to keep that dream away from her thoughts this morning, when she had made love to her lover. Nonetheless, later, when Gaiane had come to see her and brought the same unwanted thought of Xena dragging her behind a horse up, some very unexpected feelings of underlying fear and unease had rushed through her. If only the Amazon messenger had not shown up.

... what about your mental wounds, my queen?

Now there was no more denying it: all the suffering, all the torment this particular event had caused. Her physical wounds might have vanished very fast and the Land of Illusia might have saved her loving relationship with Xena, but still... All the pain from this and other recent events was still present and it would probably take more than a little while for her to heal from this. Gabrielle already felt like a different person, a more mature one, one who knew that she could not take everything for granted.

Do you wish you'd lost that particular memory at the Temple of Mnemosyne yesterday?

She remembered the Temple of the Goddess of Memory. Yes, this had somehow been one of her underlying goals to lose that particular memory, along with the memories of her rape, Hope, Solan's death and especially her guilt. She knew she had made the right choice in keeping her memories but some of the agony remained. Why did she have the terrible thought of her lover abusing her seep through her dreams? She knew the Warrior Princess had been overcome by a state of rage when she had attacked her. Xena had not been herself. She had forgiven her the hate while they had been in Illusia. It had not been her Xena doing this, so what was she afraid of?

Well, now since she knew that she was not able to keep Xena's dark side completely under her control, what proof did she have that such a thing would not happen again if the warrior were to be overtaken by some wrath all over again? She had none, but she still wanted to be with Xena.

The Warrior Princess had almost always felt like a protector to her, not an abuser. She needed to get rid of this newly found psychological conflict within herself. Perhaps trying to have a good communication with her lover might help. She would never dare bring that up herself, but if Xena wanted to talk she should not shun the subject so maybe they could both attempt to work things out since the two of them really loved each other. Moreover, the storyteller did not want to be afraid of her partner, not even subconsciously.

Gabrielle rose from the rock she had been using as a seat. She looked around her. Then suddenly she realised that she had left her fighting staff at the campsite. She had been so overwhelmed with those troublesome thoughts that she had forgotten her only weapon. By the Gods, how could she have been so distracted? It was a real warlord jungle out here. Somebody evil could pop up anytime within a large forest like this one, and Xena had always told her, countless times, not to forget to take her staff whenever she was going somewhere. The bard started walking back towards the campsite. There was going to be quite a few moments that would pass before she would be able to reach it however, as she had wandered for such a large distance from where the Warrior Princess was in those woods.

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Xena stood beside Argo. She was brushing the mare's mane and body. The animal whinnied in approval. She always liked being brushed by her mistress. The warrior was still absorbed in thought. She was very unhappy Gabrielle had left the site the way she had, and she was surprised that her mere touch had startled the younger woman. Xena figured she should not have mentioned the fact that she knew about the dream. That had probably been a bad idea.

She hoped her bard would come back soon. She deeply regretted everything she had done that had hurt her lover and best friend, particularly dragging her behind a horse.

*How could have I ever attempted to kill my own guardian angel? She always keeps me on the right path. Ares... that bastard! I should have never listened to him.*

The dark-haired woman gently patted on Argo and went to put the brush back into one of the saddlebags. She then walked nervously and without purpose around the spot where the burned out wood from today's cooking fire was. As she absentmindedly looked around the campsite, her eyes happened to fall upon a nearby tree. She stopped instantly and focused her attention on the object that lay on the ground next to it. It was Gabrielle's staff. Xena made her way towards it and grabbed her lover's weapon. She stared at it, wide-eyed.

*Gods... she forgot her staff! Oh no, it's my fault. I shouldn't have annoyed her with all those questions and insecurities of mine. She would have remembered to take her weapon before she went for a walk. By the gods, I've got to go find her.*

The Warrior Princess kept the staff in her hand as she ran away to go try to find the bard. She hoped that nobody had already attempted to cause trouble to her Gabrielle.

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It was almost a quarter of a candlemark after the blonde woman had began making the first steps back towards the campsite. She was trying to walk fast but the forest ground was sometimes treacherous with all its small mounds of earth and little heaps of plants with occasional broken branches lying around. She did not want to end up falling. She could not help feeling tense right now.

As she turned around a corner, Gabrielle knew that she was no longer alone. A man who looked like a lone marauder was walking in the opposite direction from her, fifty feet ahead. She began struggling to reassure herself inside her mind.

*Relax, Gabrielle. You can handle it. Just try to act normal.*

The bard said nothing. She just kept walking. If she were going to attempt to flee, she feared that might cause an unwanted reaction from the man who carried on approaching. He was dressed in dark brown leather clothes with a succession of small silvery metal plates covering each side of his upper garment. His somewhat unkempt dark hair fell by his shoulders. As he was sauntering across this path, he seemed to be gazing towards her in an eerie way.

Gabrielle did not know of another way to get back towards where her lover was. She did not want to get lost within those woods. However, she realised even more as he now was getting very close that she really did not want to risk an attack.

She suddenly changed her mind and chose to turn right. She found herself in the middle of another large bunch of trees. She undertook a few strides to see if she could get a little further away from the path she had just been on, away from that stranger. A few seconds later, she heard some quick footsteps drawing near where she was. She started running.

*How in Hades could I forget that staff? Oh I really wish Xena was here.*

As she continued to run, the blonde woman, all of a sudden, got one foot caught in one of the roots that rested at the bottom of a tree. She fell forward onto the ground and swiftly rolled herself over only to see the marauder now being too close for her to get the chance to leave. He held a dagger in his hand as he ran towards her. He was so athletic and muscular that it only took a few heartbeats for him to reach her position. For a mortal, that lone marauder had probably nearly as much strength as Xena.

As she was trying to stand back up, he abruptly pushed her back down. Scared, she screamed in alarm: “Xenaaaaaaaaa!” Her loud shriek echoed through the large forest. Gabrielle lay on the grass, her back onto the cool verdure beneath. The fall had not caused her much harm but she was terrified.

“Shut up and stay on the ground, little beauty.” The marauder cruelly sneered down at her in an incredibly chilling way, as he knelt down while pointing the sharp blade of his weapon at her. “I won’t hurt you if you cooperate. Open your legs!” He seized one of her wrists as he closely watched her.

The bard felt intensely frightened. She reluctantly started to do what he was asking her to. She wished she could figure out a way of kicking or hitting him. Without her staff, her chances of defending herself against such a strong man were scarce. He was such a big warlord, and she did not have Xena’s fighting skills.

*But Xena is going to come and save me now, isn’t she? She must have heard my scream for help. Oh, how could I get myself into this mess?*

The attacker spread Gabrielle’s legs wider and moved himself between them. Hovering above her, the man caught her other wrist and gathered both of them tightly into one of his hands. His other hand took the coil of a thin rope that had been hanging by his belt. He immediately unrolled it and tied both of the young woman’s hands with it. He placed them above her head. By tying her up, he was making her chances to fight him even scarcer.

“Please... No... Don’t do this,” Gabrielle agonisingly begged in a low voice. She sobbed. She was petrified. This moment reminded her so harrowingly of when she had been suspended above that altar in the Temple of Dahak, and the evil thing had abruptly thrust into her, except that this time this was going to be a human raping her. Her hands frantically shook within their bindings.

*Oh no... Gods, please, tell me this is not happening again. Xena, come quickly, please.*

“Be quiet, woman!” He lifted her skirt over her belly and cut the sides of her breeches with his dagger. He then removed the piece of fabric and threw it aside. He put the blade of the knife under the laces of her green top and ripped it open.

Gabrielle felt dreadfully exposed against her will. What she was experiencing was so ghastly and repulsive. Yet she did not know what to do. She cried and moaned in despair when he started touching one of her breasts. “No... Please... No.” Having her bosom kneaded by someone who was not her lover felt utterly horrible.

*Xena, please come and save me.*

“I told you to shut up, little bitch!” he growled and slapped her across the face, which hurt her and reddened her cheek. That man was now kneeling between her legs and holding his dagger a little higher above her supine body. He was just about to unbuckle his trousers with his free hand when a round, circular object suddenly struck his knife away from him.

“Ayiayiayiayi!” The familiar war cry made itself heard in the middle of the woods. Xena caught her chakram as it flew back around towards her while she was standing between two trees, thirty-three feet away. The Warrior Princess then performed a forward flip that brought her closer.

Still on the ground with her hands tied up, Gabrielle tried to get away from the marauder by shifting her legs. As he attempted to catch her again, the bard had one leg underneath him and raised her knee in a swift upward motion, hitting his crotch and making him yell. This was instantly followed by a violent kick from Xena onto his shoulder, which threw him backwards onto the grass. All this happened within the span of a few mere seconds.

“Get up, you bastard!” Xena roughly grabbed him by the vest.

“Xena! I’m so glad you came,” Gabrielle said in a grateful voice, still sweating from the recent fright while looking towards her beloved warrior. “Please, untie me.” She managed to get back upon her feet with difficulty, since she could not separate her hands.

“Are you okay, sweetheart?” Still holding the marauder in one strong hand, the Warrior Princess made her way towards the bard and quickly used her chakram to carefully cut the rope that bound her lover’s hands.

“I am. Thank you, Xena.” Gabrielle, still breathing fast, shook the remnants of the bind away from her wrists. With one hand, she quickly proceeded to hold her green top shut. There would be some spare laces in one of the saddlebags back at the campsite. She went to pick her torn breeches up from the ground with her other hand. It was unfortunate she could not put them back on.

The bard watched as Xena firmly gripped the man and pushed him with force, slamming his back against a tree. He snarled in pain as the Warrior Princess stood in front of him. Xena rapidly jabbed her fingers at two pressure points on the marauder’s neck. He uttered a groan that got stifled by his immobilisation.

“You’ve got about thirty seconds to apologise to my friend. Tell her you’re sorry for trying to rape her.” She pulled him by the hair to make him look at Gabrielle.

“Argh... I’m sorry... for trying... to rape you,” he forced himself to say, between low growls.

The blonde woman watched with worry as her lover seemed to be taking great pleasure in hurting him. “It’s okay, Xena. Take the pinch off him, please.”

The dark-haired woman pressed the same points on the man’s throat to remove the pinch. He put a hand onto his neck as he tried to catch his breath. Xena pulled her sword out of its sheath and pointed it at him. “I should just kill bastards like you,” she said as she gazed at him with scorn. “How dare you try to rape my best friend, huh? You like treating women like pieces of meat, don’t you? Son of a Bacchae!”

Gabrielle could see her partner was very angry. “Xena, please don’t kill him. He did not get the chance to do anything,” she said, still holding her green top shut and clasping her ripped underwear in one hand.

Still keeping her weapon near the marauder, Xena looked at Gabrielle. “But what tells us that he’s not gonna try to do this again, to someone else?”

“I don’t know, Xena.” The bard had no idea of what to say. Her blue-green eyes were still wet with tears from her attack. Her cheeks were bright red and one had been slapped. She was firmly grasping onto her tattered breeches. It felt incredibly hurtful to the warrior seeing her like this.

While Xena was distracted staring at her girlfriend, the man kicked the sword out of her hand, a move that the Warrior Princess had not anticipated. He was a strong and quick bastard. He slapped the warrior with the back of his hand as she turned back towards him. Xena then roughly punched him in the jaw, making him bleed. He was then quick and strong enough to kick the tall woman’s abdomen in retaliation. This threw her onto the ground.

The marauder got another dagger out of his bootleg and angrily lunged towards Gabrielle. The blonde woman gasped and attempted to run. Xena swiftly got up, grabbed her sword, scampered towards the man and plunged her blade into his back, impaling him just as he was brandishing his knife and was about to stab her younger lover. He let out a loud cry as the long weapon rammed into his heart and the bloodied blade came out of his chest. A few drops of blood splattered onto Gabrielle’s clothes and skin. The man whimpered and died, dropping his dagger.

Xena removed her sword from the marauder’s body, and the weight of his corpse fell on the ground. The Warrior Princess replaced the blade into its scabbard on her back. She would have to clean her weapon tonight; that was for sure. She went to Gabrielle. Panting, she placed a hand onto the bard’s shoulder.

“Are you all right?”

“Yeah.” The storyteller breathed deeply.

“I’m sorry, Gabrielle. I wasn’t sure if I was going to kill him, but then he came at you real fast.”

“It’s all right, Xena. That way we know for sure he won’t ever try to rape another woman again.” Gabrielle’s face was unsmiling.

“Come here, Gabrielle.” Xena hugged her for a short moment. “Let’s go home.” She then wrapped an arm around the bard’s shoulders and they both walked back towards the path the younger woman had tried to take earlier. “Here, I’ve got your staff.” The warrior picked up the long fighting stick she had left lying on the grass, as they both wandered away. “Sorry I didn’t have the chance to give it to you as I was being so busy taking care of that filthy man.”

“It’s okay, Xena.” Gabrielle rested her head against Xena as they walked. The Warrior Princess kissed the top of her blond hair.

“Everything’s going to be all right, Gabrielle. I’ll take good care of you, sweetheart.” The tone of the warrior’s voice sounded deeply comforting to the bard’s ears.

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The two women had made their way down to the little lake by the water cascade right after they had returned to their current camp, in the later candlemarks of the afternoon. Xena had brought a bar of soap, a towel and a clean white shift for Gabrielle, along with a cloth for her sword, all of which she put down on the ground at the edge of the stream. The bard was now taking off her boots. Xena did the same. She also removed her breastplate and gauntlets. She dropped those armour items onto the grass. The warrior then moved closer to the bard, who still felt upset by what had happened to her.

“Hey...” The taller woman tenderly said. “You’re gonna be okay, sweetheart.” She hugged the blonde woman tightly.

“Yes, Xena,” A few tears rolled down Gabrielle’s eyes. “Please, help me remove my clothes.”

Xena helped her younger lover take her green top and her skirt off. She then grabbed the soap, gently took the storyteller’s hand and led her into the lake. They stopped walking in the water when it reached the top of Gabrielle’s thighs, because the warrior was still wearing her leather garb. Xena had the bottom of her battle skirt dipping underwater as she faced her nude lover. The younger woman took a little moment to immerse herself in the stream, to dampen her skin and her hair. She stood back up above water, in front of the Warrior Princess.

“Wash me, Xena, please,” Gabrielle said in a sad tone. “Even if he didn’t manage to rape me, I still feel awfully dirty after he touched me. I want you to clean my skin and hair, to help me forget.”

“Oh, Gabrielle...” Xena moaned compassionately. She proceeded to wash the blonde woman carefully. She ran the soap along every inch of Gabrielle’s skin. “You don’t seem to have many bruises, which is good.”

“Why did he wanna kill me?” the shorter woman asked in a dismal tone.

“I don’t know, Gabrielle. Frustration perhaps, from the fact that he couldn’t rape you... or maybe vengeance. Marauders can be degenerate people.” The Warrior Princess cleaned her lover’s face. “Turn around, love,” the dark-haired woman requested. She then cleaned the long golden hair.

Once the bard had been washed thoroughly, the warrior splashed herself a little and cleaned off her battle sweat. The smaller woman moved back under the surface to rinse the soap off from herself. She then got back up and twisted her blond hair between her hands, to squeeze water out of it.

When they both felt clean enough, they made their way back to shore. Xena dried the excessive liquid from Gabrielle's skin and hair with the towel. She delicately stroked the large piece of cloth across her lover's smooth frame while she looked at her with loving eyes. Xena then caught the clean shift from the ground. "Lift your arms, sweetheart."

The bard did what she was told and the warrior put the thin nightdress onto her. The white garment fell down her body, up to the top of her knees. Both women solemnly stared at each other, and Gabrielle began to cry again. "Xena... I shouldn't have forgotten my staff. You'd always told me to never forget it..."

"Gabrielle..." Xena took her into her arms, hugged her tightly and softly caressed her hair for a little while. "Please don't cry, sweetheart. It wasn't your fault." She kissed the top of the blonde's head. The brunette then brought one hand to her lover's face. She slowly rubbed her palm onto the younger woman's cheek. Xena then lightly cupped Gabrielle's chin to gaze deeply into the sea-green eyes. "It is never your fault when someone tries to rape or kill you. It's always is the attacker's fault."

"I know but..." The sound of Gabrielle's low voice was rueful. She had both her hands placed onto the warrior woman's strong shoulders as she kept weeping. "I'm sorry, Xena. I shouldn't have left our camp like this."

"It's all right, my bard." Xena kindly smiled and began to dry her younger lover's tears with her fingers. "We'll talk about this later, my love... Right now, I'm so happy you're alive and that marauder didn't get the chance to rape you. It's very fortunate I was able to save you in time just after I'd heard you scream. I may not have been able to save you from what Dahak did to you, but I'm glad that, at least, I could save you from this." Xena's words felt incredibly true to Gabrielle's ears, which helped the younger woman stop crying.

"Thank you so much for saving me, washing me and comforting me. You're my true best friend, Xena."

"No problem. I'd do anything for you." Silvery blue eyes brimmed with the tiny sparkle of empathising tears. "I love you, Gabrielle."

"I love you too." Gabrielle and Xena hugged again and shared a brief kiss on the lips.

The Warrior Princess put her armour, boots and gauntlets back on while the bard bent down to take her dirty clothes that were still stained with the evil man's blood. Gabrielle also picked up the bar of soap that had been tossed onto the grass and went to kneel by the edge of the lake. She submerged her green top in the water and scrubbed it with the soap, until two strong female hands suddenly stopped her movements. Xena was kneeling next to her.

"Let me help, my love. Let me take care of your laundry this time." The dark-haired woman washed both of Gabrielle's garments for the next moment or so, cleaning them completely. The soap they had bought from a town market was strong and did a wonderful job at washing anything. The warrior woman rinsed the clothes by drenching them. She wrung them out and handed them back to her lover. After that, she untied the scabbard from her back and pulled her sword out of it. She doused her weapon and the inside of her sheath in water. She then wet the little cloth she had brought and cleaned the dried blood off from her blade, using soap.

Once the warrior finished wiping the last traces of blood from her sword, they both stood up, gathered Gabrielle's belongings and peacefully walked back up towards their camp, with Xena having an arm around her shorter lover's shoulders.

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Both women got back to where their camp was. Gabrielle hung her damp clothes onto the little branches of a bush close by. The heat from the campfire, once built, would then get her green top and skirt to dry. The bard picked up her torn breeches and went to open one of the saddlebags. She got a needle and thread out of it, along with another pair of breeches that were intact. She put them on, underneath her white shift.

Xena fed a couple of apples to Argo, went to re-fill the mare's wooden bucket of water and went to chop some wood for a fire. After she came back with a small heap of firewood, the Warrior Princess started building the first flames. The campfire built up and burned steadily in the middle of the clearing.

Both women were sitting on the nearby log when Joxer arrived. Gabrielle was sewing her ripped breeches back on while Xena was sharpening her sword. They looked at the young man as he arrived. He was carrying a small cauldron.

"Hey, ladies." He smiled.

"Hey, Joxer." Xena grinned back at him. So did Gabrielle.

"Hello, Joxer," the bard said.

"Evening, Gabrielle... Listen, guys, you won't have to hunt or cook tonight. With a few dinars, I was able to buy some stew from a tavern in the closest village. It'll need warming up but there's enough for three. Isn't this wonderful?"

"This is very kind of you, Joxer," Xena answered. The two women thanked him, and the Warrior Princess put her sword and whetstone down to go help the young man place the pot on top of the fire. Gabrielle kept sewing for another couple of minutes, until her torn breeches were repaired. She stood and went to put them in a saddlebag, within which she also put the needle and thread. She grabbed a large wooden spoon and walked towards the fire cooking dinner. The bard stirred the stew in the cauldron. The warrior went to get some plates and smaller spoons.

Once the meal was ready, the three friends went sitting on the tree trunk to eat. Gabrielle was now a little bit hungrier, which made both Xena and Joxer smile.

"Excellent stew," The blonde woman said. "Really many thanks for buying it, Joxer."

"No problem, Gabby." He looked at her in a kind of dreamy way that reflected his crush on her.

Once they finished the stew, Gabrielle and Joxer were talking, while Xena resumed the sharpening of her weapon.

"So, Joxer, I'm quite surprised you didn't come back and see us earlier on today," the bard wondered.

"Well, I met a couple of childhood friends at the village and we spent the whole day chatting in the tavern. An Amazon came looking for you at some point, by the way. She seemed honest, so I told her where to find you. Did she come to see you?"

"Yes, she did, Joxer. It was Gaiane, a messenger. She delivered a message from Ephiny and left."

Joxer changed the subject as he briefly looked at the shift that was on Gabrielle. "Gabby, I hope you won't mind me asking but, why are you wearing a nightdress? It's not time to go to bed..."

"Her clothes are still drying, Joxer," Xena interrupted, while carrying on whetting her blade.

“That’s right, Xena,” confirmed the blonde woman, before gazing back at the young man. “They had to be washed. I was attacked this afternoon, by a lone marauder, and Xena had to kill him but a little bit of his blood spilled over my clothes.”

“Oh, sweet Aphrodite, Gabrielle!” Joxer’s eyes widened. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, Joxer, I’m all right.” She gave him a small, reassuring grin. “Xena arrived just in time to save me.”

“Oh, Gabby...” The young man opened his arms and Gabrielle accepted his hug, for a short while. He then stared back at her. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what to say. If there’s anything I can do...”

“It’s okay, Joxer,” the bard cut him off. “You’re a good friend. I understand that.” She smiled at him.

“Yes, you are, Joxer,” Xena seconded. “Thanks again for buying the food. It was nice. If you want the money back, you just ask.”

“It’s all right, Xena,” Joxer objected. “The food is on me.”

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Moments passed as the three friends continued their evening conversation. Two candlemarks before sunset, the women needed some privacy and Joxer was very politely asked to leave again.

“Good night, ladies.”

“Goodnight, Joxer,” replied Xena.

“Goodnight.” Gabrielle kindly waved at him. “Bye, Joxer.”

“Bye, Gabrielle. Take good care of yourself.” He walked away from the campsite, carrying the empty cauldron on his way back towards the nearby village that was outside the forest. He would bring the cooking pot back to the tavern.

After he left, the two women were still sitting on the tree log. They turned towards each other, eyes meeting and silently staring. A minute passed and Xena took Gabrielle into her arms. She hugged her tightly. The younger woman felt very responsive to the warm embrace as she placed her hands onto her lover’s back, her head resting on the warrior’s chest.

Xena tenderly caressed the blond head. She then moved slightly back to look into her younger lover’s eyes again.

“Gabrielle... is there anything you want us to talk about right now? Anything I can do for you?”

“Yes, Xena.” Gabrielle gave her an earnest look. “We need to talk. Good communication is probably the best solution for us.”

“I believe you’re right. I’m sorry there were a few things I didn’t want to talk about after we came back from Illusia. I really thought that since we had forgiven each other, everything was okay but obviously not, because you kept having those nightmares about your guilt... I gave you the choice to do whatever you wanted with your memories at the Temple of Mnemosyne yesterday, but you still decided to come back and remember me. And then you had this other horrible dream last night about me attacking you. Is that right, Gabrielle?”

“Yes, Xena.” Gabrielle sighed. “Ever since we returned from Illusia, I kept shielding my conscious thoughts from this particular memory. It was enough of a miracle that my physical wounds were gone, so I believed I had to push what happened as far away from my mind as possible.” Small tears started running down her eyes. “Unfortunately, in my dreams, my subconscious mind roamed free, Xena. So that’s why I had that other nightmare last night. I had it twice, but I kept ignoring it this morning while we made love. Still, when Gaiane turned up and talked to me today about the last time you were at the Amazon village, she said something about my ‘mental wounds.’ It hit a nerve in me. Then it all came back to the surface...” She wept.

“Oh, Gabrielle...” The Warrior Princess softly stroked the side of her younger lover’s face. “I’m so sorry,” she finally said. “I shouldn’t have done this. I should have never treated you like this. I’m sorry I attacked you that day.” She began crying herself. “I was so heartbroken and angry after Solan died... I remember that, before I’d decided to abruptly storm into that Amazon village, Ares had come to me during a time when I was most vulnerable to manipulation, while I was deeply mourning Solan’s death. The God of War kept trying to tap into my dark side, implying that what had happened to my son was all your fault, and telling me that I should go back to my old warlord ways and kill you...” Xena whimpered and sobbed.

The bard’s eyes widened. “Ares had egged you on, Xena? Is that why you’d come at me like that? Oh, but that changes everything...”

“It changes nothing, Gabrielle,” Xena denied. “It was still me who did this to you.” She sniffed and pulled Gabrielle towards her, hugging her tightly again while caressing her back. “I’m so sorry about what happened that day, my love. I occasionally thought about it, sweetheart, and still felt some guilt. I think you might have forgiven me this while we were in Illusia, but still... you are the light in my life and the mere thought of hurting you makes me want to die inside.” She kissed the top of her younger lover’s shoulder. “That was one of the underlying reasons why I didn’t want to be forgiven when you went into that church with Tara that other time, remember?”

“I remember,” Gabrielle moved to rest her head into the crook of the warrior’s arm. “I’ve already forgiven you for what happened anyway. And now I know that Ares was trying to separate us again. He probably wanted you to kill me so that then he could take you back.”

“Oh, Gabrielle,” the dark-haired woman kept crying and gently running her hand along her partner’s back, “he did not succeed. Just like when he sent you to Chin ahead of me in an attempt to make us hate each other and separate us, he did not succeed. He can try all he wants. I promise you he will never manage to tear us apart. I should have never listened to him. I was overwhelmed with grief and anger, but I should never have mistreated you like I did that day. It was not you who killed Solan. It was Hope.”

“Oh, Xena!” The bard lifted her head and gazed at the Warrior Princess. “I still should have never sent Hope to the place where Solan was. I should even have known she was evil right from the start.” Gabrielle’s features were gloomy.

“Gabrielle, as painful as it is for me to admit, I understand that you were a mother and this was your first child. You were trying to protect her because you couldn’t help but love her. I’ve already forgiven you for that. I saw Solan in Illusia. It’s all over... but since you had that dream last night and Gaiane showed up to tell you that I was temporarily barred from the Greek Amazon territory for what I did, I simply wanted to tell you how sorry I am. I’m supposed to be your protector, not your abuser.” Xena shook her head. “Killing you would be like killing one part of me.”

“But you protected me today, when you fought that man.” The bard now looked more hopeful as she reminded herself of the present day’s events, and before. “And, sometime after we’d returned from Illusia, you’d also fought a whole Persian army for me before saving me from a poison... Xena,” she took her older lover’s hands into hers as they both kept staring into each other’s eyes, “let’s just try to forget about the bad times. I know it won’t be easy, but we’ve already forgiven each other. Now what matters most is that you genuinely love me and you will always want or try to keep me safe from harm, just as much as you want me to become a stronger fighter.”

“Yes, that’s true, Gabrielle, but... Can I ask you a question?”

“Yes, Xena. Go for it.”

“Are you sometimes scared that I might physically hurt you again? If I were to be overcome by wrath again?”

The blonde woman uttered a low gasp and remained silent. The warrior pondered her lover’s reaction and understood why the bard was not answering her question.

“Gabrielle,” Xena sincerely said, “I cannot promise that such a thing will never happen again, as it is something that I don’t know...” Her azure blue eyes still showed sadness and regret. “I can only tell you... that I will try my best to stop something so horrible from happening again.” Xena nodded. “I love you, Gabrielle, and I don’t want to harm you, ever.”

“I love you too, Xena. And I am not afraid of you. I believe what you’ve just said, and I want to be with you.” They kissed and hugged for a while. Then Gabrielle said, “What matters most is that we both want to treat each other right.”

“Yes, and we will strive to achieve this.”

“We will.”

They stood up and went to get some cloth from the saddlebags to dry their tears. As night was drawing near, they felt happier.

“I’m very glad we had this conversation,” the bard stated.

“I’m glad too,” the warrior woman confirmed.

“Now let’s just put all this behind us.”

“Yes. Now it’s really over.”

Gabrielle would no longer need to shut down her bad memories in her mind. They did not frighten her anymore. Good communication had just been established between Xena and her. Her older lover had also apologized for what had happened three days after their children’s deaths. The taller woman had said that she clearly would never want such a thing to occur ever again. The bard understood that this memory had been upsetting the warrior too, ever since the older woman had heard her talk in her sleep the night before. Gabrielle figured that this was probably such a thought that had perturbed Xena while they had been making love this morning.

The storyteller knew as well that the Warrior Princess had definitely forgiven her for her betrayal and her lies regarding Chin and Hope. Over time, both lovers’ mental wounds would hopefully heal completely as they were now putting all those horrible things behind them, once and for all.

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It was dusk when Gabrielle took her skirt and green top down from the bush they had been hanging on. Both garments were dry, thanks to the campfire which still lit the clearing. The bard went to the saddlebags, to get spare green laces for her top. She had bought those cords in town and always kept them just in case she would need to fix her top. She ran the laces into the fabric, to repair the garment. She then folded both her clothes and placed them on top of the saddlebags. She took a clean shift out of a bag, for her lover.

Meanwhile, Xena was getting ready for bed. She had checked on Argo, thrown some more wood in the fire and made sure the bedroll would be comfortable for her and Gabrielle. She took all her clothes off except her breeches. Her armour and weapons lay by her side of the sleeping blanket. She took the grey shift from the bard's hands as her younger lover walked towards her. The Warrior Princess put her nightdress on.

Both women lay down onto the bedroll and covered themselves with a blanket, as the nearby campfire kept burning. Gabrielle lay on her back and Xena onto her side. The warrior was watching her. She gave her a goodnight kiss on the lips and settled down next to her.

"Goodnight, Gabrielle." Considering the fact that someone had tried to rape her bard today, the warrior was being very mindful of the possibility that the younger woman might not be comfortable with any acts of intimacy yet. Therefore, Xena made no attempt to make love to Gabrielle. She just simply lay there and closed her eyes.

The blonde woman sighed. "What is it with the 'goodnight,' Xena? You're not usually like this. You usually want to get very close."

The dark-haired woman had re-opened her eyes as soon as she had heard her lover's frustrated voice. She raised her head and gazed deeply into the supine woman's eyes. "Well, Gabrielle, I thought you might not want us to do anything after someone just tried to..." She placed a gentle hand onto the bottom of the shorter woman's belly.

"Xena," Gabrielle gave her a serious look, "I'm okay. He didn't even get the chance to do anything. And he's dead now anyway. You killed him to save me. Now please... make love to me and make me forget all about what happened today. I want to lose myself in your touch and forget about that man. I crave you touching me just as much as ever, and especially now that we managed to sort everything out between us."

"All right." Xena got closer to Gabrielle on the bedroll and kissed her for a short moment. "Are you sure this is what you want?"

"Love me, Xena. That's all I ever want." The bard grinned at her lover and sat up. She pushed the top blanket away and made some movements to remove her shift. She chucked the garment aside and lay back down.

The warrior took her own nightdress off and climbed on top of her younger lover. She supported some of her weight onto her forearms as she stared down in the smaller woman's sea-green eyes.

"I love you, Gabrielle."

"I love you, Xena."

Xena kissed Gabrielle. Her tongue gained entry into her mouth. Both their tongues touched and intermingled for a long while as their lips strongly pressed against each other. They moaned their desire into one another's mouth.

The storyteller shuddered in delight at the feel of her older lover's ample breasts making contact with her own. Their nipples touched and hardened. The Warrior Princess started moving her mouth down to the pulse point on the bard's neck. She kissed her there and then licked her way down to Gabrielle's bust.

"Oh... Love me, Xena... Yes." The blonde woman felt the warrior tenderly kneading both her breasts while sliding her tongue around one sensitised nipple.

Xena basked in taking each of Gabrielle's breasts in her mouth, one at a time. She groaned in hunger against each of the gorgeous mounds while sucking on them in turns. After the joy of orally stimulating her younger lover's breasts, the warrior planted several kisses along the bard's abdomen until she came upon the barrier of her breeches.

Xena raised herself and reached down to remove Gabrielle's underwear. She pulled at it, making it slide down the younger woman's legs. Then she threw it to the side. The Warrior Princess spread the bard's thighs and moved her own body back down to settle her head between them. She blew warm breath onto the blonde's centre, making the golden curls vibrate.

"Hmmm..." Gabrielle made soft, sensual sounds of erotic anticipation as she felt Xena tenderly kiss her sex. She loved all the different ways her warrior could pleasure her like this.

The dark-haired woman pushed her tongue back and forth inside her lover's entrance as the younger woman's legs hovered above her shoulders. She reached a hand around one of the blonde's thighs and slowly massaged her clit with her fingertips while she continued to probe her with her tongue.

"Gods... Xena..."

Xena then licked and sucked her way further along the tender flesh of Gabrielle's folds while she kept moving her mouth and tongue into the intoxicating heat for a moment. She felt overwhelmed by the familiar and scrumptiously tasty wetness of her younger lover.

"Yes... Gods... Xena..." The storyteller kept her hands on the bedroll. Her fingers curled into fists as she held handfuls of the blanket beneath.

Xena quickly found Gabrielle's sensitive button and she slid the tip of her warm tongue in circular motions around it. She took the bundle of nerve endings into her mouth. The Warrior Princess lovingly kept sucking the bard's clit while she moved her hand down and teased her lover's dripping wet opening with two fingertips.

"Yes... Oh... Do it, Xena." Gabrielle kept crying out in ecstasy. She moved her hips towards her partner's fingers, to welcome the insertion.

Xena gently entered Gabrielle as she continued to orally please her swollen nub, while inhaling the delicious scent of her bard. She moved her fingers back and forth inside her blonde lover, picking up a rhythm. Sometimes, she briefly stopped, slowed down and twisted the tips of her digits inside Gabrielle to make love to her girlfriend in swirling motions, while her mouth and tongue kept working on the blonde's engorged clit. She then resumed her back and forth movements inside the bard.

Gabrielle was driven closer and closer to the edge until she came, screaming her lover's name. "Xeeenaaa!" She breathed heavily as she felt her older lover withdraw her fingers and lick away at every last drop of her love juices. She saw the taller woman climb her way back up on top of her. They shared a sizzling, deep and wet kiss, which tasted of bardic excitement. When they finished, the Warrior Princess spoke.

"I want to spend the rest of my life with you, Gabrielle." Xena softly glided her open lips across her lover's smooth mouth. "I love you, my bard."

"I love you too, my warrior." Gabrielle beamed. "I want to stay with you forever."

"Forever it will be then." The dark-haired woman hugged and cuddled the blonde one. She still had the nectar of her lover's arousal on her fingers. She raised her body to uncover the storyteller's breasts and she spread the essence onto her nipples, circling them one at a time. She then went to suckle each of them in turns, to lick the wetness off from them.

"Hmmm..." Gabrielle enjoyed Xena's lips on her breasts again.

When she ended the sweet activity, the Warrior Princess kissed the bard again and then went to lie down onto her back, beside her lover. Gabrielle shifted to go lie on top of Xena straight away. She placed a thigh between her lover's legs. The brunette lovingly caressed the younger woman's back.

"My turn to pleasure you now, warrior?" The blonde woman smiled down at her.

"Gabrielle... You know, you don't necessarily have to. I've decided, for tonight, to care more about your pleasure than mine."

"Xena, oh, don't be silly." Gabrielle chuckled. "I really want to please you. I want to make you come, my love."

Xena laughed. "All right." Feeling her lover's thigh pressed against her underwear was already driving her mad with desire. So was the feel of her girlfriend straddling her leg.

The bard hungrily took the warrior's lips. They kissed vigorously and eagerly. Then, no longer able to wait, Gabrielle seized Xena's breasts, wrapped her hands around them and firmly squeezed them as she brought her mouth down to one of them. The blonde woman ran the tip of her tongue around the taut nipple before sucking on the gorgeous mound for a while. She did the same when she switched to the other breast.

"Oh, Gabrielle... Yes!" The Warrior Princess began voicing her pleasure. She was glad that, this time, she could fully concentrate on what her younger lover was doing to her. "Make love to me, my bard..."

Gabrielle continued to delight in her loving stimulation of Xena's superb breasts for a moment. She was suckling them, licking them, lightly biting them and playing with them with her fingers. Then she started to move herself lower onto the warrior woman's body. She stuck her tongue into the navel and softly licked and bit at the skin around it. Knowing that her taller lover was still wearing breeches, the bard sat up and instantly proceeded to take them off, pulling the undergarment down the older woman's legs and tossing it aside once she got it out the way.

"Gabrielle... Please..." The Warrior Princess spread her legs.

Gabrielle lowered herself back down and tenderly kissed each of the inner parts of Xena's thighs. She kissed and smelled the luscious scent of the dark curls before opening her partner's folds with two fingers and delving into the warrior's centre. Once her mouth and tongue were in position on her lover's sex, the bard's hands reached up to grab her lover's breasts as she carried on licking her swollen labia.

"By the gods... Gabrielle... Yes!" Xena immediately covered Gabrielle's hands with her own and made her knead her bust in a harder way. She moaned in ever-increasing rapture from each stroke of the storyteller's tongue on her sex.

The bard dipped her tongue several times inside the warrior's hot, dripping cave. She kept relishing the wonderful taste of her lover's juices as she licked her way up and down the warrior woman's appetising centre for a while, revelling in all the succulent textures her mouth made contact with.

"Gabrielle... Oh... Uh..." The Warrior Princess put her hands on the bedroll, which she roughly gripped onto while throwing her head backwards, taking intense pleasure in her little girlfriend's oral ministrations.

Gabrielle carried on cupping Xena's breasts as she tongued the area around her lover's engorged bundle of nerves. The bard noticed that the warrior was very wet and completely aroused. She drew the clit into her mouth and slipped a hand down to place three fingertips just outside the older woman's soaking wet cavity.

"Oh... Yes, Gabrielle!" Xena raised her hips in invitation. She trembled in satisfaction when Gabrielle entered her.

The bard thrust her digits hard inside the warrior as she carried on stimulating her nub with her mouth and tongue. As her movements picked a rhythm that Xena loved, it only took a short moment for Gabrielle to drive her lover further up the road to climax.

“Gabrie-e-e-e-elle!” The Warrior Princess’ body tensed and fell limp on the bedroll.

The storyteller removed her fingers from her partner’s warmth and licked them clean. She also licked away at her warrior’s last juices before kissing the dark patch of hair and crawl her way back up Xena’s body to kiss her, making her taste herself.

“I love you warrior.”

“I love you too, bard.” She embraced her. “Hey, you won’t be having any more nightmares tonight?”

“I don’t think so. Not a chance.” The bard smiled.

“Good. I’ll always be watching over you.” Xena ran her fingers through Gabrielle’s hair in a gentle way.

They rested and fell asleep in each other’s arms, after tenderly kissing, cuddling and feeling the pleasant warmth that resulted from their lovemaking as their bodies were pressed against one another.

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A few candlemarks went by into the night. The two lovers were still naked. They were sleeping in a spooning position on the bedroll, under their blanket. Lying onto her side, Gabrielle awoke and opened her eyes, feeling Xena’s familiar body behind her. She gently took the strong female hand that had wrapped itself around her and guided it down to the blond patch of hair that was between her legs. This roused the Warrior Princess right away.

“What are you doing, Gabrielle?” Xena asked in a low voice, blinking her eyes awake. She softly gasped when her fingers made contact with the fine golden fur.

“Hmmm...” Gabrielle moaned in a desirous tone. “Please, Xena... I want more... Touch me...”

The warrior sighed. The bard’s words and the feel of her lover’s warmth against her hand excited her anew. “You always want more, sweetheart...” She kissed and softly nipped at the blonde woman’s shoulder, always loving the taste of her silky skin. “All right, you win.” This clearly was not the first time the younger woman was waking her up for more, right in the middle of the night. Xena rubbed Gabrielle’s sex and gently tickled her clit.

“Oh, yes... Xena...” The storyteller felt a curling sensation at her centre and got even wetter from Xena’s touch. The sweet fondling lasted until Gabrielle could not take it anymore. She needed Xena to enter her. “Xena... Please...” She squirmed from the ache coming in her sexual core.

The Warrior Princess quickly understood her bard’s body language. She could feel the sticky pool between the other woman’s legs. She slipped her free arm underneath her younger lover’s body and reached around to cup one firm breast. She temporarily removed her hand from the smaller woman’s centre and grasped her hip, which caused a whimper from the bard.

“No... Don’t stop, Xena.”

“I’m not stopping.”

Xena slid her hand behind Gabrielle. She caressed the smooth buttocks and then the back of the blonde's thighs. Her fingers inched closer towards her younger lover's hot and dripping wet folds.

"Oh... Yes! Xena, please." The bard arched herself a little forward and moved her hips to allow the warrior access.

"You want this, don't you... hey, my love?" Xena teased Gabrielle's sexual lips with her fingertips.

"Yes... Do it..."

The warrior pushed two fingers inside the bard's drenched centre, taking joy in her partner's inner walls squeezing around her. Gabrielle groaned her lover's name in bliss when she felt Xena take her from behind. She seized her taller lover's free hand that was on her breast, and hungrily sucked on two long fingers, making them wet.

The dark-haired woman kept thrusting hard inside as she removed her other hand from the blonde's mouth and moved it down underneath her girlfriend's body until she was able to find her clit at the front. She trapped Gabrielle's sensitised node between two fingers as she continued to sink her fingers deeper in her younger lover's sex in backwards and forward movements.

"Oh... Gods... Xena... Uh... Oh... Yes..." Gabrielle bent her upper body a bit further forward on the bedroll as Xena kept filling her in this spooning position. She pushed her hips back towards the intensely thrilling pleasure the taller woman was giving her. The bard carried on uttering rapturous noises and moaning her lover's name as the warrior continued to rub her swollen bud while adding one more finger inside and never stopping making love to her.

"Touch me too, Gabrielle," the Warrior Princess kindly ordered.

The storyteller reached somewhere behind her, and her hand found her older lover's sex and stimulated her clit. The lovers' torrid love moves continued at a gratifying rhythm between them both, until Xena thrust harder and effectively inside Gabrielle, building pressure against the firm spot within. She made her girlfriend orgasm and felt the younger woman's core clenching around her fingers in one final spasm.

"Xeeenaaa!" the bard screamed. She kept fondling her lover behind her, while relaxing her spent body. Multicoloured butterflies were flying inside her mind. As she felt Xena withdraw her digits from her, Gabrielle carried on playing with the warrior's stiff bundle of nerves until she made her fall over the edge of ecstasy.

"Gabrie-e-e-e-elle!" After she reached the peak, the dark-haired woman panted heavily and, as the blonde removed her hand, she pulled her younger lover's back closer to her.

Gabrielle rested herself into Xena's passionate embrace, before turning around to kiss her lover. The warrior covered the bard's lips with her own and mingled her tongue with her lover's. They kissed in a sultry way, deeply stroking inside each other's mouth as their tongues danced around one another. When this ended, Xena whispered something in her lover's ear.

"Gabrielle, what matters most is that I love you."

"The fact that I love you, Xena, is what matters most to me too."

"All right, let's sleep now, my sweet bard." The warrior woman grinned.

Gabrielle's face was happy when she turned anew and Xena settled herself behind her again, in another warm, tender spooning embrace. The delicious aftershocks of their heated lovemaking still profoundly vibrated inside their heads. Their bodies were exhausted as the warrior held a strong, comforting hand around her bard and she swiftly

kissed the sweet-smelling blond hair. The bard took the warrior's hand in her own and briefly kissed it. She could pleasantly smell the scent of her own passion onto Xena's fingers.

The two lovers rested and entered the Land of Morpheus a few minutes later. They had a peaceful sleep for the rest of the night, with no more bad dreams for anyone.

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Morning broke through the woods. A couple of candlemarks after it did, the Warrior Princess woke up and kissed her bard to make her open her eyes.

"Good morning, my love. Please rise, my little sunshine."

"Morning, Xena. I'm... coming..." Gabrielle yawned herself awake and sat up on the bedroll as Xena got up to put on a shift. The brunette went to gather their clothes, some soap and a couple of towels. She also led Argo by the bridle.

The blonde put her nightdress back on too, and gradually stood up from the blankets to join Xena, as the warrior and her mare headed down towards the lake by the waterfall. Gabrielle lazily followed behind, carrying their boots and still feeling too tired to say a word.

Arriving at the stream, Xena took Argo to the perimeter of the water, and the animal instantly lowered her muzzle to drink. The warrior put her and her lover's clothes down onto the grassy ground. She kept the bar of soap in her hand.

The two women removed their shifts, entered the lake and went to shower themselves together under the cascade. They soaped and washed each other's bodies as they exchanged kisses and intimate words of everlasting love. After rinsing each other, they made their way back to shore, dried themselves and put on their day clothes.

Gabrielle criss-crossed the new green laces onto her top as she finished getting dressed. Xena got into her leather outfit. They both put their boots on, before walking back up towards the campsite with Argo.

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As Gabrielle, Xena and Argo returned to the place where the rest of their gear was, they noticed that Joxer had gotten there. "Hello, ladies," he warmly said.

Both women greeted him back and went to brush their hairs. After that, the warrior went to put her whole armour back on.

The young man helped the two lovers, as they got ready to break camp. While the three friends were walking away after gathering all their belongings, Gabrielle spoke to Xena, who held the slowly trotting mare by the bridle.

"What matters most is that we stick together, Xena." The bard smiled at her lover, vertically carrying her staff in one hand.

"Yeah," the Warrior Princess replied with a grin, "and that we strive to be respectful and loving towards one another. We already love each other and care a lot about one another anyway."

"That's right," Gabrielle kept a small grin on her face.

Joxer pretended to be completely oblivious to their conversation as they all carried on strolling through the forest. "Right, ladies. Let's go get some breakfast in the closest village."

They all walked until they exited the woods. The nearby village they chose to enter was close to the Temple of the Heavens. It was there they would soon hear about a warlord named Maecanus who stole the Mystic Diamond of the North Star for Aphrodite, the Goddess of Love.

THE END